



“Gestures of approach”: aspects of liminality and labyrinths

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Abstract

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The purpose of this article is to explore some matters of liminality relevant to labyrinths. To this end, the discussion opens by considering some implications of the way liminality is defined before moving on to an examination of labyrinths in terms of their two- or three-dimensionality. The liminal implications of these labyrinths as designs and structures are then discussed in some detail, together with their symbolic/metaphorical aspects. In the course of this discussion, a taxonomy of the labyrinth-walking process is presented. The article concludes with a brief consideration of the liminal significance of the Knossos Labyrinth’s location on the island of Crete.

Opsomming

“Wyses tot toenadering”: aspekte van liminaliteit en labirinte

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om etlike kwessies rondom liminaliteit met betrekking tot labirinte te ondersoek. Ten einde hierdie oogmerk te bereik, word die implikasies van die definisie van liminaliteit eers bespreek. Vervolgens word labirinte in terme van hulle twee- en driedimensionaliteit ondersoek. Daarna word die liminale implikasies van hierdie labirinte as ontwerpe en strukture tesame met hulle simboliese/metaforiese aspekte in meer detail bespreek. ’n Taksonomie van die labirint wandelproses word in die loop van die bespreking aangebied. Die

artikel sluit af met 'n kort oorweging van die liminale beduidenis van die Knossos Labirint se ligging op Kreta.

1. Introduction

We live out our lives on earth in a border area defined by birth, on the one hand, and by death, on the other. Within this living area, we find innumerable other boundaries, exits, and entrances: the fences surrounding our gardens, the walls defining our dwelling and the rooms within it; the speeds at which we may travel along roads delineated by pavements, yellow lines, and the mechanisms – traffic lights, for instance, or various forms of speed traps – by which those speeds are controlled. There are limits to, and in, human existence in individual terms; these are predominantly physiological and psychological. In society, they take the form of the laws and norms defining permissible and non-permissible behaviours.

Some boundaries are external, physical, tangible, manifested to the senses, enforced by barriers and guards. Others are internal, metaphorical, symbolic, imperceptible to the senses but no less powerful and equally enforceable through various systems of penalty and punishment. This multiplicity of boundaries, visible and invisible alike, create the areas and spaces within which, or beyond which, we live out our lives.

2. Areas and spaces

In the literal sense at least, matters of liminality are matters of area and space. “Space is an emptiness that embraces everything, but it is the foundation of all existence and the nourishing ground of being.” (Conty, 2002:261.) Conty explains a little later: “space can ... be defined by light, by sound, or even by the wind”. Bachelard (1994:43) concurs when he suggests:

Sounds lend color to space, and confer a sort of sound body upon it. But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, in the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless.

Conty (2002:264) agrees, albeit less poetically: “[I]ike emptiness, space does not exist in itself and cannot be described or conceived by itself”. In another sense, matters of liminality raise concerns about ritual processes and rites of passage as well as symbolic meaning, as Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) have explained so pertinently, as we shall see.

The purpose of this article is to explore some preliminary matters of liminality in labyrinths. However, we shall also need some definitions because they serve not only to provide clarity about the terminology used in what follows but also because, when unravelled or deconstructed, they offer connotative meanings of the entities to which we shall be paying attention. Further, we need to define labyrinths in order to distinguish them from mazes, and to clarify our understanding of the dimensionality of the entities with which we are dealing.

3. Defining liminality

We begin by considering definitions of the word *liminality*. The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (SOED, 2007) offers the following:

liminal /lɪ mɪ n(ə)l/ adjective.
[ORIGIN from Latin limin- limen + -al¹.]

1 Of, pertaining to, or constituting a transitional or initial stage of a process. Also, marginal, incidental, insignificant.

2 Of, pertaining to, or situated at a limen; occupying a position on, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.

liminality noun.

In the alternatives presented in the first definition, we notice how movement and ritual are implied, not only in the word *process*, but also in the preceding adjectives *transitional* and *initial*. The adjective *transitional* also implies a movement or process already begun, a shifting from one phase into another, one place or position to another, whether physical or metaphysical, although precisely *from* which and *to* which remains unstated. The adjective *initial*, deals with the idea of beginning or commencement. Yet the word also conveys a sense of peripherality, a starting-point (in itself, suggesting a particular position – at an edge or a boundary, at the outside – in relation to other, subsequent positions), and a possible sense of minor importance (even a quality of irrelevance, perhaps) or of being outside and separate in the context and structure of the completed process.

In the second definition, the focus on the limen itself points to a necessary stasis, as well as the implied narrator's equally static position at, or on, one or other side of the threshold. A threshold constitutes a boundary line or marginal area *between* two or more areas or spaces; it is a position from which a movement *inward* or *outward*

may be inferred, even if not necessarily pursued. As Turner (1969: 95) explains: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” By virtue of their very intermediality, such places may possess “strong transformative powers” (Viljoen & Van der Merwe, 2007:3)

It is no less instructive to consider an entry in Kidd’s *Latin-English, English-Latin Dictionary* (Kidd, 1960:192) where the noun *limen* is defined as “threshold, lintel; doorway, entrance; house, home; (*fig.*) beginning”. These definitions have both literal and symbolic significance, embodying as they do a number of differing positional relationships between the narrator and the narrated. The individual’s relationship to an area or a space depends on his/her position at and/or within that particular area or space, together with his/her appreciation of its symbolic or connotative meanings and his/her narratorial point of view. For example, we can contemplate being “at” the door, moving “across” the threshold, going “in” the entrance, and “into” the house. If the protagonist was returning to his/her own house, the connotative meaning of separating from the outside world is distinct from entering the house of a stranger, entering the unknown, and separating from the familiar.

There are dramatic differences, involving more than mere size, between a lintel, on the one hand, and an entire house, on the other, to say nothing of the positions of the doorway “in front of” or “at the side/back of” and at ground level, with the lintel “above” both door and ground levels. The threshold itself constitutes and defines the boundary line between “inside” and “outside”, as does the doorway while the entrance suggests an inward movement “into” and, by implication, becomes the antithesis of the outward movement of exiting, despite its eventuating through the same doorway and over the same threshold. Such movements may be seen in terms of Van Gennep’s tripartite schema of separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960:11).

Significant differences also characterise the connotative/symbolic meanings that distinguish “house” from “home”. In addition, we notice that the figurative definition, “beginning”, reiterates the *SOED*’s mention of the “initial phase” – whether literal or metaphorical – of a process, a sense of initiating a movement towards a subsequent phase, without a presumption of transliminality, however. In essence, these meanings reveal not only their scope but also their potential ambiguities.

4. Labyrinths as designs and structures

Research on labyrinths was long made difficult by the fact that people did not clearly distinguish between the prison given its name by Minotaurus (Ovid, 1986:8.156 ff.), which is a three-dimensional construction, and the older forms of labyrinths, which are flat (two-dimensional) constructions. (Becker, 1994: 170.)

This problem has not gone unnoticed by other writers either, as Kern explains at the outset of his authoritative volume on labyrinths:

In current usage, the term *labyrinth* has come to have three different meanings. It is most frequently used as a *metaphor*, a reference to a difficult, unclear, confusing situation. This figurative, proverbial sense of the word has been in use since late antiquity (third century CE) and can be traced back to the concept of a *maze*, a tortuous structure (a building or a garden) that offers the walker many paths, some of which lead to dead ends or blind alleys. (Kern, 2000:23.)

The outcome of this terminological confusion has been the obfuscation over time of “these two distinct notions ... resulting in unavoidable terminological confusion, which has not been accounted for until this [twentieth] century” (Kern, 2000:23).

However, while the distinction between two- and three-dimensionality goes a good way towards unravelling some of the difficulty, other problems remain, not least because of the historically much later development of mazes:

The words ‘maze’ and ‘labyrinth’ have distinctly different meanings, though confusingly they are often used interchangeably. Puzzle mazes have existed for only about 500 years, whereas labyrinths, from which they are descended, go back at least 4,000 years. (Fisher, 2006:7.)

Of course, the difference in age between labyrinths and mazes is far from being their only distinction. They differ in design and intention, too, as Adrian Fisher (2006:7) notes succinctly: “A labyrinth implies a single path and aspects of ritual, while a maze is a puzzle, with junctions and choices.” Some of these choices “lead to dead ends or blind alleys” (Kern, 2000:23), neither of which are possible on the labyrinth’s uninterrupted, unicursal path. Dimensionality is another distinguishing feature: generally speaking, mazes are three-dimensional (the walker’s moving through its spatial structure) while labyrinths are two-dimensional (the walker moving over its surface de-

sign). And the very purpose of each structure differs: mazes “are designed to make us lose our way”, while labyrinths “are designed to help us find our way” (Artes, 2000:2-3).

We could add here that the labyrinth at Knossos (where the Minotaur was confined, but which he did not name, as Becker erroneously asserts) and vertical mazes are both three-dimensional, while horizontal mazes are two-dimensional (as are delineated labyrinths). Bewilderment is inevitable, and the confusion is compounded yet further by those authors (Matthews, 1922; Doob, 1990) who use the terms *maze* and *labyrinth* interchangeably as if they were synonymous.¹

For our present purposes, and to eliminate as much confusion as possible, our focus will be limited to the two major forms of labyrinths.

If the definitions we have touched on are to be in any way relevant, then this discussion of labyrinths in the context of liminality will, of necessity, deal with aspects of area and space, thus returning us to the distinguishing criterion of two- and three-dimensionality. As a gesture towards clarification, two-dimensional labyrinths will be described here as *designs* and their three-dimensional counterparts as *structures*.

4.1 Two-dimensional labyrinths

As I have explained elsewhere (Ulliyatt, 2010:83-84), labyrinths as designs may be characterised as:

- two-dimensional
- delineated on surface
- unicursal: a single uninterrupted path
- easy to enter and exit
- can be temporary/ephemeral
- movable
- extremely common

1 Most dictionaries include the word *labyrinth* in their definition of a maze and the word *maze* in their definition of a labyrinth.

- easily constructed
- relatively inexpensive
- day-to-day materials

In terms of liminality, the significance of these labyrinths lies in the fact that they have length and breadth, but no height; they constitute areas rather than spaces.

Labyrinths as designs are *delineated*,² either temporarily or permanently, on a surface. They are imprinted, scratched, drawn, incised, dug, painted, or outlined (with stones, bricks, ropes, cement, pieces of wood, masking tape, chalk, paint, cacti, bamboo canes and paper, shoes, or even plastic eating utensils (Buchanan, 2007; Rainbow-Labyrinths, 2009; Renssen, 2005; Saward, 2003; Saward, 2002). Obviously, the surfaces available for such delineations are almost numberless, but would certainly include earth, sand, turf, rock, canvas, wood, gravel, marble, paper, walls, floors, and roof bosses, among others. (We shall not be dealing with computer games here.) One recognises immediately not only the relative permanence or impermanence of these materials and surfaces but also their complex metaphorical/symbolic potential (Ulliyatt, 2010:84-85).

Some delineated labyrinths have been characterised primarily by their ephemerality. Chris Parsons, for example, delineated a labyrinth design with a brush in the overnight dew on the surface of a bowling green. In the morning sun, the dew evaporated, the only evidence of the labyrinth's existence captured in a photograph (Saward, 2002:139). Buchanan (2007:56-62) has not only created labyrinths by using projected light, but has also dug one into a beach at low tide, the rising tide obliterating it gradually, much like a child's sandcastle. This labyrinth's existence also resides only in a photograph (Saward, 2002:146-147).

In delineated labyrinths, the classical and the mediaeval patterns predominate. Both comprise a single, unicursal path leading to the centre uninterruptedly. In other words, it is impossible to lose one's way on a delineated labyrinth. Exiting the labyrinth is achieved simply by following the same path from the centre outwards, thus re-

2 Some writers, including Matthews, use the adjective, *pavement*, instead of my preferred term, *delineated*, when referring to labyrinths as designs. I would argue that the use of *pavement* suggests that such designs are to be found in only very limited environments, when the converse is more accurate.

versing the inward route. This being the case, the way in and the way out are one and the same, although, not surprisingly, there are occasional exceptions.

The liminal and symbolic implications of the unicursal labyrinth are considered later when the tripartite process of walking it is discussed.

As I have noted elsewhere (Ullyatt, 2010:85):

Mediaeval labyrinths were embedded in the floors of various European churches and cathedrals. Although their designs were intended to be permanent, some were defaced or entirely destroyed subsequently. (Saward, 2003:94-97.) These models are modifications and adaptations of the seven-path classical design (Saward, 2003:84), encompassing circular (Bayeux), hexagonal (Amiens), square (Reims Cathedral, Abbey of St Bertine), and ovoid (Poitiers) designs, amongst others (Matthews, 1922:54-70).

The most obvious question arises: Why were classical labyrinth designs incorporated into mediaeval cathedral floors or found as decorations on roof bosses (Saward, 2003:102), on monastery pillars (Saward, 2003:96), or set into a wall at La Lucca Cathedral (Italy) (Saward, 2002:21)?

In his book, *The maze and the warrior*, Craig Wright (2001:73-100) devotes a chapter to “The theology of the maze”, a detailed account of how the labyrinth’s meaning was Christianised. While a detailed discussion of his argument lies beyond this article’s purview, his early remarks offer a broad outline:

At the height of the Roman Empire a new cult, Christianity, began to grow in the midst of these same Mediterranean cultures (Egyptian, Hellenic, Etruscan, and Roman). Not surprisingly, the proponents of the youthful religion endowed the labyrinth with fresh meaning. Just as they adapted the temples and festivals of pagan Rome to serve the cultic needs of Christianity, so too the fathers of the church took the ancient symbol of the labyrinth and gave it a specifically Christian interpretation. For more than a thousand years, from the time of the patristic fathers until the Renaissance, the maze was used to promote the beliefs of the Western Church. (Wright, 2001: 73.)

In passing, we note how Wright uses the terms *labyrinth* and *maze* interchangeably. In rudimentary terms, the change was affected by creating a new symbolism for and around the labyrinth.

Prudentius (348-c.405) describes its topography. In fact, for Prudentius there were two forms of the maze, the multicursal and the unicursal. The former is a deceitful construct of misleading byways that nurture confusing heresies, while the latter offers a simple model for orthodoxy. (Wright, 2001:74.)

The characters of the ancient myth were also conscripted into the metamorphosic process. Theseus of the ancient Greek myth passes the thread to the Messiah of the Christian pageant. Henceforth Christ will serve as guide through the hellish labyrinth of earthly life.

This Christianizing of the myth of Theseus, Ariadne, and the maze was intensified during the high Middle Ages, when many Western theologians sought to marry the teachings of the church to the precepts of classical philosophy. Now every particular in the story of the labyrinth is given an *interpretatio christiana*. (Wright, 2001:76.)

Inevitably, the transformation of the classical labyrinth into a religious symbol brings about an equally powerful transformation of its liminal aspects.

One may be reluctant to quibble about the ramifications of what constitutes the “outside” of a two-dimensional mediaeval labyrinth when it is located “inside” a three-dimensional cathedral building. Yet, as Wright observes, it is of considerable symbolic import: the situation of a *domus Daedali* within the walls of a *domus Dei* serves to show that Christian architecture was “vastly superior to pagan artifice, the earthly inventor a mere shadow of the supreme architect” (Wright, 2001:71). Alternatively, one might read the mediaeval labyrinth’s very embeddedness in the church building as a symbolic acknowledgement of the church’s need to embrace the mystical meaning of the labyrinth and rewrite the mythological story as a Christian one, as Wright has explained. One might also propose that the presence of a two-dimensional labyrinth – within the walls of a three-dimensional – cathedral symbolises the flatness of human existence unless it, too, is embedded in, and surrounded by, God’s overarching presence.

5. Form, function, location

Exploring labyrinths in terms of liminality yields both literal and metaphorical meanings. This, in turn, raises the question of form and function. However, when we talk of delineated labyrinths, it appears that the adage – form follows function – has been inverted. Contemporary functions have been overlaid on ancient forms because of insufficient evidence (rather than speculation) about the original function for labyrinths as designs.

Let us reflect on such a labyrinth. It cannot be situated *in vacuo*; it is always contextualised by, and within, a physical area or space. Therefore, it is in a relationship to the contextualising location. Placing a labyrinth in an area or space creates a consequent set of symbolic meanings: for the area or space, for the labyrinth, and for their interrelationship.

Every location possesses its own literal and symbolic meanings, even prior to the interpolation of a labyrinth. Consider the differences manifest in situating a permanent delineated labyrinth inside a church, within hospital grounds, on a privately-owned wooded estate, at a public mall, on a beach, or in a suburban garden, on the one hand; or laying out a temporary labyrinth inside a community centre, a sports arena, a school hall, a prison, or an old-age home, on the other. While location exerts its particular influence on an understanding of the labyrinth, it is also true that a labyrinth’s permanence or impermanence impacts on our understanding of its location, as well as its symbolic meaning. For example, within a church building or its grounds, we may be inclined to attribute spiritual meanings to the labyrinth, the *spiritual* journey of life itself; in a hospital environment, however, we may focus more specifically on its *curative* potential. If we assign spiritual meanings to walking a labyrinth, we may ask what happens to the environment – such as a school hall – in which a temporary labyrinth is positioned. Does the hall acquire a symbolic spiritual function – albeit temporary – associated with the labyrinth’s purpose or is its established role as a school hall prevalent, despite the labyrinth’s presence? Is the labyrinth there to *teach* walkers, albeit unconsciously? And one might consider whether the symbolic role of the temporary labyrinth’s environment impinges on the symbolic effect of the labyrinth itself.

Setting up a temporary labyrinth within a building brings about a transitional relationship between the building’s permanence and the labyrinth’s temporariness. This interface engenders a symbolic boundary of some intricacy, involving, as it does, not only the ele-

ments of permanence and impermanence but also those of inside (the labyrinth) and outside (the building), as well as the concomitant issues centred on separation, transition, and incorporation. Into this symbolic interweave, we could add the location and primary function of the building itself: a school hall in a city suburb offers a different symbolic “reading” from a large tent – with its own temporariness and less solid structure – in a field (which, in itself, may be perceived as a rural remnant or a potential urban development) on the outskirts of town, another boundary where the urban and the rural intersect.

Whether we are discussing temporary or permanent labyrinths, if they are located within some sort of building, we are also establishing a relational interaction between the two-dimensional *area* of the labyrinth and the three-dimensional *space* of the building. And we should not overlook meanings implicit in the shape of the area or space in which the labyrinth is located. Nor should we neglect to note the (perhaps unconscious?) mythic implications of a labyrinth housed within a building, a quasi-replica of the Knossos Palace with its subterranean labyrinth, together with the accompanying symbolism.

Perceptions of the labyrinth’s symbolic function or meaning also depend on the circumstances of those walking it, whether they are doing so voluntarily (as with hospital patients or an old-age home’s residents) or compulsorily (as with prison inmates). Old age, ill-health, and criminal behaviour are circumstantial variables, each of which may create diverse “readings” of the labyrinth-walking processes.

6. Walking the walk

As we stand now at the threshold of the delineated labyrinth’s unicursal path, about to begin walking it, how are we to conceptualise what lies “behind” us or what lies “in front of” us? What terms should we use to identify our position: the geographical, physical, psychological, spiritual, open-minded, or even non-committal? Or some permutation of these?

As we step onto the path, we find ourselves at the limen of past and future; we are in the immediate present. What, if anything, are we leaving behind or separating from? What particular psychological baggage are we bringing with us? What is our state of mind when we set off? How is this state of mind related to the one we are about to experience as we enter? Are we saddened, if only temporarily,

excited, or made apprehensive by the departure process? Does memory distract us from the immediacy of the moment, drawing us back across any of the numerous temporal or geographic thresholds of the past?

No less importantly, we might ask if, and in what ways, we are properly prepared for what awaits us, particularly if we perceive the labyrinth as a *temenos* – a sacred space. In his book, *Patterns in comparative religion*, Eliade (1997:370-371) explains:

The enclosure, wall, or circles of stones surrounding a sacred place – these are among the most ancient of known forms of man-made sanctuary. They existed as early as the early Indus civilization ... and the Aegean civilization. The enclosure does not only imply and indeed signify the continued presence of a kratophany or hierophany within its bounds; it also serves the purpose of preserving profane man from the danger to which he would expose himself by entering it without due care. The sacred is always dangerous to anyone who comes into contact with it unprepared, without having gone through ‘the gestures of approach’ that every religious act demands.

The sacred place to which Eliade refers to is a piece of earth that was originally delimited, and subsequently consecrated, as Van Gennep (1960:16) observes:

When milestones or boundary signs ... are ceremonially placed by a defined group on a delimited piece of earth, the group takes possession of it in such a way that a stranger who sets foot on it commits a sacrilege analogous to a profane person’s entrance into a sacred forest or temple [...] the prohibition against entering a given territory is therefore intrinsically magico-religious.

The labyrinth, by contrast, identifies itself as separate from its environment by virtue of its delineation, design, and construction. It is different from its context, whether of earth or building, whether outside or inside. Nonetheless, like the enclosures that both Eliade and Van Gennep describe, the delineated labyrinth is presumed to offer those who walk it a possible sense of a kratophanic (manifestation of power) or hierophanic (manifestation of the sacred or divine) presence. In other words, the labyrinth constitutes a *temenos*. The adjective “sacred” is frequently attached to the labyrinth’s unicursal paths, thus distinguishing them yet further from their profane surroundings. These attributions also imply or demand appropriate ritual behaviours.

Apart from the certainty of the path itself, what expectations might we have about what could happen to us, psychologically at least, on the journey to the centre? Where are we heading? And in which direction? Are we moving “inwards” and, if so, what does that mean geographically, physically, psychologically, or spiritually? When we arrive at the centre, where are we then? Have we arrived at some sort of inner sanctum, the core of our being, the central purpose of our journey, after which our lives will be changed in some manner forever? What were we expecting to find at the centre? Have those expectations been met, and, if so, in what ways and to what extent? What are we meant to discover there? Has any kratophanic or hierophanic presence manifest itself? At the centre, are we only half-way through our travels? Uncertainty seems unavoidable unless we are made ready for the experience.

When asked what they discovered or had revealed to them at the centre, a small number of labyrinth walkers say “Nothing” or “Not much at all”. These are singularly revealing responses, given that the individuals themselves are at the centre. And we note, too, the tendency to focus on the externals of the process, that which is “out there”, partly as a defence against having to cope with encountering internal processes – what is “in here”. Further, we might ask: Is the obliteration of the self, even temporarily, one consequence of arriving at the centre?

Once the sojourn at the centre is complete, which direction do walkers follow? Are they going “back” whence they came? Does this constitute nothing more or less than a “return”? Are they “leaving” again, this time from the centre, and, if so, what are they leaving “behind”? Or are they heading “out”? Given the flat surface of the labyrinth as design, where and what constitutes “in” and “out”, since both terms imply a sense of three-dimensionality and space? And when walkers reach the threshold again as they exit, what or where are they about to “enter” or “re-enter”? Is this the same place, psychological state, or emotional feeling they left “behind” when they “entered” the path and began the walk? To what extent is Heidegger’s assertion – “Only the backward path will lead us forward” (quoted in Conty, 2002:160) – relevant at this juncture, and in what ways?

One further question: When walking a labyrinth, are walkers “in” it or “on” it? If they assume the latter, how does this affect how they (and we) understand the terms *inside*, *outside*, and *centre*? Words such as *above* and *below* now enter into the discussion, together with their symbolic meanings. One thinks of the earth “beneath” one’s

feet, of being “under” the sky, or “out” in the open. The very word *open* suggests an area, apparently without boundaries, surrounding the labyrinth, which then becomes a man-made focal point embedded in the natural world.

7. The tripartite process and more or less

Walking a delineated labyrinth may be perceived as a tripartite process, which may be expressed simplistically in terms of motion as movement > stasis > movement – which are paralleled in terms of directionality by entrance / inward > centre > exit / outward.

However, tripartite models are scarcely new, and parade under a wide variety of names, beginning with the rudimentary beginning > middle > end; and including the more sophisticated import > conversion > export; or input > throughput > output, to name only three familiar examples. In his seminal book, *The rites of passage* (1909), Van Gennep (1960:10-11) calls rites of passage “a special category” of ceremonial pattern, which he subdivides into “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation”. He goes on to explain:

Thus, although a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated. (Van Gennep, 1960: 11.)

Numerous symbolic “readings” of this tripartite process of walking the labyrinth have been proposed. Four examples follow.

The Labyrinth Resource Group’s schema (2011) tends towards the more literal than the symbolic in its labelling of the process: enter > centre > return, although there are brief explications for each phase of the ritual. In the first, the walker is encouraged to “Release ... let go ... relax ... listen to your body and your spirit”. This constitutes the preparation for the second phase when the walker is to “Receive ... the center is often the place to see clearly and gain insights ... stay as long as you like”, being open for possible transformation. The third phase centres on returning, which is perceived as “A strengthening ... re-entering your world ... bringing insights to bear on your life”.

Jaskolski’s book, *The labyrinth* (1997), is subtitled “Symbol of fear, rebirth, and liberation”. Here, we have three possibilities for understanding some of the meanings inherent in labyrinths both as de-

signs and as structures, for Jaskolski incorporates both forms into the development of his book. Although he does not specifically articulate a tripartite process per se, the three predominant perspectives on labyrinths would, if conjoined, engender a tripartite model: fear > rebirth > liberation.

Corbett (2009) suggests purgation > illumination > union, while Artress (2000:9) proposes releasing, receiving, and returning as appropriate labels. As these exempla show, whatever functions are attributed to the delineated labyrinth, each part of the process is couched in distinctly religious diction.

At the same time, we observe the varying emphases that each schema places on each phase of the process. Jaskolski presumes the initial phase centres on *fear*, whether of the unknown one faces in the process that is about to begin or of the psychological baggage that one must acknowledge (and perhaps abandon) as a prerequisite to the possibility of *rebirth* in the second phase. To surmount this fear is to cross the boundary into the inevitable, the journey's progress through rebirth – another threshold – to eventual *liberation*. This final phase suggests freedom from one's bondage, a boundary-less space, devoid of fear and filled with the potential of *renaissance*.

In his typology, Corbett proposes *purgation* as the initial step, a ritual cleansing of the self, the preparation of a mental, emotional, psychological, or spiritual *tabula rasa* ready to receive illumination. Of course, the prospect of purgation may well bring the individual to the threshold of fear. Also worth noting is the term's etymological links with "Purgatory":

A condition or supposed place of spiritual cleansing, spec. in the Roman Catholic Church, in which the souls of those who have died in the grace of God suffer for a time to expiate venial sins or to atone for mortal sins for which they have received absolution; the duration of this condition. (SOED, 2007.)

Defined as a temporary, rather than permanent, place or condition of expiation, *purgatory* then becomes a border post, a boundary area, and a threshold in the soul's journey towards *illumination* – which is defined as "the time spent at the center [sic] of the labyrinth, quietly praying and receiving whatever wisdom is forthcoming" – and *union*. The final stage is described as the reworking of the path, "preparing to reenter the world and actualize the new sense of self, or of knowledge gained" (Corbett, 2009).

The labyrinth process is designed to “actualize the new sense of self”, to produce a profound transformational experience or, at least, a new awareness of oneself. Corbett (2009) explicates the process:

The most obvious thing about the labyrinth is that it directs you, guides you; it leads, you follow. When you are concentrating on the immediate strip of pathway under your feet, you can lose the sense of where you are on the looping pathway. Being human, one part of the mind is constantly trying to place us, to think ahead of our steps, over and around where we really are, and the design of the labyrinth foils this beautifully by simple keeping the mind focused on the path itself. Once inside the center, you can really look around and see where you have been, take a look at the path and where it had led you, recognize where you were both physically and emotionally when you entered the labyrinth. Chances at reflection and perspective are so rare in our society that they take on extraordinary value for many people. The chance to stand inside a sheltered space and see the path we are walking is a blessing not to be taken lightly.

We note the author’s perception that walking a path with no obstacles may lead one to paradoxical feelings of being lost or disoriented. This may be attributed in part to the fact that the path leads and guides the walker who, in turn, is subject to the role of follower, a submission to the process and the destination – psychological, emotional, or otherwise – to which it leads. Implicitly, walkers surrender personal control of the route the journey takes, as they do on some of the major pilgrimages.

We note, too, that the author depicts the labyrinth as “a sheltered space”, even though its flat unicursal path may well be located in the open air. The attribution of “shelter” posits an assumption of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional area. The idea of “shelter” may encompass a spiritual dimension, an assumption that the space around the labyrinth (rather than just the area the labyrinth itself occupies) may offer some sense of spiritual refuge and safety.

In using a broader term, *releasing* to describe the first phase of the process, Artress encompasses both the initial fear and the purgation symptomatic of any boundary crossing. One has to release oneself, or be released in some way, from the inhibiting bonds and restrictions of one’s internal history – at least, not to be its victim – before one is free (or free enough) to undertake the journey, although the process of releasing may well involve some sense of loss and insecurity or uncertainty. This is Artress’ explanation of the process:

Generally, on the way in, people experience a sense of shedding of everyday thoughts. This shedding leaves them open to receiving insights, guidance, or peace of mind, especially at the center, yet this can happen anytime throughout the experience. The time spent returning is helpful for reflection and integration of the experience. (Artress, 2000:9.)

Despite its ambivalent position in the labyrinth journey, the centre plays a pivotal symbolic role, as Eliade explains in detail:

Without being over-hasty in deciding the original meaning and function of labyrinths, there is no doubt that they included the notion of defending a 'centre'. Not everyone might try to enter a labyrinth or return unharmed from one; to enter it was equivalent to an initiation. The 'centre' might be one of a variety of things. The labyrinth could be defending a city, a tomb [the Egyptian Labyrinth] or a sanctuary [the Knossos Labyrinth] but, in every case, it was defending some magico-religious space that must be made safe from the uncalled, the uninitiated. The military function of the labyrinth was simply a variant on its essential work of defending against 'evil', hostile spirits and death. Militarily, a labyrinth prevented the enemy's getting in, or at least made it very difficult, while it admitted those who knew the plan of the defence. Religiously, it barred the way to the city for spirits from without, for the demons of the desert, for death. The 'centre' here includes the whole of the city which is made, as we have seen, to reproduce the universe itself.

But often the object of the labyrinth was to defend a 'centre' in the first and strictest sense of the word; it represented, in other words, access to the sacred, to immortality, to absolute reality, by means of initiation. The labyrinth rituals upon which initiation ceremonies are based (at Malekula, for instance) are intended for just this – to teach the neophyte, during his sojourn on earth, how to enter the domains of death without getting lost. The labyrinth, like any other trial of initiation, is a difficult trial in which not all are fitted to triumph. In a sense, the trials of Theseus in the labyrinth of Crete were of equal significance with the expedition to get the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides, or to get the golden fleece of Colchis. Each of these trials is basically a victorious entry into a place hard of access, and well defended, where there is to be found a more or less obvious symbol of power, sacredness and immortality. (Eliade, 1997:381; interpolations – TU.)

In liminal terms, as a container for symbols of "power, sacredness and immortality", the labyrinth (the "place hard of access") evokes different spaces – palaces, places of worship or hallowed ground,

even heaven itself – which, in themselves, presume different requirements and rituals for and means of, access; whether as monarch or minion, priest or congregation, saint or sinner – as well as differing architectural and/or structural spaces and boundaries. Such spaces also contain other spaces and/or areas within them to which access by the uninitiated, the unprepared is prohibited, places where such individuals are kept outside its boundaries. The idea of heaven presumes an afterlife in a probably inconceivable, indescribable space without boundaries but, nonetheless, with a behavioural limen which, ultimately, allows or bars access.

As one might expect, there are exceptions to the tripartite model. For instance, there are those who perceive the process as a bipartite one: “The entry into the labyrinth is birth; the centre is death and eternal life. In Christian terms, the thread that leads us through life is divine grace.” (Anon., 2010.) This process is congruent with Daniel Keyes’ words from his novel, *Flowers for Algernon*:

Although we know the end of the maze holds death (and it is something I have not always known – not long ago the adolescent in me thought death could happen only to other people), I see now that the path I choose through that maze makes me what I am. (Keyes, 1989:155.)

There is no return path, no exiting from the centre, no escape from death and the possibility of eternal life. In this bipartite process, the act of being brought over the threshold of birth – an action taken for us by others – initiates our literal and symbolic movement as individuals into the life-long journey along an irrevocable path. It also assumes that, once committed to the path of life’s circuitous labyrinth, there is no way of leaving it until death removes us. This countermands the essential two-dimensionality of such labyrinths, implying that their unicursal pathways possess an imperceptible yet impenetrable three-dimensionality inhibiting deviations or detours from the path, as well as return journeys.

Other exceptions to the tripartite model depend partly on the fact that medieval labyrinths frequently have eleven circuits rather than the seven of the classical version. Sig Lonegren (2007:139), for instance, links this eleven-path version with musical notes (A-A#-B-C-C#-D-D#-E-F-F#-G-G#), as well as with the twelve signs of the zodiac, beginning with Aries, rather than to the walking process.

Lonegren also quotes Rena Querido’s *The golden age of Chartres: the teachings of a mystery school & the eternal feminine* (1987), in

which she suggests that the four segments of the Chartres labyrinth may be read as the four parts of the Mass: “(1) evangelium, the awakening; (2) offertory, the sacrifice; (3) consecration, the transubstantiation; and (4) communion, the culmination” (Lonegren, 2007: 149).

However, such esoteric approaches to, and reading of labyrinths and their meanings are not without their critics. Jaskolski (1997:172) notes: “An example of the questionable esoteric direction that the interest in labyrinths seems to be taking in English-speaking countries is the book that appeared in the autumn of 1993 in German translation: Sig Lonegren: *Labyrinths: ancient myths and modern uses*. This was the first edition; the book is now in its fourth revised and updated edition. No less esoteric is Patrick Conty’s *The genesis and geometry of the labyrinth: architecture, hidden language, myths, and rituals* (2002), which is more about knots than the subjects of the subtitle. There is no lack of ingenuity in those studying, and writing about labyrinths.

There are also those Christian critics who are just as intolerant as the critics of esotericism, condemning what they perceive as the occultism of labyrinths. In a piece entitled *The labyrinth: a walk to life or a walk to death?*, Muse (2010) argues:

As we walk the labyrinth we are in some cases knowingly or as the case with most people unknowingly entering into a covenant agreement with the demonic being initiated just by using the labyrinth as one innocently uses a Ouija Board thinking they are just playing a game. We become joined with the powers of darkness and put ourselves at the mercy of the spirits who will lead us to destruction.

Unfortunately, the rather dismal quality of the writing certainly cannot be overlooked quite as facilely as the author overlooks the presence of labyrinths within the walls of several of Europe’s great cathedrals. The presence of a *domus Daedali* within the walls of a *domus Dei*, the author implies, symbolises the presence of demonic darkness within the very confines of Christianity; it is the unseen canker in the heart of the rose. Of course, the author is not alone in this stance towards labyrinths. Carl Teichrib argues that “the labyrinth is, by its theological nature, an inter-religious and deeply mystical device” (Teichrib, 2010). Consequently, it does not square with Christian, and more particularly, Old-Testament Scripture, in which believers are warned “to refrain from anything used in pagan practice” and to heed the whole Book of Jeremiah as “a warning against involvement

in alternative religious practices” (Teichrib, 2010). The church becomes a conservative, dogmatic, intolerant Old-Testament fortress in the war against unbelievers. It may be seen as a bastion of unquestioning fundamentalist devoutness in a universal landscape of heathens, pagans, and generally perverse ungodliness. Its adherents put on the armour of God; aggression and violence characterise some aspects of its *modus operandi* – a far cry from the love and compassion of the New Testament. Their church becomes the sanctum from which they can launch their crusades against most forms of liberalism and into whose safety they can return. While adherents are permitted into the church’s literal and symbolic structure, non-believers are kept at bay. Crossing the threshold in either direction presumes a particular mindset, a narrowly-defined mental space.

However, in the course of his rejection of labyrinths as symbols of “the Christian way”, Teichrib (2010) does provide, whether deliberately or unconsciously, an interesting quadripartite model of the labyrinth-walking process by which to structure his criticisms:

- embarking on the journey;
- following the path;
- reaching the center [sic];
- the path of completion: returning from the center [sic].

There is, apparently, no lack of ingenuity in those writing against labyrinths either.

8. Three-dimensional labyrinths

Generally speaking, labyrinths as structures belong to the ancient world. Several of these have been described by ancient travellers. Pliny (1970:567), for example records four of them:

- The Egyptian, of which a description is given by Herodotus and Strabo, was situated to the east of the Lake of Moeris, opposite the ancient site of Arsinoë or Crocodilopolis.
- The Cretan, said to have been built by Daedalus on the plan of the Egyptian, is famous for its connection with the legend [not “myth”, we note] of the Minotaur.
- The Lemnian was similar in construction to the Egyptian with 150 columns.

- The Italian, was a highly intricate series of chambers in the lower part of the tomb of Porsena at Clusium.

Pliny (1970:567) also applies the word to a crude drawing on the ground or pavement; this constitutes a rudimentary definition of the delineated labyrinth.

Pliny's exempla are corroborated by Brewer's list (2001:654), which contains a further four, namely

- the Cretan conduit, which had 1 000 branches or turnings;
- the labyrinth of Clusium, made by Lars Porsens, King of Etruria, for his tomb;
- the Samian, which Theodorus designed (540 BCE); and
- the labyrinth at Woodstock, built by Henry II to protect the Fair Rosamund.

We observe Brewer's crafty attempt to pass off a hedge maze – Rosamund's Bower – as a labyrinth. This is a symptomatic example of the confused (and confusing) definitions offered by dictionaries and reference works. (For a further discussion, cf. Ulliyatt, 2009.)

Of the labyrinths noted by Pliny and others the prime examples are the Egyptian and the Cretan Labyrinth. Of the former, little is reputed to remain today, although in 1888, sufficient remained for Sir Flinders Petrie to determine at least its orientation and its considerable size – some 304 metres by 244 metres (a little over 74 000 square metres). Petrie's speculations about the function of the structure have been, and continue to be, debated. This debate is less likely to persist with the recent Mataha Expedition's geophysical explorations of the Harawa area (Egypt), partly because of their use of geophysical techniques rather than traditional archaeological methods. Their findings are certainly challenging: "The geophysic survey ... can now officially verify the occurrence of large parts of the labyrinth as described by the classic authors at the study area." (Mataha expedition, 2010.)

Here is one such "classic" author's account. In his *Histories* (II, 148), Herodotus (1996:180) describes the Egyptian Labyrinth in substantial detail:

The pyramids ... surpass description, and are severally equal to a number of the greatest works of the Greeks, but the labyrinth surpasses the pyramids. It has twelve courts, all of them roofed,

with gates exactly opposite one another, six looking to the north, and six to the south. A single wall surrounds the entire building. There are two different sorts of chambers throughout – half under ground, half above ground, the latter built on the former; the whole number of these chambers is three thousand, fifteen hundred of each kind. The upper chambers I myself passed through and saw, and what I say concerning them is from my own observation; of the underground I can only speak from report: for the keepers of the building could not be got to show them, since they contained (as they said) the sepulchres of the kings who built the labyrinth, and also those of the sacred crocodiles. Thus it is from hearsay only that I can speak of the lower chambers. The upper chambers, however, I saw with my own eyes, and found them to excel all other human productions; for the passages through the houses, and the varied windings of the paths across the courts, excited me in infinite admiration, as I passed from the courts into chambers, and from the chambers into colonnades, and from the colonnades into fresh houses, and again from these into courts unseen before. The roof was throughout of stone, like the walls; and the walls were carved all over with figures; every court was surrounded with a colonnade, which was built of white stones, exquisitely fitted together. At the corner of the labyrinth stand a pyramid, forty fathoms high, with large figures engraved on it; which is entered by a subterranean passage.

Familiar aspects of liminality recur here: the bifurcated structure manifesting its three-dimensionality; the subterranean structure; the agglomeration of “courts”, “chambers”, “colonnades”, and “houses”; the vast wall enclosing the entire building, to name but three. The primary function of the underground chambers, according to Herodotus, is to serve as “sepulchres of the kings”. In other translations, these have been called “tombs” (Peck quoted in Mataha expedition, 2010) or places containing “coffins” (Orcutt, 2010).

Similarly, depending on which translation one uses, the pathways become “varied windings” (Herodotus, 1996:180), “baffling and intricate passages” (Mataha expedition, 2010) or “the windings – going in and out through the courts, in their extreme complication” (Orcutt, 2010). These variations in translation present readers with a similar variety of meanings, and prevent any definitive reading of the relevant liminal matters. The “varied windings” evoke the image of the meander rather than the contorted passages of a labyrinth; these are evoked in the words, “baffling and intricate passages” while the rather clumsier “windings ... in their extreme complication” seem to evoke a serpentine nature of a much more convoluted

variety. Self-evidently, these differences in definition – which manifest the translators' interpretations – affect any understanding of what Herodotus is attempting to describe.

The labyrinth's underground passages, it may be speculated, were deliberately bewildering to prevent the invasion and desecration of the tombs, even those that may have been only cenotaphs (empty tombs). We note, too, that the 50% above-ground/50% below-ground division of the chambers also manifests an archetypal image of human burial: the corpse below ground (in the darkness) with its identifying symbol – whether building (mausoleum) or token (grave-stone or cross) – above ground (in the daylight).

The Knossos Labyrinth – the capital letter “L” has become standard practice – remains the better, perhaps even best, known, primarily as the setting for the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the interwoven stories of Minos, Pasiphae, the Minotaur, Theseus and Ariadne, among others. Even the story of Sir Arthur Evans' excavations and reconstructions at Knossos has acquired a mystique of its own, one that is even more beset with debate than Petrie's. Much of this debate arises from the necessarily speculative interpretations of the evidence, scant as it often is. The process is not without its hazards, however:

Incompleteness of explanation just has to be lived with sometimes. What we have to avoid doing is filling in the missing details with wild speculation or making the mistake of supposing that an incomplete explanation is a fundamentally wrong explanation. (Baggini, 2002:43-44.)

Baggini's caveat is equally pertinent to some of the extravagant esotericism already mentioned.

From classical times to the present day, diverse aspects of the Daedalus and Icarus myth have inspired artists, writers and composers, not least because of the enigma of the Labyrinth's very existence. No archaeological evidence of its existence has been found to date, but this is scarcely surprising, given the earthquake of 1700 BCE which seriously damaged or destroyed large portions of the palace which were subsequently rebuilt, only to suffer later tremors and further rebuilding, until about 1400 BCE, when the final destruction of the palaces occurred (Edwards *et al.*, 1980:141). Alert readers of the various classical versions of the myth will be aware of Ovid's description of the Knossos or Cretan Labyrinth (Melville, 1986:176):

Appearances

Were all confused; he led the eye astray
By a mazy multitude of winding ways,
Just as Meander plays among the meads
Of Phrygia and in its puzzling flow
Glides back and forth and meets itself and sees
Its waters on their way and winds along,
Facing sometimes its source, sometimes the sea.
So Daedalus in countless corridors,
Built bafflement, and hardly could himself
Make his way out, so puzzling was the maze.

The Knossos Labyrinth, it would seem, is not a labyrinth after all but a maze.

Labyrinths as structures are three-dimensional agglomerations of rooms, passages, stairways built above, below, and at ground level, and are thus devoid of any single unifying pathway. They enclose space in a multiplicity of ways. The constructs of “inside” and “outside” are manifest physically in the presence of internal and external walls, which constitute boundaries between “in” and “out”, between “here” and “there”; while roofs and floors (at their interface with walls) contain space within the parameters of “top” and “bottom”, or “up” and “down”.

That the way in and the way out are one and the same in the three-dimensional labyrinth adds a further dimension: “The labyrinth is simultaneously inextricable and impenetrable. Those inside cannot get out and those outside cannot get in.” (Lamb, 2008:385.) These obstacles to entry and exit establish several figurative dimensions to the labyrinth. It is a place of confinement, whether to protect the world from its inhabitant (as in the Minotaur’s case) or whether to protect the inhabitant from the world (as in the case of Rosamund’s Bower). Thus, it acquires metaphorical yet paradoxical overtones of both constraint and sanctuary. The labyrinth’s inextricability makes it a place of imprisonment from which escape is extremely problematic, if not impossible. This inextricability also means that the labyrinth may become a place of death (literal or metaphorical), if its inhabitant is neglected or abandoned within its confines. In addition, the multiple levels of the Knossos Palace – in some places three floors deep, at others, five – adds an inevitable literal and symbolic darkness to those spaces below ground – characterising descent, evil, and hell, as well as threat, confusion, loss of direction, terror, the unknown, and other symbolic meanings. Inhabitants may well be

entombed within its space, regardless of whether they are, literally or metaphorically, alive or dead.

At the same time, the labyrinth's impenetrability means that the intervention of a possible saviour or redemption figure, whether Ariadne, Theseus, or another, is made inordinately difficult at the mundane level, requiring characteristically mythic ingenuity for its solution. Further, the combination of inextricability and impenetrability means that the individual wishing to get *in* is detained in the *outside* world (despite the broadness of its boundaries), while the individual wishing to get *out* is detained in the *inside* world. It is an exquisite double bind; neither person is able to cross the access/egress threshold, which then comes to epitomise stasis, a barrier to transliminal mobility, and the inability to solve the spatial problem of the maze, particularly those portions constructed in subterranean darkness.

If the primary function of the Egyptian labyrinth was to prevent access to the sacred spaces of the dead, the essential mythic function of the Cretan Labyrinth was to prevent egress. It was intended to confine, and prevent the escape of, the Minotaur – that quintessential example of hybridity – while, at the same time, hiding Minos's own shame at his bull-child's very existence.

Of course, if the impenetrability/inextricability combination is regarded as an absolute rather than relative situation, then some awkward logistical questions arise. For example, how was the Minotaur led into the labyrinth, and by whom? (We recall that even Daedalus, its designer/builder, had considerable difficulty in finding his way out.) The next question is: How did those escorting the Minotaur into the labyrinth extricate themselves from it? Alternatively, if they were unable to find their way out, were they simply abandoned, destined to be the first course of his cannibalistic diet?

The relative approach to the impenetrability/inextricability combination allows more scope. The labyrinth is impenetrable only to those who do not know its complicated structure. Thus, the cranially-bovine Minotaur – with his concomitant bull-headedness, perhaps would be unable to work out an escape route, while the sacrificial Athenian youths and girls would, as newcomers, have no knowledge of the labyrinth's structural complexities. However, as the labyrinth's builder, the cunning Daedalus possesses crucial "insider" information about its convolutions, and, hence, could exit, if only just. He could then pass on the solution to the labyrinthine puzzle – the ball of thread trick – to Ariadne. (In some versions of the myth, Theseus

is described as one of Daedalus’s relatives, another reason for his collaboration with Ariadne to facilitate her lover’s escape.)

The Egyptian labyrinth’s bipartite structure – half above and half below ground – locates it on the boundary between light and dark, earth and sky, heaven and hell, life and death. It becomes a metaphorical limbo, an in-between space manifesting itself as an intermediate neither/nor.

Yet, as protection for its dead inhabitants, and as a foil to those who would perpetrate sacrilege, the very darkness of its subterranean portion, combined with intricately convoluted passageways, creates an unfathomable, impenetrable space, inhibiting, if not preventing, movement into as well as within. The transition from light to dark, from seeing to not-seeing begins at the threshold itself. Further, the readiness of movement, which one would presume on the upper section, does not even characterise that part either. Indeed, so complex are these “winding passages” that, according to Strabo’s account of his visit, “no stranger can find his way either into any court or out of it without a guide” (Orcutt, 2010). The guide, the Ariadne figure, or her Daedalian counterpart remains central to the possibility and opportunity of transcending the thresholds of three-dimensional labyrinths.

As we noted earlier, the Knossos Labyrinth is a de facto maze. In her documentary film, *The Minotaur’s island*, Bettany Hughes (1998) points out that the palace at Knossos has seven entrances, more than sufficient to corroborate its identity as a maze rather than a labyrinth. This, in turn, means that it has no unicursal path leading, unobstructed, to the centre. Indeed, given the structure of the whole palace at Knossos, it would be difficult to identify any part as the centre, except perhaps, the large courtyard, one of the few places from which Daedalus and Icarus could have feasibly launched their escape flight. Quite clearly, there would be no need for Daedalus and Icarus to “launch” themselves from a two-dimensional unicursal labyrinth. This is one of several problems arising from assuming that the coins excavated at Knossos, depicting two-dimensional designs, represent the labyrinth itself. It should be remembered that, from Ovid’s description, the Knossos Labyrinth is a three-dimensional maze, and is thus unrelated to the delineated designs. Not surprisingly, ingenuity continues to have its way: some authors have proposed that the delineated labyrinth design constitutes the route required to escape the complexities of the Knossos Labyrinth. That they escaped by air (at least in some versions) takes them, *contra naturam*, into the element of the birds and the gods, one that is

unnatural for man. Daedalus and his son enter into the unknown space of the skies, the wind, clouds, and, inevitably, the sun.

The question of whether the Knossos Labyrinth is no more than a maze-like structure below the palace or whether it comprises the whole palace with multiple storeys offers divergent symbolic and liminal meanings. For our present purposes, we shall assume it is a structure *beneath* the palace itself, not least because the palace-as-a-whole argument creates many difficulties, difficulties beyond the purview of this article.

At the Knossos Palace, we again encounter the above-ground/below-ground structural bifurcation with all its associated images and symbols. If the function of the Egyptian labyrinth was impenetrability, the prevention of intrusion into the necropolis, the function of the Knossos Labyrinth was inextricability, the prevention of escape into the world. The ubiquitous darkness of the subterranean portion of the labyrinth serves as an impalpable but powerful barrier compounding the obstacles inherent in the structure itself. At the same time, it embodies chthonic symbolism.

Since the Knossos Labyrinth is multicursal, there is no way of knowing where (within its multitude of chambers, corridors, and dead-ends) the Minotaur might have concealed himself. The inscrutable darkness of the environment aggravates the menace of his brute strength; both serve as barriers to those sacrificial victims forced to enter the Labyrinth. By virtue of the Minotaur's cannibalism, the Labyrinth acts as a place of unholy sacrifice. In becoming the inverse of a place of the sacrifice to the gods – a temple – it becomes a grotesque travesty, the young Athenians being sent to their grisly deaths at the hands of the hybrid monster – part human, part beast.

Of course, understanding the hybrid Minotaur's different symbolic roles affects one's "reading" of the labyrinth's meaning. Certainly, from one point of view, he is the subhuman monster, yet he is more than that; he is the outcast, set apart from his parents and siblings as well as from normal society by his physical and temperamental abnormality. He is deracinated. His father, King Minos, interns him for nothing more or less than being himself: the scapegoat of the gods. Unlike the biblical scapegoat sent into the desert's pathless openness, bearing the sins of the people, the Minotaur is hidden away within the labyrinth, bearing not only the sins of his mother but also the mark of Poseidon's revenge: his hybridity. He is, in part, the victim of his father's hubris which, in turn, led to his refusal to acknowledge his folly in challenging the power of the gods by not

sacrificing the white bull from the sea that Poseidon sent. And in the Christian transformation of the myth, the Minotaur becomes Satan himself, as we see in Kern’s (2000:136-137, Figure 235) discussion:

‘Ecce minotaurus vorat omnes, quos Laborinthos. Implicat: Infernum hic notat, hic zabulum.’ (See, here the Minotaur devours everyone enveloped by the labyrinth. This represents hell and that is the devil.) [...] In the poem, the world is likened to the labyrinth, which is ruled by the devil (*zabulus*), who imprisons and devours the citizens of the world until Theseus/Christ finds him, with the help of Ariadne’s thread and vanquishes him.

The labyrinth may also become the place within which the dark forces of instinct and the unconscious reside – and are, ideally, contained. This place is no longer located in the individual’s external, “outside” world but is now deeply embedded within the psyche. Unbridled, these forces manifest in dark, perverse, instinctual, violent, evil, sub-human behaviours. If the Minotaur emblematises such forces, then the labyrinth is transformed into the mental hospital, an asylum to protect society from the dangers of psychopathy and to protect certain inmates from society. In this role, the asylum assures those living “outside” its walled boundaries that they are safe from its inhabitants secured “inside”. In stereotypical terms, “normality” prevails in the external world; and “abnormality”, in its internal counterpart. The threshold between the two worlds is guarded, sometimes like a military-style border post, while the inmates are frequently dressed in quite abnormal outfits, such as bright orange overalls, to make them readily identifiable, should they manage to “escape” into the regions of normality. Such conspicuous clothing labels these individuals as “abnormal” (according to societal definitions):³ “By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human.” (Goffman, 1990:15.) Those outside the asylum are thus warned that the inmates are possibly/probably/definitely “not quite human” individuals who have eluded the systems of boundary barriers and their function of containment. Thus, inmates are stigmatised and metamorphosed into scapegoats.

3 What constitutes “normality” and “abnormality” is open to serious question and debate, not least because it is “normal” society that decides the criteria for “abnormality”. The introduction of the idea of sanity into the equation simply compounds the problem (cf. Bentall, 2004, Chapter 3).

9. The labyrinth and the island

Liminally speaking, one should not ignore the fact that the Knossos Palace, in which the labyrinth is embedded, is located on an island:

... an island always has a potent effect on its inhabitants. Its frontiers are immutable, divinely determined rather than due to mere human vicissitudes. Strangers cannot easily cross them unnoticed or unopposed. This sense of being sea-protected, 'the envy of less happier lands', gives island people a sharp awareness of their identity and of their difference from everyone else. [...] An island home, in short, greatly enhances the belief in belonging to a chosen race that is native in every human breast. (Hawkes, 1968:41.)

The sea is the boundary and the border in both directions: entering or leaving. It keeps those on the island protected from outsiders but also confines them symbolically within its perimeters. The sea's littoral zones are also thresholds – simultaneously ways in and ways out. They have to be crossed in order to put to sea and leave the island, and then they have to be crossed at the destination, to leave the sea and arrive on the other shore.

As an island, Crete comprises an *area* possessing overtones of the inextricability and impenetrability that characterise the Knossos Labyrinth itself. With the advent of air travel and tourist invasions, this macrocosm/microcosm symbolism is now less powerful than in earlier centuries. Nonetheless, strong winds and rough seas in the Mediterranean may still prevent the arrival and departure of ferries, thus detaining their passengers involuntarily on the island.

As a zone of transition from island to mainland and vice versa, the sea itself may be perceived as a vast maze, requiring the necessary guidance of maps, stars, compasses, or navigational technology to perform Ariadne's trick of finding one's way safely to one's destination – the metaphorical centre? The primary task en route is to remain *on* the sea's surface. Yet the journey is not without its hidden dangers and potential dead-ends: shallows, rocks and shipwrecks *beneath* the surface, to say nothing of the confusion and bewilderment that inclement weather – mist and fog obfuscating daylight and darkness alike, or violent winds causing changes of direction, whether deliberate or accidental – as well as human error may overlay *onto* its turbulent surface.

10. Conclusion

Axiomatically, by virtue of their two- and three-dimensionality respectively, labyrinths as designs and labyrinths as structures raise different issues of liminality, of area and space, and of ritual behaviour. Consequently, they engender differing meanings. Such meanings are open to a multiplicity of “readings”, interpretations which depend on the location of the labyrinths, their inter-relationship with that location and its own symbolic meanings. In addition the meanings and interpretations are impacted by the specific circumstances of the labyrinth walkers themselves, such as their state of mind, the extent of their freedom, and the extent to which they project those states of mind and their individual personalities onto the labyrinth-walking process.

The process itself is open to several schemata, which are structured according to various symbolic meanings projected on the labyrinths. Depending on these widely differing perspectives, the labyrinth may be “read” as a spiritual, even Christian symbol or as a pagan embodiment of the demonic, to cite only two diverse examples. “Readings” of the labyrinth’s symbolic meanings vary according to the common sense, ingenuity, esoteric finesse/clumsiness, or sheer determination of their proponents to make their particular readings fit. To attempt to make some cohesive sense from such incommensurable writings about labyrinths is not dissimilar to facing the Minotaur – without Ariadne’s thread.

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Key concepts:

Knossos Labyrinth
labyrinth-walking process
labyrinths
liminality

Kernbegrippe:

Knossos Labirint
labirint-loopproses
labirinte
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