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# THESEUS IN THE LABYRINTH

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**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in light of the distinction between labyrinth and maze. According to the myth, Ariadne helped Theseus to escape from a labyrinth by giving him ball of string. But if a labyrinth is unlike a maze in presenting no choices to the wanderer, then why did Theseus need a clue? Though this question has not been systematically addressed in the scholarship, two lines of response can be identified. First, some scholars maintain that the 'labyrinth' in the myth must be a multicursal maze, for otherwise the story would make no sense. Secondly, others hold that they can make sense of the myth even if the labyrinth has but a single path. I argue against both positions in favour of an account that highlights the constructive use of contradiction in myth.

**Keywords**: Theseus, labyrinth, Ariadne, Minotaur, maze

## 1. Introduction

According to several ancient writers, Theseus went to Crete, slew the Minotaur, and liberated fourteen young Athenians.[1] This he accomplished with the help of 'fair-tressed' Ariadne,[2] who gave the clue of the labyrinth to him. The clue was a thread that he could unwind on the inward path and roll up to find his way out. These are the central actions of a well-known episode in the Theseus myth.

[1] See especially Diod. Sic. 4.60.1-4, 77.3-4; Apollod. *Epit.* 1.7-9; Plut. *Thes*. 15–17, 19, 21. See also the discussion in section 3.
[2] Homer, *Il*. 18.592.

The labyrinth in the Minotaur story is generally assumed to be a maze.[3] However, a Cretan labyrinth is not a maze.[4] A maze offers many paths and requires many choices. A maze need not have a centre, but if it does, then the wayfarer might never discover it, and if she does, she might never find her way out. A labyrinth, by contrast, consists of a single path and offers no choices. As long as the wanderer follows its road, he will reach its centre; if he turns where he must turn then he will find the exit. The labyrinth is thus not only different from the maze but opposite to it.

The distinction between labyrinth and maze is of significance for an understanding of the Theseus myth. Since a Cretan labyrinth has only one path, fourteen young Athenians could not have been locked in it, Theseus could not have gone off course, and Ariadne's thread was not necessary for escape. If the labyrinth in the story were a Cretan labyrinth, in other words, then the oldest episode in the myth of Athens' greatest hero[5] appears to be reduced to nonsense. The premise of the story makes little sense on its own terms and appears to be inconsistent with its central act.

## 2. Labyrinth as Maze

In terms of logical possibilities, the labyrinth in the Theseus myth can be interpreted in three ways: it is either a labyrinth, or a maze, or neither a labyrinth nor a maze. The first option leads straight to the paradox that I have just sketched out. I will return to it later in the paper, after reviewing and arguing against both second and third options.

One natural response to the puzzle is to insist that the labyrinth in the myth must be a multicursal maze. Such a view is advanced by Umberto Eco, for example, who observes that 'the Ariadne thread is useless' in a labyrinth

[3] This assumption is evident in both popular writing on Greek myth and scholarly work. As an example of the former, Edith Hamilton says that 'one [can] go endlessly along [the labyrinth's] twisting paths without ever finding the exit' (1942:212). For an example of the latter, see Kotsonas 2018:367 who defines the Cretan labyrinth as 'the maze created by Daedalus to conceal the Minotaur' and uses the terms 'labyrinth' and 'maze' interchangeably throughout.

[4] On the Cretan or 'classical' labyrinth (Eco 1984:80), see Kern 2000: fig. 1 and Saward 2017. For a classification of labyrinths by type, see Kern 2000: ch. 7. For my purposes, it makes no difference whether the labyrinth has the usual seven circuits, more, or fewer; it is likewise unimportant whether it be square or round. I henceforth use the term 'labyrinth' to designate a Cretan labyrinth.

[5] I paraphrase Walker 1995:16. I do not assume that there was a canonical version of the myth.

'since one cannot get lost'.[6] In a similar vein, Paul Harris argues there has been 'a crucial slippage in terminology' in the telling of the Theseus myth: 'the ... Labyrinth would technically have been a maze, because it would have been multicursal (having multiple paths) with dead ends in it, whereas a labyrinth properly speaking is unicursal (having one path).'[7]

This argument proceeds without any survey of the meaning of the word 'labyrinth', resting instead on two claims about the logic of myth. The first is that myths ought to make sense and the second that an interpretation of 'labyrinth' as maze gives a more 'logical' meaning to the Theseus myth than an interpretation as labyrinth. But are these claims true? Do myths have to make sense? And why should it be an objection to a myth or interpretation of a myth that it be illogical?

Though I do not have a theory of mythical coherence, nor in fact any general theory of myth, it is clear there are different ways in which 'things' make, or do not make, sense. And in some ways of making sense, a myth does not need to make sense. For example, a myth does not have to make sense if this means conforming to known laws of nature: magical sandals, invisible rings, and so on - all these have their place. On the other hand, a myth is a kind of story and stories have a logic to them. When things do not add up, or are left unresolved, we wonder why; we see this as a difficulty or a weakness. Myth, it is clear, cannot support an illogicality that destroys the story.

Eco and Harris imply that the 'labyrinth' in the Theseus myth should be taken to refer to a maze not a labyrinth because this makes better sense of the narrative. At first sight, this looks to be true but seems somewhat less secure upon reflection. In the first place, Ariadne's thread would not lead Theseus to the Minotaur or the centre of the maze except insofar as it enabled him to eliminate every incorrect path; in a maze of sufficient size this ponderous method would tend to the impossible. Secondly, Theseus would have to remember which paths he had already traversed in order to avoid repeating mistakes for, unlike Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs, he would have to roll up the thread when retracing steps. This would not be straightforward in an extensive and many-branching maze.[8] For these reasons, then, an interpretation of 'labyrinth' as maze does not lead to a wholly satisfying account of the Theseus narrative. We seem to be caught

[6] Eco 1984:80. The interpretation of Eco that I present borrows from Harris (2014:137). It is noteworthy that Eco regards the Cretan labyrinth, maze, and net as species of labyrinth. This is, to my mind, needless obfuscation.

[7] Harris 2014:136. Cf. Kern 2000:23 and see also Doob 1990:40-43.

[8] On the connection between Ariadne and Arachne, see Ruskin 1907:XXIII and Miller 1976:66. On some versions of the myth, Ariadne gave to Theseus, not a piece of string, but a magical wreath. See Hyginus, *Poet. astr.* 2.5.

between an interpretation that leads to inconsistency and one that looks incomplete, like a joke that does not quite work.

### 3. Meaning of the Word Λαβύρινθος

As I noted above, the Eco-Harris argument does not seek to establish how the term 'labyrinth' was actually understood by Greek speakers of various times and places but, at most, how it should have been understood if people had been thinking clearly about the myth. I must now look into the question of what the word meant, both in general and in the context of the Theseus story. For though the figures of labyrinth and maze can be differentiated precisely and geometrically, the meaning of the Theseus narrative depends not merely on the definition of 'objects' but also on the significance of words.

The word 'labyrinth' belongs to 'das Vorgriechische', a substrate language, from which many Greek words, including those with the suffix -ινθος, are borrowed.[9] The etymology of the term is disputed, with some following Maximilian Mayer and Arthur Evans in deriving it from the Carian word *labrun*, meaning 'axe',[10] and others, including John Ruskin tracing it to λαύρα, 'path', 'alley', or 'narrow road', a suggestion that is also mooted by Robert Beekes. The latter scholar suggests in addition that the word might be connected to the Carian god Δαβραυνδος.[11]

The first probable use of the word 'labyrinth' occurs in the Mycenaean dialect of Greek, in a phrase written in Linear B 'on a small clay tablet' discovered at Knossos:[12]

> *pa-si/te-o-i/meri*
> *da-pu-ri-to-jo/po-ti-ni-ja me-ri.* [13]

The word *da-pu-ri-to-jo* is plausibly transliterated as λαβυρίνθοιο, in which case the phrase can be converted into classical Greek as follows:

> πᾶσι θεοῖς μέλι...λαβυρίνθου ποτνίαι μέλι...
> to all the gods honey... to the mistress of the labyrinth honey...

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[9] Beekes 2009:13-14 and 819.
[10] Mayer 1892:191 and Evans 1901:108-111. On the meaning of the Lydian word *labrun*, see Plut., *Quaest. Graec*. 45.
[11] See Ruskin 1907:XXIII, and Beekes 2009:819.
[12] Kerenyi and Manheim 1996:89-90.
[13] See Knossos Gg 702, and Kerenyi and Manheim 1996:89-90. See also KN Oa 745.2 and KN Xd 140.1, as noted in Kotsonas 2018:370. For discussion, see the references in Kotsonas 2018:370n28. See also Litinas 2006.

The mistress of the labyrinth 'must have been a Great Goddess',[14] for she received an equal portion of honey to all the other gods combined.[15]

The first securely attested use of the term λαβύρινθος occurs in Herodotus, who applies it to a temple in Egypt near the City of Crocodiles,[16] most likely the mortuary temple of Amenemhet III at present-day Hawara. Herodotus describes the temple as having an 'extremely twisting and winding course... through the courts.'[17] To this extent the Egyptian labyrinth seems to have been a building that was difficult to traverse. We must remind ourselves, however, that a true labyrinth is not in any way confusing—it is winding yet secure, offering one path to the middle and end.[18]

Plato is the earliest extant author to use the word λαβύρινθος to mean labyrinth. The relevant dialogue is *Euthydemus* and the context one in which Socrates is describing the activity of dialectic. He says:

> When we got to the kingly art and were giving it a thorough inspection to see whether it might be the one which both provided and created happiness, just there we [fell into a] labyrinth (εἰς λαβύρινθον): when we thought we had come to the end, we turned round again and reappeared practically at the beginning of our search in just as much trouble as when we started out. (291b-c; Sprague translation)

The metaphor of a movement to a centre, a pivot, and an ineluctable return to the beginning fits the labyrinth figure exactly and does not apply to the multicursal maze. In this context, at least, it is safe to assume that λαβύρινθος means labyrinth and not maze. Moreover, Plato's casual use of the term shows that the word was part of the Athenian vocabulary by the late fifth century BC.

Visual depictions of a labyrinth in a Cretan context or one suggesting the Theseus myth give further support to the claim that 'labyrinth' meant labyrinth and that the λαβύρινθος in the story was taken to be a true

[14] Kerenyi and Manheim 1996:90.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *Histories* 2.148. See Lloyd 1970:90 and Doob 1990:21n6.
[17] *Histories* 2.148, Lloyd translation. See Lloyd 1970:83.
[18] On the question of why Herodotus should apply the word 'labyrinth' to this building, two answers have been put forward. The first connects the word to a similar sounding expression in Egyptian, whereas the second sees the application as metaphorical, fitting on account of the complex structure of the temple or mortuary tomb. The metaphor is problematic, however, since the true labyrinth is not complex but simple. Cf. Diodorus Siculus, who reports the view that Daedalus used the Egyptian labyrinth as a blueprint for construction at Knossos (1.61). Pliny makes a related but weaker claim: Daedalus imitated only a 100th part of the Egyptian original (HN 36.13(19)). For further discussion and a useful illustration, see Lloyd 1970.

labyrinth. The earliest clear depiction of the Cretan labyrinth in the context of the myth is on a 'pendant from the Delion on Paros' dating from the eighth century BC, which shows a 'seven circuit [labyrinth] on one side and two dancers of the γέρανος, the crane dance associated with Theseus, on the other'.[19] In addition, silver coins from Knossos (c. 500-430 BC) show labyrinth patterns on one side, with a human or divine head on the obverse,[20] and others a labyrinth or meander with bull's head or a star.[21] The meander, 'it needs very little imagination to see, has reference to the labyrinth in which the monster was alleged to dwell',[22] presumably because it *is* this figure in linear form.[23] We must not lose sight of the fact that the familiar Cretan labyrinth is itself a picture of a physical structure in which somebody can walk through.

Remarkably, since labyrinth figures can easily be transformed into mazes, very nearly all subsequent representations until the Middle Ages fit this pattern in linking Theseus and the Minotaur to a labyrinth not a maze.[24] In most cases, the word  does not appear along with the figure, though it sometimes does, such as on a mosaic discovered at Pompeii (c. 70 AD), on

[19] Kotsonas 2018:375 and fig. 5. I have substituted 'labyrinth' for Kotsonas's 'maze', since what is shown on the pendant is, unambiguously, a Cretan labyrinth (see note 1). Another early representation of Theseus with 'the other young male and female victims looking on, and Ariadne holding the string that will help them get out of the labyrinth', is found on a Cycladic relief amphora dating from 670 to 660 BC (Walker 1995:16).

[20] See Matthews 1922: figures 25, 30 and 31.

[21] See Matthews 1922: figures 20, 21 and 22. The Minotaur was named Asterios or Asterion (Kerenyi and Manheim 1996:105). See also Kern 2000: figures 39-48.

[22] Matthews 1922:44. According to Nonius Marcellus, 'compiler of the first surviving Latin dictionary' (Doob 1990:41n3), the meander is 'a kind of design similar to the labyrinth' (quoted ibid.). See also Kern 2000: figure 43 and accompanying note.

[23] Kerenyi and Manheim 1996:90. For a contrary claim that the meander figure is merely decorative and does not symbolise the labyrinth, see Litinas 2006: footnote 21.

[24] My argument does not depend on the claim that the mythical labyrinth is never represented visually as a maze; that the Theseus myth is linked to a true labyrinth in many or most cases is sufficient to motivate the inquiry. In this regard, there are at most two depictions of multicursal mazes from antiquity and the Middle Ages: the so-called 'maze fresco' from Knossos (Kerenyi and Manheim 1996: fig. 32a and 32b), discovered and reconstructed by Sir Arthur Evans, and 'a wall labyrinth (only vaguely multicursal) at Poitiers dating from the twelfth century' Doob 1990:40. See Kern 2000, figures 242-243 and Matthews 1922: fig. 5. See also Kern 2000:65, fig. 43. The maze fresco is of Cretan provenance, of course, but neither depiction is explicitly connected to Theseus. Moreover, Doob 1990:40n3 has raised doubts about whether the maze fresco does in fact depict a multicursal maze. Similarly, Kern argues that the wall labyrinth is not a maze but a poor representation of the path through the labyrinth, that is, Ariadne's thread (see 211 and plate 17).

which has been written the phrase: *labyrinthus hic habitat minotaurus*.[25] The makers of these artifacts seem to say that Theseus escaped from a labyrinth, an implication that holds independently of the specific meanings of the Greek word.

Moving on now to the literary record, sources going back to Homer preserve many allusions to the Theseus story, but no explicit references to the labyrinth in the context of the myth survive prior to the third century BC.[26] Descriptions are common in the Roman period, however, 'probably in response to [Crete's] annexation by Rome',[27] and in these narratives, it has been argued, the word 'labyrinth' means maze.[28]

The later Greek sources present an account of the Theseus story in which the labyrinth is a prison which is difficult to traverse on account of its intricate design. For example, Callimachus of Alexandria, '[the] earliest surviving source [who] explicitly associates the Minotaur with the labyrinth',[29] describes the labyrinth as γναμπτός (curved) and σκολιός, that is, winding or tangled,[30] and Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch allude to its winding (σκολιάς) passageways or paths (τοὺς εἱλιγμούς).[31] Similarly, Apollodorus describes the labyrinth as a chamber 'that with its tangled windings perplexed the outward way';[32] he also writes that 'he who entered it could not find his way out', being 'shut off from the unperceived out-road by many-twisted windings' (πολυπλόκοις καμπαῖς).[33]

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether the meaning of the Theseus myth depends on reading labyrinth as maze, for this is what is in

[25] See Kern 2000:98 fig. 107 and Doob 1990:43 and 47, fig. 4. For discussion, see Heller 1961.
[26] In the *Iliad*, Homer sings of the shield of Achilles, and a dance floor like 'unto that which in wide Cnossos Daedalus fashioned of old for fair-tressed Ariadne.' (18.590-592) Some writers have interpreted this as a reference to the labyrinth as a dance (Kern 2000). 'The first [explicit] literary reference to [the Theseus story seems to occur] in Sappho … who mentioned the fourteen victims … in a lost poem.' (Walker 1995:16). For discussion and references to certain lost sources that dealt with Cretan mythology, see Kotsonas 2018:371.
[27] Kotsonas 2018:371.
[28] See Doob 1990:41. For discussion of the Latin sources, see Doob 1990, chapter 1. Pliny discusses four material structures designated as labyrinth: the Egyptian, Cretan, Lemnian and Etrurian. He regards the Cretan design as an imitation of the Egyptian. See HN 36.19 and, for discussion, Doob 1990.
[29] Kotsonas 2018:371.
[30] Callimachus, *Hymn to Delos* 311, in Mair 1921.
[31] Diod. Sic. 4.77.4 and Plut. *Thes*. 19.
[32] *Bibl.* 3.1.4. Translated by J.G. Frazer. According to Frazer, the embedded quote may be a line from Sophocles' lost play *Daedalus*.
[33] *Bibl.* 3.15.8.

question, it is noteworthy that the source material does not refer to any choices that the wanderer must make or say that the many windings of the labyrinth include forks or branches in the road.[34] In fact, the terms that designate curvature or winding can all apply to a continuous path such as a racecourse or a river. Moreover, Plutarch's description of the 'alternating motions' and 'unfoldings' of the γέρανος that Theseus danced when he reached Delos in imitation of the 'circling passages' (περιόδων καὶ διεξόδων) of the labyrinth seems to fit a labyrinth better than a maze.[35] There is no alternating motion applicable to a branching maze and its traversal.[36]

Suppose, however, that some of the literary sources do support an interpretation of labyrinth as maze. In this case, it would follow that the term λαβύρινθος carried a double and, indeed, opposite, meaning in the Greek language, much as 'labyrinth' does in present-day English. If λαβύρινθος was an auto-antonym which meant both labyrinth and maze, then the question arises as to which sense, if either, was primary. On this question, Hermann Kern, who is one of the world's foremost authorities on the topic, argues that the word originally referred to a labyrinth, but that '[this] visually simple concept' was by the third century BC 'eclipsed by the more complex notion of a "maze"'.[37] Thus, in his view, 'two distinct notions [were] obfuscated', 'resulting in unavoidable terminological confusion, which has not been accounted for until [the twentieth] century.'[38]

It is not necessary to appraise and evaluate Kern's thesis to recognise that it does not resolve the puzzle that we are working through. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur can be traced to the eighth century at least whereas, for Kern, the labyrinth concept was conflated with or eclipsed by the maze in the Hellenistic period. In its earlier retellings, at least, Ariadne helped Theseus to find his way out of a unicursal labyrinth, that is, apparently, a structure that one cannot get lost in. And this seems to be

[34] On this question of fork and branch, compare *Phaedo* 108a4, where Socrates takes exception to the claim of Aeschylus' Telephus that 'only one single path leads to Hades'. According to the manuscripts, Socrates uses the phrase σχίσεις καὶ περιόδους to describe the path as he conceives it, that is, 'forks and circuits', but which many editors correct to σχίσεις καὶ τριόδους, 'forks and three-fold paths'. See Rowe 1993: 268.

[35] Plut. *Thes*. 21.

[36] Apollod. *Epit*. 1.7-9.

[37] Kern 2000:23.

[38] Ibid. See also Kerenyi and Manheim 1996:93. It is tempting though speculative to account for the eclipse of the labyrinth by reference to the difficulty of understanding the Minotaur myth in terms of a true labyrinth.

exactly what is implied by the eighth-century pendant from the Delion on Paros.[39]

## 4. Paradox and Resolutions

As noted at the beginning of section 2, the labyrinth in the context of the Theseus myth is either labyrinth or maze or neither labyrinth nor maze. Since I have now eliminated the second option on both mythico-logical and historical grounds, it remains to consider the third before reconsidering the first.

One possible interpretation of the third option is that the labyrinth in the myth is a complex building akin to the Egyptian labyrinth. Both Liddell, Scott, and Jones and *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* define 'labyrinth' in this way, either as a 'large building consisting of numerous halls connected with intricate or tortuous passages',[40] or a 'large building with elaborate and complicated passageways (fr. which it is difficult to find a way out)',[41] that is to say, neither a Cretan labyrinth nor a many-branching maze.[42] Whatever the general merits of such an account, it is presently vulnerable to the same objections as the Eco-Harris argument. The 'neither-nor' option does not provide a satisfying interpretation of the myth and leaves the evidence linking the Theseus story to the Cretan labyrinth unaccounted for.

Penelope Doob offers a more sophisticated defence of the second option. On her view, the meaning of the labyrinth differs in the visual as opposed to the literary sources. In visual representations, the labyrinth is always a true labyrinth: it has a single path to the centre and back to the beginning.[43] By contrast, in literary representations, the labyrinth is always, or almost always, a maze: it has multiple paths which present multiple options to the wayfarer. The Minotaur myth in its literary retellings is, on her reading, inconsistent with pictorial representations of that story.

Doob attempts to resolve or ameliorate the difficulty by offering an interpretation of the respective figures that transcends opposition. '[The] best solution that can be found to the mystery is', she says, 'that classical and medieval eyes saw insufficient difference in the implications of the two

[39] See section 4. It is tempting to explain the eclipse of the labyrinth concept as driven by the attempt to make sense of the Minotaur myth.
[40] See LSJ ad loc.
[41] *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021).
[42] Strictly speaking, the Egyptian labyrinth might fit the definition of a multicursal maze with chambers serving as dead ends. Since I do not wish to enter into the difficult questions of reconstruction, I will simply bypass the matter by treating it as a distinct third option.
[43] For possible exceptions, see note 24.

models to warrant a new design.'[44] I understand Doob to mean that 'classical and medieval minds' thought of 'labyrinth' indeterminately as neither a labyrinth nor a maze, and as a figure somehow encompassing both. The ancient artists worked with an expansive λαβύρινθος concept that incorporated both labyrinth and maze.

Doob's argument can be questioned at several points. In the first place, the claim that there is a contradiction between the literary and visual depictions of the myth is less than secure. The Greek literary sources from Homer to Apollodorus do not show that the labyrinth of the Theseus story should be interpreted as a maze.[45] Moreover, this assertion is unimportant for the present inquiry, since the puzzle remains at the level of the visual sources alone, as Doob herself admits and emphasises. Diverging assessments of the scope of the paradox do not undermine the claim that it exists.

The main problem with Doob's proposal is that it does not help us to understand the Theseus story. To say that the word 'labyrinth' or the concept of the labyrinth was associated with both labyrinths and mazes, or that people of ancient and medieval times could not see the difference and indeed the opposition between the two, or regarded it as unimportant, simply restates the difficulty. We can state this objection more clearly by saying that Doob's argument leads to a dilemma. If the many visual depictions of Theseus and a labyrinth express a popular understanding, then the original puzzle remains. For these artists and their audiences, Theseus needed help to escape from a building which it is apparently impossible to get lost in. What then were they thinking when they contemplated the story of Ariadne's thread? On the other hand, if visual depictions do not express a popular understanding, then those most trained in the apprehension of shape and figure were unable to connect a specific geometrical form to the denouement of a famous Athenian myth. The implication that these artists were insensitive to the paradox is unacceptable; the idea that they were not bothered by it assumes what is in question. For these reasons, Doob's account is not a genuine solution: it does not make the myth any more intelligible; nor does it provide any reason for thinking that the myth's unintelligibility is constructive or perhaps part of its point.

[44] Doob 1990:59.

[45] The sources that Doob relies on are both late and Latin, and, for this reason, do not settle the matter.

## 5. Getting Lost in a Cretan Labyrinth

We have gone through several circuits and returned to the idea that the labyrinth in the myth is a labyrinth. This idea seemed undesirable for it created the paradox that motivated the search for an alternative. How could Theseus have gotten lost in the labyrinth if it had only one path? I now want to take up the question of whether this reasoning was too hasty and to explore, specifically, whether there might be a sense in which one can get lost in a labyrinth. There appear to be, broadly speaking, two ways in which this could work. On the first, the Minotaur's abode might be in some way objectively confusing or difficult to traverse despite its unicursal form. On the second, the meaning of the myth would turn on the relationship between the objective labyrinth structure and the hero's understanding of it; even if the building were not really difficult to navigate, it could perplex if viewed in a certain way.

In *Fors Clavicula*, John Ruskin advances an interpretation of the first sort. According to Ruskin, a three-dimensional labyrinth defined by walls presents no difficulty. But what if there were no walls, or, rather, if the 'walls' were not tangible? That would be another matter entirely. He writes:

> And recollect, upon this, that the word 'Labyrinth' properly means 'rope-walk', or 'coil-of-rope-walk', its first syllable being probably also the same as our English name 'Laura', 'the path', and its method perfectly given by Chaucer in the single line- 'And, for the house is crenkled to and fro'. And on this note, farther, first, that had the walls been real, instead of ghostly, there would have been no difficulty whatever in getting either out or in, for you could go no other way. But if the walls were spectral, and yet the transgression of them made your final entrance or return impossible, Ariadne's clue was needful indeed.[46]

Ruskin identifies the paradox of the myth with admirable clarity, but his solution seems *ad hoc*; there is, as it were, no trace of the spectral labyrinth in the stories passed down to us. Moreover, Ariadne's clue would be of no help in a spectral labyrinth unless she laid down the rope beforehand, which is, I think, what Ruskin intends to say. But now the action of the myth has been altered to the point of unrecognition. We have lost the framework in terms of which the original question made sense.

Moving on to the second account, we must ask whether a three-dimensional labyrinth could be confusing from the subjective point of view even if it were defined by a single unbranching path. Karl Kerenyi raises this question and answers it in the affirmative:

[46] Ruskin 1907:407-408.

> [The] present-day notion of a labyrinth as a place where one can lose [one's] way must be set aside. It is a confusing path, hard to follow without a thread, but, provided [one] is not devoured at the midpoint, it leads surely, despite twists and turns, back to the beginning.[47]

We notice that Kerenyi denies Ruskin's central premise—that if the labyrinth were a material structure with walls—then no clue would have been needed. In his view, the myth could make sense even if 'labyrinth' denoted labyrinth. Yet it is difficult to understand what Kerenyi means. What would be confusing about a single unbranching path through a walled labyrinth and how could it be 'hard to follow without a thread'?

Kerenyi's idea seems to be that what is crucial is not the objective structure in which Theseus found himself, but what he thought about, and experienced in, this structure. This idea is suggestive, I believe, but also incomplete and in need of further development. On the view that I want to put forward *as* this development, Theseus could in a sense get lost in the labyrinth because he did not know its nature. The question 'what is the labyrinth?' is, in a way, part of the story.

What could it mean to get lost in a labyrinth? One way of approaching this question is to ask what would be required if one was to find one's way right through. The answer can be simply stated: a wanderer who has entered the labyrinth would find her way out if she pressed on and did not turn at any point other than where she was compelled to turn. If she did this, she would find her way back to the light.

Given this account, Theseus could have gotten lost only if he did not keep walking but turned at points other than the centre. The twists and turns of the labyrinth might disorientate him; he might not know which way he was facing and whether he was going in or out. His getting lost would on this view be a matter of an oscillation from outside to inside, or the converse, without ever following the path right through. From this account of what is involved in losing one's way in a labyrinth it follows that one who knew the nature of the labyrinth could not think that he might get lost, and, for this reason, could not get lost. Or, from the other direction, the possibility of losing one's way depends on ignorance of what the labyrinth is and, more precisely, a conflation of labyrinth with maze.

Assume now, with these claims in mind, that Theseus thought that he might get lost in the Minotaur's lair. From this it follows that he did not know that the 'labyrinth' was a labyrinth and that he believed it to be a many-branching maze. Yet if Theseus thought that the labyrinth was a maze, then he would have known that Ariadne's thread would help

[47] Kerenyi and Manheim 1996. See also Doob 1990:46-49.

primarily on the way out. Though it would prevent him from getting irretrievably lost, it would not help him to find the centre of the maze unless he himself remembered which false paths he had taken; such feats of memory would be required to avoid repetition of error, allowing him, eventually, to move to the centre. With these thoughts in mind, Theseus would recognise that Ariadne's thread would help him only a little or a little more than that; there would still be, in any case, much, perhaps too much, for him to do.

If Theseus thought that he could get lost, therefore, and reasoned in this way, then, when he chose to enter the labyrinth, he did not think that he had its key. Nevertheless, Ariadne's thread was to this extent useful: it emboldened him to step inside and to keep going until he found the Minotaur; by giving to him a way out, it gave him a reason not to despair, stop, or turn around. Yet, by the time Theseus reached the centre, he would have known that the thread was not needed. By then he would have recognised that the labyrinth was a labyrinth and not a maze—for he 'could go no other way'. Ariadne's thread could not save him because no thread was needed. The labyrinth is simple, unbranching, and whole.

## 6. Levels of interpretation

The problem of the Ariadne episode in the Theseus myth is in its main iterations the problem of how one can be imprisoned in a prison which is not a prison,[48] how Theseus could get lost in a structure that one cannot get lost in, how one can get help in doing something that one needs no help in doing, and so on. These questions sound a bit like jokes or, rather more significantly, riddles. I suggest that the paradox is a matter of design and that the function of the labyrinth representation is to force inquiry into the story. Perhaps the inquiry is both for Theseus and for us, and the true meaning of the myth is communicated in the active attempt to comprehend it.

On the view that I am proposing, the labyrinth in the myth could not be a maze or a complex building akin to the Egyptian 'labyrinth'. For, if it were, then the story would be superficial: a problem, a contraption, a partial and insufficient resolution. It would be a fairy tale that required nothing further to be said or thought. But if the labyrinth were a true labyrinth, then it would or could be a cause of wonder— and as Aristotle remarks in the *Metaphysics*, myth is composed of wonders.[49] The mythical narrative is deep precisely because it contains a level of meaning that initially eludes the

[48] The *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021) cites Theocritus (21.11) for a meaning of labyrinth as 'trap' or 'cage' made 'of woven rushes used in fishing'.
[49] *Metaph.* 1. 982b17-19.

reasoner's grasp. This makes it impossible to rest; the story forces thought into a question.

I have suggested that a question about the nature of the labyrinth is part of the meaning of the Theseus story. The paradoxical idea of getting lost in a labyrinth can be understood in terms of a discrepancy between the objective and the subjective points of view, between the nature of the labyrinth as it is in itself and what one might think of it. And it is this discrepancy which brings the labyrinth into the story as a question. Theseus could get lost only because he thought that he might get lost, which is possible only for one who does not know what the labyrinth is. On this view, the myth would resemble an oracle which draws its recipient into a presumption that will bring about his downfall or, for him who is wise and favoured by gods, self-knowledge and liberation.

How should this feature - viz. that the nature of the labyrinth is a question within the myth - be communicated? This will depend to some extent on whether the communication is visual or written, though a more general point applies in both instances. In the first place, if artists depicted the labyrinth as a maze or intricate and perplexing building, then there would be nothing more to think; there would be no question for consideration. Likewise, a poet who stated explicitly that the labyrinth was a labyrinth and that Theseus thought that it was a maze would do what no comic should ever do, that is, explain his joke. Thus we are led to the paradoxical conclusion that the presentation of a self-inconsistent narrative allows the question of the labyrinth to become part of the story. For when one attempts to understand the logic of the story, one runs into perplexity and dead ends. What then is the labyrinth after all? And what did Theseus think of it before he stepped inside?

The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is, I suggest, a story about waylessness, which aims to induce waylessness (aporia) in the listener, reader, or viewer; this perplexity, and a specific response to it, that is, inquiry, is part of what the myth seeks to communicate. In a sense, it is not possible for a myth to make no sense, for whenever the story seems to break apart, the listener or reader is asked to think more deeply. If it is not possible for the myth not to make sense, then it must make sense. What sense can one make of it? An answer to this question can be given at three levels.

First, one must distinguish an inquiry into the meaning of a myth that proceeds at the level of the narrative, extending it in various ways by asking and answering questions. Some of these questions were presented in the preceding section where I showed how the supposition that Theseus wrongly identified the labyrinth as a maze drives a certain account of what he must have thought about his action. But there are other questions here too. For example, why, if the labyrinth is a labyrinth, did the young men and

women of Athens not wander right out? Was the bull-man of Crete a prisoner because he believed that the labyrinth was a maze? Who was Ariadne really? Why did Theseus leave her behind on 'sea-girt Dia' and why was she killed by Artemis?[50]

One of the features separating myth from fairy tale is that the former invites the hearer into an inquiry that requires the active extension of the story. The many versions of the Minotaur myth are, on this view, records of the inquiries of those who have wondered about the story. They are answers to questions that drive the activity of reconstruction and interpretation. And these questions are prompted by incongruity and contradiction, such as, for example, the notion of getting lost on a simple path. The proper response to contradiction of this sort is to use it as a springboard, a stepping stone to questioning and deepening, and not to see it as an impasse that ends all thought.[51]

Clearly the power of myth derives, at least in part, from its symbolic meaning. Thus, at a second level of interpretation, the inquirer must proceed from the level of the narrative to the deeper level of symbol.[52] For example, some parts of Hesiod's *Theogony* present an account of the differentiation of Being.[53] The myth is, in a way, metaphysics, and the inquiry into the myth's meaning is a metaphysical inquiry. An understanding of this underlying meaning depends on the interpretation of the narrative, for the details of the narrative drive the search for, and fundamentally determine, its symbolic content. Gaining clarity about the narrative details is part of the process of recovering the myth's deeper meaning.

The symbolic meaning of the Theseus myth is not merely or primarily metaphysical, but ethical. On the account I have sketched, Theseus could have chosen not to enter the labyrinth, or once inside, could have fallen into despair. But he did go inside because he thought that he had a way out, and in virtue of so doing, succeeded in getting out. By venturing into the labyrinth and persevering along its course, Theseus comes to recognise that the labyrinth is not a maze; it has but a single uninterrupted path that leads ineluctably to the centre and back out again.

What do we learn by thinking of the myth in this way? Something about the nature of the hero. The only way to fail to thread the labyrinth is to despair and to give up, or to waver and turn around too soon. Courage and perseverance enable Theseus to solve the labyrinth and overcome the monster inside. Moreover, sometimes a little help is needed, and sometimes

[50] *Od*. 11. 320-325. Translated by A.T. Murray.
[51] Cf. Plato, *Resp*. 511a.
[52] On allegory and myth in Homer and Plato, see Small 1949 and Lear 2006.
[53] See Miller 1983.

too, a little lie. Did Ariadne trick Theseus into courage and being a hero? Why did she not tell him that the labyrinth was a labyrinth? Perhaps the true and original Minotaur was his own fear of death.[54]

Thirdly, there is the activity of interpretation and the attempt to delineate the activity of self-understanding that the myth is designed to elicit. We receive a myth that seems simple, a fable and a fairy tale. The labyrinth is a maze, and the thread of Ariadne enables Theseus to find his way through. We must be led to recognise that this is the wrong way of looking. We are caught in a labyrinth without knowing it. Is this - the not-knowing - what it means to be a prisoner?

Our position prior to reflection is akin to Theseus' position: we are in the grip of an illusion caused by a presumption. The first step in our deliverance is the recognition that our interpretation does not make sense. What brings about this recognition? A problem with the story generated by a concept or figure that leads to a question. We must use the clue that *is* the idea of labyrinth to recognise that the story does not hang together. The labyrinth in this sense is a metaphor for our own hero's journey and the thread that permits its resolution.[55] And all this with its inordinate simplicity.

In summary, then, those artists who represented Theseus or the Minotaur in a Cretan labyrinth sought to express the idea that one *can* get lost in a labyrinth, that is, a structure that one cannot get lost in. They did this to show that the myth contains a deeper meaning that the audience would have to recover for itself.[56]

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[54] See Futter 2014.

[55] See Miller 1976.

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