THE LABYRINTH AS METAPHOR OF POSTMODERN AMERICAN POETICS

by

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(Under the Direction of Hubert McAlexander)

ABSTRACT

New media is often referred to as "network," and hypertexts are celebrated for their

complexity and the freedom they allow the reader, the interaction they require. This is not

merely a function of digital media, however, and in this study I explore several labyrinthine

works that embrace this aesthetic of complexity and network in print format. Extricating oneself

from a labyrinth and unraveling the complicated threads of discourse in postmodern poetry are

similar endeavors. Both involve maneuvering through deliberate obscurity and diversions in

order to elicit a pathway. Both also require entering into a vastly different kind of space and

time, leaving the mundane world behind and searching out confusion and amazement.

Postmodern poetry forces the reader to alter one's perspective, to reorient oneself to a new

aesthetic. To enter the labyrinth of antiquity was to court a deliberate encounter with the

monstrous, to expose oneself to possible violence and danger, and I argue that to enter a

postmodern poem is a similarly dangerous step. Lurking inside the labyrinth is the Minotaur, a

hybrid creature, half man and half monster. The threat of encountering this monster is

metaphorically equivalent to the threat of nonmeaning in postmodern poetics. As the reader

traverses the poem, there's always the threat of things falling apart, of a disconnect or

breakdown, of dissolution. Labyrinths represent an encounter with mystery, with obfuscation

and disorientation, and postmodern poetics often share these same characteristics. To emerge

from the labyrinth is to find oneself, to return fortified, changed or strengthened by this arduous

journey. Comparing postmodern poetry to the labyrinth metaphor, a return to the surface

represents the reader's somehow conquering or resolving the words on the page. Examining

what happens when one returns from the center of the labyrinth will allow us to explore some

fundamental tenets of the postmodern aesthetic. I contend that we enjoy labyrinths and poetry

for remarkably similar reasons, and analyzing what exactly happens when one returns from this

mythical place might help us understand the value and benefits of poetry for contemporary

readers.

INDEX WORDS: American Poetry, Contemporary Poetics, Postmodernism, Labyrinths,
                 Entrance, Disorientation, Complexity, Frustration, The Minotaur, The
                 Monstrous, Void, Ritual, Redemption, Anne Carson, Mark Strand

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

Navigating a poem, no matter how seemingly simple or straightforward it may seem, is much like entering a vast labyrinth. A fragment from former Poet Laureate Billy Collins' poem "Introduction to Poetry" makes this connection clear. The persona, a literature instructor, asks his students to hold poems up to the light in order to see them more clearly, to waterski across the poem's surface, and even to drop a mouse into the poem "to watch him probe his way out" (lines 5-6). Reading a postmodern poem can have this disorienting effect, like an experiment gone awry that transforms the reader into a mouse trapped within a very large and ever-changing maze, at the mercy of the some overlord language scientist, simply trying to find a way out. Postmodern poems have multiple entrances and seem to have very few exits, defying conventional or traditional expectations in favor of complexity and multiplicity. One could not blame the readers of contemporary poetry for feeling as if they had been dropped into a poem from above, as if by fate or the gods, into a structure like a labyrinth that must be conquered and solved. Extricating oneself from a labyrinth and unraveling the complicated threads of discourse in postmodern poetry are similar endeavors. Both involve maneuvering through deliberate obscurity and diversions in order to elicit a pathway.

Postmodern poetry forces the reader to alter one's perspective, to reorient oneself to a new aesthetic. Unlike a narrative that invites the reader along, or allows one easy access with an introductory chapter and a bit of exposition, the poem's very appearance on the page is a fixed architectural space, a façade or fortress that prohibits direct entrance. Instead of words casually

strung together in an easy linear row that yields to the eye, the poem's intricacy appears like a puzzle, a particular configuration of words that might require a key for the reader to unlock or the eye to traverse. The spatial boundaries remain rigid and unalterable, like the unyielding walls of the labyrinth, and the reader is forced to scale these walls in order to begin processing the poem's layers of signification. Once inside this poem, the reader must confront the obscurity of the line and gaps in syntax that occur in the white expanse of the postmodern poetic line. Instead of entering a lilting and lulling cocoon of Romantic sensibility, the postmodern reader confronts the Minotaur inside the poetic labyrinth – absence itself. A diametric reversal of the black expanse inside the labyrinth, the white space of poetry surrounds the reader with blankets of silent white noise, providing a consistent hum of anxiety as the attempt is made to decipher or translate.

The way out of the postmodern poem is from a subterranean place of undercurrents and half-truths into light. When the reader arrives at the last word of the poem, this is not necessarily the end of the journey. Meaning is not always linear, but sometimes adjacent, or multiple, or deferred. One must always circle back through, returning to words and ideas that lead into other avenues. It's not a straight shot, but a retracing of steps and progression of renewal that allows one to exit the postmodern poem. The last word can feel like a dead end, a weighty wall of blankness, and the reader must turn around and look for an alternate way out, looking back into the labyrinth for other possibilities.

What's intrinsic to this study of comparing the postmodern poem to the ancient labyrinth is what we're left with. What do we get out of all this? So many visual poems appear to be all surface and no depth. Often, postmodern deconstructed poems just leave the reader grasping at straws for coherence – so much of postmodern poetry leaves readers feeling as if they've been

wandering in circles endlessly. If we can trace this metaphor of reading and map the aims of postmodern poetry to the experience of the labyrinth, then we can decenter the traditional notion of what we're supposed to "get" out of poetry. By comparing the reading of poetry to a labyrinth, one can immediately begin to imagine how the journey overshadows any goal or reward. The postmodern aesthetic, like an encounter with a labyrinth, is about the journey, the working through difficulty, and not the rewards. Perhaps contemporary poets, disappointed or disenchanted with the world around them, are demonstrating *the way* – not the truth, but a route to it, informed by Eastern philosophy. In Buddhism, one cannot explain the transcendent; one can only describe the pathway to enlightenment. These poems are not showing us something new, but they challenge us to see differently, showing us a new way of looking.

In his study of the role of myth and ritual in modern life, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell explains that myths exist in order to guide us through cultural and psychological trials, showing us a new way through life's difficulties into a new awareness of ourselves and our place in the world. Campbell argues that myths are a type of abstract language that unlocks inner symbols, engaging our unconscious wisdom, and that "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (Campbell, *Hero* 11). Following this reasoning, myth acts as a passage or trial, something we need to process in order to get to a higher level of consciousness. The myth of the labyrinth in particular demonstrates a journey or trial, an overcoming of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. If we were to compare the act of reading to this labyrinth metaphor, then the process of interpretation becomes a sort of adventure or puzzle the reader discovers, solves, and navigates through the text's pages or the poem's lines. The reader creates the text, determining how to read and

interpret the author's words along the way. Like a labyrinth, the text is created anew by the choices and interpretations of each individual reader, just as the labyrinth is unique for each traveler depending on the choices he or she makes inside the structure. These are not new ideas, as interpretive communities, reader-response criticism, and multiplicity are fundamental tenets of postmodern literary theory. Contemporary readers and writers would mostly agree that the text does not have one meaning, one identity, or a singular interpretation. However, viewing the text as a labyrinth reveals the exploratory function of writing, the trial and error process of reading, and the deliberate obfuscation of a clear destination. Instead of looking at the outcome, here we are considering the obstacles, the false turns, the frustrations, and the competing, intersecting paths that bewilder the reader of postmodern poetry.

In addition to looking at various poems that exhibit labyrinthine qualities, what labyrinth scholar Penelope Reed Doob describes as "labyrinthicity," my purpose will be to explore the reading of poetry, the process of reading itself, as a metaphorical trip through the labyrinth, the postmodern equivalent of strapping on one's sandals and setting forth on a quest for knowledge. The postmodern aesthetic and various schools of poetry frustrate and disorient, employing multiplicity, derangement of syntax and word; the boundaries between word and image blur; poets fragment language and bar access; they try to (mis)represent time and space on the page, breaking through the page's surface in an attempt at multidimensionality. The metaphor of reading postmodern poetry as a harrowing journey through dark winding corridors where you don't know what to expect is an apt one, and it can help us imagine what contemporary poets are attempting with language.

Postmodern poets are highly aware of not just their craft, but the reader's part of this craft, the necessity of a perceptive reader who not only reads the words on the page, but who also

reads the page itself. Instead of looking through the page to the words marked upon it, the postmodern reader must pay attention to the page's surface and regard the material object of the text as artifact. Literary critics are beginning to concentrate on materiality and the physical properties of texts, especially in light of new ways of writing and reading and distributing texts electronically. With the emergence of online reading and writing, writers and critics are more aware than ever of the medium of language, and how information is transmitted through various technologies. The codex has become demystified, unveiled as a tool or technology itself, and the printed words and spaces between – how words and space operate in/on the mind of the reader – have been given more thought. However, critics have yet to explore the potential link between the artist's conception or imagining of space and spatial relations, and how this translates onto the printed page. While this project cannot possibly bridge that distance, between artist's mind and the printed word, it will examine the depths of the artist's mind and look at the way space is conceived of, talked about, used, or hinted at in the several poets' works.

The postmodern poem's linguistic function, its syntax and diction, and its multiple ways of being read, all mimic the arduous process of thought and persistence of purpose one needs to complete the labyrinth or the maze. The linguistic and cognitive functions needed to read and understand contemporary poetry closely resemble the rigorous physical demands of surviving a maze. By exploring the metaphor of labyrinth as poem, we can learn about the symbolic significance of both processes, escaping the labyrinth and explicating the poem. Both have structures that cause confusion, and they represent ordeals that people willingly submit themselves to in an effort to get lost deliberately, and then to regain some sort of equilibrium, to find alternate ways through both labyrinth and text.

The Labyrinth Myth

The labyrinth represents many things in various discourses, and is primarily a symbol of ambiguity and disorientation. Teasing out the several competing meanings associated with the labyrinth will prove that this is indeed a highly malleable and deceptively complex metaphor. To begin our examination of the labyrinth, however, we must start with the most prominent associations, and these would be the labyrinth of ancient myth and the fated meeting of Theseus and the Minotaur. Most early labyrinth scholars believed that the labyrinth first emerged in Minoan Crete in the third or second millennium BCE, and that the mythological labyrinth was the first of its kind. Several ancient writers believe that the Minoan labyrinth was predated by one in Egypt, though, a huge elaborate mausoleum for Amenemhet III (Kern 27). Some argue that this was just a confusing building and not a true labyrinth. Even if this Egyptian labyrinth was really a complex mortuary temple, several visual depictions survive from antiquity, predating the Greek myth. These renderings can be found throughout the world: "on prehistoric rock carvings, on a Linear B tablet from Pylos, on sixth-century Egyptian seals, on the Tragliatella pitcher, on Hellenistic coins, on gems, in a graffito on a house in Pompeii, and on Roman floor mosaics all over Europe and North Africa" (Doob 40). Most of these depictions show a simple labyrinth with just one path, what is termed a unicursal model. In Figure 1.1, taken from Kern's *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years*, several ancient coins are stamped with a rudimentary labyrinth design. These coins all show the same simple unicursal pattern, despite the obvious discrepancies with the Greek myth. Many examples of this simplified labyrinth design can be found in art and architecture all over the world, but because of the labyrinth from classical mythology, people will forever associate the labyrinth with intricate and inextricable passageways.

The labyrinth of classical mythology was located at Knossos, in Crete, and built by Daedalus as a prison to contain the Minotaur, a monster half human, half bull. The Minotaur had a rarely used name, Asterius, a name he inherited from his grandfather, the former king of Crete (Tripp 382). The Minotaur was the offspring of Pasiphaë and a bull sent from Poseidon. Pasiphaë was married to Minos, king of Crete, and when Minos failed to sacrifice this bull to Poseidon, the sea god "caused Pasiphaë to fall in love with the beast. She pleaded with Daedalus to help her with her lovesickness, and he made her a hollow wooden cow covered with hides, inside which she was able to satisfy her passion. As a result, she gave birth to the Minotaur Asterius, a bull-headed man, whom Minos quickly imprisoned within the labyrinth. Pasiphaë's daughter, Ariadne, would later fall in love with Theseus, the young man who would escape the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur, her half-brother. And to confuse the twisting labyrinthine parentage even more, Theseus believed that his true father was Poseidon. The two sons of the sea god would eventually meet deep inside the earth, the Minotaur and young Theseus born of different mothers but symbolically descending into the womblike darkness of the labyrinth to do battle with one another.

According to myth, the Labyrinth at Knossos was commissioned by King Minos to hide the shame of his wife Pasiphaë, and the evidence that she had lusted after a bull. The labyrinth can thus be seen as an architecture built upon betrayal and shame, not just a structure to get lost within, but one that would hide things. Poetry is often associated with hiding things, as well, a structure with a hidden meaning where truth is secreted away. Minos' role in this myth is key, as his neglecting to honor the gods was the cause of the bull's summoning, and it was later Minos who charged Daedalus with the labyrinth's creation. Joseph Campell paints Minos as tragic figure, caught up in destiny's repeating pattern. Describing the often overlooked king, who

usually gets overshadowed by Theseus and the Minotaur's battle, and even overshadowed by the labyrinth itself, he writes:

> Minos, the king, had been busy, it is said, with important wars to protect the trade routes; and meanwhile Pasiphaë had been seduced by a magnificent, snow-white, sea-born bull. It had been nothing worse, really, than what Minos' own mother had allowed to happen: Minos' mother was Europa, and it is well known that she was carried by a bull to Crete. The bull had been the god Zeus, and the honored son of that sacred union was Minos himself – now everywhere respected and gladly served. How then could Pasiphaë have known that the fruit of her own indiscretion would be a monster, this little son with human body but the head and tail of a bull? (Campbell, *Hero* 13)

To hide the shame of his wife's son, the king commissioned Daedalus, the artist and inventor, to build the labyrinth. Sources differ on how often youths were sacrificed to the Minotaur, but every few years, Minos would command several men and women to enter the labyrinth never to return. One year, the Athenian prince Theseus volunteered to be one of the victims, and upon seeing him, the king's daughter Ariadne fell in love with him. She begged Daedalus to help her in rescuing him from the Minotaur, and he suggested that she give him a ball of thread to unwind as he penetrated the labyrinth so that he could later find his way out.

Some sources indicated that Theseus killed the Minotaur by beating with his fists, in a particularly gruesome and violent battle (Tripp 567). Theseus did not use any of his famed wit or grace, but resorted to pure physicality to defeat the monster; the Minotaur's death was very much of the body, a physical, percussive death. In some vase paintings, Theseus uses a sword to kill the monster, perhaps because it's less bloody, or easier to render in the artist's medium. Various paintings and artistic renderings of the labyrinth myth alternately show Theseus fighting the Minotaur at the center with a ball of pitch and a sword in hand, and some versions of the myth indicate that Ariadne also gave Theseus this ball of pitch to throw into the monster's

mouth. While the Minotaur was choking on this pitch, Theseus then ran him through with his sword.

The one constant in all versions of the labyrinth myth is Ariadne's gift of thread. The thread is never left out in any of the sources, and this seems to be the key component that guaranteed Theseus' victory. Joseph Campbell argues that this thread given to Theseus by Ariadne was symbolic of hope. She did not give him a weapon or a blueprint, a grand plan to thwart the monster: "Daedalus simply presented her with a skein of linen thread, which the visiting hero might fix to the entrance and unwind as he went into the maze. It is, indeed, very little that we need! But lacking that, the adventure into the labyrinth is without hope" (Campbell, *Hero* 23). This thread represents direction and purpose, a definite way back into the world after a harrowing battle. Like a poet offering the reader important clues, the thread gave Theseus a path to follow, a way out of danger and back to known territory. Defeating the monster inside the labyrinth was only half the danger, as extricating himself from the labyrinth itself proved an even greater challenge. And so this myth is not a simple story of slaying an enemy or facing a demon. As much as this myth concerns vanquishing the Minotaur, it is also a tale of the promise of return. Ariadne's thread gives Theseus a way back to himself after his victory, a way to return after his triumph. Theseus retraces his steps to return to the world; the hero comes full circle in an act of regression. He does not defeat the labyrinth with his intellect or cunning, but must rely on a simple tool to lead him back to safety and himself.

After Theseus emerged victoriously from the labyrinth, he set sail the triumphant hero, taking the king's daughter with him. He then quickly abandoned her on an island and went on to further conquests and exploits, his adventures just beginning. Daedalus, however, was punished and imprisoned by the king. Minos jailed Daedalus and his son, Icarus, within the labyrinth.

Some sources indicate that Daedalus was then released by Pasiphaë, and after inventing the first

sail, Daedalus and his son escaped by sea from the vengeful king (Tripp 186). Most

mythological sources indicate that their imprisonment forced Daedalus to invent his famed wings

made of wax and feathers, and their flight and escape led to Icarus' drowning after he flew too

close to the sun and the wax from his handcrafted wings began to melt.

Years after his escape from the labyrinth, Daedalus was a favorite of Cocalus, king of

Camicus. Unable to forget the past, perhaps because of the loss of his daughter, perhaps because

he felt betrayed, King Minos sailed to every port trying to track down the aging inventor, and

devised a clever trick to find him. To every ruler he encountered, Minos gave a spiral seashell

and some thread, and demanded that he thread the shell as a test:

> None of the kings could accomplish this seemingly impossible trick until Minos
> reached Sicily. Presented with the same demand, Cocalus returned the shell to
> Minos the next day completely threaded. The shrewd Minos knew that Daedalus
> must have found a haven here, for no one else in the world was clever enough to
> solve the problem. He was right. Cocalus had given the shell to Daedalus. The
> inventor, no doubt recalling Theseus' escape from the Labyrinth, had tied one end
> of the thread to an ant, and the ant, for obscure reasons of its own, had made its
> way through the tortuous windings of the shell. (Tripp 186)

The entirety of the labyrinth myth seems an elaborate game of lost and found, a long narrative of

imprisonment and escape. First the Minotaur was hidden away and imprisoned, then Theseus,

but he was shown the way out by the thread, and finally the labyrinth's creator was trapped

within the structure. Daedalus then hides and takes refuge in another king's domain, but is found

by Minos via the strategy of the labyrinth; Minos is able to find Daedalus because of the thread,

the agent that allows one to find one's way. The ant finding its way through the shell is a

microcosm of Theseus' journey, and both Theseus and the ant traced their pathways, writing on

the structures they traveled through, keeping a record of the past. What allowed Theseus to

succeed, and Minos to find Daedalus years later, was this thread. This thread acts as an agent of

inscription, of writing one's way through the maze. Keeping track of the choices one has made

in the past, the decisions and pathways traveled, allows one to be located in the present. For the

reader of postmodern poetry, this metaphor would imply that the successful reader must mark the

text as it is read. One must enter the contemporary poem with an increased awareness of

interpretive decisions made along the way. The postmodern aesthetic of complexity and

multiplicity requires thread. As the reader traverses the poem, possible false turns and dead ends

will call for a backtracking or reversal, a continual finding of one's way through elaborate and

complex possibilities.

Etymology and Archaeology

Before we begin comparing the labyrinth to contemporary poetry, an examination of

what this word has come to mean is necessary. The term "labyrinth" seems to imply antiquity

and otherness just in its difficult pronunciation, and retains a different set of assumptions lost by

the more popular term "maze." Both words imply being lost in an elaborate puzzle, but

"labyrinth" is the term that refers to the actual physical building:

> 1. A structure consisting of a number of intercommunicating passages arranged in
> bewildering complexity, through which it is difficult or impossible to find one's
> way without guidance; a maze. a. With references to the structures so named in
> classical antiquity." And also "An intricate, complicated, or tortuous arrangement
> (of physical features, buildings, etc.). And another "A tortuous, entangled, or
> inextricable condition of things, events, ideas, etc.; an entanglement, maze."
> ("Labyrinth")

The essential part of the labyrinth definition is *complication of structure*, whereas the definition

of the word "maze" focuses more on the *state of confusion*, the mental bewilderment

independent of any structure or building. *The Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of "maze"

is "A state of mental confusion," or "Worldly, vain, or dissolute amusement or diversion," or

even "A delusive fancy; a trick or deception" ("Maze"). Both labyrinths and mazes cause

bewilderment, but according to these definitions, the term labyrinth implies a physical cause, a causal structure, whereas the word maze merely indicates confusion within the mind. The term maze was often applied to the widely popular hedge mazes throughout England, and thus the term is now often used to describe any labyrinth structure, though "labyrinth" remains the true term referring to a physical construction.

As for where this term "labyrinth" originated, there is still some debate among etymologists and labyrinth scholars, and a brief overview of the origins of the word may help us gain entrance, or at least understand the complexity of the term itself. Figure 1.2 shows a double-axe taken from a Dictaean cave near Crete, and represents the first theory of where the term "labyrinth" originated. Sir Arthur Evans began his excavation of this site in 1900 and believed that it was evidence of a Minoan bull-cult, and the possible site of the labyrinth of classical mythology. This double-axe was called a labrys, and it was a weapon used to sacrifice bulls in ancient rituals. Evans argued that several of the doorways were shaped like the head of this axe, bowed out at the top and bottom, and that the entire complex of buildings he uncovered must subsequently be a labyrinth. Evans found several-storied buildings that had meander patterns painted on walls, further evidence of the cult of the bull, and "the frequent occurrence of the sign of the double axe, which was obviously an object of great importance in Minoan worship" (Matthews 31). Based upon the structures and artifacts he uncovered, Evans concluded that the palace of Knossos was the true labyrinth that gave rise to the mythological story, and that the Minotaur figure was based upon the tradition of training captives to participate in the dangerous sport of bull-leaping (Matthews 35). Matthews explains that two pits rested below the palace, possible dungeons for prisoners, which would fill in the only missing piece of the labyrinth myth, its inextricability. Contemporary historians have since discredited Evans,

accusing him of fabricating evidence and planting artifacts to later "discover," so perhaps Evans'

contention is erroneous, and the mythological structure will remain shrouded in mystery.

Although debates still surround Evans and his archaeological discoveries, he has been

rather widely condemned for his use of new materials such as concrete in his reconstruction of

ancient buildings, in an attempt to erect a museum to Minoan culture. Erich Neumann, in his

work *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, agrees that this double-axe was central to these

ancient bull cults, and that the term labrys is closely bound to the symbolic sacrifice in the story

of the ancient labyrinth. He claims that the labrys was used as a design or symbol throughout

buildings as a motif, explaining why perhaps this shape was so prevalent in and around Evans'

archaeological site. For Neumann, and for many other labyrinth scholars, the labrys is an

essential piece of the labyrinth puzzle, a key instrument in ancient practices:

> Central to the great Cretan fertility cult is the bull, the male instrument of fertility
> and also its victim. He is the chief protagonist in the hunts and festival games; his
> is the blood of the offerings; his head and horns are, besides the double-axe, or
> labrys (the sacred sacrificial implement), a typical symbol in Cretan shrines. This
> bull symbolizes the youthful god, son-lover of the Great Mother who, as the
> Europa of Greek mythology, reigned in Crete. (76)

Neumann goes on to argue that the sacrifice of the bull in ancient myth is symbolic of

emasculation or castration, that the head of the bull represents an archetypal sexuality, and myths

concerning sacrifice of bulls represent a stage in psychological development, what he calls the

evolution of consciousness. Like Evans, Neumann stresses the importance of the labrys in his

description of the rituals and buildings, but it is unclear whether the labyrinth is named after the

ancient weapon, or vice versa.

W.H. Matthews offers several competing theories and a thorough overview of the

etymological debate surrounding the term in *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and*

Development, devoting an entire chapter to the origin of the words "labyrinth," "maze," and

"bower." He believes that "maze" is of Scandinavian origin, referring to "a state of bewilderment or confusion, or of being wrapped in thought" (Matthews 179). Indeed, the maze and the postmodern poem share these characteristics, both causing consternation and provoking thought. For the term "labyrinth," Matthews presents several options, from which he also concludes that the word stems from the structure's associations with the labrys, the double-axe. He enumerates several other possibilities, including conjecture that the word stemmed from *labors,* meaning "great," or the Egyptian phrase "*la-pe-ro-hunt"* meaning "the temple at the mouth of the reservoir." He outlines the debate among etymologists and philologists as follows:

> Down to a few decades ago we were content with the bald statement of most dictionaries that it was probably correlated with the word *laura,* meaning a passage, or mine, though there was also a suggestion that it might be of Egyptian origin, viz., that it was derived from the name of Labaris (=Senusret III), erroneously conceived by the scribe Manetho to be the founder of the Hawara pile. Then Mr. Max Mayer put forward the suggestion that it might have some connection with *labrys,* a word which, in some of the early languages of Asia Minor, *e.g.,* Lydia and Caria, denoted an axe, the axe being the symbol associated with the god known as Zeus Labrandeus or Zeus Stratios, the worship of whom was known to have taken place at Labranda, in Caria. Coins from Mylasa, a neighboring town, show this god holding in his hand a double axe. (175)

Matthews explains that Evans' discovery of double-axes near Crete in an ancient Minoan structure solidified this theory, and that the terms *labrys* and *labyrinth* were linked thereafter. This "Mr. Max Mayer" Matthews mentions is the German archaeologist Maximilian Mayer, and his theory of the labrys formed the basis of most labyrinth scholars' beliefs about the word's derivation for many years. In addition to his overview of the etymology of the term "labyrinth," Matthews also conducted a cursory survey of literature bearing the name of labyrinth to explore its various connotations in literature. Interestingly, he found that often the term "labyrinth" was an equivalent for "Thesaurus" or "Compendium of Knowledge" and that several medical or pharmacological/alchemy volumes were called labyrinths (195). Again, the term labyrinth

seems to be associated with bivia, various choices, or confusing texts that invite the reader into a nonlinear reading experience.

For years, this theory of the labrys was the accepted explanation of where the word came from. However, Hermann Kern, whose work *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years* is arguably the most comprehensive volume of labyrinth evidence, history, and study to date, argues that the labrys has little to do with the term labyrinth, claiming that this etymology has "proven untenable for a multitude of reasons" and that the word may have some associations with the word "stone" (Kern 25). Kern contends that "labrys" was not a Cretan or Minoan word, and therefore Mayer and Evans were incorrectly applying a foreign word to the structure. Kern makes an intriguing argument when he asserts that no labyrinth existed in Crete or in Egypt, not as we conceive of them today anyway, and that large elaborate buildings called labyrinths by archaeologists were mistakenly referred to as such. Kern's revolutionary theory is that the term labyrinth referred to a dance, and that the complicated movements of this dance were later attributed to the convolutions of the buildings, and thus the two were conflated (42-43). Because these buildings were referred to in writing as labyrinths, the labyrinth came to mean not a two dimensional surface for dancing, but a three dimensional enclosure with multiple confusing pathways. Claiming that the earliest mention of labyrinths on record refers to stone structures of some sort, in one case "meticulously crafted stone stairwells decorated with meanders," and also to a form of complicated group dance with elaborate choreography, Kern explains that "the term 'labrinthos' originally denoted a dance whose path was determined by the graphic pattern" and this pattern "surely must have facilitated the performance of complicated movements on a dance surface" (25). Kern believes that the mysterious "stone structures" must have been a stage upon which a labyrinthine performance would occur. In his assessment,

labyrinths have been associated with the arts from their inception; the term labyrinth would then originate from a ceremony that fused stone structure, song, and dance in a performative pattern of movement. Often this elaborate performance would be conducted by riders on horseback, perhaps to symbolize the impenetrable forces of a kingdom or stronghold. If Kern's theory is correct, and the term labyrinth is associated with rhythm and dance, then the labyrinth would certainly be an apt metaphor for the rhythmic art of poetry. Another labyrinth scholar, Craig Wright, agrees with Kern, claiming in *The Maze and the Warrior* that Theseus was said to have performed a dance mimicking the twisting and intricate turnings of his escape. And in *The Aeneid,* Virgil describes an equestrian ballet performed by young military men on horseback that honored the fallen soldiers of Troy (Wright 10-11). In addition to honoring the dead, these soldiers were recreating the city and its impregnable battlements, simulating the architectural stronghold of Troy. The labyrinth symbolized the perfect city with its impenetrable walls. Wright elaborates upon Kern's theory, presenting the labyrinth as a dance or ritual enacted by soldiers as a symbol of protection and security. He ignores, however, Kern's improbable yet fascinating assertion that the ultimate purpose of all these labyrinth diagrams was to trace the movements of the planets back and forth across the heavens (Kern 33). Kern believed that the first labyrinth was not a structure at all, but originated as a sketch of the night sky. He admits that his theory is based on pure intuition, and no other labyrinth scholars address his theories, but Kern makes a case for the labyrinth as astronomical record, that the continual returning, cyclical diagrams would seem to map out the trajectories of heavenly bodies.

Archaeological evidence of labyrinths is no less confusing than these etymological debates, and has generated widely disparate claims about where the first labyrinth originated. Labyrinths have proved to be a fascination for scholars, artists, writers, and historians grappling

with the evidence of their existence, their function and significance in the ancient world, and possible explanations for their creation. Some historians believe that the Cretan labyrinth never existed at all, and the myth refers merely to a system of caves near Knossos. Figure 1.3 represents a sketch appearing in W.H. Matthews' *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development* that traces the outline of the cavern of Gortyna. One can certainly imagine the terror in the figure's complexity: the irregularity, the craggy rocky surfaces, the claustrophobic narrow tunnels and harrowing turns. However farfetched it appears, this theory would associate the labyrinth with a more organic inception. In terms of this project, a naturally occurring labyrinth's irregularity fits with the postmodern aesthetic, but to be truly analogous to poetry, the labyrinth must be something crafted by an artisan, something of artifice that is constructed and created out of raw materials like a poem. Matthews includes a sketch of this cave complex, but argues that subsequent discoveries have diminished its claim to have housed the Minotaur and be the labyrinth of the Theseus myth.

In *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, Penelope Reed Doob claims that there were four known labyrinths of the ancient world considered architectural feats. The most complex and elaborate were located in Egypt, Crete, Lemnos, and Etruria (Doob 20). The Egyptian maze predates the one in Crete, and was never finished, but displayed remarkable artistry, carvings along the walls, paintings on the ceilings, as well as relics and murals found throughout. Doob writes that "This impressive monument inspired Daedalus, whose Cretan labyrinth, a markedly inferior copy, included only a hundredth of the 'passages that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner' in the Egyptian exemplar" (21). Several sources indicate that this great multistoried Egyptian maze was probably the mortuary temple of Amenemhet III at Hawara (21). Matthews cites Herodotus, who claims to

have witnessed the structure for himself, for a description of this Egyptian labyrinth. Herodotus

declared that all of Greek architecture together would be surpassed by the labyrinth in Egypt.

Located above Lake Moeris, this pyramid is described as having "twelve covered courts, with

opposite doors, six courts on the North side and six on the South, all communicating with one

another and with one wall surrounding them all. There are two sorts of rooms, one sort above,

the other sort below ground, fifteen hundred of each sort, or three thousand in all" (Matthews 8).

Herodotus also describes a vast lake that was constructed next to the labyrinth, supplied from a

canal dug from the Nile, with two pyramids on either side with colossal seated stone figures atop

each pyramid. His description is of a huge, bewildering place, a building of superhuman

proportions in a setting of grandeur and spectacle. Contradicting Herodotus' claims, Kern argues

that the mausoleum for Amenemhet III was not a labyrinth, though it certainly was a huge

complicated structure, and that the first true labyrinth was from "Minoan Crete, which was the

predominant culture at the time (third-second millennium BCE) and the first advanced European

civilization" (27). Kern informs us that in Herodotus' time, the term "labyrinth" was used to

denote any large structure of merit, perhaps offering an explanation for all of the confusion as to

the first labyrinth (191). Such disparate theories abound, including those that claim the labyrinth

was always just a metaphor. One such example appears in the writings of Philochorus, who

claimed that the labyrinth was merely a dungeon and that "the monster was simply a military

officer, whose brutal disposition, in conjunction with his name, Tauros, may have given rise to

the Minotaur myth" (Matthews 20). In another theory, the names associated with the labyrinth

myth could have been purely symbolic. Matthews hypothesized that the terms "Minos" and

"Daedalus" might have been generalized terms, like "pharaoh" or "caesar," possibly referring to

more than one person (21-22). If this were true, one could read the labyrinth myth as a saga of

the relationship between ruler and artisan, the governing body and the scientific elite. The labyrinth would thus be a metaphor for the artist's creation.

Drawing attention to the cultural connections between Egypt and Greece and their strong commercial ties from as far back as 2000 B.C., historian C.N. Deedes posits yet another possible explanation for the origins and associations of the ancient labyrinth as both symbol and artifact. In his essay simply called "The Labyrinth," Deedes argues that the labyrinth in Egypt was a symbol of the royal tomb, and that the essential plan of all labyrinths is based upon the royal tombs and mortuary temples from Egypt. Deedes believes the great Egyptian labyrinth thought to be the template and inspiration for Daedalus' labyrinth in Crete was the temple of Amenemhet III, built next to his pyramid and funeral tomb. This temple, dedicated to Osiris, would have housed the royal bodies after death, and the pyramid and its connected tomb would have been full of blind alleys and false passageways, making for a truly complicated infrastructure. Deedes contends that this architecture was not to fool interlopers, however, and that according to all historical evidence, the king's body would never have been vandalized in this peaceful period of Egyptian history. Looting and robbery were so rare that the elaborate passageways of the funeral tombs must have served another purpose, other than protecting the king's tomb from human desecration. Deedes concludes that the mystery plays of Osiris enacted in the temples attached to the funeral pyramids hold the key to why the structures were made labyrinthine.

Of all the competing theories for the labyrinth's possible origins, Deedes' seems the most likely, and his is the only argument that convincingly accounts for both the physical structure's purpose and why this particular mythology of the Minotaur and the King are attached to it. Deedes informs us that the Egyptian labyrinth was the site of yearly mystery plays depicting the

death and resurrection of Osiris, the god of life, death, and fertility. The following is a brief

synopsis of the play:

> We have seen that in the Osirian drama a ritual fight went on during the procession to the temple. Once within the temple, the king-god was safe from his enemies. There he underwent his ritual death. He was not torn in pieces by an angry mob, but the divine bull was ceremoniously slain in his place. When the figure of the dead god emerged from the temple, there was, apparently, more fighting, and the drama continued. (Deedes 24)

This ritual explains the various elements of the labyrinth mythology: a king, a slain bull, a final

victorious emergence from within the temple. Also in the play, the angry mob representing the

god Set and his followers enters the temple. As these people attack Osiris, they must overcome

the obstacle of the building itself; the labyrinth's structure therefore enacted the ritual

concealment of the Osiris from his attackers, later symbolically protecting the king's body from

unearthly, spiritual harm. In Egyptian culture, therefore, the labyrinth was a site for the ritual

death and resurrection of the king, a place where a bull is sacrificed to the gods, a dangerous and

sacred space of slaughter and resurrection. This is also a safe place too, a symbol of protection,

the complex passageways of the funeral tombs carefully guarding what's inside. In this theory,

the labyrinth embodies the themes of protection and resurrection of a god or ruler. The cycles of

life and death were acted out inside the labyrinth, their mystery concealed by its intricate

structure, and so Deedes argues the labyrinth became a symbol of redemption for the Egyptians.

Much like the Romantic poets who felt that poetry could help one reach a transcendent truth, the

labyrinth was thought to conceal and contain the mystery of life itself.

These competing theories of the archaeology and etymology of the labyrinth deny us a

singular origin or clear starting point in clearly defining the labyrinth. Like the confusing

structure which it describes, the etymological and archaeological evidence provides us with

frustration and choices, competing pathways in the history of the word. The proliferation of

competing theories as to the origin of the labyrinth as both physical structure and site of legend is

a testament to the richness of its metaphorical possibilities and enduring, layered symbolism. No

matter which historian or scholar we choose to side with, the labyrinth will remain an image of

deep mystery that conceals dangerous secrets. Even if we cannot pinpoint an indisputable origin

of the term, there is no confusion in what the word implies, and all of these different

explanations can enrich our understanding of the labyrinth as a symbol, metaphor, and archetype.

Whether the word refers to an ancient weapon, a ritualized dance, or a laborious process, all of

these meanings accumulate in a term that welcomes complexity and multiplicity. From the very

start of Kern's volume, he defines labyrinth as "a literary motif" that has come to represent

difficulty and complexity, some type of "tortuous structure" that leads the reader down "many

paths, some of which lead to dead ends or blind alleys" (23). This is a good start, to be sure, but

a thorough analysis of the labyrinth will reveal a far richer metaphor, one that allows us to

understand postmodern poetics in an entirely new light. Kern starts us off with the labyrinth as

metaphor for complexity, yet there is so much more – the labyrinth is frustrating, endless,

interactive, a process of decision making, a journey, intricate, terrifying, threatening, inhabited

by a monster, an initiation rite, an act of possible redemption and rejuvenation, and so on. It

seems that the longer one looks at the labyrinth, the more interpretations and possibilities one

sees. Applying these metaphors to postmodern poetry allows us to approach the page differently,

to adjust our expectations of what the experience of poetry should be, and appreciate the process

of the poem. Teasing out various "readings" of the labyrinth and comparing them to the poem,

we can broaden the aesthetic field of postmodernism and envision the poem as a site of

extrication, voluntary entrapment, surrender, and exploration.

Postmodern Poetics

Postmodernism is a difficult entity to define or even attempt to place boundaries on. My approach will be to explore the aesthetic of expansion and possibility of postmodernism. The traditional definition of postmodernism would include an incredulity toward metanarratives, meaning that in contemporary culture people reject conventional truths or paradigms in favor of more local, individual ideologies. The postmodern reader is constantly aware that there is not one truth, one way of reading, but that multiple possibilities coexist within the text. A poem offers many interpretations, and no longer yields one reading alone. The postmodern aesthetic also stresses the importance of the personal, the particular discourse of the individual reader who constructs the text as he or she reads. Truth or coherence doesn't magically reside on the page, waiting for a reader to unlock some inherent meaning; instead, the reading depends upon the reader to a great degree. The page can no longer be imagined as a repository of eternal truths. Each reader brings a different mind to the text, and so each poem can be viewed as an individual journey. In addition to this personalization of the reading experience, the postmodern aesthetic above all celebrates fragmentation, partiality, and multiplicity in the reading experience. Rather than suffer the anxiety of a fragmented world, or lament language's inability to convey truth truthfully, the postmodern writer plays with the materials available. This increased awareness of language's fault lines can be traced to linguistic studies that have revealed the instability of language itself.

So much postmodern literary theory seems focused on disruption and transgression. Language appears to be under siege, with signifiers slowly being pulled apart from what they signify. This ritual dismemberment of the language medium in postmodernism evokes the deadly battle at the center of the labyrinth. Postmodern theorists are continually trying to

dismantle or decenter the text, selecting a key term to dissect or unravel, to introduce instability

to a fundamental underpinning of the text and watch it crumble like a house of cards. Unlike

their modern predecessors, postmodernists do not focus on the loss of meaning, but instead

concentrate on the obstacles to linguistic communication. Despite language's instability,

signification is still possible. Frederic Jameson writes of postmodernism as an end of an era, the

end of industrial modes of production, accompanied by an emptying out of depth in signification.

For Jameson, the text becomes two dimensional, full of signifiers in a field. Like pathways in a

labyrinth, these signifiers all compete for attention and the postmodern reader must select his or

way through the text.

      A corollary of postmodern linguistic analysis is an emphasis upon mutation and

perversion in contemporary fiction and poetry. The monstrous and contagion are a result of

unstable linguistic signs. As words shift, they mutate into unrecognizable shapes and figures.

The theme of hybridity in contemporary writing stems from the slippage of the linguistic sign.

As a word slides toward another definition, it retains elements of its former connotation, and

both interpretations exist simultaneously. The figure of the Minotaur is thus an apt symbol in

postmodern literature. The Minotaur is at once an animal and human, the tragic other and the

rapacious beast. Anne Carson personifies this postmodern emphasis on monstrosity in her work,

Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse. Her main character Geryon is described alternately as

human and monstrous, at once a winged red monster of ancient myth and a present day boy

living out echoes of his mythic counterpart. The form of her text is hybrid, as well, both novel

and verse, competing elements united by her title and her intentions. Carson's text and her

character take on both forms at once, and readers move back and forth between worlds as they

read. The resulting experience is one of personified hybridity and multiplicity. To explain the

work, one must acknowledge that is neither one thing nor another, that it is both. Geryon is not a monster and he is not human; he is both, and the novel (or poem) is richer for it.

Contemporary literary theory often ignores poetics to focus on the more inclusive term of "the text." My desire is to elaborate a postmodern poetic theory, one that is more encompassing than any current theoretical movements. It borrows from postmodernism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, but is far more specific than other aesthetic arguments about poetry's function in society, or how a poem works. The metaphor of poem as labyrinth bridges disparate theorists, and even includes those outside the academy. A theory of poem as labyrinth implies various theorists, including for instance Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes. The labyrinth metaphor is not merely a philosophy or argument; it is an archetype deeply rooted in our psychology, our cultural history. We can see the labyrinth at work in both literary theory and in contemporary poetry, and it is a valuable lens to use in seeing how the poem works. In all its abstraction, my endeavor here is a practical one. I want to apply the labyrinth metaphor to various ideas of poetics, and then to actual poems, to understand the nature of poetry in a postmodern world. It is a new way of conceiving of art itself, the poem as infinite expanse within a finite structure; the poet, a modern day Daedalus constructing labyrinths of the mind to ensnare and enlighten readers; and the reader, who volunteers to descend into another realm of language in order to slay the monster of anti-meaning and return fortified, stronger for the mental adventure.

Before embarking on an exploration of this metaphor, however, a brief overview of various theories that inform this study is in order. The deconstructive criticism of Jacques Derrida influences much poetic theory today. Post-structuralism and postmodernism have forced authors, poets, and scholars to rethink language and textuality. In his revolutionary conference

paper, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida puts forth the

main tenets of post-structuralism, arguing that texts have no fixed center, and thus at the heart of

every text is a fundamental absence. Meaning and truth can no longer be though of as

transcendent, and Derrida argues that

> in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse […] that is to
> say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental
> signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence
> of the transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of
> differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and
> the play of signification indefinitely. (91)

The center of Derrida's text then becomes a void, an empty space, and the endless play of

signification resembles the infinite branching corridors, the endless possible routes within the

labyrinth. The post-structuralist view of a text is a place of choices, decisions, and play within

darkness, in a system that is decentered and disorienting like the labyrinth. The text becomes a

process of play, a journey, not a fixed entity but a continually changing beast. I use the word

beast here to echo Derrida's terminology. The absence at the center of this text is described by

Derrida as "the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity" (103). He urges us

not to turn away from these truths, this decentering of the text, this lurking monster within.

The conclusion of Derrida's essay offers two choices for contemporary readers: to look

for a center or origin that is not there, or to submit to the play of signifiers. In Derrida's words,

the choice is as follows:

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play.
> The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which
> escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of
> interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin,
> affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being
> the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of
> ontotheology – in other words, throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full
> presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. (102)

Derrida's decision, and the decision of most postmodernists, is to embrace the necessary existence of play, to willingly acknowledge and accept that the text has no center, that words once considered solid and fixed have become slightly slippery, and less definite than they once were. Derrida uses the term "dissemination" in much of his work, arguing that meaning scatters throughout a text, and no longer remains locked up within individual signifiers. Despite language's instability, meaning proliferates.

Contemporary poets have inherited this critical framework, and are writing in light of all these theories. Derrida's arguments have become standard practice for readers and writers alike, incorporated into the academy and in various discourses of knowledge in various disciplines, and his theories imagine the text as a site with a dangerous void at the center, endless play surrounding it, and always the lurking possible monstrosity of nonmeaning. All of these qualities combined evoke the image of the labyrinth, and so a useful strategy for understanding today's poetry would be to explore this metaphor, to imagine the postmodern poem as a labyrinth, to see what interpretations are possible in the dark corridors of Derridian play. Envisioning the text as a labyrinth that readers attempt to solve or even survive serves as a fortuitous and illuminating metaphor.

Lyotard's definition of postmodernism evokes the image of the labyrinth in a similar way. Postmodernism for Lyotard is defined as the "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 509). He argues in "The Postmodern Condition" that progress in the sciences has led to more questioning of all truths, skepticism, and the need to look for legitimacy, the need to verify. Lyotard believes that the modern academy has suffered "an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge" (510). He argues that language is a complex fabric, made up of interconnections and overlapping threads, images again reminding us of the labyrinth:

> The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules. Wittgenstein writes: "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses." (511)

Lyotard's quotation of Wittgenstein here directly mentions the maze, comparing language to a maze that is eternally changing to reflect the evolution of language. The various discourses inform each other and compete with one another, so this maze becomes increasingly complex; the more definitions of words one knows, the more opportunities for false turns in the maze, and so no one can ever hope to achieve mastery of a text. And so, according to Wittgenstein and Lyotard, language resembles a labyrinth, a complicated interconnected structure, something to lose oneself in, not necessarily to solve or escape from. The architecture of our language is infinite, variable, and shifting, and these qualities are shared by labyrinths. The postmodern and post-structuralist readers become the intrepid hero, venturing forth into the poem to slay the Minotaur and return vindicated.

One of the most influential figures in recent literary theory is Michel Foucault, alternately described as historian, social scientist, philosopher, and literary theorist. By tracing the history of the term "author," Foucault continued the process of destabilizing or problematizing the traditional view of the author that Barthes had began in his essay "The Death of the Author." Foucault describes the act of writing as a game, and one could again envision the maze in the following passage about the nature of writing:

> This means that it [writing] is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier. Writing unfolds like a game [*jeu*] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of

writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. (175)

Foucault imagines the subject slipping away here as it writes, because the self is a construct, because a stable self must always dissipate; the self cannot even remain stable in a text because it is always a fiction. It is difficult not to imagine the labyrinth in this passage here, the traveler disappearing into the dark ahead, rounding a corner and gradually fading out of sight. And as each subsequent pathway is chosen, the traveler becomes someone new, the text changing as well. Read this way, Foucault's argument would encourage this analysis of poem as labyrinth. For Foucault, the point of writing is not to pin a subject down to one interpretation, or to find a viable exit, but to create a space for wandering, a labyrinth of the mind in which the reader can linger. One can imagine the self, the ego, falling away within a labyrinth, and only instincts remain, or perhaps the simple momentum of traversing the maze takes over. The intellect is overtaken by physicality, and movement is key. Foucault uses the phrase "constantly disappearing," indicating that writing is always ongoing, changing. In this paradigm, the reader of a poem enters a shifting architecture.

Roland Barthes' various writings also display an interest in the possibility of signification and the processes of reading and writing. He calls himself a professor of literary semiology, and so his focus is on signs and what words can convey, how and what words mean. One of the tenets of post-structuralist theory is that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes, "Death" 146-47). The text for Barthes is a site where the writer and ego are stripped away, a space not unlike the dark corridors of the labyrinth, and again like Foucault, Barthes describes the text as a place where identity is lost, where the self falls away. In Barthes' theory, the author

becomes the absence at the center of the text, that which previously had been considered the origin. The author is no longer a stable entity to explain where the text comes from and what it truly means. Barthes and Foucault effectively extract the author from the work, arguing that the author is no more than a disembodied writing hand, "borne by a pure gesture of inscription." Barthes envisions this hand not attached to any originating author, but motivated only by the origin of writing itself:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture […] and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (149)

This endless deferral recalls the figure wandering in the depths of the labyrinth, searching for various possible passageways. Barthes claims that deciphering a text has become futile. For him, the author was once the center, the fixed foundation that explained a text, or provided a fixed point around which semantic play could occur, but this play would be limited, grounded by the center. Postmodern thought can no longer tolerate the author as center, this fictional stable presence, and so reading becomes a process of exploration and extrication:

> In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled,* nothing *deciphered;* the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. (150)

For Barthes, and for most postmodernists, the text is a site of play and discovery, a place to range over, to roam endlessly like a labyrinth. He even mentions thread in his description of writing here. He uses stocking thread in his example, but one could easily substitute Ariadne's thread guiding Theseus out of the complicated labyrinth. The text again is described in postmodern theory as a tissue of complication, a web of possible signifiers, a labyrinth of multiplicity.

So what can the postmodern reader hope to achieve by reading poetry? Why would the contemporary poet continue to write when facing such theoretical multiplicity? If language is essentially disorder, or overly complicated entanglement, what could the contemporary poet dare try and communicate? By looking at the poem or text as a labyrinth, we can envision poetry as an exercise or meditation, a trial or journey. The poet would become Daedalus, the crafty artisan who constructed the labyrinth, or perhaps a Virgil to our Dante, or Ariadne with thread to help Theseus find his way back. The metaphor has many possibilities and layers, and envisioning the reader and writer in various roles within the myth will allow us to explore what role poetry retains in the postmodern world. Labyrinths have fascinated us since antiquity and have been sites of ritual and psychological trials, and by analyzing the importance of these architectural structures, we can begin to envision reading poetry as a ritual, an action or process, not an ultimate product. Using the labyrinth metaphor, we could see the poem as not an object, but a function that the reader must act out. If there's no longer one truth that can be successfully conveyed, if Derrida and Lyotard are correct about there being an excess of signification, then the only option for the poet is to let his or her reader explore all the untruths, all the possible pathways to multiple truths in the maze of language.

Current Research

This project incorporates research from many diverse disciplines, and as such there are several key books from disparate studies that were wonderful resources. Since I am attempting to write about poetic theory, spatial configuration, architecture, monsters, horror, psychology, and possible redemption, this project has become truly interdisciplinary, with just a few cornerstone works and many tangential texts. The following works all became essential to my

argument, either because of their content or form, the information they contained or the author's approach to literary study.

Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* was the initial inspiration for this project. Aarseth's study focuses on digital media and what he calls "ergodic literature," a term he invents to describe texts that must be read interactively, with the reader performing specific functions or actions in order to determine how the text is read. The *I Ching,* the ancient book of Chinese prophecy and poetry, also known as the *Book of Changes,* would be an example of an ergodic text. Although in codex form, the book is not read page by page; the reader views pages out of traditional sequence, determining the order of progression. An encyclopedia would also qualify as an ergodic text, as one usually reads it not by sequential pagination, but by looking up subjects individually. Most useful in Aarseth's study is his demarcation of unicursal and multicursal narrative models. Looking at the many comparisons literary critics make between texts and labyrinths in narrative theory, Aarseth exposes an overlooked aspect of the labyrinth metaphor: labyrinths may either have one long circuitous path (the unicursal model) or many competing forking paths where one could get lost or wander (the multicursal model). These two models are often conflated, and often the unicursal model is overlooked entirely, despite the fact that almost all of the earliest diagrams or artistic representations of labyrinths are unicursal in design, one long winding pathway that offers no choices to the traveler, but simply demands persistence. Aarseth's was the first study I encountered that mapped the structure of a labyrinth onto a text, and to me it seemed an extremely useful and accurate metaphor for understanding and interpreting postmodern poetry.

N. Katherine Hayles, in her unconventional, highly designed work *Writing Machines,* examines three texts in depth: *Lexia to Perplexia, House of Leaves,* and *A Humument.* Hayles

calls these books "technotexts," a term she uses to explain books that seem cognizant of their own technology, texts that are somewhat self-aware, or that make reference to their own inscription practices. These three works all foreground the writing process, and readers would have extreme difficulty overlooking the authors and their presence within the text. *House of Leaves*, for example, is a horror novel about a house that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, and the book itself has a cover smaller than the pages it contains. These pages stick out, and the form of the book, as well as the writing style, the shifting voices, the mutating fonts, all of these design elements work upon the reader. Hayles argues that these technotexts affect our subjectivity, and that the materiality of the book has become tantamount in literary study. Although she does not examine any poetry or explicitly mention the labyrinth as metaphor, I like to imagine that this project could be an extension of hers, a venture into what one might call "technopoesis."

Much of Joseph Campbell's work was of great help in conceiving of the labyrinth as a symbol and metaphor with modern resonance. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Campbell explains the psychological significance of the labyrinth as a rite or ritual, a process that I could then compare to the process of reading. Campbell's writing allowed me to appreciate the relevance and universal nature of this multifaceted and enduring symbol, and much of my reading of this ancient story is through Campbell's eyes. Other pertinent resources that reside outside of the realm of traditional literary study would be Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space.* Both of these books were extremely useful in my exploration of spatiality, and I extrapolated many of Eliade's and Bachelard's theories about space and applied them to the postmodern page, and the ways in which contemporary readers and writers approach the text as a material artifact. Several books

on architectural theory and the study of horror and monsters allowed me to expound on the symbolism of the labyrinth structure and the Minotaur trapped inside. Each of these texts contains thought provoking analysis within its own field of study, and so these helped as catalysts for my own project.

Finally, there are several books on labyrinth studies that were indispensable to my project. Hermann Kern's study of labyrinths titled *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years* is considered the definitive compendium of information about labyrinths. Kern does not directly apply labyrinths to literary study, but his amazing volume encompasses a wealth of information about the history of labyrinths and their appearance in art. Kern originally was compiling resources for a museum exhibition in Milan in 1981, and the program, *Labirinti,* was such a success that he published it the next year. His impressive, comprehensive study was translated into English in 2000, and every scholar researching labyrinths owes a debt of gratitude to Kern's exhaustive research and detailed analysis. Predating Kern's work, W.H. Matthews' book *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development* is meant to be a general study on the subject of labyrinths, what the author calls a "readable survey" from a generalist's perspective, not from any limiting approach of archaeology or mathematics. Most of Matthews' material is subsumed in Kern's later volume, but it still provides an enjoyable glimpse into the passionate scholastics of labyrinth study.

Also concerning labyrinths but using a vastly different approach, Craig Wright's book, *The Maze and the Warrior: Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music,* provides a wide-ranging study of the historical significance of labyrinths in churches, describing and picturing existing mazes and "reading" their symbolism for churchgoers in the Middle Ages. While Kern and Matthews approach the labyrinth from a historian's point of view, Wright places the

labyrinth within the Christian church, and his study includes countless diagrams, photographs, and examples of early Christian manuscripts that incorporate the symbolism of the labyrinth. Wright traces the earliest occurrences of the labyrinth in architecture and literature, and provides a fascinating account of how the labyrinth was first adopted by the Gnostics and reinterpreted, and how it eventually became a Christian symbol. Wright also includes several examples of musical mazes, compositions meant to meander and confuse, that show the labyrinth metaphor at work in yet another artistic medium.

Serving as an exemplary model, Penelope Reed Doob's comprehensive study of the labyrinth in medieval thought and literature, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, informs much of the theoretical basis of this argument. She explores the properties of labyrinths, how people in Medieval times imagined the labyrinth, and identifies how various Medieval texts can be read as labyrinthine. Doob applies the labyrinth metaphor to these texts, and though her scope is limited to Medieval manuscripts, her project is the most similar in approach to mine, the most intrinsic to my project. My study will incorporate much of her terminology and insights, but I would like to focus my efforts on exploring the mythology and psychology of the labyrinth, and what it symbolizes for a postmodern world.

I also encountered several texts that initially seemed similar to my endeavor, but proved to only touch upon some small aspect of my study. They all deserve mention here, since each one offers an alternative approach to studying labyrinths and literature together. The first of these would be a brief chapter in Evans Lansing Smith's book *Figuring Poesis: A Mythical Geometry of Postmodernism,* where the author explores the maze, the apocalypse, the goddess, alchemy, and the underworld as fundamental archetypes. His treatment of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the text coincides with my study, but there is not a sustained look at poetry here.

Smith maps these archetypes onto geometrical figures – the circle, the square, the spiral, the triangle, etc. – and he combines geometry and myth to form what he calls "a universal grammar of the human imagination" in postmodern literature (Smith 1). He mostly looks at literal labyrinths, Borges' fascination with the maze, labyrinths mentioned in James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover,* Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose,* Garbriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum,* Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*. Smith creates a compendium of the mythic in postmodern literature here, but it reads like a quick catalogue and not a focused analysis.

Donald Gutierrez's work, *The Maze in the Mind and the World: Labyrinths in Modern Literature,* also explores various metaphorical mazes in twentieth century British and American literature or works that have labyrinthine properties. Gutierrez does not venture into poetry, but he does categorize mazes in interesting ways, looking at the maze of society, or the maze of sex and love, and so on. Gutierrez does not relate his study to literary theory, and he looks at modern works here, not postmodern ones, but he does offer an excellent exploration of many modernist classics in light of maze symbolism. Another study like Gutierrez's that is tangentially related to this project would be J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines.* Miller attempts to untangle particularly repetitive and difficult passages from various novels, comparing them to labyrinths because of their complexity. Miller's focus remains on overlap and repetition within texts, the crisscrossing over the same words and ideas that traps readers within complicated texts. He traces what he calls a "compulsion to repeat" through several works, arguing that this repetition is intrinsic to the pattern of these stories (Miller 12). Miller similarly applies the metaphor of the labyrinth to reading and writing here, but only in the sense that these texts become unreadable or obscure.

Chapter Descriptions

The journey through this project will follow one's progression through the labyrinth. The opening chapter deals with entrances, or the difficulty in gaining access to the labyrinth and poem. In this initial approach, we will consider the labyrinth and postmodern poem as thresholds allowing us to enter into a different realm, a different experience of time and space. The second chapter will explore the false turn, the possibility of a wrong decision in traveling in the labyrinth or reading on the page. So many postmodern poets embrace deliberate confusion in their work, and their poetry ends up being about the idea of perception and seeing itself, as much as it pertains to a particular topic or content. In this chapter I will be looking at several examples of visual poetry to consider the way the eye meanders across the surface of a page or canvas, as if lost within a maze. Here in this consideration of contemporary schools of poetry, I will look at the space within a labyrinth and the space in a postmodern poem. How does this space function on the page or in the reader's mind? How are the aesthetic impulses of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and procedural poets evocative of the exploratory meanderings of the labyrinth's design? Many contemporary schools of poetry seem to invite encounters with nonmeaning, and delight in the possibility of confusion and dispersal, encouraging similar feelings and reactions to one lost within the labyrinth's dark passageways.

At the center of the labyrinth, once we have explored how the architecture of the maze, along with the construction of the poem, has affected the traveler and reader, we will confront the Minotaur. Here I will outline the fears and anxieties that plague those attempting to walk the labyrinth and those trying to read contemporary poetry. What similarities can we find and which unseen threat is more terrifying, the growling beast's terrible presence or its haunting absence? This chapter will explore monster theory, and we will closely dwell on the Minotaur's particular

form. What does it mean that he is a hybrid of man and beast, a composite of two beings? And finally, after a hopefully successful encounter with the Minotaur, I will attempt to map out our return. Those who survive the labyrinth must always go back the way they came, and so here I will return to the theoretical underpinnings of the postmodern aesthetic and the mythological narrative of the labyrinth structure. In the story of the labyrinth, Theseus came out with less than he had upon entering – but what did he gain from his experience? What intangibles can we take away from the postmodern poem? Does one come back changed, rejuvenated, enlightened, redeemed? Or does one return merely exhausted and vaguely dizzy? In this final chapter I will focus on the postmodern poem as a possible redemptive act. In an increasingly secular world, what magical symbolism does the labyrinth retain? Why or how is the ancient classical myth of the labyrinth still relevant today? And perhaps most importantly, I will examine how contemporary poets are evoking this age old form and all that it implies, either by conscious reference or unconscious design in their writing.

Figure 1.1
Silver coins from Knossos (Kern 54).
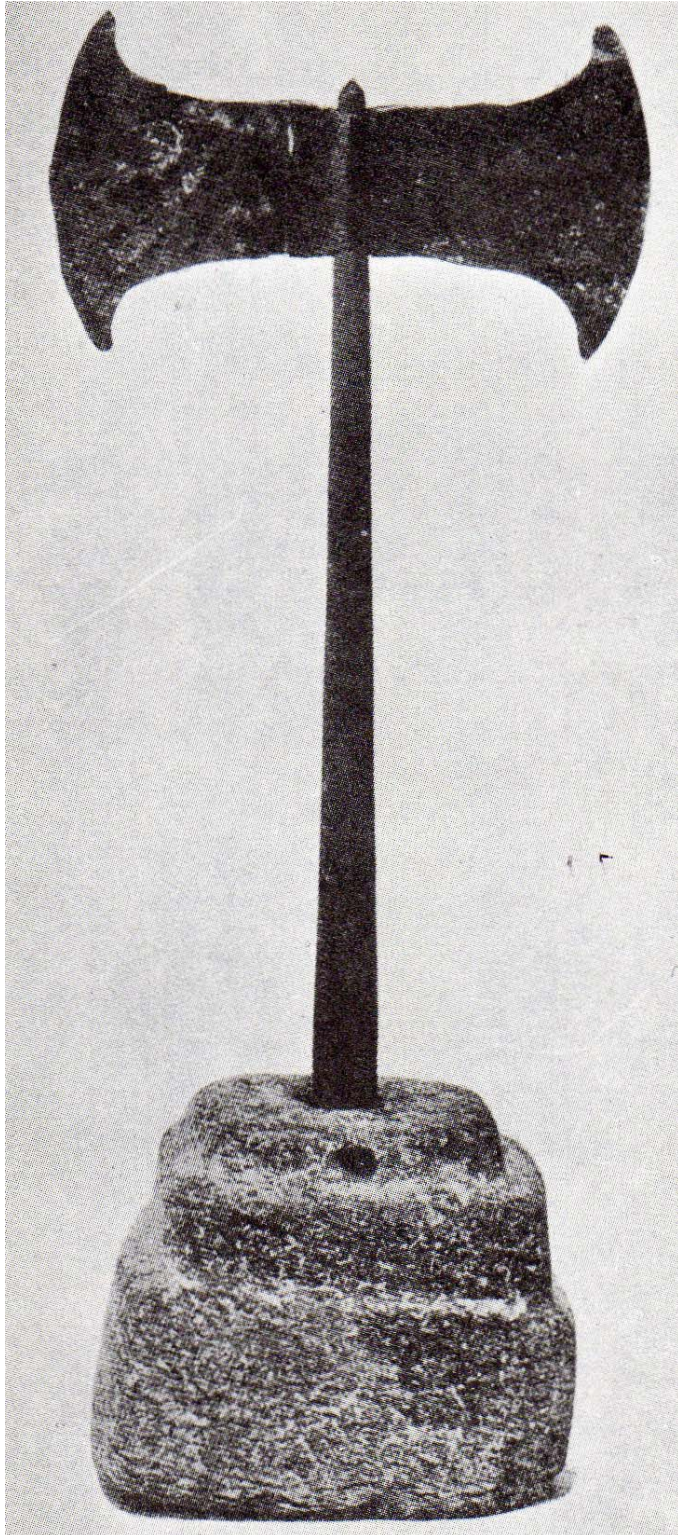
Figure 1.2
A picture of a Double-axe or labrys from Dictaean Cave, evidence of a Minoan bull-cult near Crete, found by Sir Arthur Evans (Matthews 32).
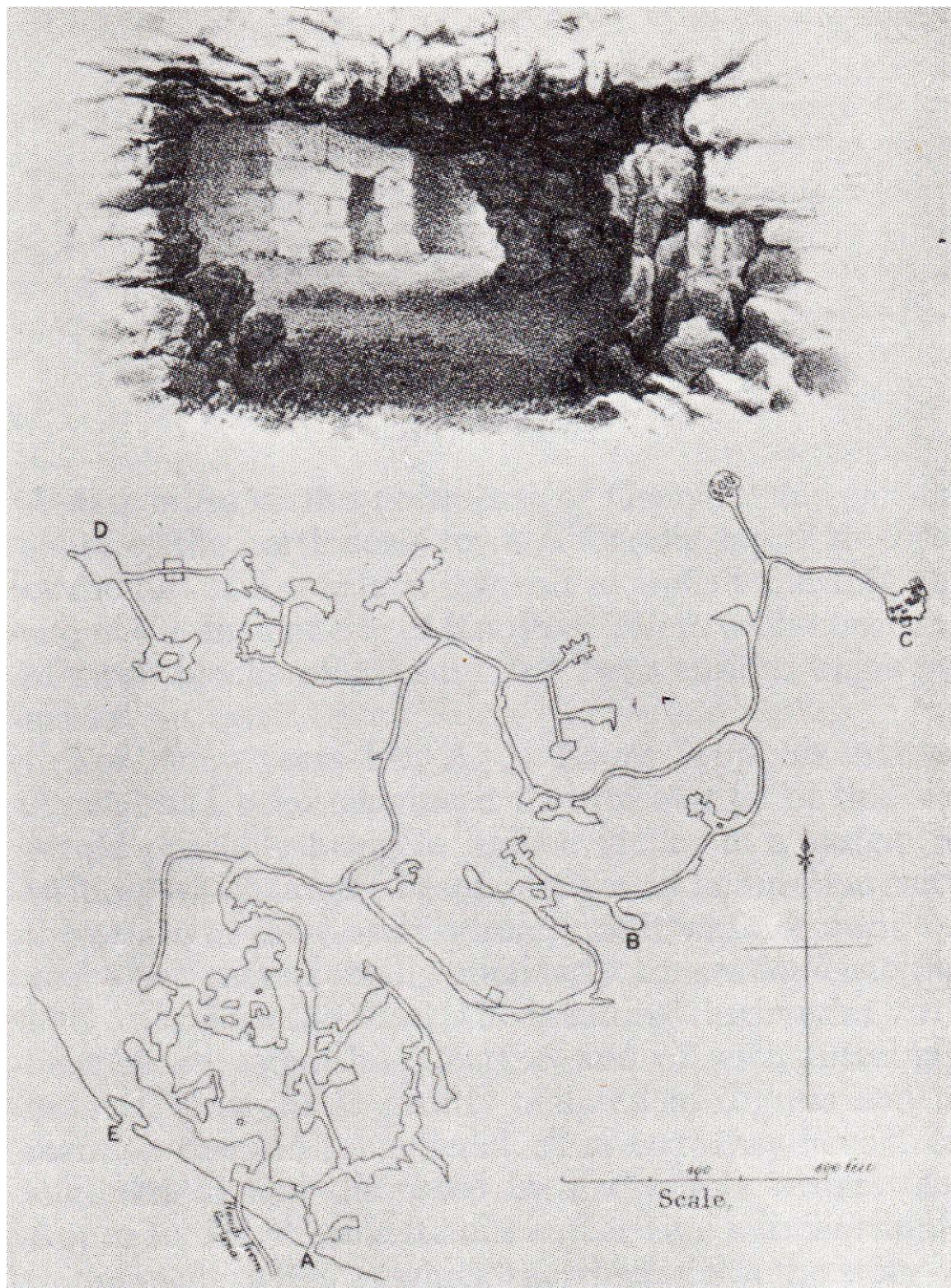
Figure 1.3
Cavern of Gortyna (Matthews 29).

CHAPTER TWO

ENTERING THE LABYRINTH

In the postmodern age, labyrinths have been relegated to decoration or diversion. We encounter them in cornfields on summer excursions, or as hedge mazes in various public spaces, or even within the funhouse at carnivals. Today, labyrinths are almost exclusively for ornamentation or play, not at all like the structures of mythic import or religious symbolism from antiquity, with their perilous pathways and dire consequences. Even if we dismiss labyrinths as irrelevant, child's play, or just smart design, the idea of the labyrinth remains incredibly relevant to the world of the mind, our interiority. The labyrinth serves as a useful metaphor for reading, writing, creating, thinking, perceiving, and for life itself. Psychologically, the labyrinth is an archetype that still moves us and describes life for us in some essential way. It is a structure that has been embraced by artists and architects throughout the ages, and by looking at postmodern poetry through the lens of the labyrinth, we find an enlightening new way to conceive of today's poetic practices.

The first step in reading a poem or in traversing the labyrinth is to gain entrance, and in both cases this can be quite daunting. Entering a postmodern poem can be just as disorienting and confusing as walking a labyrinth, generating just as much anxiety. Readers fear making a false move, meeting a dead end, or running into something unexpected, something monstrous or incongruous. Entering the labyrinth changes one's perceptual state, allowing for a different level of awareness. Poetry likewise demands a shift in perception, a heightened reading and heightened expectations. In order to enter the poem, readers must enter a dreamlike or

contemplative state, submitting to the structure of the poem, allowing it to work upon them. This suspension of the faculties when stepping into a different kind of space is required by any art, but even more so with poetry in its abstraction and minimalist use of language to convey or communicate its truths to the reader. Poetry requires a deliberate mind shift, and there is no object or artwork to gaze upon to act as a catalyst for the viewing process. The written word as both prose and poetry appears remarkably similar, and only the context enables the reader to know when to adjust his or her expectations. This adjustment of expectations hinges on such subtle clues as the presence of space (the absence of words), the centering of lines, or the discernment of a poetic tone, as opposed to more prosaic or episodic writing. These differences can be so slight, yet one seldom confuses the two types of writing. For all the subtlety of the differences in the material object of the text, one is usually confronted with poetry, aware from the moment of reading that one is in the presence of the poetic line. This heightening of expectation might have something to do with the level of abstraction employed by most poets. Using fewer words to evoke more possible meanings, poets are using language in a more abstract way, employing ambiguity and connotation in their craft, stretching their words' dictionary definitions. Instead of words having particular, tangible, finite definitions, in poetry words seem to expand and shift, working on different levels simultaneously, offering the reader multiple pathways through the poem.

Aristotle classified poetry as an art of possibility and multiplicity, and also hinted at this different order of discourse in his *Poetics*:

> The poet's function is not to report things that have happened, but rather to tell of such things as might happen, things that are possibilities by virtue of being in themselves inevitable or probable. […] Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history, in that poetry tends rather to express the universal, history rather the particular fact. (54)

Here Aristotle makes several far-reaching and generalizing claims about all of poetry, claims that seem to persist in our contemporary expectations of poetry's form and function. We still imagine poetry to be of a higher order of discourse, one of transcendent expression and universal truths, and not mundane particulars. The architecture of white space on the page, the ambiguity of reference, and the stylized appearance of the poetic line, all of these characteristics mark poetry as a different form of discourse than prose, a discourse that bars immediate access and requires a measured approach.

Labyrinths have a universal mythic importance and share this elevation of experience that Aristotle attributes to poetic language. Facing the labyrinth, the traveler visits a site of contemplation, fascination, and mystery. The labyrinth is more than just a crooked conglomeration of paths, and it demands higher thought processes to traverse than a simple passageway would require. When facing a poem or a labyrinth, one experiences a bit of awe and trepidation. The way in and through and out the other side will require some concentration, determination, and skill. As in poetry, where the opening line seems the best place to start, although the entranceway to a labyrinth may seem obvious; however, once inside the way becomes deliberately confused, so the traveler or reader must prepare before embarking, effectively steeling oneself for the journey ahead. The first step must be to set aside all expectations of straightforward expression or movement. One must reconcile with frustration and error, since the poem and labyrinth alike will provide setbacks and recursive strategies. It is far too sweeping a generalization to suggest that postmodern poetry is always concerned with mystification and subversion, but it is not too farfetched to suggest that contemporary poets value the poem's process, method, and form over meaning and content. The poet's aim is not to inform or instruct, but simply to guide. It's not about what's being said, but it's about the way,

the journey, the experience of reading the poem. Instead of attempting to convey meaning, the postmodern poem offers meanders; instead of attempting expression, the poem fosters exercise.

Like a modern day Theseus, the reader of a postmodern poem receives no reward, but merely survives the journey intact, perhaps a bit changed for the experience. Again though, the emphasis is not on the final outcome or some perhaps mythical ultimate meaning, but on the process of reading, the journey through the lines. Too many theoretical arguments stand between the poem and its supposed content for one to imagine "getting what the poet really meant here," a nostalgic notion at best. Ideas of "author" and "reader" have been questioned to the point that all that remains is the physical text, the material page. Instead of trying to convey meaning, the postmodern poet must be content to put his or her reader through an experience of reading, hopefully a novel experience, one that the reader has not encountered before. Contemporary poets are still following Pound's advice to make it new, and since we can no longer assume content is stable or transferable, all the poet can hope to present successfully is form. Perhaps this accounts for the proliferation of materiality in postmodern writing and theory. So many contemporary poets are working with various textures and physical materials to create word art, collages, artist books, found art, and concrete poetry. If meaning and content are up for grabs, then the poet must embrace form and the possibilities of the printed page, the physical medium.

Both the labyrinth and the poem represent structures in which a person can get lost, becoming immersed in different pathways, different choices and possibilities. In *Labyrinth: Studies on an Archetype*, literary scholar Gaetano Cipolla argues that entrance into a labyrinth is easy; finding the exit is the difficult part. The entranceway is often obvious, large, and inviting. There is usually just one entrance, a direct and simple way into the structure. There is often only one way out as well though, and extrication is neither simple nor direct. For Cipolla, the

labyrinth has rich psychological importance and can symbolize many things: a place of death, an experience of getting lost, a way of finding a new self, a world of darkness, an image of a reverse womb, an intricate forest, the belly of a whale, a controlled chaos, a descent into Hell, or a revisiting of the unconscious (24-5). He claims that the labyrinth is always an in-between place that is solveable but obscure, a place that tests our merit both physically and intellectually. The labyrinth is a place of mystery half in the world and half otherworldly, and entering the labyrinth always means leaving the familiar behind and embarking upon a journey or trial of some sort. Focusing on the psychological implications of the labyrinth image, Cipolla argues that the Theseus myth ultimately represents a rite of initiation, the hero venturing into the earth and symbolically dying, only to be reborn or resurrected as he emerges from the mysterious darkness. Only Theseus never does die, and the labyrinth is not a literal hell. This myth toys with in-between places and liminal space. Even the confusing architecture inside the labyrinth seems to play with this alteration of space. So what does entering a space like this mean?

The reader of postmodern poetry finds himself entering a shifting and ambiguous space much like that of the labyrinth. As readers enter the poem, they submit themselves to a time and place of dislocation and disorientation. The spatiality on the page rearranges one's sensibility, and readers must reset their expectations. Entering a poem, like entering a labyrinth, is a deliberate entrance into indeterminancy, as readers subject themselves to a period of lostness, a prolonged exposure to mystery. Cipolla likens the descent into the labyrinth to entering the world of the feminine (earth, body, darkness, mystery) in order to find the world of the masculine (intellect, mind, illumination). After entrance, there is an increased receptivity for both reader and traveler, as they must surrender some agency to the surrounding structures and follow the pathways or connections provided. When Cipolla points out that the entrance of a

labyrinth is always wide open, but the exit is more elusive, the same argument could be applied to a poem (42). Readers know exactly where to begin, yet the way out seems more convoluted; the only way out is through. The suspended animation of the labyrinth traveler, who is at once stuck in place yet moving, endlessly circling the same territory while trying different avenues, mimics the silent stillness of the reader immersed within the poem's lines. Cipolla describes the labyrinth's structure as an oxymoron, a space that seen from within appears disordered, but from the outside would seem remarkably ordered and designed:

> The labyrinth is the perfect oxymoron which opposes the chaos of its tortuous and dark corridors to the geometric precision of its external forms; in the precision of its external order it embraces being, form and the tendency to become fixed; in its internal confusion, it embraces the constant becoming, the uninterrupted flowing of life. (120)

The movement through both poem and labyrinth is paradoxical in this way – these are places of stasis, but not paralysis. In postmodern poetry, especially in visual poetry that incorporates graphic design elements or collage/pastiche techniques, the space appears at first glance to be highly designed and ordered, but upon entering the space, readers experience confusion and disorder, not knowing how to proceed through the space or read the various design elements competing for attention. Even in a purely textual poem, postmodern poets are playing with grammar and syntax, abandoning or deliberately bending the mechanics of the language, and readers often find themselves guessing what to read next, fumbling blindly through the text as if groping for the correct passageway within a labyrinth. Decisions in both spaces are often made based on adjacency, contingency, whim, and instinct, instead of clearly demarcated rules of grammatical progression.

To understand this paradoxical space better, it will be helpful to explore how various theorists have attempted to classify labyrinthine literature in the past. We can further our own

study by adopting relevant terminology, and seeing exactly which texts they would associate with the labyrinth metaphor. Espen Aarseth, in his 1997 work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, situates the new digital texts within the tradition of what he terms ergodic literature, "ergodic" meaning texts that have paths or choices, open dynamic texts in which the reader performs a sequence, like with the *I Ching,* Apollinaire's calligrammes, the Talmud, video games, and even encyclopedias. For Aarseth, any work that involves a process, leaving the sequence up to the reader to decide, falls into this category. Multiple pathways are possible in these texts, like in a labyrinth, and the reading process demands more than mere page turning from the reader, making for a far more interactive and individualized text. Aarseth also coins the term "cybertext" and defines it as a machine for the production of variety of expression (3). By this definition, any text that can be read nonsequentially would qualify as a cybertext, or any work that depended upon its reader to establish the reading order. Aarseth views the book as a mechanism or machine, and is curious about labyrinths and how they relate to a text's procedure. He argues that we've internalized the book's structure and functions, no longer seeing it for what it is, a complex machine, what he calls "a symbiosis of sign, operator, and medium" (55), the three variables that determine how a text is read. These three variables struggle with one another according to Aarseth, and he claims the text is a site where "meaning struggles to produce itself" (57). Ultimately for Aarseth, entering an ergodic text equals entering a space filled with choices.

Aarseth's first chapter is entitled "The Book and the Labyrinth," and he explores how ergodic, procedural texts provide pathways for the reader to follow. Most of the texts he examines are hypertextual digital media, and yet he leaves the door open for print books. He refrains from analysis of any print works, but his definition of cybertexts definitely includes a small subset of bound books. Whereas this study proposes that postmodern poetry functions like

a labyrinth for the reader regardless of medium, Aarseth's main concern is digital media and hypertext literature. All of Aarseth's examples of cybertexts allow the reader to become an active participant in the reading process, able to influence the outcome by making certain choices; the reader can even get lost along the way or discover secret passageways within the text, and yet this influence is not true control. Aarseth compares the reader to a spectator, absorbed in the narrative and invested in the outcome, but powerless to bring about the narrative's resolution, since "The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent" (4). And so the reader of ergodic literature influences the order or sequence of text but cannot affect content; the reader cannot alter the lines of text just as someone traversing the labyrinth cannot move its walls. Again, Aarseth's study includes many print books, as well as hypertexts, video games, and online MOOs and MUDs, but the only poetry he mentions is Apollinaire's calligrammes, visual poems in which the words spread across the page can be read in various sequences (10). Aarseth fails to explore the ergodic function of postmodern poetry fully. This is the key to understanding postmodern poetry, this metaphor of the labyrinth. By Aarseth's definition, any poem that offers the reader visual choices could be classified as labyrinthine. Any visual disruption or interruption of the textual line would constitute an alternate pathway, so any visual poetry, concrete poetry, or found poetry would qualify. By examining these types of poems as labyrinthine, we have a new way of grouping seemingly disparate groups of artists. We can then begin to ascertain their purposes, and begin to construct an inclusive poetics of postmodernism to bridge these divergent types of poetry.

Most helpful to this study is Aarseth's analysis of the labyrinth concept, and here he draws from several labyrinth and literary scholars before him. He argues that there are

conflicting models of labyrinths, and that our use of the term labyrinth now implies a structure of many pathways, of false turns and dead ends:

> Our present idea of the labyrinth is the Borgesian structure of "forking paths," the bewildering chaos of passages that lead in many directions but never directly to our desired goal. But there is also another kind, or paradigm, of labyrinths. Penelope Reed Doob, in her excellent discussion of physical and metaphorical labyrinths of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages (1990), distinguishes between two kinds of labyrinthine structure: the unicursal, where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center; and the multicursal, where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices. (5-6)

Aarseth takes his cue from Doob, who in turn was expounding on W.H. Matthews' classification of labyrinth types. Matthews was the first to distinguish between unicursal and multicursal labyrinths in his work *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development*. Doob then extrapolated what these two divergent images of the labyrinth would symbolize in the reader's or artist's imagination, mapping the labyrinth metaphor onto medieval literature. In turn, Aarseth used the multicursal labyrinth as a metaphor for cybertexts in the digital medium, and here we are examining postmodern poetry in light of both unicursal and multicursal models.

Experts debate whether the labyrinth at Knossos of classical mythology was truly a difficult maze to escape from, whether it would be classified as a unicursal or multicursal structure. Doob, author of *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages,* an exhaustive study of all kinds of literal and figurative labyrinthine spaces, cites several Greek texts that claim it was multicursal. Indeed, how could Daedalus have gotten lost in his own creation if it were a simple unicursal design? Doob argues that although labyrinths always appeared unicursal in visual representations up until the Renaissance, the labyrinth always was simultaneously a metaphor for order and chaos, structured linear architecture on the one hand with one path to follow to the center, and dark winding passages that twist and end unpredictably on the other. Aarseth argues that we now view the terms "labyrinthine" and

"linear" as incompatible, but that up until this mind shift during the Renaissance, the labyrinth was considered both unicursal and multicursal. And we can see this in the hundreds of mosaics, paintings, and manuscript drawings of labyrinths that were clearly unicursal in design, but featured a menacing Minotaur at the center, hinting at the danger and treachery of the labyrinth's ability to ensnare. Later, as Renaissance artists concentrated on the multicursal aspects in their renderings, the unicursal form of the labyrinth faded, along with the richness of the metaphor of text as labyrinth, at once linear and multiple. For his purposes, to explore emerging hypertexts online and link them back to their print precursors with forked paths and procedural reading, Aarseth would like us to reinstate labyrinths with their former paradoxical power, at once unicursal and multicursal, simultaneously representing order and chaos.

Another literary scholar famously fixated on the idea of the labyrinth, and fond of the metaphor's complexity and richness, is Jorge Luis Borges. In so many of his fiction and non-fiction works, Borges writes about, around, and through the metaphor of the labyrinth, and appears fascinated with the labyrinth as a metaphor for the book and for reading. Like Aarseth, Borges has no qualms about imagining the labyrinth as simultaneously unicursal and multicursal, embracing the paradox inherent in the labyrinth's duality. As we consider the labyrinth's relevance to postmodernism, it is only fitting that we begin with Borges, as one could argue that his appropriation of this symbol has brought labyrinths to the forefront of the contemporary poet's imagination. Not only is Borges firmly situated in the academy, with his most famous works entitled *Labyrinths* and *Ficciones (Fictions)* widely read and appreciated, but he also uses the labyrinth image in many different ways, creating new associations while reaffirming the old for new generations of writers. Borges alternately equates labyrinths with books, libraries, lives,

and existence itself. In the epilogue to his 1960 collection of personal essays *Dreamtigers*,

Borges imagines his entire body of literary work as a labyrinth:

> A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he
> peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships,
> islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his
> death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.
> (93)

All of his experience, all of the abstract symbols and musings set down upon paper in his lifetime

ultimately take on the form of a labyrinth written upon the physical body. Here writing is seen

as a labyrinth of possibilities and meandering directions, etched onto the author's face.

Alternately, in "The Library of Babel," Borges imagines each individual book as a labyrinth in

itself, housed in a vast labyrinthine space. He imagines the universe as an infinite library

composed of hexagonal galleries, each connected to the other by hallways, creating a honeycomb

labyrinth to house the infinite book-labyrinths. Likewise, the narrator of his story "The Garden

of Forking Paths" is a self-proclaimed connoisseur of mazes, who takes a seemingly impossible

journey, told to "follow that road there to the left and turn left at every crossing" (Borges,

Fictions 122). In this fantastic tale, perhaps Borges' most widely read work, life and literature

become a web of infinite networked times and places. We follow Borges' narrator through

twisting paths in the countryside to arrive at an isolated home. The narrator and his host then

discuss a labyrinth that is alternately a physical object (an ivory writing cabinet), a metaphor for

the narrative itself (in which the narrator journeys through complicated events and locales), and a

story (the novel within the story, an infinite book written by the narrator's ancestor Ts'ui Pên).

This written labyrinth contains all possible outcomes, and is a parable on the nature of time.

Time in this imagined novel is not uniform or stable, but an infinite series of moments

that intersect and branch out in endless combinations. Borges' labyrinth is a branching network

of possibilities in time here, instead of in space. The host explains that they have met before, infinite times, with every possible outcome happening simultaneously. Time is described in the narrative as "a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging, and parallel times. This web of time – the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries – embraces *every* possibility" (Borges, *Fictions* 91). The narrator ends up killing his host, in an intricately wrought plot turn, in order to obliquely communicate war information to his countrymen; the host's name and death will be broadcast the next day in the headlines of all the papers, and his last name, Albert will pinpoint the next targeted city to the enemy. This dizzying, convoluted resolution of a complicated plot is but one of infinite possibilities, and time in Borges' story acts as a multicursal labyrinth, forking and branching in every direction. There is a sense of inevitability here too, though, that reminds one of the relentless unicursal model, as time unfolds continually, and each character must enact each possible future as if on a fixed path. Borges celebrates the duality and paradox of the labyrinth in this story, his characters acting out their lives on a fixed unicursal path, but aware that there are infinite paths, infinite selves acting out every permutation of their lives. Time in this story acts as both a unicursal and multicursal labyrinth, at once inevitable and chaotic. Because his narrator discloses the fact that he's a double agent within the first paragraph, the narrative's surprise ending is surrendered at the outset. Just as in a physical labyrinth, the entrance and exit to Borges' story are both explicit and obvious: this man is a double agent who will betray his host. Interest in the narrative is not garnered by anticipation, suspense, or a revelation at the end, but rather by the gradual layering of symbolism, the increased complexity of the labyrinth metaphor within the heart of the story. Just like within a literal labyrinth, in Borges' literary

labyrinth, the further one progresses into the narrative, the more complications and complexity one encounters.

Borges creates labyrinths within labyrinths, the labyrinthine story containing infinite possible narratives, and containing objects the characters describe as labyrinthine as well. Everything is a labyrinth for Borges in this story, including physical objects, the concept of time, the actions taken or not taken in a human life, and the written objects within the narrative. The labyrinth metaphor multiplies and takes over the story, obscuring the plot by devouring everything in sight; everything becomes a labyrinth, and so the words swim on the page in a telescoping game of reference. Time and space become unstable, as Borges' story imagines limitless dimensions with selves enacting simultaneous actions with different results in each moment, in each place. The novel is described in the story as something that houses infinite, forked time, and Borges presents his readers with a fable about agency, choice, fate, and possibilities. This awareness of complexity, a conscious acceptance of paradox and duality, is what seems fundamentally postmodern here. For Borges, and for postmodern poets and theorists, words, narratives, and truth are all entities that are shifting, unstable, and multiple, like the possible ways through a labyrinth. Imagining the book as a labyrinth gives us a useful metaphor to conceive of the poem as a process, a journey taking place across time and through a definite space. Borges would like us to imagine all reading and writing in this way, each reading as a possible pathway through time and space.

By applying the metaphor of the labyrinth to the book, Borges allows us to perceive the physical dimensions of the book's form; it is not just an abstract dimensionless space. For Borges, and for many postmodern theorists and critics, there is a focus on the material artifact of the book, its physical dimensions. Contemporary theorists embrace the materiality of the text, its

situatedness and concreteness. For Keith Smith, an artist interested in the potential of the book format, the physicality of the book is paramount to his craft. Smith's essay "The Book as Physical Object" presents the argument that pages are slivers of time. As an artist, he experiments with transparent pages in his books/works of art to demonstrate that pages are discrete elements. He claims that opaque pages force readers to read a fragment at a time, constructing the entire narrative only as an afterthought: "In the codex, this single experience is revealed in slivers. The total is perceived and exists only as retention of afterimage in the mind. The codex is never seen at once" (Smith, *Structure* 12). The material – narrative, poem, information, etc. – only exists in fragments of time, and can only be conceived of in totality after the act of viewing. In this sense, the very pages of the codex themselves act as spatializing factors. The various features of a book (the pages, the print, the paratextual elements, and the binding) are encoded by their material production. Smith imagines that a book is pieced together in the reader's mind, a composite of accumulated images compiled afterwards in a singular consciousness. Each reader, and indeed each reading, would yield different results, infinite possible combinations of recollections creating infinite possible books. Smith, like Borges, complicates our ideas of time and space and how we conceive of these while progressing through a physical book. Reading is not a linear process, not a straight shot through from introduction to conclusion, but a series of moments, slivers of time, that accumulate and are assembled in each reader's mind. Like moving through a labyrinth, choices and decisions must be made; there is no one way to piece all of this information together. And so what each of these theorists share is an idea of the book as a multidimensional process; instead of imagining the book as flat, static, or linear, contemporary artists, poets, and theorists are employing metaphors of webs and networks, systems and labyrinths. By focusing on the spatial and temporal aspects of the book, these

theorists force us to envision the text as a material object, a site where choices are made over a duration of time as in a labyrinth.

This concern with the complexity of time and space transcends the realm of abstract theory and even surfaces in studies of graphic novels and the visual arts. Increasingly, theorists are engaging with the context of art, not just the art object, but what surrounds it, the negative space around a sculpture that further defines its materiality, the white space surrounding the text that helps shape a poem, or the wall on which a painting is displayed that creates a border to surround the framed work. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* author and graphic artist Scott McCloud examines comics as an art form, providing an analysis of how the mind processes comics, temporal relations from frame to frame, and the interaction of words and pictures in this purely visual medium. McCloud argues that time works in complex ways in comics. Each panel represents a prolonged moment of time and space and the storytelling happens often in the intervals between panels. Like Smith, who imagines each page as a sliver of time, separate from all the rest, McCloud conceives of each cartoon panel as a discrete moment. Each framed image is an independent event, and often the graphic artist will omit key information deliberately; panels do not simply represent linear sequence but great leaps in time, requiring the reader to fill in the blanks. McCloud describes this as a fracturing, that "Comic panels fracture both time and space," and this extremity of expression reflects the experimentation, risk taking, and testing of limits going on in this rapidly developing medium (McCloud, *Understanding* 67). In cartoons and graphic arts, the gaps in between panels become a site for the reader/viewer to perform the operations necessary to complete the text. The space between frames is called the gutter, and comics require that we enter into this space and participate in constructing the narrative.

McCloud's description of time and spatiality in the graphic arts approaches the procedural metaphor of reading and writing in the labyrinth metaphor proposed here, in the forked time of Borges, in the branching network of cybertexts in Aarseth, in the accumulated pages of Smith's artist books, and in the fragmented installments of McCloud's panels. All of these writers, theorists, and artists complicate the temporal and spatial elements of a text, asking the reader to perform or complete the text in some way, to connect the dots and fill in the blanks from panel to panel, page to page, line to line. Each of these writers argues that we as readers must contribute to the text. The text is not isolated and pristine, but a site of construction and assembly. We think in the gutter, in the margins, in the white space, and the majority of the story is pieced together by the reader. Reading is a recursive process. To process visual images and text, the reader must loop back and revisit in a continual accumulation of meaning. McCloud revisits this concept of temporal perception in *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, to make the bold claim that comics are "an artist's map of time itself" (206). To create in this medium is, for McCloud, to try and capture the experience of time visually, to physically represent an abstraction and render the fourth dimension on the two dimensional page.

Graphic artists are not the only ones capable of this type of endeavor, this experimentation with representing time in their art. In the 1970s, artist Jim Rosenberg made poetry in swimming pools. Rosenberg would place several floating plastic words in a pool and the swimmer/reader would then assemble a poem as he or she floundered in the water (Vogler 452). Like the reader of a graphic novel filling in the gaps between panels, the swimmer had to construct a poem while immersed in water, the physical manifestation of the space between words. Each of Rosenberg's poems became an exercise, a process or journey in which the

readers/swimmers created a work of art by assembling pieces, constructing a poem while experiencing the duration of time inherent in composition. One could imagine this as the ultimate example of frivolity and postmodern play, but the theoretical underpinnings of Rosenberg's experiment ask the reader to explore the physicality of a poem. His readers entered into the medium itself, physically handling the materials of the text, and the many possible outcomes were made palpable; suddenly the choices involved in reading became apparent. Rosenberg's poems must be acted out, enacted by the reader, constructed through a process of choice and discovery that resembles the progression through a labyrinth. Readers get to the end by going through, assembling the poem one word at a time. Instead of assuming that each word is another inevitable step in a fixed sequence, his readers are made to understand the choices involved in the space between, in a truly liquid shifting space representing the printed page. For both McCloud and Rosenberg, despite the disparity of their chosen media, art is a process involving readers and granting them agency in the construction of the work.

In all of these examples, the artists and poets have been fixated on the art object and its materiality. What is the art object and what is the space around it? What are the boundaries of a text and what is the duration of an artwork? To examine how postmodern poets conceive of time and space in their writing, it will be helpful to begin a general discussion of these concepts from noted philosopher, writer, and religious historian, Mircea Eliade. His arguments are grounded in religious thought and terminology, but we can easily map his ideas onto the labyrinth metaphor and read them from a secular perspective. Eliade delineates two types of time and space in the world – the sacred and the profane. Profane time is ordinary temporal time, secular time, the same as profane or secular space. He argues that when myths or rituals are performed, time and space seem to change in nature, expanding towards the infinite, stretching the bounds of

everyday experience. For Eliade, profane temporal time is linear and regular, whereas sacred

time is circular, recursive, "reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is

periodically reintegrated by means of rites" (70). This approaches the characteristics of time

we've been witnessing in the writing of various postmodern artists and theorists, in that time is

complex and cyclical, not simple and linear. And the presence or absence of myth and ritual are

not the only things affecting our experience of time. Eliade claims that various activities elicit

different types of time. We experience time in varying intensities depending on whether we are

at work or play, we feel bored or experience desire, or even while we read. Entrance into a

labyrinth would certainly qualify as entering into sacred time and space for Eliade, since the

labyrinth is a site of both myth and ritual. I would argue that entrance into the literary field

changes the experience of time and space, as well. Like entering a labyrinth and submitting

oneself to the mystery of the architectural puzzle therein, when a reader delves into a poem, he or

she enters a different realm of language, a different order of experience.

Eliade's description of sacred time (and space, which will be addressed later) is

reminiscent of the literary experience. There is a continual present in the text that one can return

to over and over, and the immersion in the language mimics the religious or contemplative pose

of prayer. Much like a winding labyrinth in which the traveler returns to the same spot over and

over, cycling through the same space, this type of time is infinitely repeatable:

> *by its very nature sacred time is reversible* in the sense that, properly speaking, it
> is *a primordial mythical time made present.* Every religious festival, any
> liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a
> mythical past, "in the beginning." Religious participation in a festival implies
> emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythical time
> reactualized by the festival itself. Hence sacred time is indefinitely recoverable,
> indefinitely repeatable. (Eliade 68-69)

As much as we can consider the pages of literature eternal, it seems one could extend Eliade's

argument to the reading of verse. "In the beginning" was the printed word, and one may

continually return to experience the text anew. Eliade believed that myth and ritual, that which

allows us to experience the sacred, nourishes humanity, and in a similar way poetry nourishes,

sustains, and revitalizes the human spirit. Instead of imagining postmodern poetry as a

frustrating labyrinth, in which anxiety and doubt prevail, we could imagine this metaphor as

redemptive, the time spent wandering the labyrinth or contemplating the poem becoming a

regenerative act. According to Eliade, the point of myth and religion is to approach the gods in

an attempt to live in the presence of divinity. The reading of poetry has been ascribed many

goals: to commune with an inner self, experience transcendence, divert the mind, or even to be in

the presence of genius. We do not need to follow Eliade's argument through to its theological

conclusion to agree that in reading and in religion there is a common desire to witness some form

of creation. Ultimately, what informs this analysis is Eliade's theory that sacred time is

recursive, cyclical, and approaching eternity.

Eliade's discussion of sacred space could also be applied to the experience of space

inside a labyrinth. Space for Eliade is not homogeneous. Some places, places where ritual is

performed or the divine is felt, are more "real" and the space surrounding these special places is

just a formless expanse, "without structure or consistency, amorphous" (20). The sites of ritual

and worship become fixed points, and provide an axis for humans to structure their world

around. Eliade writes, "The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the

homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no

orientation can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center" (21).

These fixed centers give man an orientation in a chaotic world. A tall tree, a large rock, a

mountain – mankind first centered his world around natural formations until he could form larger

structures to act as cultural centers – pyramids, monuments, churches. And within these sacred

places, our experience of space is magnified, altered. Eliade makes an important distinction; he

does not refer to the abstract concept of space, which of course is neutral, but he's examining the

experience of space, and we perceive different places in different ways. Our lives are centered

around fixed points, the home, work, school, the several areas we haunt regularly, and all other

space is just the neutral territory in between or surrounding these various foci. Although much

of his argument is theological, secular experience corroborates Eliade's theories, since we most

certainly ascribe more meaning to space where important things have happened to us:

> There are, for example, privileged places, qualitatively different from all others –
> a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first
> foreign city he visited in youth. Even for the most frankly nonreligious men, all
> these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the "holy places"
> of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the
> revelation of a reality *other* than that in which he participates through his ordinary
> daily life. (24)

For modern man, perhaps it is the home that provides orientation within the world. Eliade claims

that for ancient man it was places of worship that valorized the world and became the centers

around which life revolved. In the presence of such structures, the experience of both time and

space is qualitatively different. One enters into such places in order to feel something different,

or to approach another realm of experience, another level of awareness of one's surroundings.

Applying Eliade's theories of sacred time and space to poetry, the experience of space on

the page is different from prose to poetry. A poet's lines are fixed in space; they are not

continuous and linear, proceeding regularly in an orderly narrative, but arrested and arranged in a

static constellation on the page. The space in poetry is more purposeful, infused with import,

and either provides or withholds an orientation for the reader. In postmodern poetry, this

orientation is often compromised or questionable, and the reader is left disoriented, lost in the space between words or the gaps between lines. The poet confuses the reader with his or her use of space, and the reader's eye gets trapped on the page, lost in the labyrinth of possibility. *Should I read this word next? This phrase? Are we supposed to read vertically now? Wait…should I zoom out and read the entire page as a visual now? Am I reading this correctly? Am I reading it enough? Is there just one right way?* Although entrance is immediate, the form and design of poetry offering readers a quick composite view, how to proceed is a bit more difficult.

In postmodern poetics, time and space are increasingly complex and labyrinthine. The best metaphor for this spatiality is a labyrinth, which is at once a beautiful designed space of intricacy and a chaotic space of frustration and anxiety. The postmodern poet often subverts conventions of spacing and printing, breaking the spatial configuration of the page, disorienting the reader and, as Eliade would argue, threatening the stable orientation of the page with chaos. This attempt to subvert the traditional appearance and usage of space on the page stems from a desire to reorder the world, to reimagine and reorient both the page and the reader. It is a calculated risk, deliberately inviting nonsense, disorder, and turbulence onto the page. In this way, the Pound era lives on – the postmodern agenda of spatial and temporal reconstruction is all to reorient readers, to make them see the world anew. Poets engaging multiplicity in their work, the OULIPO poets who invite chance into their composition, hypertext poems and cybertexts that require the reader to perform procedures to determine the reading order or content of the work – all of these postmodern forms and more challenge the notion of a fixed edition, a stable text, and the possible readings are multiple. Like a multicursal labyrinth, the text or poem becomes a mechanism of variability. Within one structure/text, there are many possible ways

through. The desire is not to lose readers, but to torture them a bit perhaps, put them through an ordeal. Playing Ariadne to the reader's Theseus, the poet forces us to claw our way out of the dark winding passageways into the light of day and the relief of catharsis. By immersing us in multiplicity, in chaos and disorder, this space of disorientation, we experience the threat of darkness and emerge out the other side reoriented, newly found. In this way, reading a poem and traversing a labyrinth could be imagined as a symbolic death and resurrection. Whether we take the metaphor through to this extreme conclusion or not, what remains clear is that poetic space is markedly different. Like Eliade's sacred space, poetic space is recursive and cyclical, and the lines, according to the hopes of many a poet, approach the eternal.

Another theorist who explores the perception of different types of space is noted French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. Although he does not write about the experience of poetic space explicitly, his work does examine what happens to individuals psychologically when they inhabit various surroundings. First published in 1958 and translated into English in 1964, *The Poetics of Space* explores how we are affected by our perceptions of houses and other natural and manmade shelters. Bachelard is not interested in poetry, although his writing itself approaches the poetic. His chief goal is to come up with a universal vocabulary of space by looking at the world around us and the places we inhabit. He believes that memories of the first places we lived in shape our thoughts and dreams, as well as influence how we interact with others and our construction of self. Bachelard describes the place one grows up as the child's first cosmos, a center around which the universe revolves, what Eliade would call a sacred place, and he claims that the first house we inhabit is inscribed in us and shapes our vocabulary of spatial relations (Bachelard 14). Bachelard's study focuses on the many kinds and values of inside space and interiority. The house protects us, offering us shelter, and ultimately allows us to dream: "the house shelters

daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). Our dreams are rooted in and made possible by the house, "And we should not forget that these dream values communicate poetically from soul to soul. To read poetry is essentially to daydream" (17). What is most useful in Bachelard's argument here is not where poetry comes from or how it originates, but that it is directly dependent upon an architecture. The construction of the house acts as a container or shell to allow the poet to develop. And sometimes parts of this house, much like a labyrinth, are subterranean. The cellar or underground aspects of the house are less about what Bachelard calls airy poetics, but concern more psychological fears, sinister forces. Bachelard focuses on intimate real or imagined spaces that continue to haunt our minds and he argues that our imagination is filled with these articulate interiors, liminal spaces where memory, psychology, and poetry become one.

In a chapter devoted to corners, Bachelard examines the paradoxical experience of space in a way that resembles the paradoxical or dual nature of the labyrinth. He contends that corners are at once an enclosed safe haven and a trap; they represent a space in which one is half enclosed yet half liberated. In Bachelard's words, "every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination" (136). He adds that in these silent corners, no matter how cozy, there is a negation of life. Corners witness very little activity; this is the part of the room where people retreat and objects accumulate and remain dormant. The corner does not allow for much mobility, and is therefore "a sort of half-box, part walls, part door" (137). The corner then represents a retreat for the mind, and also a trap for the mind, much as a labyrinth is considered both diversionary exercise for quiet contemplation, and a challenging puzzle from which one must try to escape. The space within a labyrinth is paradoxical, much like in

Bachelard's corner. Inside the labyrinth, one remains locked in place while lost, circling, moving yet still. The traveler feels trapped, yet he is never enclosed by four solid walls, and so the way is both blocked and open. The movement through so many dead ends and turning corridors can be imagined as a negotiation of continual corners, and so Bachelard's examination of the corner's spatiality becomes key to understanding the experience of space inside a maze. The maze is all corner, a continuous turning, whether in a labyrinth of unicursal or multicursal design, and proceeding through a labyrinth means encountering these points of stillness and negation over and over again, and turning the corners into sites of mobility. The traveler moves along until confronted by another turn or corner, and then must choose a direction and move forward once again. The experience of reading postmodern poetry also can be described as a continual negotiation of a series of bivia. Though often considered a site for lingering thoughts and peaceful meditation, the poem is also, more than any other form of literature, a site of dangerous politics and the threat (or promise) of incoherence, confusion, and difficulty. To read contemporary poetry is not a passive endeavor, and like the traveler within the labyrinth, readers must turn corners and transform apparent dead ends into mobility or else be faced with inextricability.

Along with houses, Bachelard explores natural shelters such as nests and shells, examining the psychological effects of imagining these spaces, and what they represent to us on a fundamental level. Although a shell demonstrates a very visible and rational geometry in its form, the mystery of its formation enchants and amazes us. This small intricate object provides what the Abbé de Vallemont, a French writer and physicist, called a sublime subject of contemplation, something poetry also provides (118). Nests and shells share this protective sheltering quality that houses engender; however, Bachelard argues that while shells are

obviously a refuge for their inhabitants, the shell can also evoke darker images of the labyrinth or

prison. The shell is at once a house and a coffin, with intricate spiraling passageways impossible

to penetrate entirely. The shell and the labyrinth from the Daedalus myth resurface here in

Bachelard's writing, and both are structures that trap the mind in diversion. Bachelard argues

that both are symbolic of resurrection as well, and thought to have regenerative powers. To

travel through a labyrinth is to bring oneself back to life, to go underground and resurface,

emerging from a subterranean place into the open air. Likewise, Bachelard explains that the

snail goes underground in Winter only to reemerge reborn in the Spring. Archaeologists have

even uncovered graves where people were buried with snails, covered in them, in the hopes that

they would return from the beyond (117). The snail's shell somehow suggests the theme of

regeneration, like the symbolic resurrection the labyrinth myth describes, with Theseus entering

the dark structure to return triumphant and restore Minos' kingdom to its former glory. Both

structures Bachelard describes share a convoluted architecture, and somehow this complexity

hints at an eternal return, or at least a continuation evoked by their circular, continuous design.

To return for a moment to Hermann Kern's study of the labyrinth, his analysis of the

labyrinth's structure echoes Bachelard's argument here. In determining the difference among

various labyrinthine shapes, Kern presents the following distinctions:

> All of these figures – spirals, meanders, and knots – are similar in that their forms
> are determined by positive spatial elements, namely, by the sinuosities of the
> delineating walls. In contrast, the most important feature of the labyrinth are not
> the lines that form the walls, but the negative space of the path formed by those
> lines, which determines the pattern of movement. (23)

Here Kern highlights the defining meander of these forms, a characteristic that links them to the

labyrinth, and he focuses his attention on the negative space the traveler must proceed through in

his or her negotiation of this maze. For both the labyrinth and the poem, there is a heightened

awareness of what is not there, the paths or words left behind. The negative space becomes paramount in the labyrinth and the poem, and this space made all the more visible by the surrounding walls and white space is what makes movement through the labyrinth or poem possible. Because it is so visible too, the reader or traveler is always aware of the limited options available, the choices one must make, the words left out and the unspoken, the wrong turn, the dead end. When entering both poem and labyrinth, one is made aware of encountering a different type of space; one both sees and feels the entrance, necessitating a shift in reading expectation or the decision making process. The poet, judging from all the white space on the page, has chosen his or her words very carefully, and so the reader must proceed accordingly. Likewise, the person inside the labyrinth at all times feels the design of the place, always aware of the architect's presence. Both with poetry and with the labyrinth, one experiences the dialectic. Words are placed like figures on a white canvas, and the reader sees both figure and ground. The person entering the labyrinth sees both path and obstruction; while following the path there is an ever present awareness of the surrounding walls pressing in, like the white space surrounding the poetic lines. In both of these spaces, on the page of postmodern poetry and within the labyrinth, one must brace oneself for complex articulation. Entering this space means deliberately subjecting oneself to confusion and the anxiety of being lost.

A concrete example of this spatial complexity, Peter Whyte's 1977 untitled poem from his volume *Open Spaces,* combines the poem and labyrinth together on the page. As we can see in Figure 2.1, entrance is simple, and it syntactically makes sense to start in the upper left corner as one would expect. However, things quickly devolve. A pause in the center of the first line tempts the reader to look elsewhere for branching options; this is the first hint that reading might require more than simple sequence. Read from left to right, the opening line warns, "the rules of

the game stipulate you may only pace through where you have not yet passed previously" (line 1). To continue reading, one "must pace through" again, and immediately one has lost the game. Where to proceed seems a mystery, as the second line virtually insults the reader declaring, "only a topological idiot begins at the middle" (line 2), and the words along both outer side margins do not form grammatically sound sentences; they cannot be read sequentially, but merely offer flashes of tenuously connected words to be assembled in the reader's consciousness, and so the eye searches about in vain for a clear direction, for words already assembled into some logical sequence or recognizable order.

As with a physical labyrinth, the entrance to Whyte's poem is easy, but immediately one is faced with the anxiety of becoming lost. Immediately one recognizes the labyrinth design of the poem's structure, and so a successful reading occurs on the surface level. Whyte places inhabitants in his poem, isolating the words "Ariadne" and Theseus" and surrounding them with white space. He also carefully positions the Minotaur in the very center of the poem, menacing and fixed, surrounded by words like "id," "bull," "fear," and "transmogrifies." Piecing together this poem of infinite variability is both frustrating and rewarding, and the reader must surrender the idea that there is one reading, one way to proceed through the text. In a very concrete and practical way, Whyte's poem embodies the aesthetic similarities of postmodern poetry and the labyrinth here. I include this here as a bridge between chapter one and chapter two, to segue from entering the labyrinth to the sensation of becoming lost. Along the right-hand margin, Whyte voices the reader's anxieties with the words "danger," "always," "confused," and "wander." The poet urges the reader to "outsmart Daedalus," and in the final line exhorts, "fly toward the sun and escape." In this poem, and indeed in most postmodern poetry, wandering and pondering are encouraged, and often demanded. Although the entrance is obvious and clear,

readers immediately recognize that they are entering a different type of space, one in which they are sure to make a false turn. Whyte's poetic labyrinth traps readers in an almost endless quest, in a game of deferral where meaning is always elusive, escape hinted at but held at a distance. To read the postmodern poem is to enter into this game, to experience a perpetual desire to simultaneously explore and escape. Both spaces require a continual retracing of one's steps, a recursive return to the beginning, an overcoming of obstacles, a surrendering to complexity, and an emphasis of the poem as process or journey.

```
the rules of the game stipulate you may only pass    through where you have not yet passed previously
mind                                                                                              hero
maze   only a topological idiot begins at the middle but there he would start at the minotaur   king
ways   mirrored                                                                                   seek
wind   clearest   supercalifragilisticexpialidocious   the initiation into absolute realities   lost
into   drear   and                                     winding      can                 tricks   mute
form   muddy   always   miscomprehensions   internal   despair   many   win   myriad   trials   awry
amid   murky   as      labyrinthine    tortures              ways   the   errors   misery   path
word   foggy   situational   inclinations   grace counterproductivity   big   abound   memory   gone
play   angry   if   stress   but                            as   one   misted   spaces   agee
with   alone   it   blackens   now   honorificibilitudinitatibus   at   but   in the   gloomy   dire
wise   as   be   for   led   out                          from   an   not   silent   abject   sand
wits   misapprehensive   any   low   way   sesquepedalian   what   oh   tie   enigma   terror   lead
also   all   dim   for   him   septuagenarian   will   we   the   around   losing   away
amusements   yet   for   way   you   for   transmogrifies   be   do   end   puzzle   string   from
atrocities   who   any   far   who   web   fear   not   so   bend   middle   wall
perturbing   may   shy   out   did   and   into   o   for   of   in inoperative mischief   catacombs
involution   bay   sly   bet   net   bull   a   him   no   a   nearer
disturbing   buy   particularities   her   minotaur   but   inconsequenciality often   pale   danger
intimation   cry   perhaps   let   id   for   as   nor   lame   darker
omnivorous   out   wayward   Ariadne's magic thread   the   if   reappearances   one   weak   vaster
dismayings   woe   mishaps                     one   it   so   how   nor   face   deeper
amazements   all   apprenticeship for the neophytes   who   be   be   if   all   two   is   always
heed   day   being   to   can   in   it   it   can   but   by   confused
need   lamenting   paths   an amplification of   be   win   an   be   pan   ten   us   dismayed
want   gnashings   found   fun   dry   in   his   ambidextrous   out   for   as   diffused
loss   tormented   along   yet   Theseus   wry   it   way   tauromachian   ill   the   we   huddle
fail   innerness   route   not   old   as   out   yet   man   hide   wonder
fall   hint   angle   new   misanthropist   in   ambivalently in the last   who   bump   wander
lame   that   mythifying   but   or   in   an   eschatological   had   hunt   pander
lose   near   miraculous   old   by   can   it   incorrigible   Shakespeherian   set   miss   simper
limb   here   intramural   age   an   one   entrancement   venerabilities   out   muse   dodder
slip   were   meddlement   can   id   outsmart   with no exit   overwhelmingly   the   fade   weep
slop   some   try   be   Daedalus                     of                   map   bended   sift
mere   gravel blind blunderers   on   antidisestablishmentarianist   overambitiously   waning   flop
atom                          an   architectonic                 to                  as   away
floccipaucinihilipilifications   anomic   bewilderments   misunderstand   phantasmagoria   if   slip
find                          vagary                underhandedly   mystery                in   hope
flay   the loss of the spirit as an illusion in the act of creation   history   honeycomb   near
slay                                                              concealedly             ends
or like its maker and his son make wings of feathers with wax and fly toward the sun and escape thus
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Figure 2.1
"Untitled" by Peter Whyte from the 1977 volume *Open Spaces*.

CHAPTER THREE

GETTING LOST

Once readers have gained entrance to the postmodern poem, they meet with frustration
and the continual fear of error, of misreading or misinterpretation. Contemporary poets who
incorporate multiplicity in their work are aware of the theoretical implications of deconstruction
and linguistic studies, and invite readers into texts of labyrinthine complexity. Readers must
make decisions in their interpretations, moving about the poem as in a maze, in an interactive
game of navigation. In a postmodern aesthetic that celebrates difficulty, diversity, and diversion,
the reader must surrender to disorientation. This aesthetic can be understood as a negotiation of
obstacles, not a purposeful journey towards a specific goal, but a wandering exploration of the
treacherous terrain of the poetic field. *Bulfinch's Mythology* describes Daedalus' labyrinth as
"an edifice with numberless winding passages and turnings opening into one another, and
seeming to have neither beginning nor end, like the river Meander, which returns on itself, and
flows now onward, now backward, in its course to the sea" (156). Like this labyrinth of endless
passages, the postmodern poem cannot be resolved. It must simply be explored.

Written in the early nineties, Robert Coover's apocalyptic essay "The End of Books"
examines the new digital technology of hypertexts and compares reading online to entering an
"exitless maze" with no edges, no center, and no order in a poststructuralist blurring of the
boundaries of the text (par. 10). This type of recursive reading is a function of poetry though,
and not merely a symptom of hypertext technology. So many poetic techniques necessitate a
doubling back in the reading process that for Coover to claim this happens only in digital media

is absurd. Enjambment, symbolism, double entendre, increased abstraction, complicated form,

intricate rhyming patterns and metrical configurations – all of these poetic devices force the

reader to return over and over to the same lines, looping back to retrace one's steps as if in a

maze. Coover eventually recanted many of his initial arguments, declaring the age of the

hypertext already over in "Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age," a keynote

speech he delivered in 1999. Yet he still argues that our ability to imagine a text in time and

space is unique to digital media, attributing recursive reading entirely to the hypertext. Coover

claims that "for all the wondrous and provocative invasions of text by sound and image, all the

intimate layering of them and irresistible fusions, still, the most radical and distinctive literary

contribution of the computer has been the multilinear hypertextual webwork of text spaces, or, as

one might say, the intimate layering and fusion of imagined spatiality and temporality" (Coover,

"Literary" par. 18). He contends that the promise of freedom and interactivity inherent in digital

media have hardly been realized, comparing reading a hypertext to the experience of watching a

movie, "the most passive and imperious of forms" (par. 11). This interactivity that Coover first

celebrates and then laments is not a difference between codex and hypertext media, but a

condition of the postmodern aesthetic. Regardless of medium, the metaphor for the reading

process has undergone a transition from a linear model to a labyrinthine network. With this shift

comes an increased sense of anxiety and frustration for the reader, who now must learn to

navigate a new terrain.

     The postmodern poet who delights in the shifting permutations of language,

experimenting with chance elements in composition, introduces nonlinearity and possible

nonsense to both the writing and reading processes. The result is the competing threats of too

much meaning, of too many choices, and the possibility of no meaning at all, of absolute

incoherence. Postmodern readers experience the same anxieties of one lost within a labyrinth –

the terror of being lost in all this confusing complexity with no hope of ever finding one's way

out, and the extreme frustration of trying to get to the center of things amidst so many false turns

and dead ends. The reader and the labyrinth traveler alike are haunted by dual fears: the threat of

not finding a way through, and the frustration of not getting to one's goal quickly enough. This

duality of frustration, of being trapped in incoherence on one side and thwarted by multiplicity

on the other, is mirrored in the architecture of the labyrinth's structure. A complex and highly

designed space, the labyrinth is an architectural feat, and as seen from above, the labyrinth would

evoke a definite pattern. Experienced from within, however, the labyrinth would feel chaotic

and disorienting, an unknowable array of passageways. Describing the paradoxical nature of the

labyrinth's design, Penelope Reed Doob affirms, "The labyrinth is thus simultaneously a

stupendous work of art and an image of confusion: objectively, as artifact, it is a magnificent

design; subjectively, as experience, a potential chamber of horrors. […] Once you learn the maze

or see the labyrinth whole, then, elaborate chaos is transformed into pattern (24). We can see

this in poetry as well, this duality of pattern and chaos. If we imagine looking at a poem in terms

of surface and depth, of visually scanning the page versus reading to comprehend and

understand, then we can see the labyrinth metaphor at work in postmodern poetry. These two

readings happen concurrently, and readers must evaluate the surface pattern, the poem's form,

elements of the material page and its visual design, while also interpreting the textual

connotations, the words on the page and their relation to one another.

      With visual poetry, especially, this pull between surface and depth is foregrounded, and

readers must choose which path to follow. We should begin our examination of feeling lost

within a postmodern poem with visual poetry, since the competing elements are made explicit

and tangible. Poets incorporating graphic design elements in their works force readers to both

look and see, to examine the poem as both a textual and visual creation. Like Doob's argument

above that the labyrinth can be experienced both objectively and subjectively, the poet working

with visual elements asks us to *look at* the page as an art object, and *look within* the page to the

textual content. In concrete poems, poems that have a highly visual element, the reader is

confronted with a palpable dichotomy, and experiences an anxiety of where to look, how to read.

This dichotomy of course exists in all poetry, as one could imagine multiple interpretations

competing for leverage, pulling the reader in different directions, yet in visual poetry, we can

actually see the postmodern aesthetic at work. We can witness the poet's creation of multiple

pathways and visually trace the different ways of looking at the page. Figure 3.1 depicts a

textual labyrinth that is simultaneously artistic pattern and textual poem. Entitled "Labirinthe

Spirituel," and created by Albrecht Wagner in 1758, it is a letterpress printing on paper that

resembles visual poetry. The poem begins at the top center and makes its way down and around

"four grace fountains" that cite biblical passages, to eventually end where it began (Kern 219).

Wagner creates a narrative of redemption with his text, a story of following a winding, complex

path past sin and vice to find paradise. Looking at the design of the page, one sees the

complexity of a labyrinth as beautiful and orderly form. Within the narrative, however, the

reader encounters sin and obstacle, and the circuitous anxiety of subjective experience. To try to

read this text produces anxiety in the reader as well, as the font is small and difficult to read,

combining both German and French languages, and the page must be turned; it is far more

preferable to focus on the poem as object, as visual form. One can make sense of the thing

objectively. So these two ways of reading vie for dominance. We are being asked to engage the

poem both objectively and subjectively at once, to use a sort of stereovision in order to focus on

individual lines of text while also keeping in mind the overall design schematic. The inclusion

of graphic elements on the page introduces an alternate way of reading the text, a choice the

reader must make. And this choice between reading text or viewing graphic elements is a

tangible demonstration of the hidden choices readers make all the time when reading. The

competing methods of reading this text evoke the multicursal labyrinth here, and foreshadow the

multiplicity of the postmodern aesthetic.   When poets exploit the visual medium of the page and

incorporate found text in their art, or graphic elements alongside text, the reader must choose

between these competing signs.

Reading a visual poem thus becomes a negotiation. For someone who has wandered into

a labyrinth, the first step is deciding how to proceed through this confusing structure. The reader

must choose what to look at, how to look, where to look, and all of these decisions demand

active participation as the reader navigates a path through the poem. For so many postmodern

poets there is a fascination with the medium itself and poets manipulate the material page,

playing with printing conventions, and subverting the reader's expectations. The postmodern

poet strives for complexity and difficulty, for a text that ensnares the reader, or produces

obstacles that must be overcome. As argued by theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in

their work *Remediation: Understanding New Media,* this aesthetic is not one of transparency, but

opacity. Although their focus is mainly on hypertext writings, their theories about a text's

materiality transcend the digital medium. Bolter and Grusin describe remediation as "the twin

preoccupations of contemporary media," the transparent presentation of the real and the

enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves," and indeed postmodern poets delight in the

media of both page and screen (21). Instead of attempting to disappear, to erase all traces of

author from the poem, postmodern poets demonstrate an increased interest in the visual features

of a text, such as font, spatial dimensions, and graphic elements. Design and form are foregrounded; if poetry were html language, then the focus would remain not on the words but on the codes. This concentration on the design of the page ultimately calls attention to the writing process and forces the reader to become part viewer, dividing his or her attention between textual content and visual surface. There is no escaping the fact that these poems are written and constructed by a calculating mind, and that this space has been carefully designed for the reader. The effect of all this design is that the reader is repeatedly brought back to the surface of the page or screen, "repeatedly brought back into contact with the interface," the marks on the page (33). We must alternate between reading text as words, text as signs, text as images, text as coded language, and this wavering adds extra dimensionality and multicursal paths to the reading process. Bolter and Grusin concentrate on new digital media, but postmodern poetry and art often share this opacity, requiring the reader or viewer to look *at* and not *through*. In much of postmodern poetry, one cannot penetrate the surface; the eye is trapped on the page, lost in the clutter of visual information that acts as a maze for the mind. Visual poetry makes this process explicit, as the reader must choose between graphic and textual elements, and this decision represents an alternate passageway within the labyrinth.

For a concrete example of a visual poem that divides one's attention between text and graphics, we can look to painter and writer Tom Phillips. With his work, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel,* Phillips has taken a Victorian novel and created a visual artwork around it, or more accurately on top of it, allowing only certain words to show through. For many contemporary poets, anxieties about language and the printed page manifest in their work as words and phrases that get omitted or stamped out. If language is so incomplete and faulty, then why not embrace this and create poetry that celebrates this inherent distortion? In *A*

Humument, we see Phillips employ the skills of both artist and editor, transforming an existing text into postmodernist poetry by the process of negation. Exploring pages from this book will allow us to apply these theories of reading and looking to an actual text, and attempt to analyze what is going on when we encounter these carefully designed pages. On the book jacket, the author offers a glimpse into his rationale for this project: "I took a forgotten Victorian novel found by chance. I plundered, mined, and undermined its text to make it yield the ghosts of other possible stories, scenes, poems, erotic incidents and surrealist catastrophes which seemed to lurk within its wall of words." Phillips describes his process as unearthing lurking catastrophes, and imagines the book as having an architecture, a wall of words, and this description implies the labyrinth metaphor. The lurking catastrophes are reminiscent of the Minotaur roaming the labyrinth's dark corridors, as the artist explores the cavernous wealth of possibilities that lie dormant within each page.

On each of the pages of Phillips' work, a winding passageway of text remains, seeming to emerge through the surrounding artwork, and the reader's eye follows this crooked corridor of the original, surrounded by so much graphic ingenuity. Phillips transforms a novel into a succession of visual poems, turning each page of prose into a poem of text and image. First published in 1980, this project began in 1966 as what the artist refers to as idle play. The original text that Phillips worked from was entitled *A Human Document,* written by W.H. Mallock and published in 1892. Phillips describes his process as a mining of the original text, adapting its lush and varied vocabulary to suit his own purposes. He arrived at his own title, *A Humument,* by folding the title page and eliminating the middle letters from Mallock's title. In Figure 3.2, the title page shows this omission of the central letters of the original. Significantly, Phillips removes the heart of the title, not the peripheral letters, and the words left for the reader

on this title page indicate that this project is one of discovery: "The following sing I a book. A book of art of mind art and that which he hid reveal I" (1). Immediately, the reader encounters a statement of the artist's intent, to reveal something hidden away or trapped within the original text, as this opening statement invites us into a game of hide and seek on the page.

By omitting, erasing, and defacing the original text in this manner, Phillips exhumes one book from another, making the reader look at what's left behind. We can almost make out the text underneath the artist's hatch marks, but these faint and obscured letters remain graphic elements, and not readable text. And on this opening page we have but one path to take, a meandering corridor that bridges words as it winds down the page. Phillips calls these pathways "rivers," and this first river does appear to ebb and flow like water. The background graphics on the page are highly stylized and geometric in design, all sharp corners and an angled arrow pointing us onward to subsequent pages. The river of text contrasts with all this edge and precision, appearing as a natural river might, organically turning and pooling in places, as if time has worked its magic upon the leaves of the page, gradually eroding and shaping the original work to form this new entity. As we proceed through the volume, we encounter vastly different techniques and graphic forms on each page; Phillips' goal was to match the text left on the page with his painting, making the art somehow comment on or enhance the textual content. Figure 3.3, page 7 of the work, mentions this connection explicitly, as the three rivers of text seem to comment directly upon his artistic strategy. The first pool of text tells us that this book has been written before, with the words "scribe the once or twice story." A long river that extends down the right hand length of the page then refers to this other art, the visual painting that somehow cores the original novel to produce a new hybrid work: "scribe, art of the other hand, you have written a volume inside out." Alone in the bottom left corner, the reader finds an isolated cluster

of words declaring "now the arts connect," and this small grouping of text defines the artist's purpose here (7). On this page, the art remains black and white, with simple forms of straight lines and muted circles faintly visible in the background. The stark simplicity of this page contrasts with the surrounding explosions of color and graphic intensity, and it seems that this page is one of understatement through which the artist quietly conveys his aesthetic. The variety of expression throughout the volume is astounding, and Phillips displays a wide range of mood and articulation with both text and graphics. The reader must decide how to read every page, constantly making decisions about how to proceed through the text.

Any interpretive act requires a choice, but with visual poetry, this choice is a conscious one, a deliberate decision to follow either the textual content or the graphic content, or perhaps to bounce perpetually between the two. Readers must adjust their focus and choose whether to read the poem as text or view it as one would look at a painting or design. Although he does not extend his arguments to the interpretation of poetry, Karl Gerstner's studies on the reading process can help us explore the choice set before the reader here. Gerstner makes a distinction between seeing and reading in his study *Compendium for Literates: A System of Writing*, which examines the effects of design, font, spacing, and display on reading. Gerstner experiments with the legibility of various fonts, type arrangements, and colors of text and ground, in order to examine the effect of form on content. His work explores how design can help represent content, allowing the reader to visualize data. Gerstner argues that beyond a certain normality, type becomes "seen" and not "read," that after a certain size (either too large or too small), perception alters and the typography shifts to become a design feature instead of a sign to be interpreted. Gerstner claims that this all happens instantly, and that "in determining the size of type there is a certain point where the act of perception changes from 'reading' to 'seeing.' Reading involves a

process; seeing is an instantaneous act of recognition and means being taken by surprise, overwhelmed even, by information via writing" (79). Again we encounter the idea of reading as a process occurring over time, a long journey of discovery and exploration versus the more immediate gratification of pictorial representation. So the reader of visual poetry faces a series of decisions, perhaps not conscious ones, but decisions nonetheless. We could thus argue that the visual poem incorporates different experiences of time and space in its art. Readers both read and view, one act implying duration and the other instantaneous communication. There is a layering of temporality, an increased complexity of the reading process that mixes differing types of signification on top of one another. The overall effect is multiple voices on the page, either working harmoniously in the composition or creating a cacophony the reader must try to decipher. The graphic and textual elements provide readers with a hybrid artform that engages different parts of the brain in a composite of picture and word. Phillips offers his readers what critic James L. Maynard argues is a "re-visionary reading experience" (Maynard 83). By adding visual artwork to Mallock's original text, Phillips has layered two types of signification on top of one another:

> Regarding the book's verbal and visual signification, one recognizes certain local
> instances of narrative, continuity, and coherence interspersed with equal amounts
> of opacity, discontinuity, and abstraction. These tensions display the various
> forms of synthesis and interference that can occur between the two forms of
> representation. (82)

No matter how beautifully Phillips marries his art to the text he chooses to leave on the page, the textual and visual elements compete with one another on the page, each vying for the reader's attention and both requiring a different type of perception the reader must move back and forth between continually throughout the text as if negotiating a labyrinth.

This hybridity of form we encounter in visual poetry is the metaphorical equivalent of a multicursal labyrinth. Readers must decide not only what to read first, but fundamentally how to read this hybrid text. Concrete poems, visual poems, found poetry, basically any poem in which attention is drawn to the materiality of the page itself, either its construction or design: all of these require the reader to make deliberate decisions about where and how to look. What happens when we attempt to interpret typography that has been altered to resemble an image, text that has been transformed from textual sign into word art, or when words become pattern? How do we read a visual poem when it is composed of both picture and words? How can we reconcile this duality and proceed through the text? W.J.T. Mitchell has published several articles and books examining this intersection between image and text, and even coined the term "imagetext" to describe this simultaneity of representation. In his 1994 volume *Picture Theory,* Mitchell begins his discussion by considering metapictures, examining images that can be seen in two different ways. The most famous of these would be the image taken from a humor magazine that Wittgenstein then analyzed that appears to be a rabbit one way and a duck the other. Figure 3.4 offers a reproduction of this puzzle. There are countless examples of these amusing images that play with our perception, and Mitchell uses these to segue into his discussion of hybridity. He argues that these metapictures allow us to become conscious of the way in which we see. Once we have been shown the two alternate images, both duck and rabbit for instance, we see in plural, something akin to stereovision. The image is not just a rabbit or a duck, and not a simultaneous rabbit and duck, but as Wittgenstein suggests, we experience an image as a composite, synthetic figure, a "duck-rabbit" (Mitchell 52). For visual poetry then, there would be a double signification. Readers could read word as word, and then as image, flipping back and forth as from duck to rabbit.

All poetry employs form, not just visual poetry, and this structural difference from prose allows us to view it as image as well as text. We see the shape of a sonnet while reading the poet's words. Just looking at a page of poetry we recognize it as poetic, and so we are always also *viewing* the text while *reading*. This instant recognition of the poetic work as different or other nudges it toward the realm of image and therefore it must be read as such. In order to read any poem, we need to read it as language while also keeping in mind that it works upon us as an image. It is at once individual words and entire scope – singular and plural. Like the labyrinth, the poem is made up of individual words and lines that could lead one in various directions, while remaining a fixed constellation of words upon the page, a fixed design when viewed objectively. In poetry that employs this simultaneous representation, the reader turns this way and that, from form to content, from image to text, unsure of which way to proceed. If we are to believe Mitchell and Wittgenstein, the reader is always seeing both sides of the coin at once, perceiving various interpretations and forms of representation simultaneously, and this divided awareness often produces discomfort. Readers feel pulled between different ways of seeing, different things to see, as if they can intuit all of the many ways through the poem or labyrinth all at once, but cannot possibly take all of the passageways at the same time, and all of this uncertainty adds an element of excitement. Readers can elicit pleasure in their involvement, or simply delight in the proliferation of options. If one were to imagine prose as a unicursal labyrinth, in which there is an established procedure for moving through the text from left to right, down and around, then poetry, especially visual poetry, would resemble a multicursal labyrinth. The reader could first attempt to follow a traditional path through the poem. Often though, the use of unconventional form invites the reader to skip around on the page, abandoning a prose reading style and opting for a comprehensive or circular sweep of the page usually

reserved for perceiving a photograph or painting. In this way too, reading a poem verges on viewing an image, and the poem engages the skills and cognitive functions for both processes.

Visual poets use language and graphics together, merging the two media, and this not only changes how we read, but where this information is processed. As Paul Saenger points out in the introduction to his comprehensive study on the history of spatial notation in manuscripts, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading,* different parts of the brain are accessed for these different functions. Comparing the graphic and phonetic characters in the Chinese language, Saenger cites studies that prove each form of writing triggers different loci in the brain:

> It would appear that the right hemisphere plays a more active role in reading scripts in which words have discrete images. Research indicates that English-speaking subjects also have discrete systems within the brain for the aural understanding and the silent visual understanding of language. (3)

By incorporating both image and text in their work, visual poets are engaging both hemispheres of our brain and literally decentering the text, changing not only how we process a text, but where in our physical brain this interpretation occurs. If meaning is indeed shifting and unstable in the postmodern world, the poet can recreate this uncertainty on the page and in the reader's mind by dislocating, or relocating, where the text is processed.

The reading of poetry cannot be explained or understood by examining just the linguistic elements of the text, but we must also analyze what happens when a viewer looks at an image. We need to look at the poem both as text and image, and recognize that the poem works on both levels. When the reader of a visual poem encounters the page, he or she must be instructed how to read it. Visual data is not, as one might assume, obviously apparent. It may be immediately visible, but like any sensory data it must then be processed. Just like words, this data must be read. While one could argue that visual poets can convey more by using multiple forms of

media, this argument could be turned around to imply that the more media, the greater the

possibility of confusion or misreading. Early in the twentieth century, a group of psychologists

known collectively as the Gestalt psychologists (after the German word for "form") discovered a

set of principles to describe how one perceives an image. Their foundational discovery was that

we tend to split our perception between foreground and background, and that when we first

encounter a picture, we look for patterns and order to determine an overall design or "gestalt" of

the page. Looking at a page of poetry, we immediately attempt to discern a spatial syntax, and

our ideas about proper arrangement depend upon particular ways that our perceptual systems

function. According to the Gestalt theorists, there are six general ways in which we group

objects spatially:

> 1. Proximity (grouping objects that are close together)
> 2. Similarity (grouping like objects)
> 3. Common Region (grouping objects within a closed form)
> 4. Connectedness (grouping objects tied together with lines)
> 5. Continuation (grouping objects that appear to align or continue)
> 6. Closure (grouping lines or shapes to produce unified objects) (Horn 75-6)

Applying these theories to reading poetry, we would first recognize if the lines were divided into

groups or stanzas, and then we would recognize symmetry or similar line lengths, and so on.

With visual poetry, these processes are complicated and compounded, and readers must

look for associations among words and graphic elements, resulting in a confused response.

When spatiality becomes a prominent feature of poetry and form is foregrounded, this familiar

pattern of discerning a visual syntax is disrupted, disorienting the reader. The eye must roam and

travel, circle and return, mimicking the movements used to process a picture or image, and yet to

process it as only picture denies its textual element. To return to Phillips' *A Humument* for a

moment, Figure 3.5 allows us to experience this disorientation with visual syntax. The artist's

use of vivid colors distracts us from the text here, and the scattering of words to the corners of

the page with a set of initials abandoned in the middle seems confusing. One cannot discern a structure or order here, and the graphic elements overwhelm the text when surveying the page. Applying the Gestalt theorists' methods of perception to this page, we can see that the rivers of text are not proximal, and there are groups of text, but all four are shaped differently and of varying sizes. Phillips even thwarts our ability to view this as a common region, as the top left corner breaks the border of the page and extends into the margin and we are denied a sense of closure. Our only sense of visual syntax stems from continuation here, as the artist has grouped certain words in alignment, although these groups are far apart. Because the text looks placed on top of the painted scene in the background, we look to it first, but the continuity and completion of the background competes with the scattered text. The reader feels drawn to the bright colors and serene image. The background takes precedence over the foreground as it is easily processed and comprehended by the eye, and the page is more viewed than read as a result. The green field peppered with flowers occupies most of the page, with a hint of blue ocean in the upper left corner. And yet Phillips' words seem to deny the validity of these graphics. His largest river of text in the lower right corner reads somewhat paradoxically, "meaning losing its meaning when it follows any picture of the part of a half of a picture details are not representation." A small rivulet connects this to the concluding cluster, "question whether the book is this—it is as If it is and exists in the purposes it does." We are told to question the picture here, in a circular investigation of how meaning can be conveyed, and in the top left, the artist leaves words to contend that this is a "book for nobody" (Phillips 12). The text and images compete here, and the only sense one can make out of this figure is an impression of a pretty landscape and flowers, and yet the artist tells us that ultimately we must be suspect of all representation.

One final example from *A Humument* will show us how the absence of linear text turns into a vivid profusion of colors, a rainbow of abstraction amidst the darkness. In exchange for not being able to trust text or graphics in this book for nobody, Phillips represents every form of representation itself on one page as seen in Figure 3.6. Colorful shapes seem to float on a black background, and on top of this rests a page with abstract marks scratched upon its surface. Small rivers of text are then layered on top and in the center Phillips encircles the words, "a museum hidden in the story of M" (60). The whisper and silence in the lower right hand corner lend an air of secrecy to this page, and the hidden museum is centralized. It is as if we finally come to the center of the labyrinth here and find a secret key to the text; Phillips' goal is to unearth a museum's worth of art from the original novel, to make us look past all the surrounding debris of excess words to the art underneath and within. Phillips invites us to wander through his museum here, to whisper quietly within its silent halls. His rivers of text act as passageways through each page, and the artist and reader together explore this novel, searching for fortuitous connections. The last word on the page, "silence," balances with the riotous color and abstract symbols here. In the foreground, a page with unreadable symbols sits atop a background of nonrepresentational blobs of color. We cannot *read* either, and must simply *look* at the page as one looks at paintings in a museum.

Visual poetry requires that the reader perform incompatible tasks, laying bare the competition between form and content that resides in all poetry. The combination of language and visual media creates a recursive experience, similar to wandering in the labyrinth. One must revisit the poem several times, reading it for different information, like attempting different pathways, alternate routes of meaning. Visual poems create anxiety for the reader, who must choose which direction to follow, how to proceed through the poem, how to decipher the text and

visuals. This anxiety is the same felt by the person trapped within the labyrinth, who must tread

carefully. In both the labyrinth and the visual poem, the mind cannot fully concentrate on one

thing, but the fear and frustration cause a splitting of the psyche, an aesthetic of distraction.

Inside the labyrinth, one fully appreciates neither the journey nor the goal; attention is

consistently torn between the two. Reading a visual poem is likewise a schizophrenic endeavor,

as one is constantly aware of the choices involved in reading. All poetry that operates on a

spatial level requires that the reader be aware of the act of reading, the hidden or unspoken rules

implied, the internalized expectations of how one proceeds through a text and across a page.

Any poem or text that is aware of the materiality of the page, the materials of its construction,

requests of the reader an acknowledgment of the reading process. In visual poetry though, this

request is anything but subtle. Unavoidable, bold graphic visuals compete with words for the

reader's attention, and so even more so than with a poem aware of its own constructedness, the

visual poem makes the reader physically behave differently. The eye needs to figure out where

to go. There's a fork in the labyrinth between following the text or following the graphics. Our

eyes may be drawn along a strong diagonal line or towards an interesting pattern or into a color

field, but we have missed the text entirely. Now we need to retrace our steps, go back and

choose a different corridor, a different way of reading. In this way, readers of visual poems are

more like editors or revisionists, as they must constantly return to the beginning again and

reinterpret what they've encountered. The visual poem thus ensnares us in its multiple pathways,

the limitless configurations made possible by our different modes of perception. Because the

reader must resolve not only text, but image as well, the six methods of determining visual

syntax of the Gestalt psychologists combine and recombine in seemingly infinite permutations.

Instead of delighting in this infinite possibility, what Roland Barthes would certainly deem the pleasure of the text, the reader feels lost and uneasy. Even as one intuits or deciphers one interpretation, there's always a tug in an opposing direction, as one can never quite escape the sense of being surrounded by choices inside the labyrinth. As one glances at the visual poem to achieve a gestalt or determine an overall pattern, he or she feels anxiety about jumping too far ahead, of racing towards the last page before going through in linear fashion. Color and shapes impress us first, but what if we react to them strangely? What if our penchant for a certain color, a particular font, puts us in a mood that the poet never intended, or evokes imagery the poet could never guess? Have we immediately chosen the wrong way of reading, the incorrect pathway? And can one ever really go back and begin again completely? And to echo Eliot's Prufrock, how should one presume? In visual poetry, we become aware of these choices involved in the reading process that we rarely acknowledge in literary study. Because these poems are visual and include graphics and incorporate spatial dimensions on the page, they show us how our bodies are implicated in the reading process. Reading a poem is not just a mental exercise, but a physical act. Where our eyes go determines our perception, and so in visual poetry we feel the labyrinth metaphor acutely. To read a visual poem is to physically traverse the page and risk getting lost, roaming into dangerous territory, taking the wrong turn, or wandering endlessly.

Anxiety in literature is nothing new, of course, but for postmodern poetry specifically, anxiety is located in the decision making process. Coming to terms with the anxiety of their Modernist forebears regarding nihilism, the inhumanity of war, existentialism, and fragmentation, the postmodernists' challenge was to decide what to do in the face of all this loss and dispersal. Many postmodern poets have decided to celebrate play and procedure and chance

in their writing. And so at the heart of postmodernism lies a conscious decision, a decision to attempt writing in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, not the least of which is language's inability to communicate meaning, or the failure to accurately represent ideas and transmit meaning completely. This conscious decision to persevere in the absence of hope lies within the heart of every postmodernist poem and in the aesthetic of this poetry; it's as if the poets, knowing they cannot communicate meaning directly or accurately, construct their poems as elaborate labyrinths for their readers. If a poem, or language itself, cannot convey a linear, absolute truth, then the alternative is to present the reader with a network of nonlinear possibilities to wander among. This aesthetic forces readers to make decisions, enacting the aesthetic of postmodernism itself. In reading these poems, we are made explicitly aware of how we are complicit with the poet, making decisions about how we are reading and why.

Examining the work of Roland Barthes and applying his theories of the text as a site of plurality will help make this metaphor of the labyrinth more concrete and tangible, if not necessarily clearer. Barthes' *S/Z,* written in 1970 at the beginning of the postmodern era, was an experiment in breaking apart a text. Barthes divided Balzac's novel *Sarrasine* into 561 numbered fragments. After dismantling the narrative like this, he then labeled each fragment according to various hermeneutic, semantic, proairetic, cultural, and symbolic categories or functions. His goal was to open up and separate the text, enacting the reading process for the reader, manhandling the text in order to display the fact that the unity and coherence of a text is ultimately an illusion (Barthes, *S/Z* 15). In a sense, he "coded" the novel, separating out different themes and tropes, marking them as stylistically or symbolically discrete units, creating a labyrinth out of the once considered linear narrative. Barthes' codes seem arbitrary and unnecessarily complicated, and his system is of course a subjective one, demonstrating that all

readings will be dependent upon each individual's approach. His artificial codes hint at the inexhaustible possibilities and permutations of available readings, a labyrinth made possible by a single text, and this seems similar to Phillips' idea of a hidden museum residing in a single novel here. Barthes invents the words "lexias" for his project, referring to each fragment of text, and this term is now frequently used to describe the various parts of a hypertext document. Barthes took a traditional text and stripped it of its illusory coherence, creating a hypertext for his reader, with all the contingent anxiety and frustration of how one reads this sort of thing. He argues that modern texts can be viewed as either *lisible* or *scriptable,* readerly or writerly. The former asks the reader to remain passive, upholding the traditional view of reading. The latter requires participation in the text, where the reader interacts, makes choices and decisions, and performs the text. This latter writerly text, in Barthes' estimation, is limitless. This conception of a text is inexhaustible and infinite, like the forking pathways of the labyrinth. He attempts to demonstrate with this experiment how the text can no longer be considered a stable entity, but is instead a site for plurality. This view of a text, embraced by contemporary theorists, evokes the labyrinth, and understanding this connection between theoretical discourse and the labyrinth metaphor can help us to understand postmodern theory and poetics. Instead of passively reading a coherent narrative, now the reader embarks upon a journey, an active process of carving out a pathway, coding and carving up the text in order to make his or her way through infinite possible permutations.

Another concrete example of a theorist embracing this postmodern aesthetic of complexity and plurality can be found in Walter Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk*, translated as *The Arcades Project.* A largely unfinished examination of nineteenth-century Paris, it contains several convolutes, collections of notes, sketches, and musings on various subjects. Like

Barthes' coded lexias, Benjamin's notes are placed within thirty-six seemingly arbitrary

categories, and it seems the scope of his project was to define the modern bourgeois lifestyle by

studying such arcane subjects as "Panorama," "Mirrors," "Dream House, Museum, Spa"

"Prostitution, Gambling" "Baudelaire," "Boredom, Eternal Return," "The Interior, The Trace,"

and "Iron Construction." Benjamin began collecting these quotations, fragments of ideas, and

reflections on life in Paris in 1927. The project was never finished, unfortunately, but his

classification system seems so strange and particular, not at all the kind of subject headings one

would expect, and of course this is exactly the point. Anyone approaching this task would have

a unique system, and so to record history, to compile all these fragments, is to make choices that

would determine your analysis; the codification chosen at the outset would obviously influence

your study. The arcades were the precursors to modern-day shopping malls, glass-roofed marble

corridors filled with shops and amenities that would extend through blocks of buildings, creating

a series of interconnected passages. Several of Benjamin's categories are based upon the

construction of these arcades, and he even likens his cosmopolitan arcades to a labyrinth of

commerce where people wander leisurely, dreaming their days away, simultaneously isolated

within the self and joined with the collective in the heart of the city. He imagines this idle

shopper, whom he calls "the flâneur," roaming the city on some sort of subconscious quest: "The

city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which

the flâneur, without knowing it, devotes himself" (Benjamin 429). Sometimes Benjamin's

flâneur seems to just be astray, wandering aimlessly, and at other times he moves with more

purpose; the same can be said for the meandering manner in which Benjamin compiled his work.

Benjamin gathered this literary museum of fragmented thoughts, what he called "les passages,"

for thirteen years. His approach, the discourse strategy of the text itself, mimics what it chooses

to explore, and Benjamin's readers find themselves lost in the labyrinthine convolutes supposed to shed light on the interconnected and mazelike arcades. *The Arcades Project* seems to approach poetic endeavor in its abstraction, its complexity, and its inexhaustible permutations. Benjamin's wandering flâneur could be the mascot for the postmodern aesthetic, gathering together materials in his leisure, seemingly lost in the labyrinth of commercial culture, but forging and crafting art from all this detritus. In his convolute on "Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolition, and the Decline of Paris," Benjamin describes what lies beneath the teeming city with mingled fascination and terror:

> One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld – a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. All day long, suspecting nothing, we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness; the arcades (which are galleries leading into the city's past) issue unremarked onto the streets. At night, however, under the tenebrous mass of the houses, their denser darkness protrudes like a threat, and the nocturnal pedestrian hurries past – unless, that is, we have emboldened him to turn into the narrow lane. […] This labyrinth harbors in its interior not one but a dozen blind raging bulls, into whose jaws not one Theban virgin once a year but thousands of anemic young dressmakers and drowsy clerks every morning must hurl themselves. (84)

Benjamin's study of the arcades includes research on what lies beneath, the catacombs, tunnels, and sewers lurking beneath the city, a rotting parallel labyrinth that provides a shaky foundation for the crowded shopping above. His project at times reads like a scathing critique of the emptiness of modern life, a commercial lifestyle perched precariously on top of this hollowed out underground horror. Benjamin uses the labyrinth as a metaphor for these arcades, claiming that the psychological experience of this place is as terrible and dark as within the labyrinth, that one could get as lost in this bustling atmosphere.

Benjamin describes entering these spaces as passing into a different realm, calling the gateways to the arcades "thresholds" where one leaves the sanctity and sanity of daily life to access this other, unnatural world (89). According to Benjamin, these arcades constituted an above ground labyrinth of iron, glass, commerce, and debauchery, their light airy interiors at odds with the darker purposes of prostitution and gambling. The openness and spacious interiors made possible by their iron construction contrasted with the crowded experience of space where tradesmen and transients pressed up against one another under the gaslights. This profusion of shops and customers is the opposite of the deserted labyrinth, the cavernous sewers and catacombs Benjamin describes below the arcades. Both extremes of terror are described here, the suffocating claustrophobia of the arcades and the desolate darkness down below, twin worlds working in parallel. In the world above, Benjamin's flâneur is unable to focus on much as a result of there just being too much to see, including: window hangings, embroidered curtains, chairs, fauteuils, sofas, cabinets, antiques, vases with flowers, glass cases full of curious objects, aquariums full of live fish, aviaries full of rare birds, crystal lamps, and gilt candelabras (54). All of this opulent splendor has the effect of crowding out one's consciousness with its rich fullness. No thinking is required for the flâneur, no thought seems possible in this sensory overload and so one must turn inward. In the labyrinth and in the catacombs below the arcades, space opens outward, echoing, inviting contemplation. The labyrinth below induces mental terror, the fear of losing one's sanity, lost and alone in a huge empty space, while the labyrinthine arcades above would cause the flâneur to fear for his physical safety due to all the jostling and proximity to mass numbers of people.

In postmodern poetry one can witness this dialectic between clutter and void. Often readers are either given too little information or too many visual clues, and the result is always

the same: anxiety and frustration over how to proceed, which passage to take. As in Figure 3.6

from Phillips' *A Humument,* the reader is simultaneously presented with too many visual clues,

too many types of representation, but cannot read any of them effectively. The scratch marks on

the page do not yield recognizable text, and the abstract shapes remain indecipherable. We are

given everything here and still we feel lost. The frantic visual bustling of the arcades leaves one

at just as much of a loss as the surrounding darkness of the labyrinth; above ground, the flâneur

is paralyzed by too many options, and below he cannot discern a clear path. This flâneur,

wandering the arcades idly, can be compared to both the traveler in the labyrinth and the reader

of the postmodern poem. The flâneur/reader spies an umbrella, and then his gaze shifts to

another random (or at least adjacent) ware and his imagination is sparked by the difference, or

the association between the two. If *The Arcades Project* were a hypertext document, it would be

embraced for its labyrinthine aesthetic, the infinite possibilities of arranging and reading its

disjointed lexias. As a print book, it is mourned as Benjamin's lost unfinished project. In the

print medium, we expect the expected, the authorial voice to make the work cohere. And of

course we expect nonlinear writing and multiple paths from new media, although we know

perfectly well that a hypertext could just as easily be linear and vice versa. Benjamin's collected

fragments create a deferred narrative; the several separate print lexias are held together by the

reader, the virtual flâneur wandering the Parisian Arcades, making connections in his haphazard

walks, trying to make objects cohere.

The randomness of the flâneur's connections, the element of chance involved in his

wanderings, belies another aspect of the postmodern aesthetic. Several schools of contemporary

poetry employ chance procedures in the writing process. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and

the OULIPO writers, for instance, apply constraints to their poems, and this method of creation

introduces an element of risk into the text. These poets seem to court nonsense in their work, to invite chance into their poems, and the poems often seem like language experimentation, a deliberate encounter with possible incoherence. And like the paradoxical experience of space within the labyrinth, which feels simultaneously like a trap and an infinite expanse, the experience of the procedural poem seems at once limiting and limitless. Both models of the labyrinth imply constraint; the unicursal model absolutely determines the traveler's course with no variations, and the multicursal model allows for some freedom of choice, but going left in a dark stone corridor and going right still leaves one in a confined, restricted dark stone corridor. The constraints placed upon the wanderer in the labyrinth resemble the writing constraints of procedural writers and their systematic composing processes. Writers who use chance operations in their poetry, such as throwing dice or coins to determine the next word, or eliminating words based on some mathematical formula, are limiting themselves, divesting themselves of the limitlessness of language and willingly embarking on a journey through the labyrinth. Instead of fearing the outcome, dreading the probable errors one might make in the corridors or the dead ends, the non sequitur lines that might result from their method, procedural writers delight in the wandering, like Benjamin's flâneur figure roaming the arcades randomly with no set destination in mind. At the same time, one could argue that these procedural poets who invite chance and randomness into their work are opening up the text, inviting the infinite possible variations of expression into the text.

Like the paradoxical experience of space within both the labyrinth and Benjamin's arcades, the experience of procedural poetry can be described as both suffocating and expansive. The end result is that readers encounter anxiety from both sides of this continuum. The poet's use of chance or procedure in postmodern poetry can lead to beautiful fortuitous poetry, but most

often causes confusion, distraction, and disorientation. In his essay "Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes," Jerome McGann claims that a primary theme of postmodern poetry is the problem of centeredness, as so many contemporary poets identify with the ideology of the outsider, and this lack of a stable center would account for the reader's experience of feeling flustered or disoriented within the postmodern poem. McGann maintains that most poets today find themselves outside the academy and on the liberal left. As such, the postmodern movement that emerged in the late sixties and early seventies in North America was a movement held together by ideology, not necessarily style or form (McGann 198). McGann describes the methods and goals of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, who in their attempts to engage in political discourse use writing procedures to come up with a comprehensive account of the American experience. This procedural writing often produces language that is almost unreadable in the traditional sense, and McGann claims that this is their chief purpose, to set language free by emphasizing its inherent discontinuity and disorder, arguing that, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E P=O=E=T=S are involved with writing projects which fracture the surface regularities of the written text and interrupt conventional reading processes" (207). McGann's selection of the word "projects" here is telling. These poets view their poems as experiments in the medium of language; a poem from this postmodern movement does not need to be coherent or communicate clearly, it just needs to work its procedure. The reader is then confronted with language not as transparent conveyor of information, but a complex system of signs working just as hard to block meaning as to transmit a message. McGann concludes that the goal of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets is to reveal the structures and codes of language, an aim not too dissimilar from Barthes' project with *S/Z.* This postmodern impulse, to deal with language as a fractured and imperfect system, to mutilate and annihilate coherence to unearth a new possible

text from the wreckage, is embodied in the motto of these poets; they want to systematically derange the language. It's as if these poets are inviting nonsense into their work, threatening their poems with incoherence in a deliberate encounter with the monstrous.

Poetry critic Marjorie Perloff further explores this experimentation with language and word play in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. Perloff claims that contemporary poetry is language centered writing in which the aim is not to represent reality or convey meaning, but to focus on the words themselves, the "wordness" of language, and therefore word permutations, sound patterns, and structures of sound are heavily foregrounded (Perloff, *Dance* 228). The reader can become lost in the sound patterns, the complex orchestration of sounds and syntax, trapped on the surface of the poem. The poet surrenders coherence to attempt a new mode of expression, "For here the attempt is not to articulate the curve of a particular experience but to create a formal linguistic construct that itself shapes our perception of the world around us" (230). For McGann and Perloff then, this particular poetic movement is a celebration of incoherence, a delight in the imperfection of language, and an attempt to foreground the inconsistencies of the written word. These poems are often difficult to read as the poets often refuse to impose one coherent voice, and this complexity confounds readers, disrupting the reading process and their expectations of poetry. Perloff reaffirms the mystification caused by postmodern poetry in her work *The Poetics of Indeterminancy: Rimbaud to Cage*, and she tries to position the postmodern aesthetic according to Aristotle's system of classification. Perloff lists Aristotle's six types of tragedy from his *Poetics: mythos* (plot), *ethos* (character), *dianoia* (thought), *lexis* (diction), *melopoeia* (rhythm and song), and *opsis* (spectacle). She argues that while previous notions of poetry concentrated on *melopoeia* and *lexis,* the challenging and obscure poetics of postmodernism often engage

opsis, the spectacle of performance poetry (Perloff, *Poetics* 288-89). This concentration on

spectacle would explain the resurgence of slam poetry, the procedures of Oulipo poets, and the

disruption and subversion of language in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Instead of envisioning

their poems as static constellations upon the page, these poets imagine their poetry as something

to be performed, witnessed, and experienced over a duration of time. The emphasis here is not

on product, but on process, and their poems become a production. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*

Book, a reprinting of selected poems from several volumes of the bimonthly magazine

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, contains the following mission statement in its foreword:

> Throughout, we have emphasized a spectrum of writing that places its attention
> primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither
> vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter. […]
> our project, if it can be summarized at all, has involved exploring the numerous
> ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized – revealed – produced in
> writing. (Andrews ix)

Clearly, these poets concentrate upon the possibilities of meaning making, and explore different

writing processes and techniques, experimenting with language in the spirit of revealing hidden

mechanisms, unveiling potential felicities. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, in their attempts

to derange language, often mix noise into their poetry, to create obstacles to clear

communication. Theirs is an aesthetic of mutation, as their work lays bare the flawed system of

language. These poets are dealing with the materiality of language, trying to overcome the

transparency of language as a medium, to rip off the veil of illusion that language is foolproof.

In their poetry, readers often feel lost, and the monster within the labyrinth is language itself.

The reader repeatedly encounters the inchoate spectre of disinformation, and the frustration and

anxiety inherent in the realization that language is arbitrary and inconsistent, a flawed system.

As a result, this poetry evokes similar reactions as from navigating a labyrinth: excitement,

confusion, fear, and delight.

The overseas equivalent to the procedural writing of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in North America is the French Oulipo movement founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. Oulipo stands for "Ouvroir de littérature potentielle," which translates roughly as "workshop of potential literature," and this movement was made up of both writers and mathematicians who strove to create works using constrained writing techniques. Oulipo poets use constraints as inspiration, as triggers to the imagination and the creative process, applying various formulas and operations to a text. The Oulipo movement's aim is to merge language and mathematics, and often these writers would incorporate complicated mathematical structures into their writing, imposing spatial form on the narrative, or shaping a poem according to a geometrical figure. An Oulipo poem could result from applying a mathematical formula to an already published text, perhaps adding every fourth word from each beginning paragraph in a novel, or a poem could be generated by rolling dice, selecting words from some other text or a dictionary as determined by chance operations. Often Oulipo works are experiments in omission, as well, as the poets and novelists explore what happens when one limits the possibilities of a text. An example of this would be taking a poem written either by the Oulipo poet, or even someone else's published poem, and then eliminating words according to a mathematical formula, crossing out words or letters or lines to unearth something new.

Of course all writers place constraints upon their texts; simply choosing a name for a character is a constraint, a choice that eliminates other possibilities. But Oulipo writers are using constraints in more extreme ways. In the following passage concerning the Oulipo movement, authorial constraint has been divided into three categories: "first, a minimal level, constraints of the language in which the text is written; second, an intermediate level, including constraints of genre and certain literary norms; third, a maximal level, that of *consciously* preelaborated and

voluntarily imposed systems of artifice" (Motte 11). All poetic forms are constraints too, and a poet working with a villanelle understands that a certain line must be used throughout, and syllables must be counted to conform to the traditional rules, the formula behind the form. The Oulipo poets are taking these constraints further here though, and not just conforming to a system, but composing according to a system.   Like their L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet counterparts, the Oulipo poets invite disorder into their work, experimenting with language instead of composing. Their application of these systems to their work allows readers to understand the exponential possibilities of language, the permutations of words and lines branching out ahead like the multiple pathways of a labyrinth. For both schools of poetry, the disruption of coherence is key, and the reader ascertains that these poets are working with an aesthetic of artifice. As these poets base their composition process on chance, permutation, and mutation, always the threat of incoherence is lurking like a Minotaur within the labyrinth, creating suspense and anxiety for the reader. Oulipo poetry, and indeed most postmodern writing, attempts to unveil one's assumptions about language by hinting at the possibility that language itself is an artificial manmade construct with a void at its core.

The postmodern poem asks readers to recognize their own agency in the reading process, and to be aware of this is to face the possibility of misreading, of making a false turn within the poem and getting lost. But does one become truly lost within a labyrinth of multicursal design or simply feel lost, trapped in an inexorable passageway, the winding spiral of a unicursal labyrinth? Again we must examine this strange discrepancy between how labyrinths are written about and depicted in pictures. When described in antiquity and myth, the labyrinth sounds like a dreadful puzzle, full of complicated forking paths, yet in art labyrinths are most often rendered as simple paths that wind around in an easy circle. In the classical myth, the labyrinth was

likened to a spiral sea shell, and the unicursal model of the labyrinth works here; there's a simple twisting or winding around. How could Daedalus have gotten lost in a unicursal maze though? At the end of the mythic story, Minos imprisoned Daedalus in his own creation and the trapped inventor had to invent wings to escape. This implies that he must have designed a multicursal maze after all, despite all visual renderings to the contrary. Both models are implied in the myth, with Ariadne's thread guiding Theseus out of the labyrinth's puzzle and the ant's thread winding through the simple spiral shell. What Doob discovers in her study of labyrinths of antiquity is that modern concepts of the labyrinth almost exclusively concern the multicursal model, but in Medieval times, both the unicursal and multicursal models were prevalent:

> The modern idea of a labyrinth is curiously limited. It holds that mazes must contain many points of choice between two or more paths […] with dead ends leading nowhere, and that they are intended to confuse and frustrate. This idea is not foreign to the Middle Ages; many literary texts assume a multicursal model, and some see confusion as the maze's primary function where others present bewilderment as merely a byproduct of brilliantly complex structure. But the modern concept of the maze excludes virtually all medieval labyrinths in the visual arts, which show a single winding path leading inevitably to the center and then back out again. (3)

Doob argues that the discrepancy between the visual unicursal depiction of the labyrinth and the multicursal mazes we find so often in literature is purposeful and not merely a mistake or overlooked detail. Both involve an initial choice, both involve a submission to becoming lost within the structure, and the labyrinth primarily leads the way. In both models the person wanders frustrated. They differ though, in that one rewards persistence and the other memory or intelligence. In one there is constant gradual progress, continual movement, and in the other continual pauses for reflection and decision making. In a unicursal labyrinth the traveler must follow, and in a multicursal labyrinth he or she must accept responsibility for making decisions and choices along the way.

Although in a unicursal maze one has no agency or control over the pathway, a passage that leads inexorably towards a central point within the structure, the multicursal labyrinth produces the most anxiety, as the traveler would need to concentrate despite his or her fear, and engage tricks of memory to find a way through the maze. Penelope Reed Doob argues that the greater the difficulty of the labyrinth, the more it acts as a metaphor for intellectual exercise:

> The multicursal labyrinth is even more rigorous, however, for it does not consist of a single crucial choice; rather, it incorporates an extended series of *bivia*, an array of choices. It embodies frequent testing and repeated confrontations, with no apparent end to the struggle until the goal or the entry is achieved. Hence this type of maze is a perfect symbol of intellectual and moral difficulty as well as aesthetic complexity. (46)

Doob mentions multiple confrontations here, not with the Minotaur, but with the architectural structure, the dead ends placed within the labyrinth. These pauses of course would be all the more dangerous with a Minotaur on the loose, concealed behind each corner, waiting to ensnare the hesitant. Still focusing on just the fluster caused by multiple pathways, Doob attributes the labyrinth's complexity to a love of mystification prevalent in the Middle Ages. In a chapter describing various Medieval texts, Doob concludes:

> By now it should be clear that the medieval aesthetic features a predilection for difficulty, complexity, ornateness, circuitousness, artificiality – all qualities associated with the labyrinth. This love of difficulty is manifested in many ways, not simply by a fondness for artificial order or elegant digression or elaborate amplification. In art, the interlace pattern is popular; in architecture, complicated sculptural programs; in music, increasingly complex polyphonic and rhythmic intricacies. Poetry and romance employ complex or multiplex narrative, the verbal obscurity and elaboration of the troubadours. (213-14)

Her argument here explains the gradual shifting of the labyrinth from unicursal to multicursal design in artistic renderings and in our understanding of the term. Doob associates the labyrinth with an overall aesthetic, demonstrating that the Medieval mind delighted in all things complicated, and this enjoyment of complexity should sound remarkably familiar to postmodern

poets. Often the postmodernists have been accused of celebrating artifice, using deliberate

obfuscation, and triumphing play over purpose. If we conceive of the labyrinth as a metaphor

that both the Medieval and postmodern mind would embrace, however, we can view the

postmodern poet's agenda as one of acknowledging the complexity and adversity within

language. A poem's obscurity is not meant to be absolute, but an obstacle to be overcome as part

of this aesthetic of difficulty.

This reading of the postmodern aesthetic would acknowledge many contemporary

theorists' claims that language is itself always artificial and obscure, and not a simple system of

clear communication. Echoing their Medieval forebears, these theorists often believe that

meaning is multiple and recursive, difficult if not impossible to convey. Here we could image

the postmodern poet as Daedalus, creating a labyrinth for his or her reader to encounter.

Acknowledging current literary theories of language's imprecision, the poet, a modern day

Daedalus, must admit that a text is multicursal, that there are many ways to read each word,

many ways through the poem as in a multicursal labyrinth. If perhaps there is some slippage

between signifier and signified, if we understand that words either suffer or benefit from

Derridian différance, then the poet must abandon hope for exact communication and hope that

his or her creation ensnares the reader, keeping the reader baffled enough or intrigued enough to

wander around and through, circumnavigating the poem, returning to certain words and phrases

like signposts or crossroads along the way. Like the labyrinth, this poem would encourage

wandering, circling, looping around words that one cannot quite grasp or pin down. The call to

adventure for the reader would be to enter this poem and face possible nonmeaning, the monster

lurking at the center of postmodernism, or to return triumphantly the way one came in, somehow

transformed by the reading process. This is not a linear progression; it is a recursive model and as such the reader must return the way he or she entered.

Labyrinths have only one door that serves as both entrance and exit, and the mythological Theseus did not return with any prize or reward. He left empty handed. In fact, he came out with *less* than he started out with, using his thread (wit, intellect, memory) and a ball of pitch (convictions, ideology, literary theories) in his quest. For the reader of postmodern poetry, reading is an endeavor where one must submit to possible incoherence, or at least continual moments of loss, the slippage of meaning. Progression through the poem will not be linear, simple, or straightforward, but multicursal and disorienting. One must be vigilant, using tricks of memory along the way to guard against these slippages, like so many miniature confrontations throughout the reading of the poem analogous to the passages not taken that one may need to return to if one is to make it out alive.
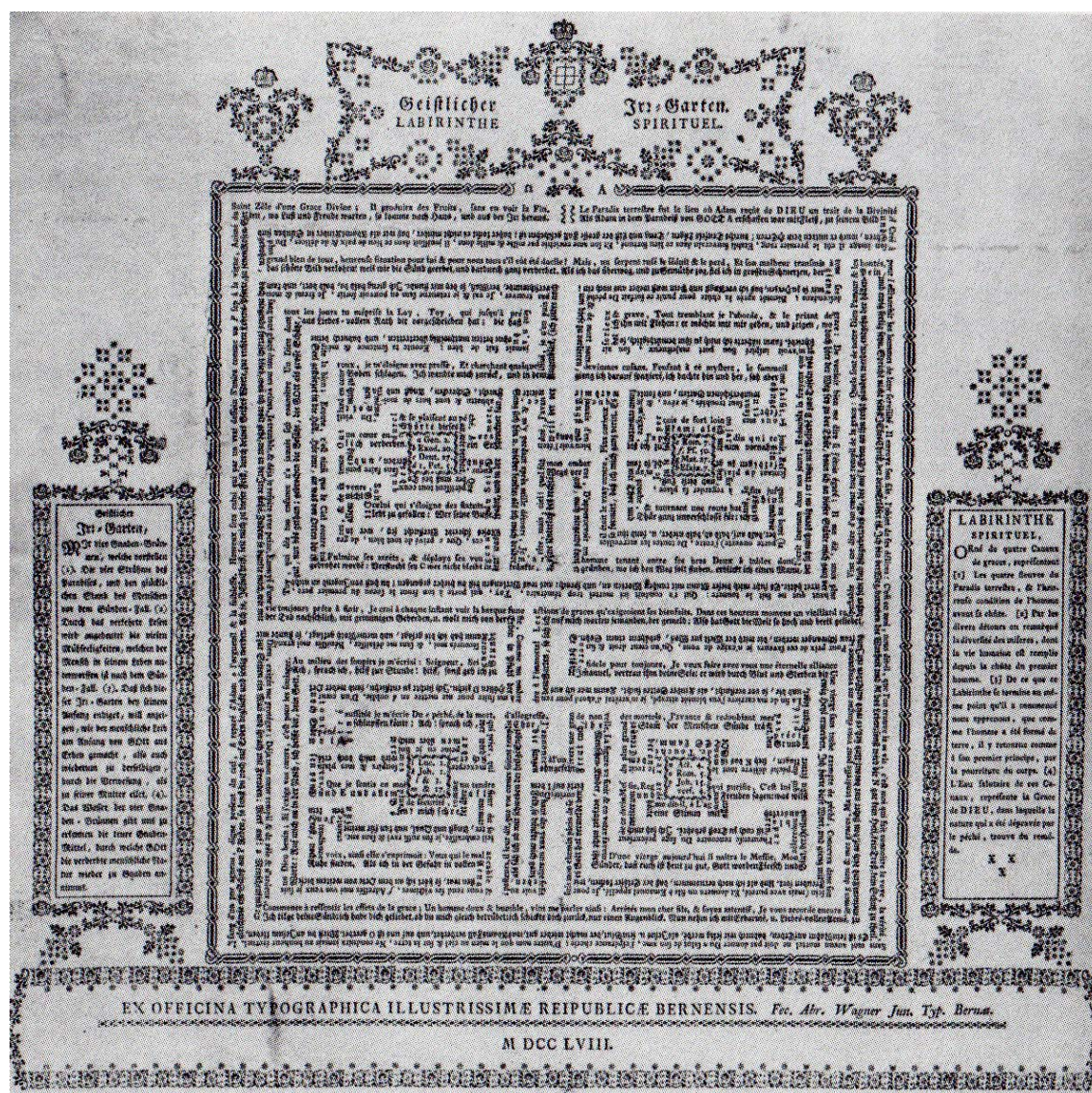
Figure 3.1
"Labirinthe Spirituel," a letterpress printing on paper by Albrecht Wagner demonstrating the complex path leading past sin and vice to redemption (Kern 219).
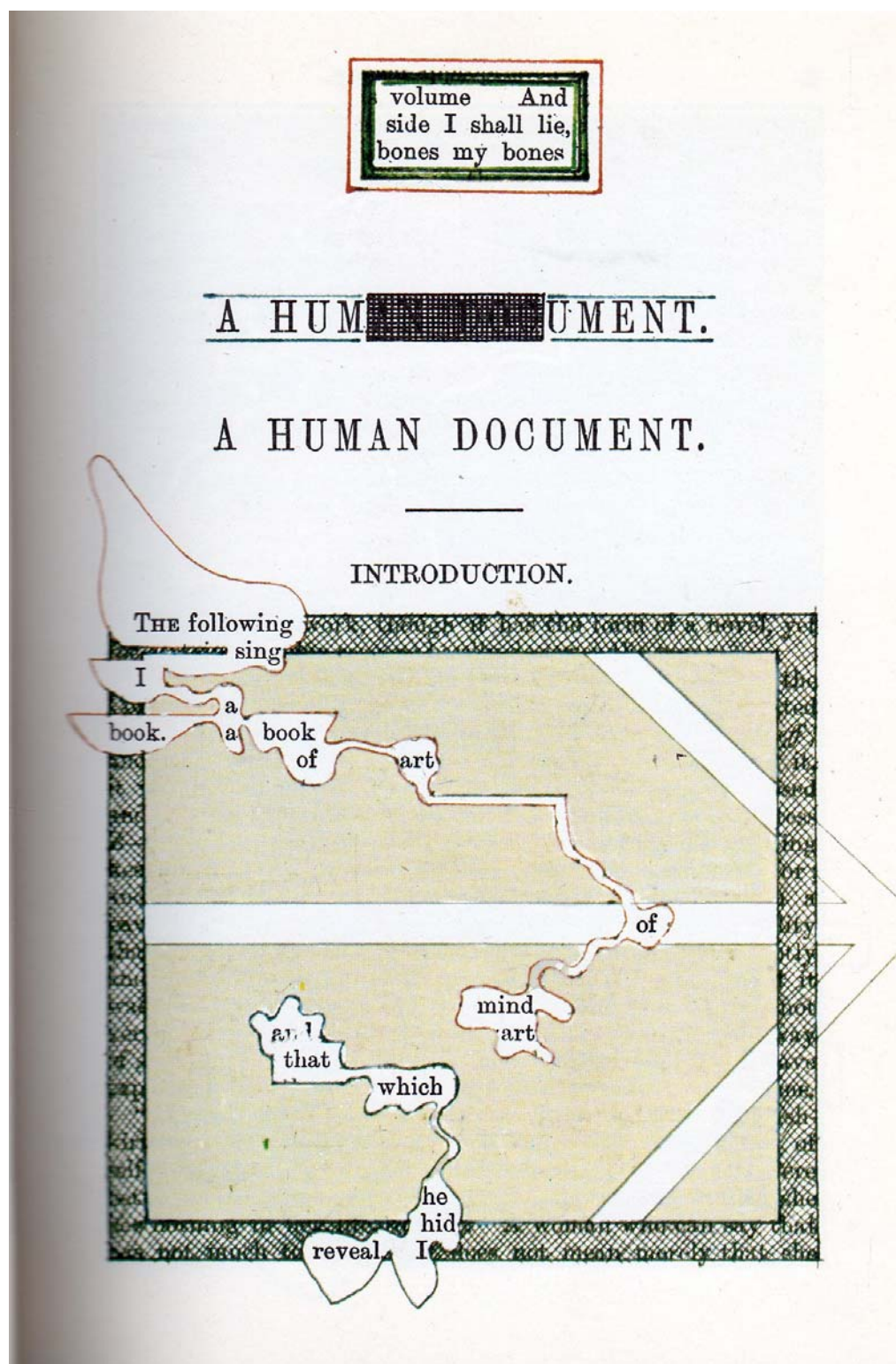
Figure 3.2
The title page of Tom Phillips' *A Humument: A Human Document* upon which he etches out the central letters of the original work (Phillips 1).
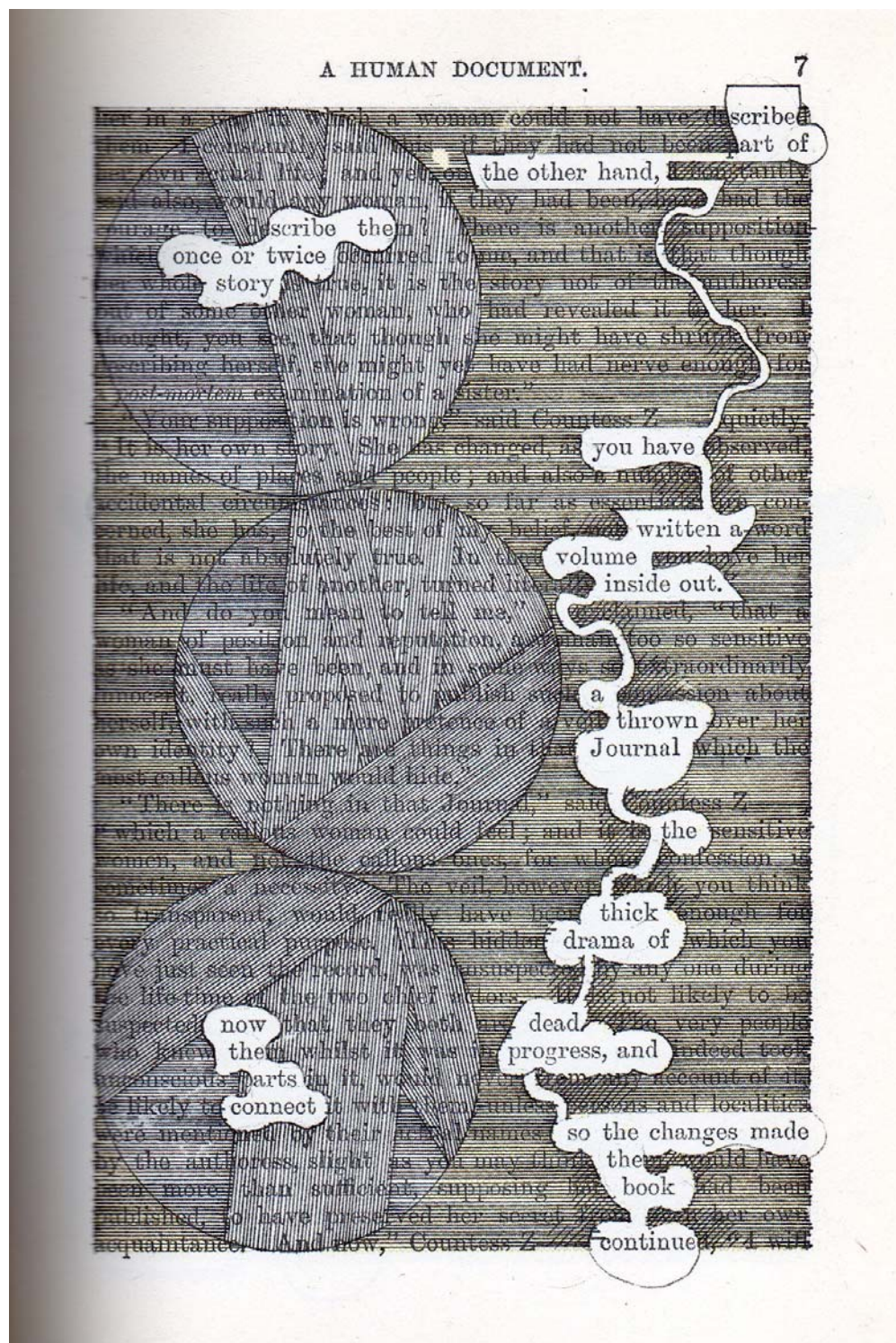
Figure 3.3
A page from Tom Phillips' *A Humument: A Human Document* with simple pen and ink graphics where the artist refers to the two scribes and two arts of this project (Phillips 7).

Figure 3.4
A metapicture, or dual image of both duck and rabbit that originally appeared in a German humor magazine, *Fliegende Blätter*, in 1892 (Mitchell 54).

Figure 3.5
Another page of Tom Phillips' *A Humument: A Human Document* demonstrating how graphics and text compete for attention in visual poetry (Phillips 12).

Figure 3.6
A final example from Tom Phillips' *A Humument: A Human Document* where the artist compares his project to a museum hidden within a story (Phillips 60).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MINOTAUR

Deep within the labyrinth's structure lurks a menacing figure, the Minotaur, a monster relegated to its depths. Thus far we've mainly considered the labyrinth as providing ample frustration and anxiety from its complicated convolutions alone, and the possibility of becoming lost or thwarted in its confusing architecture. And yet the mythological story of the ancient labyrinth foregrounds this beast; it is the Minotaur who necessitates the building of the labyrinth in the first place, and it is the Minotaur who must be paid in blood, holding a kingdom hostage. To examine the labyrinth in its entirety, one must deal with this portentous monster and the confrontation that must occur in order to successfully pass through and return. In mapping the labyrinth metaphor onto postmodern poetry, what does this moment of confrontation represent? Is the Minotaur just a manifestation of the anxiety produced by the labyrinth, or can we read this figure as something more, something beyond that which we've already attributed to the labyrinth's difficult passage? As Theseus slays the Minotaur, what does the reader of the postmodern poem vanquish? Who or what must be confronted and defeated within the poem's lines?

The Minotaur embodies the frustration and anxiety of traveling within the labyrinth, but beyond that it represents pure horror, the horror of annihilation. That the Minotaur combines human and animal elements is extremely provocative, and later in this chapter we will delve into the theoretical implications of the monstrous within the labyrinth, and examine just what type of monster this is and how its hybrid nature is relevant in our discussion of contemporary poetics.

First though, it will be helpful to establish the psychology of the monstrous, and the significance

of the Minotaur's inhabiting the labyrinth. To enter the labyrinth of antiquity was to court a

deliberate encounter with the monstrous, to expose oneself to possible violence and danger, and I

will argue that to enter a postmodern poem is a similarly dangerous step. Reading much

contemporary poetry and fiction means inviting in confusion and distress. As the reader

traverses the poem, there's always the threat of things falling apart, of a disconnect or

breakdown, of dissolution. Ultimately, the Minotaur could represent a void at the center of the

poem, an embodiment of existential dread, an absence where the hulking monster would imply a

definite presence. To focus on the Minotaur is to focus on the negation of life, a miscreation at

the center of this elaborate constructed place, the latent possibility of absence or nothingness at

the center, a very real threat in a consideration of the postmodern poem.

To begin this consideration of the Minotaur's form and function within the labyrinth, we

need to look at the psychology behind the monster. Why would this myth have come about to

begin with, and what did the Minotaur represent in ancient Greece? Why would the Greeks have

needed to tell themselves this terrible story? In his colossal volume *Space, Time and*

Architecture, Sigried Giedeon, historian of architecture, hints at a possible cause. He argues that

all of civilization vacillates between two poles: the geometric and the organic. Giedeon claims

that every city can be placed in one of these two categories:

> Throughout history there persist two distinct trends – the one toward the rational
> and the geometrical, the other toward the irrational and the organic: two different
> ways of dealing with or of mastering the environment. These contrasting
> approaches to the problem have been evident in all cultures, both early and late.
> Since the beginning of civilization there have been cities planned according to
> regular schemes and cities which have grown up organically like trees. (336)

Giedion's binary is of course an oversimplification of the complexity and diversity of

human civilization, but his description of Greek architecture is compelling.   Giedion's

vivid details enable his readers to clearly picture this city of order and precision, balanced

neatly atop the rocky cliffs:

> The ancient Greeks put their mathematically proportioned temples on the top of rocky acropolises, outlined against their southern skies; the villages of the Greek islands, whitewashed on the crests of hills, are easily distinguishable far out at sea because of their clearly marked and periodically rewhitened walls. (336)

Giedion argues that these linear and rational temples mark this city as a place of order and

structure. Even if we disagree with his classifications, we can imagine the whitewashed,

mathematically proportioned walls atop the cliffs as the complete opposite of the labyrinth's

confused passageways of subterranean darkness. Giedion's passage here allows us to envision

the labyrinth as the exact opposite of the Greek city. The labyrinth would represent the antithesis

of culture and rationality, an undoing or un-structure compared to the elaborate temples and

buildings within the city. Whether the labyrinth of ancient Greece was a real structure, a system

of interconnected caves, or simply an elaborate story about a fictional place, a space representing

so much chaos and disorder would be in stark contrast to the peaceful, linear utopia depicted by

Giedion. Just the look of the place would have represented a place of horror for the orderly

Greek mind, the converse of all things rational and orderly. Giedion's continuum pits the

organic against the geometric, and although the labyrinth is a highly designed space, it most

definitely evokes disorder and entanglement, not rational geometry. The roundness of the

labyrinth seems to negate the stately right angles of Greek architecture, and all that darkness

would chase away the light of their whitewashed structures. Aside from the terror induced by

the monster inside the labyrinth, just the place itself would appear as a site of regression and

subversion to the Greek mind. And so a possible reason for the popularity of this myth could be

that the labyrinth, so opposite in every way to the order and precision of Greek thought and

architecture, represented the perfect horror story for this civilization. Theseus' journey into the

labyrinth would allow the Greeks to encounter their fundamental opposite, the organic and irrational. And as Theseus defeats this place, successfully defending the city above from the demons within the labyrinth, he would affirm the rightness of the Greek way of life. To hear of Theseus' adventure would be to witness the triumph of order over disorder.

The labyrinths of antiquity were always described as impressive structures, portrayed by various writers with a sense of grandeur, and psychologically, to enter this kind of huge unfamiliar and unknowable space would cause a great deal of distress. Just to be in the presence of such vast, empty unseen darkness would cause consternation, and to know at the outset that a monster dwells within would be terrifying. The immensity of the labyrinth would amplify one's fears of being unanchored, uncontained, and vulnerable in the open. Paradoxically, the vastness of this space would press in upon the traveler, suddenly muted by the silent stillness of his or her surroundings. The only choice would be to march bravely to meet the monster head on; otherwise, awaiting discovery and attempting to flee through a tangled, twisting route would be too frightful. To descend into the postmodern poem, the existentialist novel, or the labyrinth, is to plumb the depths. Like the disorientation one experiences within a labyrinth, to read contemporary poetry is to embrace multiplicity and simultaneity, to welcome chance and fortune into the reading process. Postmodern poetry decenters the reader, requiring a resetting of traditional poetic expectations, much like the reorientation required within the labyrinth, and in both poem and maze, the design is such to keep one continually off-balance and unsettled, so that true north is always a bit obscured.   Renderings of ancient labyrinths always appear to have a central point, yet modern mazes often lack this centrality, and one could argue that even the architecture of the labyrinth has undergone a postmodern renovation. Labyrinths depicted in manuscripts, mosaics, and paintings would always have a center or goal in the middle, and more

often than not a Minotaur standing guard, anchoring the diagram and providing a focal point for

the viewer. Extending the metaphorical possibilities of the labyrinth beyond poetry for a

moment, one could imagine the labyrinth as symbolic of life's journey. Depending upon

whether one believed in free will or determinism would perhaps indicate if the labyrinth were

drawn as unicursal or multicursal. The complicated structure of the labyrinth also mimics the

biological structures of the human brain, and so another possibility for the endurance of this

myth is our unconscious recognition of this building's elaborate construction and its remarkable

similarity to our own anatomy.

For the Greeks, this myth would most certainly have represented the story of a heroic

quest. The complexity of the labyrinth would signify a test of Theseus' intellect, but the

presence of the Minotaur would make this a trial of the spirit, transforming Theseus' status from

that of explorer to hero. Mythology and theology expert Joseph Campbell spends some time

dissecting the possible psychological motives for the creation and popularity of the labyrinth

myth is his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's renown comes from his attempts

to synthesize myths and legends from cultures all over the world, and to explain the universal

need for a hero myth, how the desire for stories of greatness are somehow intrinsic to our

species. According to Campbell's extensive studies and expertise, a myth functions much as a

dream would; a myth solves some fundamental problem or anxiety for a great number of people.

He defines myth as a depersonalized dream and attests, "both myth and dream are symbolic in

the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by

the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are

directly valid for all mankind" (Campbell, *Hero* 19). And so for Campbell, a myth

communicates some unconscious truth to the listener. Much as poetry is often considered a

medium capable of transmitting abstract information, communicating obliquely versus prose's

more direct narration, the myth's purpose would be to explain a universal truth, something from

the Jungian collective unconscious. Echoing the physiological argument above, that perhaps the

architectures of the brain and labyrinth are not coincidental, Campbell advances the following

hypothesis:

> To grasp the full value of the mythological figures that have come down to us, we
> must understand that they are not only symptoms of the unconscious (as indeed
> are all human thoughts and acts) but also controlled and intended statements of
> certain spiritual principles, which have remained as constant throughout the
> course of human history as the form and nervous structure of the human physique
> itself. (257)

Here Campell implies that mankind's remarkable shared myths and religions issue from some

aspect of our physicality, that myth is a function of species, and one could argue the same of

course about the emergence of artistry in each culture. Anthropological assertions aside, what is

of foremost importance to this study is Campbell's analysis of the hero myth, and how we might

begin to associate the protagonist of the labyrinth myth with the reader of contemporary poetry.

Because he views myth as a psychological need of mankind, a function of our

consciousness, Campbell envisions all heroic journeys as fundamentally internal quests. The

labyrinth's resemblance to the structure of our brain is striking here, as it readily allows us to

imagine Theseus' quest as an entrance into and through the mind. Though heroes are always

venturing into perilous and exciting foreign territories, Campbell believes that these quests are

primarily journeys inward: "The passage of the mythological hero may be overground,

incidentally; fundamentally it is inward – into depths where obscure resistances are overcome,

and long lost, forgotten powers are revivified, to be made available for the transfiguration of the

world" (29). This passage describes all myth as a transformative experience; by listening to

these stories, one becomes changed by proxy. Campbell describes the hero's quest as inward,

and like all myths, especially ones in which the hero finds himself lost and alone, the labyrinth requires a descent, reminiscent of the downward spiral of Dante's dark wood, or the perilous whirlpools of Odysseus' sea journey, as the hero enters the mysterious psyche. This would mean that all the beasts, monsters, and gods one encounters in myth would just be representations of various parts of the self, inner demons surfacing in myth as externalized obstacles. Theseus' battle with the Minotaur would thus symbolize a battle with the ego, acted out for us in story form to make it more palatable, or to give this mundane topic some epic grandeur. Ariadne's golden thread is a detail of the labyrinth myth that allows us to easily understand this quest as a mental or spiritual journey; her thread acts as memory does. Theseus has no guide to help him proceed through the labyrinth, yet Ariadne's thread lets him see where he's been. Like the mind itself, Theseus can recall but not forecast; he is one man, one mind acting and thinking in isolation. Campbell offers many readings of this labyrinth myth: a triumph over the female as the hero enters the womb-like labyrinth to slay the monstrous other borne of woman's sin, a story of the god-king as Theseus restores the kingdom from King Minos' neglect of wife and homestead, a passage from old world into new as the killing of the Minotaur symbolizes the death of the old gods and the emergence of a new world order. All these possible readings entail the vanquishing of an established system, a system embodied in the figure of the Minotaur.

     As for what this monster stands for, the Minotaur is most commonly viewed as a symbol of destruction. When Theseus slays the Minotaur, he metaphorically kills death, and so the monster represents evil personified, a dark and terrible beast. According to myth, the labyrinth was built to hide the Minotaur, this aberration of nature, to hide the scandalous evidence of its birth. Again we witness the paradox of the labyrinth's structure; the labyrinth is dual in nature, at once a beautiful work of artistic complexity and a prison built to hide a beast unnaturally

conceived by woman and animal. Penelope Reed Doob makes a case for this reading of the

Minotaur in the following analysis:

> The labyrinth, like the Minotaur, is a monument to impious lust – indeed, to insane bestiality – and is implicated in Theseus's later betrayal of the loving Ariadne. The death implicit in the memorial functions of the Egyptian and Etruscan mazes […] become violent, unnatural. The literary ground is fully prepared for later metaphorical identification of the labyrinth *in malo* with destructive love, seductive treachery, sin, death. (31)

Sin, sickness, madness, and death become channeled into this creature, suppressed and hidden

away underground, and then done away with, restoring the kingdom. Doob also calls the

labyrinth a monument, a monument to the betrayal of courtly love between the king and queen,

as the queen lay with a bull to beget the Minotaur. Read in this way, the Minotaur symbolizes

the old ways, the awful progeny that results from succumbing to the will of the gods who sent

the queen this bull, and the labyrinth myth could be interpreted as a story of a city's move into

modernity. By descending into the subterranean complexity of the ancient mysteries, Theseus

conquers the old pagan gods to emerge into a new world rid of the barbaric rituals of the past.

The Minotaur, often represented with horns and hooves, has often been associated with the

Christian Devil, as well. An image from Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical

Antiquity through the Middle Ages* provides evidence of this link. Reproduced in Figure 4.4, this

image shows an illumination at the end of a 1419 manuscript copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy,*

which is currently housed in the Vatican. This drawing appears at the end of Dante's

manuscript, showing "a centaur, arms outstretched and palms turned up in a welcoming gesture,

in the center of a Chartres-type twelve-circuited maze; in the bottom right-hand corner is a

Cretan-style seven-circuited maze" (Doob 274). The similarities between the labyrinth and

Dante's Hell, with its concentric rings guarded by Lucifer at the center, are abundantly clear.

And the two figures are often depicted as beasts, here the Minotaur getting the torso of a man

and lower body of a horse. Both narratives describe an adventurer embarking upon a difficult and circuitous journey, and present metaphorical adventures representing life itself, a perpetual winding through and overcoming of various obstacles. In both, the adventurers must go through the monster to achieve victory or possible transcendence. The Minotaur could then represent any manner of obstacle or impediment, ranging from the mundane to mortal. It would be a gross oversimplification to label the Minotaur as purely evil, however, and the confrontation with this entity within the labyrinth is a bit more complex.

Ironically, this monster that has most often been associated with evil has also been used as a symbol of protection. The Roman soldiers and politicians co-opted the Minotaur as an icon of strength, transforming the terrible monster into a powerful emblem. The Roman legions used the image of the Minotaur as a heraldic sign for its fearsome visage, much in the same way knights would put griffins and dragons on their banners and shields, to intimidate their opponents and assume the strength of these fierce mythic beasts. The Minotaur and the labyrinth myth also symbolized impenetrability, and forces that could not be easily defeated (Doob 80). The sign of the Minotaur appeared on robes of Roman emperors as well, and functioned as a symbol of authority, protection, and secrecy. As evidence of this association, W.H. Matthews quotes an ancient Roman manuscript, which translated reads: "Let there be represented on it (the Emperor's robe) a labyrinth of gold and pearls, in which is the Minotaur, made of emerald, holding his finger to his mouth, thus signifying that, just as none may know the secret of the labyrinth, so none may reveal the monarch's counsels" (53). The Romans effectively turned the beast into a mascot, a powerful guardian to act as both protector and pet of the emperor. One could also imagine the labyrinth as a fantastic emblem of the postmodern poet, who reigns over the domain of language and is the keeper and sometimes revealer of its secrets. Furthermore, as

mentioned in a previous chapter, some labyrinth scholars speculate that the design of the labyrinth originated as a complicated dance to be acted out by military on horseback. These spectacular shows would demonstrate the prowess of the city's soldiers to its citizens, and could possibly have been performed as protective rituals, the acting out of the walls of the labyrinth to somehow protect one from real or imagined attackers. Instead of the Minotaur being the danger in this instance, the threat comes from outside, and both the monster and the labyrinth acted as shields from harm.

Regardless of whether we interpret the Minotaur as good, evil, neutral, or some combination of all three, we need to examine its relevance to the postmodern aesthetic. In the metaphor of the labyrinth, the Minotaur is Derrida's différance made animate. The monster represents everything that threatens, or, in terms of postmodernism, the absence of determinate meaning that contemporary literary theory implies. The monster represents irrationality, nonsense, the chaos and void hidden by the labyrinth's inextricable passages. At the heart of all the postmodern poetic's complexity, strategy, procedure, multiplicity, multimedia even, resides the monster inherited from the Modernist precursors: absence. The flipside to this nothing, this void suspended in the center of postmodernity, is everything. While the Minotaur could represent absence, its hybrid nature could also symbolize the multiplicity inherent in the postmodern aesthetic. Instead of representing the threat of nonmeaning, the Minotaur could symbolize too much meaning, the proliferation of signs, the competing information of visual poetry, or the competing voices of polyvocal poems such as John Ashbery's "Litany," which will be examined later. This monster frightens us precisely because it is too many things. The Minotaur is both beast and victim, part human and part animal. The Minotaur represents deformity, yet he is more sacred than a human for his abnormality and divine parentage. His

name "Asterius" translates as "ruler of the stars," and within his one figure he combines the

human and the monstrous. In an excellent taxonomy of every conceivable monster, David

Williams labels the Minotaur as a grotesque from the natural world, a transgression between the

human and the animal:

> The monsters of earthly form may be grouped most broadly into combinations of
> human and animal, on the one hand, and, on the other, combinations of various
> animal forms. In the first category are found many of the most famous classical
> and mediaeval monsters: the sphinx, the centaur, the minotaur, and the satyr; less
> common are the borak, a combination of horse and man (differing from the
> centaur in the fact of its Arab origin and the fact that the horse is always a mare);
> the manticore, a lion with the face of a man; the scarab, a man in the form of a
> beetle; and what for the Middle Ages, at least, was a monster, the monkey,
> considered a deformation of the human type. (179)

The Minotaur falls into this first type of monster, which combines human and animal into one

hybrid creature. Fighting the Minotaur, the bestial nature within man represented in extreme

form, could thus be seen as fighting the self. All of the figures in this myth are of divine birth,

including the Minotaur, and so one cannot easily dismiss him as just an inhuman monster,

because of his very humanity.

Borges wrote a lesser known story about the labyrinth myth that gives voice to the

Minotaur, humanizing this mythic monster. Entitled "La Casa de Asterión," or "The House of

Asterion," this story is told from the Minotaur's perspective, and Borges imagines Asterius alone

in his labyrinth, wishing for the company of his mirror self. In this brief tale, Asterius wanders

his infinite house longing for something to do, and he laments that he never learned to read.

Asterius describes his days and the games he plays with himself to pass the time:

> Of course I do not lack for distractions. Sometimes I run like a charging ram
> through the halls of stone until I tumble dizzily to the ground; sometimes I crouch
> in the shadow of a wellhead or at a corner in one of the corridors and pretend I am
> being hunted. There are rooftops from which I can hurl myself until I am bloody.
> I can pretend anytime I like that I am asleep, and lie with my eyes closed and my
> breathing heavy. (Sometimes I actually fall asleep; sometimes by the time I open

my eyes, the color of the day has changed.) But of all the games, the one I like best is pretending that there is another Asterion. I pretend that he has come to visit me, and I show him around the house. Bowing majestically, I say to him: *Now let us return to our previous intersection* or *Let us go this way, now, out into another courtyard* or *I knew that you would like this rain gutter* or *Now you will see a cistern that has filled with sand* or *Now you will see how the cellar forks.* Sometimes I make a mistake and the two of us have a good laugh over it. (Borges, "House" 52)

Borges imagines the Minotaur as incredibly human here, a character who at times displays vanity, playfulness, boredom, and hope. In this passage, the supposed monster appears impetuous and innocent, genuinely pleased to share his observations and home with another. Borges domesticates the labyrinth's architecture here, turning this horrific and chaotic space into someone's home. He describes the labyrinth as having infinite repeated rooms, and he places corpses in each room to tell them apart; these corpses he describes as the bodies of those who come to him to be delivered from evil, and Borges shows us no violence in this story, giving us no reason to recoil or distrust Asterius. In fact, we sympathize with him. Asterius longs for Theseus to come and join him in his house, to release him from his prison. At the end of his story, Borges' Minotaur wishes for redemption, hoping for his death by Theseus' hand: "I know that my redeemer lives, and in the end he will rise and stand above the dust. If my ear could hear every sound in the world, I would hear his footsteps. I hope he takes me to a place with fewer galleries and doors" (53). Normally, we envision the Minotaur as mute, animalistic, a looming threat stalking its prey. But here Borges allows us to imagine him as an individual, one who takes pride in his home, and in this version Theseus becomes an interloper. Before Theseus' arrival, Asterius briefly wonders what his redeemer will be like, whether he will be a bull or a man, or a bull with the face of a man, or if he will be like him. Perhaps because the Minotaur of classical mythology had the head of a bull, we never think of him thinking, of his having ideas or property or fear or dreams. Borges has him wonder about Theseus' nature here, in a neat

reversal; Asterius longs for his equal, another like him, and instead of a labyrinth myth where the human encounters the monstrous, in Borges' tale, these borders are blurred.

Defying categorization as human or animal, monster or man, the Minotaur introduces a crisis by his very otherness. The Minotaur's hybridity breaks down binaries – he is not either/or, but both/and. In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture,* Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes monsters of antiquity as follows: "A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration" (7). What's so striking about Cohen's description here is how easily it could be applied to postmodern poetry. Contemporary poetics defy classification, are full of antimonies, invite mixed response, involve competing aesthetics, and occupy multiple discursive spaces. Contemporary poetry would fit Cohen's definition of the monstrous. Any attempts to rationalize and explain fail. Both the Minotaur and the postmodern poem are irregular, of a different order, other. Cohen takes his argument a step further when he contends that monsters allow us to imagine the world differently. Like poetry, monsters allow us to think in different ways, to encounter something from another realm of thought or experience: "The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (7). Cohen evokes the labyrinth with his figurative language here. We "explore new spirals" on "interconnected" paths. Thinking, whether about monsters or about poetics, always seems to occur in this murky maze-like space. Cohen continues on to claim that monsters are terrifying because of their otherness, and that a confrontation with the monstrous would require a resetting of one's entire way of thinking:

> In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble. The monstrous is a genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system; the monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure; like the giants of *Mandeville's Travels,* it threatens to devour "all raw and quyk" any thinker who insists otherwise. The monster is in this way the living embodiment of the phenomenon Derrida has famously labeled the "supplement" (*ce dangereux supplement):* it breaks apart bifurcating "either/or" syllogistic logic with a kind of reasoning closer to "and/or," introducing what Barbara Johnson has called "a revolution in the very logic of meaning." (7)

Here the monster is aberration, distortion of the normal and therefore threatening in its irrationality, and it is not farfetched to suggest that this description could be mapped onto postmodern poetry. Like the Minotaur, postmodern poetry is a hybrid entity; it is not completely foreign, but combines elements from various genres, discourses, and media and therefore irrationalizes language creating the need for new categories of writing and new approaches to reading.

As long as language has been around, there have been monsters to threaten and terrify; they are intrinsic parts of culture and the human psyche. Evidence of monsters is concurrent with the birth of civilization, and it seems that humanity cannot define itself without this mythic other. According to *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors,* David Gilmore's study of monsters in various cultures, language and monsters share a common ancestry. Gilmore suggests, "Even more compelling is the fact that the very idea of the monster springs up with the same aesthetic-intellectual impulse that gave rise to civilization itself. Art historian Heinz Mode argues that visual portraits of menacing creatures occur at precisely the same time as literacy" (Gilmore 4). Both language and monsters are products of civilization, and the first evidence of each come from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia from around 3000 B.C. As soon as humans could record their thoughts and portray their inner fears, the monster was born. Gilmore maintains that monsters are necessary to civilization because

they create the need for heroes who will vanquish them, calling heroes and monsters "paired twins, indeed as inseparable polarities of a unified system of values and ideas underlying order itself" (27). Man battling monster is the origin myth for many civilizations, order arising out of the chaos, man emerging victorious from his encounter with the inhuman. Whether a projection of man's inner nature, a representation of everything that is not human, or a personification of unexplained natural phenomena, the Minotaur has been labeled as monstrous and therefore must be defeated and destroyed. So many monsters constitute what Gilmore and other monster theorists describe as a reshuffling of the familiar, a mixing of human and animal parts to create a disturbing new entity. The resultant creature, with parts both human and nonhuman, then represents the worst parts of man, the parts of ourselves we cannot tolerate or refuse to recognize:

> This mixture of human and animal is a direct consequence of a profound ambivalence shared by all people: a simultaneous terror and fascination with the beast within, the impulsive need to both deny and acknowledge that, no matter how exalted, we humans are members of the animal kingdom and heir to violent instincts. Like other animals, humans retain an atavistic side as a result of the retention of a primitive cerebellum. Coping with our dual impulses, murderous and compassionate at the same time, we make a deity of the good within us and a monster of the bad. (191-92)

Perhaps imagining a hybrid other helps man to affirm his own uniformity. Gilmore mentions the duality within humans here, a duality that we both wish to deny and need to acknowledge. We cannot rid ourselves of this monster entirely because he is a part of us, or we are a part of him. The monster represents everything we deem inhuman, but in terms of the Minotaur, who is half human already, this distinction is even less clear.

In terms of the labyrinth myth, the Minotaur is a monster banished to the center of the maze, both trapped and protected there. His suppression is complete, and he cannot leave, although we are allowed access if we choose to enter his domain. The maze's structure conceals

his secret and lets others in to their doom. Labyrinth scholar Hermann Kern examines the

Minotaur's centrality and imagines what it would be like for a traveler within the labyrinth to

reach this inner sanctuary:

> Once at the center, our subject is all alone, encountering him-or herself, a divine
> principle, a Minotaur, or anything else for which the "center" might stand. In any
> case, it is meant to be the place where one has the opportunity to discover
> something so basic that it demands a fundamental change of direction. To leave a
> labyrinth, the walker must turn around and retrace his or her steps. A 180-degree
> change of direction signifies distancing oneself from one's own past as much as
> possible. (30)

Because the monster is situated at the center of the labyrinth, it takes on more importance than

mere obstacle. The entire journey through the labyrinth is aimed at this Minotaur, pointed

towards this moment of confrontation. Kern asserts that encountering this inevitable monster is

so fundamentally unfamiliar that it necessitates a complete reversal of one's path. Whatever it

represents, whether we finally identify this monster as destructive, evil, benign, protective, void,

or hybrid, its placement in the center of the labyrinth marks the Minotaur as the key to the

labyrinth myth.

Examining the etymology of the word "monster," Gilmore explains that it derives from

the Latin *monstrum,* something that reveals or warns, a portent. In the ancient world, monsters

were feared of course, but they were also believed to signify the will of the gods, representing

various sins, vices, or moral flaws:

> Today, of course, much of this semantic and religious baggage has been lost, and
> we use the term to imply made-up creatures that are frightening, oversized, and
> repugnant, but there remains a very powerful sense in which monsters are still
> signs or portents of something momentous, carrying profound, even spiritual
> meaning beyond just frightfulness. And indeed, as we will see, the origins of the
> word reveal yet another aspect of monsters, which is the paradoxical closeness of
> the monstrous and the divine. (10)

Monsters evoke the awe and terror of the sublime, a personification of the unknown. Monsters also inhabit liminal spaces, the edges and outlying areas of society: forests, caves, lairs. For the Minotaur, this liminal space is the labyrinth, a dark cavern evocative of a return to the womb, but also symbolic of life's process, and yet somehow also representing a journey into the next world. This space is poised between worlds, just as the Minotaur combines different entities. One must venture in to encounter this monster, as he belongs to this other space, trapped within this threshold. Safely contained within the labyrinth's walls, the Minotaur allows people to identify with its unbridled aggression, its purely destructive power, just as poetry allows readers to access the potency of language. Encountering the postmodern poem allows readers to access a more immediate mediacy, a sensory and tactile language uninhibited by the constraints of normalcy, proper syntax, or expected discursive patterns. Postmodern scholars are currently conducting what Gilmore and others refer to as studies of the monstrous, or "Deformed Discourse." Gilmore argues: "Postmodern research, mainly in Western literature and art, emphasizes the demonization of the "Other" in the image of the monster as a political device for scapegoating those whom the rules of society deem impure or unworthy – the transgressors and deviants" (14). Monsters can be read as more than just political allegory, though, since they are a universal and eternal phenomenon, transcending political parties or ruling regimes. Monsters work as allegory, but even more pertinent to the individual, they represent the repressed part of one's psyche, or fear of that which lies outside the known borders of the self.

Witnessing or processing these stories and mythologies thus allows one to bring the stuff of dreams, myth, and the unconscious world back into the light of day. Poetry works in the same fashion, using language of a more symbolic order, of abstraction and approximation, to reveal something otherwise hidden. Both myth and poetry use the mechanism of metaphor. The poet

attempts to express the inexpressible by fusing form with content, and so both labyrinth and myth can be seen as veiled communications, if not exactly deceptive, then at least indirect, coded. The poem and the labyrinth are both sites of possible transformation, the hero rejuvenating the world with his cunning or bravery, and the poet invigorating language and communicating via misdirection and metaphor. Campbell argues that the mythic hero must do what he does because he always finds himself upon a threshold and cannot ignore the call to adventure:

> But whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration – a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon had been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand. (Campbell, *Hero* 51)

So entering the labyrinth means passing into a different kind of space, and we can imagine the reader of the poem as an intrepid hero, entering into another realm of expression, passing into and hopefully through language coded and veiled with metaphor and artistry.

Perhaps, as Donald Gutierrez contends in his work *The Maze in the Mind and the World: Labyrinths in Modern Literature*, the most threatening labyrinth is not a real, external physical structure, but one that has been internalized. Comparing Henry James' story "The Jolly Corner" to the labyrinth myth, Gutierrez examines how the main character's frantic search for a ghost, an "other" in a dark house with endless passages, represents a quest to find and overcome his double, the potential him that could have been. Gutierrez claims that "the real location of the drama in *The Jolly Corner* is internal, and that, though the roles of Theseus and the Minotaur are complexly reversible, the entire myth occurs in the mind of one person, who must face his Minotaur, wherever he or it is, in order to achieve either an enlargement or a consolidation of self" (7). The real threat from the monster is its location deep within, buried and hidden inside

the layered complexity of the labyrinth, or the deepest corners of the mind. And so to fail in the labyrinth quest would mean not being able to unlock this inner demon, to not comprehend its location or parameters, to not know the self. Extending this argument to the postmodern poem, the real "threat" one feels in attempting to process poetry is the threat of not comprehending the poet's intention, or not understanding things fully, as if these things were even possible. If we can imagine the labyrinth myth as a metaphor for knowing or exploring one's own mind, we can imagine that a similar phenomenon occurs in reading a poem. The reader's trepidation stems from a fear of not "getting it," and from not successfully crossing this threshold of language and entering into the realm of poetic expression.

In the 1960s, Robert Morris' performance art often used labyrinthine tactics in an attempt to explore various types of spaces we occupy in society. He was interested primarily in the psychological effects of being immersed within a labyrinth, and how one processes a piece of art from the inside out. One installation called *Passageway* had several pieces that viewers were not just meant to see, but to traverse. These pieces granted more control to the spectator, who could shift perspective, walking around or sometimes on art objects. Writing about the effects of these installations, Maurice Berger indicates that for Morris the labyrinth is linked to creativity, spaces where the real world is suspended and transcendence is possible: "Morris's labyrinthine spaces serve as metaphors for the central and driving dialectic of his oeuvre: the idea of a desublimating, antirepressive art that deconstructs the institutional hierarchies of late capitalism" (132). That the labyrinth decenters and destablilizes the viewer is key here, in a postmodern act of throwing things off balance and questioning the relationship between subject and object, the viewer and the thing viewed. For this artist, as for Joseph Campbell, the labyrinth is an icon for transcendence, a site of transformative power. To enter into this space grants Morris' viewers

access to his creative process. To walk the labyrinth is to walk the mind of its creator, in a sense,

to follow his thoughts, and to make the same connections and choices. Morris' continual return

to the form and qualities of the labyrinth was an attempt to critique public spaces in what he felt

was an increasingly capitalist society. His labyrinthine installations, sound chambers, and mazes

explored society's repression of the individual. In 1967, in an installation at the Guggenheim

Museum, Morris even erected large steel objects that resembled a maze of common office

cubicles, commenting on the increasingly labyrinthine public spaces of the workplace and

industry. In the next decade, Morris' fascination with the labyrinth became even more literal, as

he continued to examine the frustrating and disorienting spaces we inhabit. Berger describes

Morris' later art as influenced by social and literary theorist Michel Foucault:

> Under the influence of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish,* a study of how
> penal institutions and the power to punish became a part of our lives, Morris
> executed a suite of twelve drawings in 1978 that explicitly examined the
> repressive order of industrial society. The drawings – collectively entitled *In the
> Realm of the Carceral* – represent the way hierarchies of power insist that space
> be organized to monitor people and control their actions. The *Carceral* drawings,
> images of labyrinthine prisons and other spaces of confinement, have several
> sources in the history of art and architecture. (135-36)

Morris' goal here was to juxtapose the reality of social space with the fantastical mythical space

of the labyrinth, to critique what he saw as repression and possibly imagine a way out, a way to

transcend the traps of the world. Morris also made a literal labyrinth, with walls eight feet high

and narrow corridors, for viewers to walk in 1974, called *Philadelphia Labyrinth.* Although this

labyrinth was unicursal, museum patrons still felt highly claustrophobic inside the structure, even

though there was no way to get lost inside of it, and of course no Minotaur. Morris believed in

"the recuperative aspects of this dismantling of the ego and the fiction of the centered self"

(153). Despite his installation's simplicity, Morris knew that people would feel the anxiety and

frustration inherent in the space, and his determination that enclosure within such a space would

result in the individual battling with the ego recalls Campbell's assertion that all myths, and in this case mythic structures, are fundamentally manifestations of psychological events. Even without evidence of a monster inside this space, Morris' patrons still felt trapped and anxious, flustered by the high walls and the narrowness of the passages. For Morris, the confrontation that occurs within the labyrinth is with the self; one experiences a breakdown or crisis as he or she is at the mercy of the structure, all the while feeling decentered and disoriented. Even without a monster, the labyrinth is a terrifying place, either because the monster truly originates from within, or because there is something monstrous inherent in the labyrinth's walls.

An example of a text haunted and terrorized by the monstrosity of language is Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves*. Like Morris' experiments with the labyrinth in his art installations, Danielewski infuses his narrative with labyrinthine elements, including evidence of an actual Minotaur. Danielewski's text blurs the boundaries between narrative horror novel and coded poetry. Although *House of Leaves* would be classified as a novel, a highly experimental novel, this text most certainly is a derangement of language, a horror novel that creates dread almost exclusively through its use of poetic devices and material form. The narrative is left unresolved, the story is told in fragmented footnotes and scraps of discarded information, and the author refuses every type of coherence; voices compete for authority in shifting fonts, and the text even reverses direction at times. N. Katherine Hayles argues that *House of Leaves* occupies a new space somewhere between print and digital media, what she calls "a hybrid discourse" (113). And like the complexity of the competing frames in Phillips' *A Humument*, Danielewski bombards his reader with competing narratives and narrators, footnotes upon footnotes that overlap and comment upon one another in profusion and confusion. Hayles claims this novel goes beyond the concept of unreliable narrator, and that readers are confronted

with the remediated narrator, a literary invention "foregrounding a proliferation of inscription technologies that evacuate consciousness as the source of production and recover in its place a mediated subjectivity that cannot be conceived as an independent entity. Consciousness alone is no longer the relevant frame but rather consciousness fused with technologies of inscription" (117). Everything is called into question here, not just the veracity of the narrative, but the stability of plot and characters, and even the form of the physical book itself. The book's pages have been cut larger than the book's cover, to mimic the unresolved spatiality within the story. Danielewski tells a violent and unresolved tale of a house with a labyrinth inside of it, a house with more space inside it – infinite space – than the walls of the house would allow. There's a void at the center of the house/novel, and the exhaustively innovative text often makes the reader feel anxious and disoriented. The very first line of the novel, "This is not for you," printed in ransom note typewriter font, attempts to deter the reader; it's as if one receives a virtual shove from within the text. There are traces of Gaston Bachelard throughout the novel, and Danielewski's characters/narrators/commentators refer to Bachelard's theories of space and intimate places in various footnotes throughout the novel. The labyrinth within the house has an echoing spiral staircase, and at one point the reader falls with one of the main characters through this spiraling darkness. The text seems to be set within a shifting architectural space, where the ever expanding closet cannot possibly be contained within the structural constraints of the physical house. This sort of implausibility of space, of spatial dimensions expanding and retracting, of writing within an unpredictable and shifting space like this, can be viewed as a metaphor for the changing literary tradition Eliot writes about in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." As each writer composes his or her own poetry, all the poetry that has come before is affected or altered, and postmodern poets have inherited this idea of a shifting literary canon

from their modernist predecessors. The space in which authors find themselves is continually

shifting, altering, expanding, and contracting.

Space is a constant threat in Danielewski's novel, an ever-expanding dark abyss that

threatens to swallow the characters, just as the confusing and terrifying narrative tries to engulf

the reader. What begins as a too-large closet that's a bit uncanny soon blooms into an entire

labyrinth replete with rumbling growls and evidence of claw marks from an unseen Minotaur.

Though an actual Minotaur roams these pages, it is not the true source of terror. Hayles calls this

beast "a signifier of absence" (121). What so terrifies readers is Danielewski's derangement of

the novel's form, his use of typographic space to materially represent the constant confusing

space of the labyrinth within the text. Readers do not just read about some character traveling a

labyrinth, but feel thrust into a labyrinth themselves as, at the core of the novel, one of the main

characters crawls and falls through this expanding and contracting void, one moment crushed by

diminishing corridors, and the next adrift in unseen vastness. The narrative dwindles down to

just a few lines, to one line read straight across both pages, to no lines. Figure 4.1 shows one

such page where the narrative is represented by white space, an echoing emptiness, and all that

readers find is a footnote that reinforces their sense of dread. The appearance of the page is

poetic, with the briefest of lines surrounded by so much space, and instead of paragraph breaks,

the lines appear in stanza format. The foreboding lines read, "I'm afraid. It is hungry. It is

immortal. Worse, it knows nothing of whim" (Danielewski 79). The vagueness of the repeated

pronoun mimics the blankness of the white space, and the reader must fill in the missing referent.

What is hungry? The Minotaur? The labyrinth? The house? The book? The metaphorical

monsters abound here, and readers are not allowed to pinpoint the threat, making the threat that

much more dangerous in its ambiguity and omnipresence. Like Walter Benjamin's

claustrophobic arcades built atop spacious, cavernous underground spaces, there is a dialectic of

spatial extremity here, and the physical manifestation of this space on the page is dizzying for the

reader. Space constantly shifts, as does the voice(s) of the novel, shifting point of view from

character to character. The physical page and the structure of the book itself are both

labyrinthine, as there's a central story augmented with endless entangled footnotes and

appendices that surround this core narrative with winding, confusing, pathways.

Danielewski's array of footnotes argue with one another, competing for the reader's

allegiance, and often long passages of footnotes will be crossed out by an unseen hand,

sometimes visible and just crossed through with a line, and other times exed out completely so

the reader must suffer and accept this loss of information. The author, disguised as some other

reader, has deemed these passages as inessential or judged the material as misinformation, and

the possibility of information decay and loss surfaces in these moments. Evidence of these

strikethroughs can be found in Figure 4.2, where the majority of the page is devoted to footnotes

that alternate between fonts. These different fonts represent different voices, different narrations

from different time periods, one from Zampanò, who has been dead since the text began, and the

other from Johnny Truant, our eyes and ears commenting on the text all the way through.

Halfway down the page, after a lengthy paragraph that's been crossed out, Johnny's note

indicates that "Struck passages indicate what Zampanò tried to get rid of, but which I, with a

little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect" (111). Johnny

calls this rescuing of the text a resurrection, and his efforts have effectively brought Zampanò's

voice and character back to life for the reader, reinforcing the tangibility, the vitality of the text.

That some lines are in a sense alive, that text can be killed off or erased, raises the stakes of

Danielewski's game. The text is under threat of disappearance, violence, decay, and the reader

begins to enter the illusion that these voices are real and alive. These crossed out passages

frustrate the reader, because information is denied, and the narrative seems thwarted here. But

this also makes readers aware that they are not alone in reading this material; there are other

readers that have been here before, readers who marked up and changed the text, and so a true

reading is impossible, was never possible, even the illusion of some original unmarked text has

been abolished. Danielewski's text feels haunted in these places, and readers must acknowledge

these prior readers, readers who feel all too present, tangible in their markings on the page.

Many of the appendices contain letters from someone in a psychiatric ward, and the possibility

that this entire text is the product of insanity reflects the constant anxiety and distress felt by the

reader. These letters are from Johnny's mother, and the reader must become part sleuth, part

cryptographer to unearth these patterns and reveal his mother's violent madness. This

character's correspondence is encoded with secret hidden messages, and here, as throughout, the

reader understands that language is coded and communicates not just through the connotation

and denotation of its words, but also through their placement upon a page, the space surrounding

a text, the materiality of the page. Of all the secrets held within this volume, possibly the most

enjoyable surprise is decoding these letters in the Appendix. What we discover is chilling and

upsetting, but also fascinating, and the fact that we must act upon the text to unlock these secrets

involves us, implicating us in the drama of the characters' relationships. Throughout the novel,

Danielewski makes the physical page visible by playing with the conventions of what one can do

with typeface. This mad profusion of form threatens to spin out of control throughout the novel,

and the reader must hang on to avoid being thrown or lost. Readers encounter pages of seeming

normalcy, pages of increasing complexity with more and more sets and systems of footnotes

extending the page, vertical stretches of text, drastic changes in font size, color coded words and

phrases that recur throughout the novel like beacons, shifting and expanding white spaces, blank

pages, and pages that defy description, let alone comprehension. Many critics have attempted to

explain the author's rationale for coding the word "house" in blue font throughout his novel, and

Martin Brick argues that Danielewski's use of color is revolutionary, as most instances of color

in book production function as either art or organizational method. But to infuse the word

"house" with some further repercussions "re-asserts an aspect of bookmaking which has largely

gone unnoticed since the institution of modern publishing techniques: namely, the physical

manifestation of word matter" (Brick 1). Brick believes that using color makes the word more

real, more material, what he calls a physical manifestation, and indeed on many pages the

bibliographic codes seem to take over the page in jarring, upsetting ways. Figure 4.3 exemplifies

this crazed design that appears intermittently throughout the novel. Blue font typically is used

for the word "house," but here it marks a square section of the page with architecturally themed

words inside its border, such as "wall studs," "ceiling joists," "rafters," and "banister"

(Danielewski 133). Instead of putting the word "house" in blue, here the author dismantles the

house into its constituent parts and places them within this space. Surrounding this box, the

reader encounters the main narrative along with footnotes from various narrators both alive and

dead, sideways and upside down text, and two separate columns of listed information. The page

is graphically divided into six different sections of text, half of which seem informative or

narrative in nature, the other three simply listing objects, book titles, or names. Each section vies

for attention, and at the center left, the line reading "truth and telling her the truth" evokes the

composite nature of this text, warning the reader yet again that at the center of this novel there

are voices competing to explain what happened, to tell their truth. Analyzing the graphic design

of this figure, we find that the page verges on concrete poetry, with its emphasis on spatial form

and enactment of theme and content through its placement on the page. The reader experiences a palpable feeling of information overload, unable to process all of this simultaneous and often contradictory information. And again we encounter the experience of loss, a postmodern anxiety with language's imperfections and inaccuracies. Danielewski enacts the experience of traveling through a labyrinth with his use of space in his novel, and the effect is terrifying. He threatens his readers with a real monster here, a Minotaur roaming the labyrinth, but most of the anxiety and horror of the novel arises from the text's complexity and multiplicity. The reader feels disoriented, distressed because of the unexpected ways the author codes, hides, subverts, and deranges his information. The Minotaur's fleeting appearances throughout the novel are compelling and frightening to be sure, but it is always the threatening incoherence, the reader's fear of simply not being able to read, that causes the most anxiety. Like a poet, Danielewski foregrounds form over content, and his crazed architecture threatens to collapse at any moment; the true monster is the crumbling scaffolding of language, the tumult of information we've been thrust into and our inability as readers to process it all.

House of Leaves is inhabited by both a literal Minotaur and the metaphorical monstrous that manifests itself as anxiety towards the reading process, the reader's disorientation, the fear of what might come next, the sense of continual loss from what might not have been understood. The Minotaur in Danielewski's novel is never seen, only heard, felt, or sensed in a character's peripheral vision, but *the monstrous* assaults the reader on every page. The reader's eye roams the page frantically, trying to gain entrance and discern a path. Even before any evidence of a Minotaur appears in the novel, the pages seem tortured and perilous. This anxiety cannot be entirely dependent on the presence of a monster; the reader's trepidation stems primarily from the absence of clarity, a lack of order. Umberto Eco describes three types of labyrinths in

Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language while trying to explain the interconnected network of an encyclopedia. The first type he describes is the unicursal maze, the one Eco argues that needed a Minotaur hidden within its simple structure "to make the whole thing a little more exciting" (80). Jumping ahead, Eco's third type of labyrinth is like a network or internet, and this is where he places the encyclopedia. His second type of labyrinth, the multicursal example, is what's relevant to this study of the monstrous. Eco concludes that in a maze that involves choices, where one can make mistakes, the Minotaur is no longer necessary and becomes superceded by the process of the labyrinth itself: "A maze does not need a Minotaur: it is its own Minotaur: in other words, *the Minotaur is the visitor's trial-and-error process"* (81). Eco's contention here is that in a multicursal maze, terror resides in the structure, not what may or may not lurk within that structure. Seen in this way, poetry is threatening for its form, not its content. The poetic qualities are what frighten or challenge the reader, what seem arduous in comparison to linear storytelling techniques, and indeed it is Danielewski's deviation from traditional narrative form and his use of increasingly complex graphic structures that are the most upsetting to readers, that cause the most consternation. This trial-and-error process described by Eco occurs within a labyrinth, and also in the reading process. Poetry that has no literal monster can still entrap readers with its intricacy, or mystify readers in its attempt to express the inexpressible. As terrifying as the Minotaur would seem, waiting patiently for us in the center of the labyrinth, his presence there represents a definitive goal or end to the labyrinth adventure. The absence of a Minotaur would be even more distressing, as it would imply that our journey through the poem is a solitary one, and that perhaps there is no ultimate goal to be reached, no foe to be vanquished. The absence of a Minotaur creates a void in the center of this system.

Far more distressing than a hero's encounter with a monster would be the hero's confrontation with oblivion, and so perhaps another way to view the Minotaur is as a symbol of negation. Contemporary poets and theorists often focus on moments of negation: what cannot be said, the silences and gaps, the suppressed voice. Entrance into the labyrinth, and into the postmodernist poem, risks an encounter with nonmeaning, the traveler or reader blindly groping his or her way through the dark of the labyrinth, alone in this deep empty space among all that remains unseen and unknown. So many of the postmodernist poets attempt to express that which defies articulation with their art, and the constant palpable threat is that maybe these attempts are futile. Even if language were capable of communicating truth or meaning to readers, there are no perfect writers or readers, and so misreading is a constant threat, or worse, the ability to convey any meaning is revealed as a myth.

George Steiner argues in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* that all our modern modes of thought retreat from the word, that modern art and mathematics have taken us to inarticulate levels of expression, and that there often no linguistic equivalents to explain these abstract artworks or equations. Paintings are increasingly left untitled and complex theorems can be understood only through numbers and symbols. He even contends that philosophy is receding from language, and that it is becoming more and more mathematical, citing the corollaries and axioms of Wittgenstein as just one example. Claiming that modern thought is separating from language, Steiner concludes that language can deal meaningfully with a only special, restricted segment of reality. The rest, he argues, is silence (Steiner 21). And so the majority of our modern thought is inexpressible in language. Thus the challenge that lies before the poet is to reinvigorate words, to free words from their established syntactic patterns and restore their magical powers, their powers of invocation and incantation,

what he calls their subconscious energies (28). He agrees with many of his contemporary theorists that words have lost their power to communicate and that language is a faulty system, but argues that poetry can fill this void, asserting, "The poet seeks refuge in muteness" (40). For Steiner, poetry can perhaps express the inexpressible, reaching beyond ordinary expression to articulate what until now has remained unsaid. Although he acknowledges that language has its limits, Steiner celebrates silence as an inherent quality of speech: "For Brice Parain, 'language is the threshold of silence.' Henri Lefebvre finds that silence 'is at once inside language, and on its near and far sides.' Much of his theory of speech depends on the organized patterns of silence in the otherwise continuous and consequently indecipherable linguistic code'" (52-3). And so like the binary code of a computer, human language depends on an interaction of word and silence, what is spoken and the space between. Steiner focus our attention on what is there and what is not, the singular and the void of language, and from this perspective, the inexpressible is a function of expression. Steiner would most definitely view the labyrinth as a space of inarticulate silence, and a place where poets would seek refuge. Instead of imagining the dark corridors as a terrible emptiness and threatening nothingness, he would argue that its silence would be a threshold for expression. This paradoxical turn recalls Bachelard's consideration of the experience of space within corners; they are places of possible negation, where objects accumulate and one feels at rest, but they are also half open spaces, and at any moment one can move out and be free. We can now imagine the space of a labyrinth in so many ways: as darkness and existential dread personified where one is surrounded by the void, as a place haunted and inhabited by monsters and beasts where one feels constant anxiety and dread, as a place of infinite possibility with multiple ways through, and as a place of stillness and tranquility where the surrounding silence acts a catalyst for expression. These different readings of the

labyrinth's interior correspond to the myriad reactions of contemporary poets to the conditions of postmodernity. Poets can surrender to the void, experimenting with different variations of words and sounds, playing with language. Or poets can express their anxieties through form, representing frustration and disorientation for their readers with their lines. Or poets can celebrate language's complexity and multiplicity, finding delight in getting lost, and embracing the imperfections of language.

John Ashbery's poem "Litany," published in his 1979 volume *As We Know: Poems*, is an excellent example of a poem approximating the experience of traveling through a labyrinth. Ashbery's lines evoke anxiety, they confuse and disorient readers, and they also elicit delight in postmodern play. The form of Ashbery's poem is as disconcerting as it is intriguing; the entire poem is written in two columns that are meant to be read at the same time. They are not to be read in sequence, one after the other, or even a line at a time, but truly simultaneously, and from the outset, Ashbery's reader is aware that there is no way to read this poem correctly, or as the poet intended. These two columns compete with each other throughout the text, and their proximity on the page continually distracts the reader, who feels torn between the two, only safe within the margins. When readers focus on one column, they still perceive the afterimage of the other one, reading as if haunted by the ghost of the other, or reading text with an attendant shadow. The two columns are meant to be two voices, and Ashbery's polyvocal poem creates the sensation of echo on the page; as the reader focuses on one side, words from the other column catch and hold his or her attention, as if one overhears through the space, through the walls of the labyrinth, catching glimpses of information out of turn, or gathering data by eavesdropping. These voices enact the multiplicity of the multicursal labyrinth's architecture, and the hybrid nature of the Minotaur who is half man, half animal. The different voices

represent different paths one could take, and the reader must choose a direction, choose which voice to listen to on the page. Readers feel this multiplicity in the proliferation of words upon the page, and there always seems to be too much to take in, too much to process all at once. Readers are always aware of words slipping away and meaning evaporating as it accumulates, constantly menaced by distraction.

In a conversation with writer Mark Ford, Ashbery revealed that his inspiration for writing "Litany" in two columns came from attending a performance of Elliott Carter's work on a very wide stage at Cooper Union. Carter's music was being performed by a duo, with the piano at one end of the stage and the violin at the other. Ashbery explained that the two instruments were competing with one another, sometimes talking to each other in a sort of musical conversation, but often talking just to themselves:

> I thought it would be interesting to have to pay attention to two separate poems at the same time; it would be like eavesdropping on two different conversations at a cocktail party – something that happens to us all fairly often and therefore should have a poem written about it. We can't follow either one without neglecting the other one, at least briefly. Ann Lauterbach and I once made a taped recording of it under studio conditions for some experimental recording studio; it seemed that whenever there was a stanza break and one of us would be reading solo, whatever was being said at that particular moment had an overwhelming meaningfulness that disappeared as soon as the other person started again. (Ford 60-61)

The poet's description above seems to evoke a wavelike flux between the emergence and disappearance of meaning. The two columns keep the reader poised in this liminal space. Readers are continually just about to understand something, on the precipice of gaining or losing their way. In an essay entitled "The Moment Unravels: Reading John Ashbery's 'Litany,'" critic John Keeling contends that Ashbery wants his readers to misunderstand him, and that this poem in particular with its dual voices is an attempt to keep readers balanced between misunderstanding and appreciation. Keeling describes this space as a moment unraveling, or a

swerving away from coherence. He argues that the poem's continual shifts of attention "deny

any linearity of perspective, any fixed, and thus limited, whole view. Instead we see a variety of

interstices and the flow among them, constantly threatening to transform the moment in its

material, temporal, and conjectural forms" (Keeling 142). This reference to interstices recalls the

architecture of the labyrinth and again we encounter a poetics not of linearity but of network and

interconnected pathways for the reader to explore.

Ashbery's twin columns invite readers to wander and get lost, and reading this poem, like

traversing the labyrinth, is a recursive and experimental process. A note at the beginning of the

text indicates that the "two columns of 'Litany' are meant to be read as simultaneous but

independent monologues" (Ashbery 2). Throughout the entire poem, the left-hand column is in

regular typeface, the right-hand column in italics. The stanza breaks often differ, yet each

section ends concurrently. In the middle of section two, however, the left-hand column stops

abruptly, disappearing for a page and a half, leaving the right-hand monologue alone on the page.

Before this break, Ashbery employs the words "space," "materialism," "nothing," "silhouette,"

and "emptiness," to foreshadow the ensuing rupture (29). This silencing of the left-hand column

occurs in the center of the poem. There are three total sections in the poem, and Ashbery inserts

this blank space in the middle of the second section, effectively creating a void at the center of

his text like the central room that houses the Minotaur inside the labyrinth. This silence is in

direct contrast to the continual hum of concurrent voices throughout the rest of the poem, the

buzzing of too much information muted here to allow the right-hand column its moment of

clarity and singular attention. The reader still cannot concentrate on this one column fully

though, distractedly wondering where the other voice has gone. When the left-hand column

mysteriously starts up again, the reader wonders why there was a pause, and is both glad to have

the familiar structure return to the status quo and a bit annoyed at the need to once again divide attention between the two columns. The poem requires a divided mind to process each voice separately, and the entire poem resists any kind of synthesis; readers must accept its multiplicity and not attempt to reconcile its constituent parts. In *Ashbery's Forms of Attention*, Andrew DuBois argues that throughout much of Ashbery's poetry, readers face a crisis of attention, as the poet attempts to simulate a lyrical stream of consciousness. DuBois asserts that Ashbery doesn't let his readers off the hook, and that "the poet's attention tests the reader, making that reader accountable, if not at first for plumbing great depths of knowledge, at least for raking over reams of information" (xvi). Although DuBois' assessment is about Ashbery's poetry in general, the two columns of "Litany" divide attention and bombard readers with twin streams of information. The loss and dispersal of meaning is palpable because of these simultaneous columns, loss made tangible for the reader that echoes the loss hinted at throughout by Ashbery's personae. DuBois describes Ashbery's poetry as recordings of consciousness in the tradition of writing about the self (110). Throughout Ashbery's career, critics have been unsure of how to classify him as a poet, and DuBois' analysis would link Ashbery to the confessional tradition. In "Litany," we could imagine this layout as the poet's attempt to present the divided structure of the self, writing as an imitation of consciousness inside the labyrinthine structure of poet's brain. Ashbery's aesthetic might be something akin to Jackson Pollock's here in that both are attempting to represent the artistic process. More accurately, the goal is not "representation" but "presentation." The goal is not to convey meaning, but to gesture towards meaning-making and reveal the processes of artistic creation.

The typographical layout of "Litany," its spatial configuration, is a familiar one, echoing the format of a newspaper or magazine layout, and one's first inclination is to read this page in

column format. Figure 4.5 shows the first page, and if one missed or ignored the poet's

instructional note, the format of Ashbery's poem would seem recognizable, approachable. His

note draws attention to the reading process, and to the reader's futile attempt to process these two

columns at once. Even if one misses the note, however, the two columns are so dissimilar that

readers would have difficulty uniting the two voices into a coherent narrative or dialogue. The

poem's form increases the reader's anxiety of missing something, some vital connection between

stanzas. The similar stanza lengths on this first page lull the reader into thinking that each stanza

has its counterpart in the other column, that the left and right stanzas somehow go together

because they match up lengthwise. As soon as one attempts to read the corresponding left and

right stanzas together, however, the differences in voice and tone make it apparent that reading in

this order will mean jumping back and forth between concrete and abstract writing. The first

stanza on the left matches its plain font with an apparent straight forward diction:

> For someone like me
> The simple things
> Like having toast or
> Going to church are
> Kept in one place. (Ashbery 3)

This column begins with a seeming simplicity that contrasts with the more enigmatic, evocative

stanza on the right:

> *So this must be a hole*
> *Of cloud*
> *Mandate or trap*
> *But haze that casts*
> *The milk of enchantment* (3)

The diction here seems dreamlike, highly poetic and metaphorical, the "milk of enchantment"

phrase alone signaling to the reader that this is a different voice, a different order of expression.

This last line does not contain ending punctuation, and Ashbery uses enjambment to bridge

stanzas one and two in this column. Instead of returning to the left to continue this recursive, divisive reading process, the reader's eye gets drawn downward into the next stanza on the right, caught in the poet's syntax. The reader next decides to read to the end of each sentence, to proceed through the poem based solely on punctuation, hoping that this will somehow be the correct way through the text. But this means abruptly ending one's reading of a stanza before it ends, and the reader is again vexed by the anxiety of what gets left behind, as he or she trades spatial reading clues for syntactical ones. The reader is then forced to mark one's place with a finger in the text, flipping back and forth when page turning. Since neither column comes to a halt in punctuation on this first page, readers must flip back and forth while processing each stanza's conclusion.

Even the content of Ashbery's poem refuses to be neatly categorized or resolved. The reader quickly realizes that to view one column as concrete and the other as abstract is a false dichotomy, one perpetuated by the seeming otherness of the italics on the right, the left-hand column having a literally straighter font. But in this left-hand column, Ashbery inserts a purring donkey halfway down the page, who proceeds to spit on the snapdragons, and while this is most definitely a *concrete* image, it is also probably a figurative one. Turning the first page, the reader immediately encounters a jarring line in the right-hand column, just one widowed line, *"About to happen"* (4). Turning back to see where this suspenseful line generated from, to see what it's attached to, the reader discovers a meditation on trying to find one's way:

> *Around us are signposts*
> *Pointing to the past,*
> *The old-fashioned, pointed*
> *Wooden kind. And nothing directs*
> *To the present that is*
> *About to happen.* (3-4)

Ashbery explicitly refers to the difficulty the reader faces in trying to navigate this poem in these lines. As if lost in a labyrinth or stranded at a deserted crossroads, the reader gazes up at these wooden signposts for assistance. Ashbery inserts multiple signposts for the reader to follow, however, and so the reader still much choose which guide to trust. As structural and syntactical clues proliferate in Ashbery's writing, the reader feels many potential readings branching out ahead in various directions like the infinite paths of Borges' time in "The Garden of Forking Paths." Ultimately, the reader feels pestered by this second voice, this other persona interrupting one's concentration on the left-hand, and therefore privileged, primary column. Instead of the white space providing silence for introspection, surrounding the verses with a buffer and isolating this column for the reader's consumption, here the white space houses an entirely different poem, one connected to the first column by only the most tenuous of threads: adjacency, the poet, the physical page. The poem takes on qualities of an overheard conversation, of an echo reverberating between the two columns. The author's note at the beginning tells us that these two monologues are independent yet simultaneous, and the reader can imagine two voices talking over one another, obscuring each other occasionally, creating a concert of voices, a cacophonous recital. And yet to read the poem, the eye cannot physically process these two columns at the same time. One must either read them separately, or jump back and forth between them. Perhaps readers comfortable with jumping ahead to preview a novel's ending would enjoy reading one side entirely and then returning again to the beginning to read the second monologue straight through. The case for reading these two columns is strong though, as it retains the sense of suspense, it seems more efficient somehow to proceed through one time only, and perhaps most importantly, it seems more in line with the poet's placement to read these verses as they occur and not cheat or skip ahead. The risk of missing the connections

between columns never abates, no matter how one decides to read the poem, and the reader faces continual loss and distraction.

Ashbery's poem is an exercise in dispersal. The last line of the first section reiterates this loss, as the right hand column ends two lines after the left. For a moment, the right-hand column has the last word, and Ashbery's italicized voice ends with the sentiment: *"We never should have parted, you and me"* (16). The reader can attribute this to a persona's longing for love, of course, but this idea of parting and the regret it engenders is also pertinent to the separation of the persona into two distinct voices. Ashbery's "Litany" here could be a literal demonstration of divorce, a divorce between two lovers, within the self, and on the page. The poem's title implies a prayer or supplication, a long list of grievances, or a prolonged account. This litany then becomes a narrative of loss, an abstract meditation on a woman who has left and the extreme pain felt as a result. This pain surfaces in Ashbery's use of language that seems overblown at times, epic, mythic even:

> That's interesting. In my diary
> I have noted down all kinds of exceptional
> Things to go with the rest
> As one who naps beside a chasm
> Swollen with the hellish sound of wind
> And torrents, and never chooses
> To play back the tape. (25)

Ashbery's simile in this passage describes wind ripping through a chasm, and noisy torrents rushing past. This empty space is filled with the sound of too much wind, a void swollen with too much sound, like Ashbery's page filled with one too many voices, each with its own litany of information rushing past the reader. We have too much sound here, and playing back the tape does not make things much clearer; one can loop back endlessly in an attempt to make these voices connect or the columns cohere, but always there is a feeling of loss.

Ashbery's poem is peopled with mythic figures and allusions, a place of extremity and enormity, and the type of place one would expect to find a labyrinth. Ashbery's readers must navigate the space of this poem carefully, as the threat of incomprehension or lost connections is palpable. The reader ends up feeling haunted by possibilities, pursued by potential readings one could have performed, like passages one should have taken within the labyrinth. Many critics believe that this poem represents a complete breakdown of communication, and overlook the multiplicity inherent in the poem's design. In *John Ashbery and American Poetry,* David Herd argues that "Litany" represents Ashbery's loss of confidence "in the power of his poetry to affect." Herd likens this poem to a day book that the reader can dip into, but because these two monologues never interlock, "as an exchange it is underscored by failure, each voice, as in a 'Litany' proper, reading like a prayer in the face of an unvaried response" (Herd 176). Instead of the title referring to a single prayer, we can imagine this as a prayer book then, a series of prayers collaged together into a composite text. Herd's comparison of Ashbery's poem to a prayer book recalls Espen Aarseth's numerous examples of ergodic language in print form, texts that can be read out of sequence in a labyrinthine manner where the reader determines how to proceed.

In all this confusion, the reader must decide what to prioritize, to try and organize this competing information. Privileging one column over the other feels like a false hierarchy, and simply reading haphazardly somehow feels too arbitrary. Readers also might decide to skim along on the surface of the poem like Benjamin's flâneur wandering listlessly through the Parisian Arcades, picking up and discarding images they find compelling. This approach requires readers to admit that they are wandering, though, and not reading, that their progression through the text is random, subjective, and they must concede that this is not what the author's note instructs them to do. And so the reader begins to make some decisions about this format

and how he or she wants to progress through the poem. One might argue that the right-hand column feels like an afterthought due to its secondary placement and its italicized font. Like material within parentheses, what gets italicized often seems inessential or extraneous. One could decide that this italicized material resembles stage directions or footnotes, and decide not to grant it the status of primary material. The italics also make reading more difficult, as the decrease in legibility results in the reader further categorizing this column as secondary, relegating it to afterthought or echo of the main poem. The poet prefaces this poem by telling us these two columns are simultaneous, however, not to be read separately. Each column requires equal space and authority on the page, as well, neither one edging into the margins. The effect of this simultaneity the poet informs us of at the outset is to continually frustrate readers, forcing them to chase these two voices across the page, never able to read them together as intended. Reading both together is impossible for the reader to perform. Necessarily, readers get engrossed in one column at a time, becoming lost in the narrative, and must tear themselves out to pursue the other, emerging over and over again to dip into another verse for a moment, resulting in the eye's dancing across the page, unsure of where to rest. The poem resists attempts to delve deeply, and Ashbery's readers must stay near the surface, moving back and forth frequently between the two columns.

The experience of space and time here are both labyrinthine in their anxiety-producing complexity. Trying to follow these two voices demands focus, and the reader finds it difficult to keep up. Beginning the third and final section, by far the briefest segment of the poem, Ashbery's persona inquires about the nature of time:

> But, what is time, anyway? Not,
> Not certainly, the faces and pleasures
> Encrusted in it, the "beautifully varied streets,"
> The wicked taunting us to some kind of action,

> Any kind, with hands partially covering
> Their faces, to hide or to mock us, or both.
> No, these things are part of time,
> Or are rather a kind of parallel tide,
> A related activity. And the markings? (58)

Ashbery's persona separates time from the people and events it contains, which is only possible in the abstract. This passage recalls another from the first page of the poem: "Also for someone / Like me the time flows round again / With things I did in it" (3). One can grasp time as a separate entity in the abstract, but to experience time, one feels the events that fill it, and it is a constant battle to keep them separate and distinct within the mind. And it is a constant battle to keep these columns separate while moving through the poem. Even after hours of navigating Ashbery's lines, the reader still falls back into old habits, reading the two columns sequentially and trying to continue across the page only to encounter a dead end. Ashbery enacts this theory of time with the space on the page; he separates his persona into parallel voices, meant to be read together, and this impossibility forces readers to contemplate time, what it consists of, how we experience it as linear even if it is filled with simultaneous events. Keeling believes that the twin columns highlight this theme of time's flux in Ashbery's poem, arguing that "The mediation of the columns themselves highlights this return, this movement between past and present selves" (146). For Keeling, "Litany" is primarily a poem concerned with the self or Ashbery's selves as time progresses and his personae variously desire a return to the past and a desire to somehow be outside of time completely. Consequently, Ashbery's experiment with time and space in this poem allows us to imagine this poem itself as housing rival, simultaneous voices; like the faces and places encrusted within time, this poem has been embedded with different voices and images that one cannot fully appreciate or hang onto, fleeting moments that are continually rushing past

like the torrents of wind rushing by the chasm, and the poem's images, like time itself, are slipping past.

His poem ends with a reference to someone leaving, echoing Ashbery's recurrent theme of loss and dispersal. On the last page, the persona in the left-hand column seems to speak directly to the reader, but on the right, the persona clearly addresses an absent listener, the lover he already misses even before she goes:

> *But you are leaving:*
> *Some months ago I got an offer*
> *From Columbia Tape Club, Terre*
> *Haute, Ind., where I could buy one*
> *Tape and get another free. I accept-*
> *Ed the deal, paid for one tape and*
> *Chose a free one. But since I've been*
> *Repeatedly billed for my free tape.*
> *I've written them several times but*
> *Can't straighten it out—would you*
> *Try?* (67-8)

Ashbery ends his poem with "Try," the word italicized and therefore more imperative and plaintive. This ending underscores that this entire text represents an attempt, an experiment with language and poetic expression. Ashbery's poem also ends with an attempt to elicit the help of another to help escape an entanglement, to help rescue the persona from the ridiculously non-threatening, yet dogged pursuit of The Columbia Tape Club, a horror most readers will have encountered and perhaps defeated only by moving to a new residence. The Minotaur here becomes trivial, a comical pop-culture reference to Columbia House and their relentless pursuit via paperwork. The true horror of this poem is not from a Minotaur, not this ridiculous company at the end of the poem, but the experience of loss. When asked about this ending letter from "Disgusted of Terre Haute," Ashbery explains that it was actually " a found object, I think from one of the local newspapers that I used to collect on my travels while giving poetry readings"

(Ford 61). That this poem ends with a found poem, a material object chosen by the poet from some anonymous source, underscores the void at the center of Ashbery's labyrinth. It all ends with someone else's words, with a letter to an anonymous someone, a plea of inconsequence that only intensifies the loss of an actual someone within Ashbery's lines. Despite the litanies of Ashbery's two personae, this woman is still leaving. The poem ends with a distraction, an afterthought, and one feels the persona focusing on a minor annoyance to mitigate his experience of real loss.

Effectively, this entire poem is a continual distraction, the two column format never allowing readers to focus or delve deeply into one voice. The real monster is glimpsed so briefly here near the end in the line, "But you are leaving," after the reader has made it past endless complicated twists and turns.   For this one moment, Ashbery allows readers to witness the actual loss felt by his two personae, to come face to face with the monster, the actuality of losing someone. Ashbery's response to this imminent loss is to create a textual labyrinth, hiding the monstrous that he cannot face deep within his twisting, convoluted lines. Perhaps Ashbery is speaking directly to the reader here, and the "you" who is leaving, or who gets left by this poem, is the reader. The poem enacts the inner turmoil and experience of loss of Ashbery's personae, and his loss is equivalent to the slippage of meaning of postmodernism, the loss of language's stability. The only way to deal with a loss of this magnitude is to hide it away, to lock it up in a labyrinth, enclosing it with tortuous, winding passageways to keep secret the evidence of its birth. This poem can be read as a record of Ashbery's personae undertaking a journey to the center of his labyrinth to finally, inevitably, confront this monster. His persona becomes hybrid like the Minotaur; they are one and the same. These simultaneous voices represent the divided

psyche of the hero, a hero battling his own defenses in an attempt to rid himself of that which haunts him.

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I'm afraid.
It is hungry.  It is immortal.

Worse, it knows nothing of whim.
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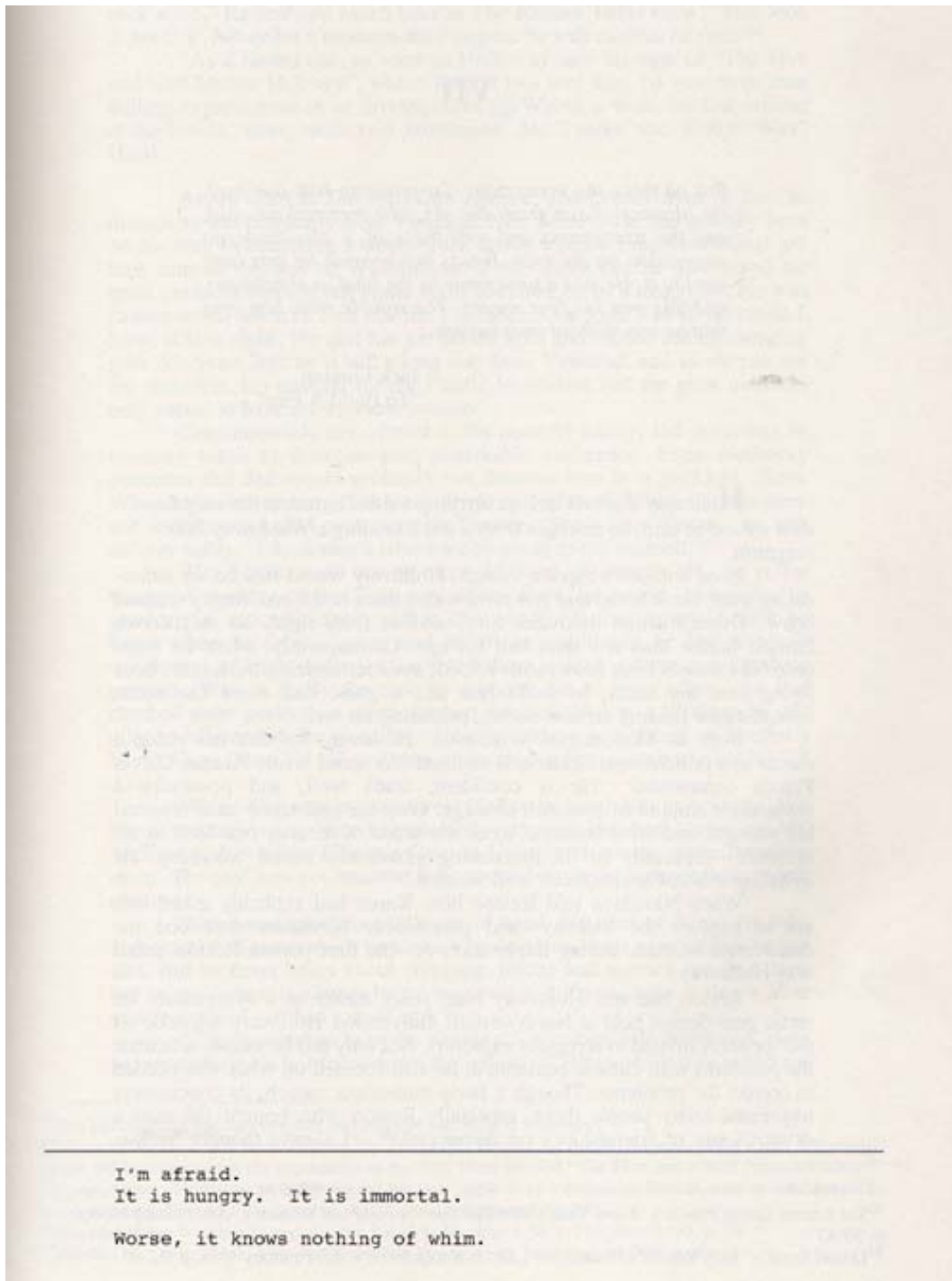
Figure 4.1
Page 79 from Danielewski's *House of Leaves* demonstrating the author's use of white space and a single footnote with lines that appear poetic in form.

However, even as Holloway Roberts, Jed Leeder, and Wax Hook make their way further down the stairway in **Exploration #4**, the purpose of that vast place still continues to elude them. Is it merely an aberration of physics? Some kind of warp in space? Or just a topiary labyrinth on a much grander scale? Perhaps it serves a funereal purpose? Conceals a secret? Protects something? Imprisons or hides some kind of monster? Or, for that matter, imprisons or hides an innocent? As the Holloway team soon discovers, answers to these questions are not exactly forthcoming.[129]

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encountered Mint (as Chiclitz refers to the Minotaur) and nearly murdered him. Had Minos himself not rushed in and killed the criminal, his son would have perished. ¶Suffice it to say Minos is furious. He has caught himself caring for his son and the resulting guilt and sorrow incenses him to no end.¶ As the play progresses, the King slowly sees past his son's deformities, eventually discovering an elegiac spirit, an artistic sentiment and most importantly a visionary understanding of the world. Soon a deep paternal love grows in the King's heart and he begins to conceive of a way to reintroduce the Minotaur back into society.¶ Sadly, the stories the King has spread throughout the world concerning this terrifying beast prove the seeds of tragedy. Soon enough, a bruiser named Theseus arrives (Chiclitz describes him as a drunken, virtually retarded, frat boy) who without a second thought hacks the Minotaur into little pieces.¶ In one of the play's most moving scenes, King Minos, with tears streaming down his face, publicly commends Theseus' courage. The crowd believes the tears are a sign of gratitude while we the audience understand they are tears of loss. The king's heart breaks, and while he will go on to be an extremely just ruler, it is a justice forever informed by the deepest kind of agony.[128]

Note: Struck passages indicate what Zampanò tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect.

[124]"Violent Prejudice in Knossos" by Zampanò in Sonny Will Wait Flyer, Santa Cruz, 1969.[125]

[125]I've no idea why these titles and cited sources are different. It seems much too deliberate to be an error, but since I haven't been able to find the "flyer" I don't know for certain. I did call Ashley back, left message, even though I still don't remember her.

[126]The Minotaur by Taggert Chiclitz, put on at The Hey Zeus Theater by The Seattle Repertory Company on April 14, 1972.

[127]W. H. Matthews writes "A similar small labyrinth, with a central Theseus-Minotaur design, is to be found on the wall of the church of San Michele Maggiore at Pavia. It is thought to be of tenth century construction. This is one of the few cases where the Minotaur is represented with a human head and a beast's body — as a sort of Centaur, in fact." See his book Mazes & Labyrinths: Their History & Development (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), p. 56. Also see Fig. 40 on p. 53.

[128]Even in Metamorphoses Ovid notes how Minos, in his old age, feared young men.

Qui, dum fuit integer aevi, terruerat magnas ipso quoque nomine gentes; tunc erat invalidus, Deïonidenque iuventae robore Miletum Phoeboque parente superbum pertimuit, credensque suis insurgere regnis, haut tamen est patriis arcere penatibus ausus.

("When Minos was in golden middle age/ All nations feared the mention of his name./ But now he'd grown so impotent, so feeble/ He shied away from proud young Miletus/ The forward son of Phoebus and Deione/ Though Minos half-suspected Miletus/ Had eyes upon his throne and framed a plot/ To make a palace revolution, he feared to act./ To sign the papers for his deportation." Horace Gregory p. 258-259.) Perhaps Miletus reminded Minos of his slain son and out of guilt he cowered in the presence of his youth.

[129]Strictly as an aside, Jacques Derrida once made a few remarks on the question of structure and centrality.

Figure 4.2
Page 111 from Danielewski's *House of Leaves* showing the crossing out of information that implies the unseen readers who have been here before.

No stranger to shock,■ Jed immediately raises Wax's legs to increase blood flow to the head, uses pocket heaters and a solar blanket to keep him warm, and never stops reassuring him, smiling, telling jokes, promising a hundred happy endings. A difficult task under any circumstances. Nearly impossible when those guttural cries soon find them, the walls too thin to hold any of it back, sounds too obscene to be shut out, Holloway screaming like some rabid animal, no longer a man but a creature stirred by fear, pain, and rage.

"At least he's far off," Jed whispers in an effort to console Wax.

But the sound of distance brings little comfort to either one.

bricks, whether split paver or red bullnose, or wall studs, firestopping, or braces, nor evidence of floor joists, end joists, or ledgers, bridgings, girders, double plate, gable studs, ceiling joists, rafters, king posts, struts, side posts, ridge beams, collar ties, gussets, furring strips, or bed molding (at least the stairs offer some detail: risers, treads, two large newel posts, one at the top and one at the bottom, capped and connected with a single, curved banister supported by countless balusters) though among other things no wallpaper, veneer plaster, Baldwin locks, any sign of glass,

truth and telling her the truth:
"I've never been to Texas."
■The following definition is from *Medicine for Mountaineering*, 3rd edition. Edited by James A. Wilkerson, M.D. (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1985), p. 43:

"Mild shock results from loss of ten to twenty percent of blood volume. The patient appears pale and his skin feels cool, first over the extremities and later over the trunk. As shock becomes more severe, the patient often complains of feeling cold and he is often thirsty. A rapid pulse and reduced blood pressure may be present. However, the absence of these signs does not indicate shock is not present since they may appear rather late, particularly in previously healthy young adults.

"Moderate shock results from loss of twenty to forty percent of the blood volume. The signs characteristic of mild shock are present and may become more severe. The pulse is typically fast and weak or 'thready.' In addition, blood flow to the kidneys is reduced as the available blood is shunted to the heart and brain and the urinary output declines. A urinary volume of less than 30 cc per hour is a late indication of moderate shock. In contrast to the dark, concentrated urine observed with dehydration, the urine is usually a light color.

"Severe shock results from loss of more than forty percent of the blood volume and is characterized by signs of reduced blood flow to the brain and heart. Reduced cerebral blood flow initially produces restlessness and agitation, which is followed by confusion, stupor and eventually coma and death. Diminished blood flow to the heart can produce abnormalities of the cardiac rhythm."
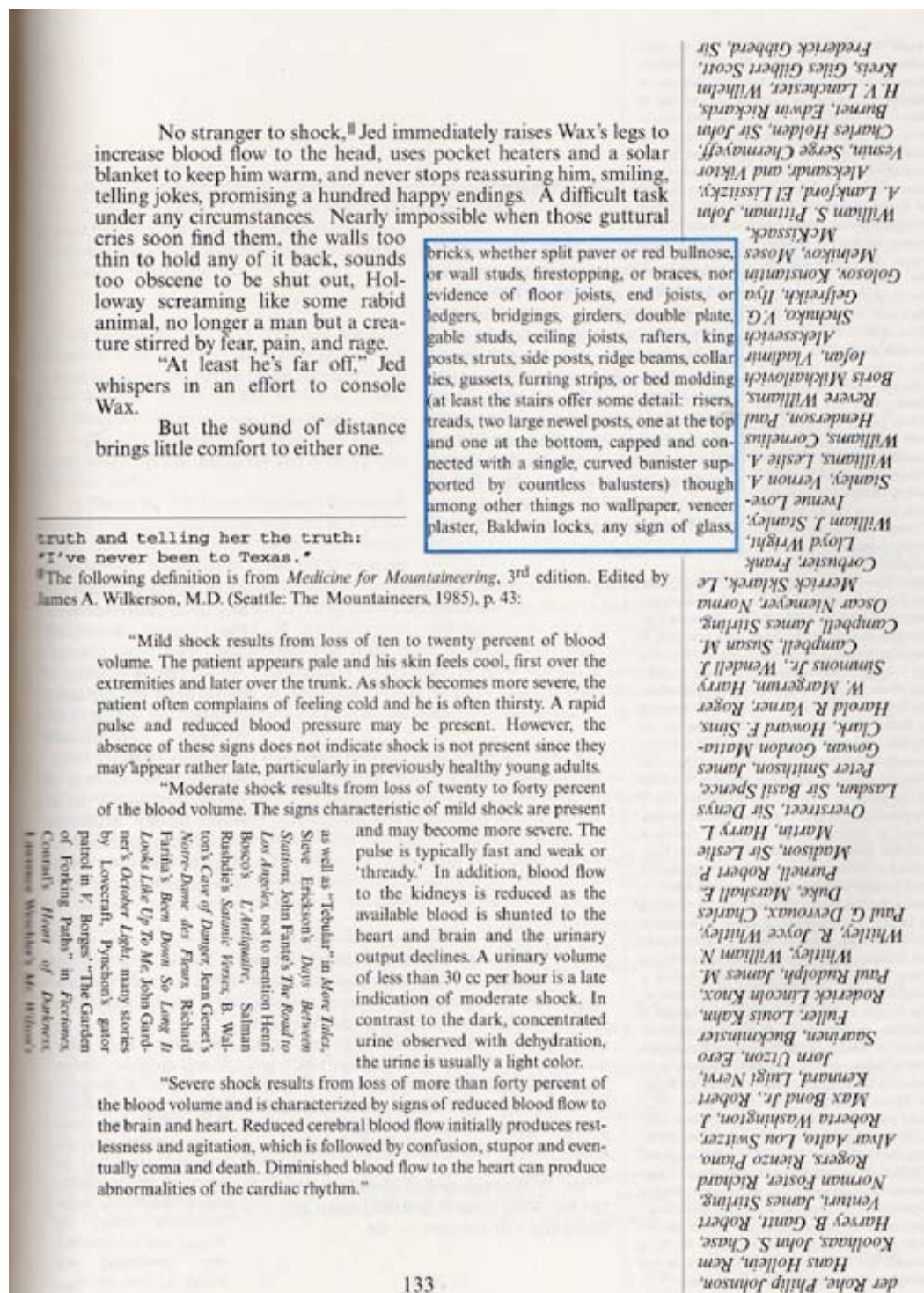
133

Figure 4.3
Page 133 from Danielewski's *House of Leaves* showing the author's juxtaposition of many fonts in competing directions, and the geometric shapes created by these different blocks of text.
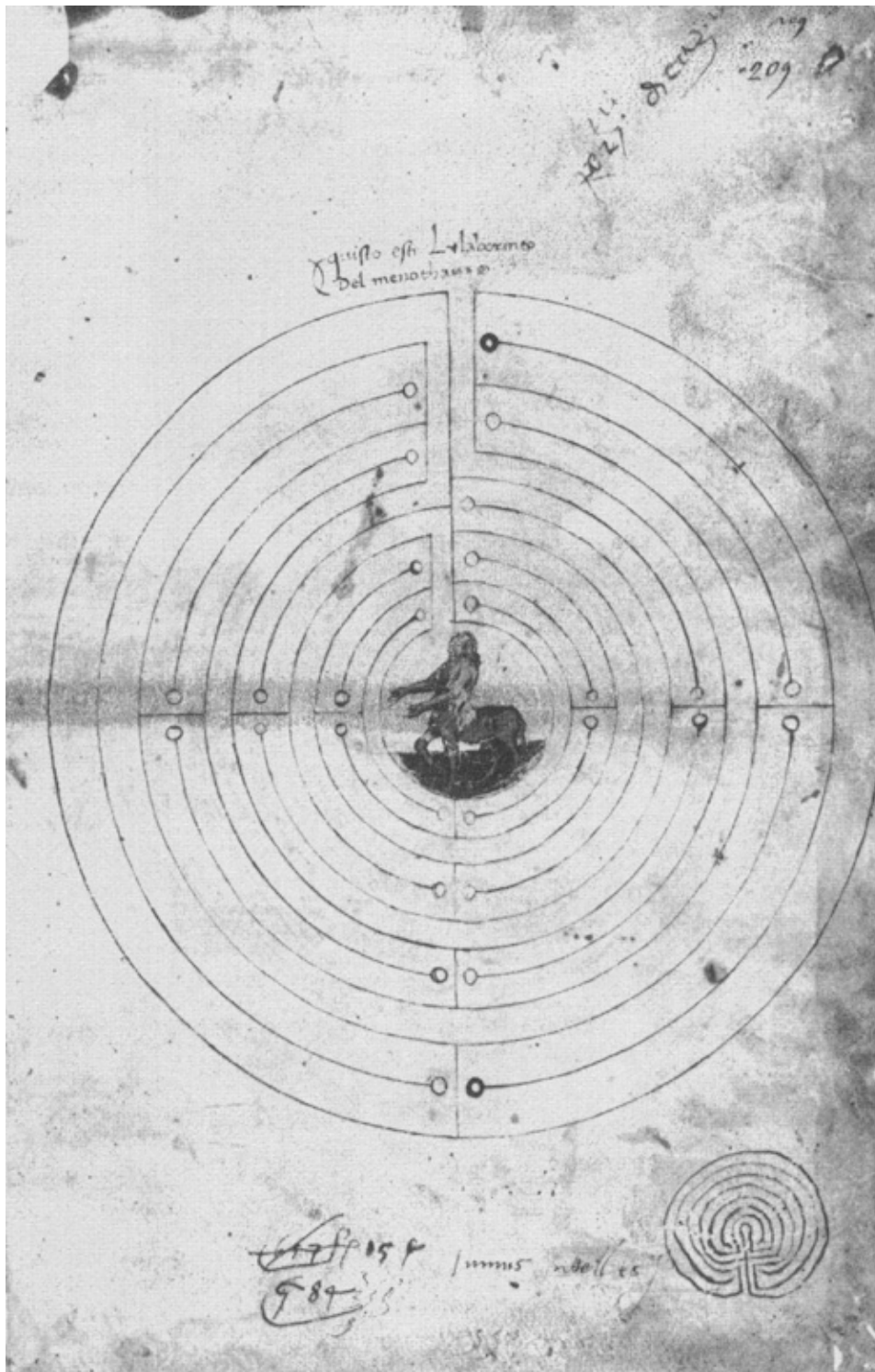
Figure 4.4
An illumination from a manuscript copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* showing not the Christian
Devil, but a Minotaur with arms outstretched at the center of a labyrinth (Doob 276).

I

For someone like me
The simple things
Like having toast or
Going to church are
Kept in one place.

Like having wine and cheese.
The parents of the town
Pissing elegantly escape knowledge
Once and for all. The
Snapdragons consumed in a wind
Of fire and rage far over
The streets as they end.

The casual purring of a donkey
Rouses me from my accounts:
What given, what gifts. The air
Stands straight up like a tail.

He spat on the flowers.

Also for someone
Like me the time flows round again
With things I did in it.
I wish to keep my differences

I

So this must be a hole
Of cloud
Mandate or trap
But haze that casts
The milk of enchantment

Over the whole town,
Its scenery, whatever
Could be happening
Behind tall hedges
Of dark, lissome knowledge.

The brown lines persist
In explicit sex
Matters like these
No one can care about,
"Noone." That is I've said it
Before and no one
Remembers except that elf.

Around us are signposts
Pointing to the past,
The old-fashioned, pointed
Wooden kind. And nothing directs
To the present that is

Figure 4.5
The first page of John Ashbery's 1979 poem, "Litany."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RETURN

After gaining entrance to the labyrinth, enduring its tortuous passageways, and confronting and conquering the Minotaur, one must return to the world outside. What does this return symbolize? Upon emerging from this dark confusion, what does the person who undertook this trial make of the experience? Negotiating a labyrinth can be imagined as a rite of passage, a psychological event, even a spiritual practice. Labyrinths are used for idle recreation and play, but they also have a longstanding association with churches and religion. On a secular level, labyrinths represent an encounter with mystery, with obfuscation and disorientation, and as we've seen, postmodern poetics often share these same characteristics. To emerge from the labyrinth is to find oneself, to return fortified, changed or strengthened by this arduous journey. Similarly, the readers encountering a postmodern poem may initially find themselves lost and confused in a network of multiplicity, but eventually they will discern a path, or perhaps even construct a path of their own through the poet's lines. Comparing postmodern poetry to the labyrinth metaphor, a return to the surface represents the reader's somehow conquering or resolving the words on the page, coming out of the reading process having forged his or her own path through the interconnected maze of signification. Examining what happens when one returns from the center of the labyrinth will allow us to explore some fundamental tenets of the postmodern aesthetic. And by looking at this enduring form, the labyrinth that has survived millennia, we might make some claims about its value and use, to explain why there will always be such interest in labyrinths. I would argue that we enjoy labyrinths and poetry for remarkably

similar reasons, and analyzing what exactly happens when one returns from this mythical place might help us understand the value and benefits of poetry for contemporary readers.

What is so compelling about the labyrinth story is Theseus' confrontation with the Minotaur, and often this myth's ending gets overlooked. However, the hero's triumphant return deserves examination. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* claims that the labyrinth mythology is a regenerative myth, symbolic of a rebirth. The old king had not dutifully sacrificed the bull sent by Poseidon; he kept it for himself, putting his own concerns before the benefit of his people. Into this neglected kingdom walks Theseus: "Theseus, the hero slayer of the Minotaur, entered Crete from without, as the symbol and arm of the rising civilization of the Greeks. That was the new and living thing" (Campbell, *Hero* 17). Campbell outlines the hero's journey and its permutations in various myths and religions of the world, and argues that all mythological adventures follow a standard formula. In rites of passage, such as the labyrinth myth, the progression of the story goes from Separation, to Initiation, to Return (30). Theseus' entrance into the labyrinth was a symbolic death, and he went inward to be reborn from the unknown deep. His return after slaying the Minotaur founded a new age for the city of Crete. And so this myth not only represents a hero's rebirth, but the founding of a new order. In *The Power of Myth,* Campbell discusses various myths and religions with journalist Bill Moyers. When asked why he named his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Campbell responded:

> There is a certain typical hero sequence of actions which can be detected in stories from all over the world and from many periods of history. Essentially, it might even be said there is but one archetypal mythic hero whose life has been replicated in many lands by many, many people. A legendary hero is usually the founder of something – the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a new city, the founder of a new way of life. In order to found something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea, a germinal idea that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing. (Campbell, *Power* 136)

Theseus volunteered to enter the labyrinth to face the Minotaur, coming from Athens to rectify the wrongful sacrifices demanded by the Cretan king. Theseus came from outside to rejuvenate their society, slaying the monster and issuing in a new age, founding a new way of life. When he kills the Minotaur, this represents the death of the old ways. His return then symbolizes regeneration, rejuvenation, and redemption.

Emerging from the labyrinth represents overcoming some sort of formidable obstacle. Whether the labyrinth is of simple unicursal design or complex multicursal design requiring Ariadne's golden thread to guide one through, emerging intact represents a victory over confusion. In psychological terms, to enter the narrow passages of the labyrinth and return would symbolize a rebirth from the womblike earth, a metaphorical death and resurrection. The myths of classical antiquity often concern a descent into the underworld, and for Theseus to survive his battle with the Minotaur and return unscathed would represent a triumph over death itself. Theseus' defeat of the Minotaur also freed the young men and women of Athens who would no longer be sacrificed to this monster, and so we can imagine returning from the labyrinth as a vindication of youth. Theseus' survival of the labyrinth made it possible for these youths to enter into adulthood, and to imagine the labyrinth as an initiation rite would also explain the Minotaur's presence. If we can imagine the Minotaur as a bestial representation of burgeoning sexuality threatening to engulf someone entirely, then to survive the labyrinth could represent taming one's physical body, overcoming physicality through an intellectual trial. All of these possible interpretations of the labyrinth myth are essentially life affirming. Because Theseus entered the labyrinth and killed the Minotaur, no more humans needed to be sacrificed. The end result was more life, and the labyrinth represents revivification. To return from the labyrinth is to survive, to live, and to have overcome both the Minotaur and the labyrinth's

architecture. By following clues or hanging on to Ariadne's thread, or by sheer perseverance in a

unicursal maze, the traveler successfully completes a trial or journey. In the end, the experience

of navigation is the accomplishment. Finding one's way is the reward or adventure here.   There

is no goal or finish line, just a return the way one came in, and the point is to simply survive, to

get through.

For postmodern poets, as well, there is no explicit and objective meaning one can convey,

the emphasis is not on an objective, tangible product, but on process. One must simply survive

the postmodern poem, piecing together clues and selecting a way through a textual maze of

signifiers. To enter the postmodern poem is an adventure, an exercise in deliberate

mystification, a descent into a world of symbols and half truths, inflections and innuendoes. To

go through a labyrinth is to find one's way out of treacherous difficulty, and this metaphor

coincides with Christian theology; one must tread carefully through a path littered with

temptation and sin in order to reach paradise.   In this way, we might envision the redemptive

possibilities of successfully navigating a labyrinth with the hoped for transcendence of poetic

language. Postmodern theory does not allow contemporary poets the luxury of believing that

poetry can reveal the natural world, or that language can unlock some fundamental truths,

notions of the Romantic poets concerning the redemptive qualities of the literary. And yet

perhaps the postmodern embrace of the labyrinth aesthetic is a result of this disconnect. If poetry

cannot lead one directly to truth, then poetry must misdirect and disorient, getting the reader to

circumnavigate these various possibilities. Perhaps there is some fundamental benefit to

wandering.

The labyrinth has seen a resurgence in recent years, and there are several groups

dedicated to keeping the practice of labyrinth walking alive for spiritual purposes. In the

postmodern world, it seems we need the labyrinth more than ever. In *The Maze and the Warrior,*

author Craig Wright describes a maze mania that swept the world in the 1990s. Wright attributes

this renewed interest in the ancient symbol to people's belief in the labyrinth's curative powers.

He claims that to walk the labyrinth is to find the pathway to inner peace. Kay Whipple,

spokesperson for the Labyrinth Society argues that labyrinths help calm the spirit, and that to

complete a labyrinth both restores one's balance and allows one to get rid of negativity:

> A labyrinth is contemplative; they're very calming to walk. […] As you move
> toward the center, your body twists and turns. Some say this helps balance your
> energy, or the left and right sides of the brain. People walk into the labyrinth
> center to release anything that no longer serves them; you're throwing 'things'
> off. The center of the labyrinth is a place of mediation and spiritual opening.
> (Whipple qtd. in Bordsen 20)

Whipple contends that walking a labyrinth allows for spiritual opening. Going through the

motions of this simple winding design allows one to clear the mind with exercise, in an

ambulatory meditation. Could the same argument be made for poetry? That to entertain even

the most difficult and obscure postmodern text is to somehow open oneself up to possibility or to

enter into a receptive state? Traversing a labyrinth and reading a poem both involve crossing a

threshold and entering into a different kind of space, a different order of literature. Mircea

Eliade would argue that the labyrinth is a site of myth and ritual, inhabiting sacred time and

space, and to enter into such a place is a redemptive act where one approaches the eternal, or

seeks communion with the divine. The introspection involved in both labyrinth walking and

reading poetry approaches the act of prayer, and both the page and the maze offer sites for

meditation and reflection. The type of secular labyrinths employed by the Labyrinth Society,

most often unicursal, have become common as both spiritual practice and recreation, and are

often constructed from grass or tiles, painted on floors, imprinted onto portable canvases, or built

out of various objects including rocks, shrubs, trees, fences, and candles placed in bags of sand.

These labyrinths allow one to walk without purpose, or more accurately, they remove the walker's agency. The center goal is provided, the pathway is diversionary and not efficient or what one would consider "purposeful," and the labyrinth traveler must surrender to the design and simply follow. This passivity is experienced only within unicursal labyrinths, however, as the multicursal labyrinth requires the traveler to make decisions and choices along the way.

A concluding chapter of Hermann Kern's *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years* entitled "The Labyrinth Today" includes his speculation about why the image and metaphor of the labyrinth has received so much renewed interest and attention from artists and scholars. He believes that people today perhaps find solace in the labyrinth, that it serves as an apt symbol for a time of fragmentation. It may be that postmodernism has spurred this fascination with all things mystical or mythical. Kern argues that our renewed interest in ancient cultures and their symbols "might be interpreted as criticism of the current world, as representing a rejection of an entirely rational way of life, which splinters human existence into a thousand individual pieces. In any case, I regard this interest in labyrinths as a deep-seated longing for meaningful cohesion." Kern then concludes that "The labyrinth's path is seen as a path to individuation, as regeneration, as bestowing meaning through a process of introspection and concentration" (305). Whether one agrees with this or not, one can certainly ascertain parallels to poetry here, and the need for thoughtful concentration, the introspection a poem requires of the reader. The labyrinth has been shown to symbolize sin and chaos or order and redemption, depending on context; it is an extremely mysterious and malleable image, and as with poetry, the labyrinth conceals as it reveals. The poem and the labyrinth contain inner secrets, beauty locked in terror, and one must overcome obstacles in order to realize what each conceals. With both, there is a desire to reach beyond, to transcend the everyday and find something other than the

mundane. In this one sense, we can understand how labyrinths have historically been linked to religion, and yet the fact that the pagan labyrinth myth, such a shocking story of bestial entanglement and monster slaying, became fodder for church decoration still seems incongruous.

The labyrinth was appropriated by the Christian church, and religious and labyrinth scholars offer many compelling arguments for how the labyrinth narrative was altered and used to express fundamental Christian beliefs. Like the popular secular labyrinths, church labyrinths are often unicursal in design, and evoke the idea of surrendering one's will to a higher power. Labyrinths were often found in naves of churches, or on church grounds, and labyrinth designs can be found frequently in early Christian manuscripts, often superimposed with a cross in the center, instead of a circular chamber. In Christian manuscripts and church labyrinths, the labyrinth design is transformed from an elliptical shape to a circle to evoke unity, completion, and perfection. Penelope Reed Doob explains that the labyrinth form was altered in these manuscripts to represent the eternal:

> Most medieval (and many ancient) labyrinths are not merely diagrammatic and unicursal; they are also round, constructed – usually by a compass – on the basis of a series of cocentric circles. These circles are generally bisected twice, by radii in the sign of a cross; thus it is the cross's axes that break the circles, turning them into labyrinthine patterns. Typical medieval mazes thus consist of a perfect form, the circle – the shape of the world, the universe, eternity. They are stamped with the cross, perhaps suggesting the impact of Christ in the world […] or, less favorably, indicating a disruption of perfect order. (103)

By changing the labyrinth's form from ellipse to circle, the labyrinth becomes less organic myth and more universal symbol, easily reproduced if one has the correct tools. This change of shape also emphasized the theme of return and completion, the cyclical death and resurrection of the Christian religion. By inscribing the cross onto this distorted labyrinth, these scribes essentially wrote over the original story, sanitizing the ancient myth and replacing it with the Christian narrative of overcoming temptation and adversity to achieve redemption.

Labyrinths inside churches were often placed near the door, as a type of threshold, an initiation for new congregates. These labyrinths could symbolize following the path of righteousness, or surrendering one's path to the will of God. Theseus could be imagined as a Christ figure, redeeming the world and conquering sin and death as represented by the Minotaur. The Minotaur would thus represent evil incarnate, despite his innocence in the classical labyrinth myth. Labyrinths became prevalent in churches on the European continent, but in England the labyrinth form was mainly relegated to outdoor turf mazes (Matthews 71). Throughout Europe, it was common to find labyrinths surrounding or within churches, in a marriage of pagan ritual and Christian religion, and more often than not these labyrinths were carefully placed near the western entrance. Labyrinth scholar Kern claims that this positioning was a calculated attempt to tie the labyrinth to Christian orthodoxy:

> Together, these aspects – west, death, entrance (initiation), 11 circuits – form the basis of a further interpretation: the act of tracing the labyrinthine path was thought to purify the Christian soul, to prepare it for meeting its Maker. […] Both aspects of such a moral, Christian reinterpretation – the labyrinth of sin and as a path to purification – are inextricably linked and were often confused with each other, since their moral, doctrinal significance is the same: both pose the question of redemption, which is answered by the cruciform shape of the labyrinth. (146)

In the mythological story, the labyrinth represented an initiation. Theseus' trial was a successful progression from adolescence to adulthood. Kern regards labyrinths as the embodiment of initiation rites. Only someone possessing maturity and dexterity would dare venture into the labyrinth. Since traditional labyrinths only have one path that winds around in a unicursal pattern, getting lost is not an issue. Yet Kern describes the process as fundamentally regenerative since "turning around at the center does not just mean giving up one's previous existence; it also marks a new beginning. A walker leaving a labyrinth is not the same person who entered it, but has been born again into a new phase or level of existence; the center is

where death and rebirth occur" (30). Once incorporated into the Christian church, labyrinths retained their initiatory symbolism, with a new emphasis on religious redemption.

Wright's study of mazes in early Christian churches reveals that the labyrinth was also symbolic of the Christian concept of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. Because the movement within a maze was almost always from west to east, travelers of the maze found themselves on a pilgrimage route in miniature, as ancient maps depicted Jerusalem as towards the east, the worshipper's goal or desired destination. Most labyrinths in churches are placed near the west portal, right as one enters, and the effects of this placement are numerous:

> Such a location has both physical and symbolic import: physical in the sense that the convert is immediately confronted by the labyrinth, and thus the proposition that adherence to the Christian faith will require an inward effort (*laborintus*); symbolic in the sense that the line of movement through the church progresses from west to east. The new Christian moves from an old world and progresses toward a higher realm. He leaves the terrestrial world at the west door, traverses a zone of initiation and purification (the maze), and advances toward the body and blood of Christ on the altar at the east end of the church. (Wright 18-19)

The initiate leaves behind the world and enters this sacred space via the catalyst of the labyrinth, its passageways leading one through this transformation. Again, this other realm is what Eliade would describe as sacred space, achieved by the ritual of crossing of the labyrinth at the threshold. We have already examined how poetry acts as a threshold, appearing to be text of a different order, another realm of signification. As the Christians appropriated the labyrinth narrative for their own purposes, we too can borrow this idea of labyrinth as threshold and apply it to what one encounters in postmodern poetry. Readers find themselves placed before an obstacle, and on the other side the promise of meaning, of transcendence. Whether readers actually achieve this is moot; we read poems hoping to understand something about ourselves, about the world, about language. And this promise of further understanding, of reorientation within the self and the world, is what drives our fascination with poetry and labyrinths.

In addition to its initiatory functions, Wright claims that the maze has many competing meanings, a resonance of many symbolic layers. He also believes that labyrinths reminded people of the fundamentals of Christian faith: salvation, purification, rebirth, and divinity. Yet for Wright the most poignant metaphor is revealed by looking at the labyrinth's symmetry:

> For the maze-walker moving within a labyrinth, however, none of this symmetry is apparent. No carefully crafted sequence of turns is felt experientially but, on the contrary, only disorder and confusion – "amazement" in the literal sense of the word. The beauty of the rhythm nested within the maze becomes apparent only when one stands above the labyrinth, on a different plane, and can apprehend the configuration in its entirety. (65)

Only from outside the structure can one sense the design of the place. Objectively, we witness it as a beautiful form, but from within one experiences terror and confusion. This is a duality we have already examined, and yet it bears repeating because of its relevance to religious imagery. While in the labyrinth, as on earth in the midst of a terrestrial existence, everything seems to be in disorder. But to step back and witness life objectively, one gets a sense of some divine symmetry. Wright finally argues that the complexity of the labyrinth represented the impenetrable and unknowable intellect of God for churchgoers: "God had always been difficult to see; here was a way to glimpse the divine" (71). Wright describes the labyrinth as a symbol for possible transcendence, of moving beyond this realm into a different space. The labyrinth was then a symbol or rite that allowed one access to the divine. Although most contemporary poets would scoff at the notion of being able to access divinity through writing, the Romantics believed that a poem, like a labyrinth, was a mechanism or practice that could access a higher truth. The Romantic imagination attempted to transcend everyday language and get a glimpse of the eternal; these poets believed poetry was a redemptive act, a gesture towards eternity. Wright's use of the word "rhythm" here also links the labyrinth to the art of poetry, and recalls the idea of the labyrinth as a dance, as well. Kern hypothesized that the term "labyrinth" was

falsely attributed to three-dimensional buildings, and that it originally referred to a dance based on an elaborately patterned choreography (42-43). If we think of both labyrinth and poem as a performance, intricate rituals of complex syntax and movement, then we can see that to go through both poem and labyrinth is an exercise, an attempt to move from the realm of the ordinary into the divine.

The labyrinth on the floor of Chartres Cathedral is the oldest church maze still surviving. A pavement maze, this labyrinth was built into the floor tiles around the year 1200. In figure 5.1, the labyrinth is in the foreground, in the nave of the church, and the high vaulted ceilings and linear architecture extend back towards the altar. Church labyrinths were highly popular in the Middle Ages and were incorporated in many Gothic Cathedrals, but over time most were either removed or destroyed. This labyrinth displays an eleven-circuit design divided into four quadrants with a rosette inscribed in the center, symbolizing enlightenment. For years, the labyrinth at Chartres was in disuse, covered with chairs even, but it has recently been restored. The classical labyrinth was elliptical in form, with only seven tracks. The circular design of the church labyrinth was meant to evoke the unity and perfection of God and a Christian life, and the eleven tracks signified "sin, dissonance, transition, and incompleteness […] The eleven tracks of the maze symbolize the folds of sin that ensnare the soul in this earthly life" (Wright 23). It is thought that repentant pilgrims would even traverse this labyrinth on their knees in search of divine forgiveness. To walk this two-dimensional labyrinth was not to risk disorientation, but to experience a calm meditation where one could easily see the order and beautiful design of God's plan. What amazes here is not confusion or chaos, or the frustrating twists and turns of a multicursal labyrinth, but the intricate order and precision of the labyrinth's symmetry and its central placement in such a grand structure. Now that it has been embellished with lights, the

Chartres labyrinth almost appears as decoration. Like the stained glass windows that both adorn

and instruct, this labyrinth is half symbolic ritual, half design element.

The painting *Pleasure Garden with a Maze* offers an example of a maze more secular in

nature, to contrast with the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in terms of function. This painting is

from the workshop of Tintoretto, painted by Lodovico Pozzoserrato, c. 1579-84. As seen in

Figure 5.2, the form of both labyrinths is remarkably similar. Both are circular and symmetrical

in design. There seems to be a sizable round clearing in this maze, instead of the rosette in the

center of the Chartres labyrinth. In the lower left of the painting, a ship filled with passengers

approaches a small island with a labyrinth. The canvas is filled with frolicking youths,

musicians, a menagerie of animals (bull, ostrich, rabbit, stag, etc.), and small groups wandering

or lingering along the paths, enjoying the maze as an afternoon diversion. A central pair of

swans in the water and a pair of gondolas are part of the lovers motif of the painting, and a

woman is being pursued in the center of the labyrinth by an ardent admirer. To look at this

painting, the viewer immediately takes in the central labyrinth design, but there are so many

different mini-narratives for one to discover that the very act of looking becomes labyrinthine.

This of course is a fictional maze, a work of the artist's imagination, although some art historians

argue that the city in the background resembles Piazza San Marco, St. Mark's Square in Venice.

This type of secular maze depicted in Pozzoserrato's painting offers delight and amusement.

These two types of labyrinths were popular concurrently, the spiritual and the secular. Both

types are still popular today, even though they are so markedly different, and yet the one element

they both share is a sense of submission.

In both unicursal and multicursal labyrinth designs, the traveler must submit to the will of

the architect. Travelers of both types of maze can jettison their daily burdens and take on the

artificial obstacles of the labyrinth. Whether by simple circuits or complex passageways, the

labyrinth can serve as a welcome diversion. The labyrinth provides a set of neutral choices to

replace the personal and therefore more arduous decisions of one's inner world. The

impenetrability of the labyrinth keeps one safe from reality, and only the decisions within the

maze matter while everything else drops away. The labyrinth here becomes an externalization

and depersonalization of inner torment. And one abandons the mundane problems one faces

every day to encounter something more special, and more importantly, something different. Lev

Manovich broaches this idea of surrendering the self in *The Language of New Media* when he

argues that digital media externalize the mind's operations:

> Interactive computer media perfectly fits this trend to externalize and objectify the
> mind's operations. The very principle of hyperlinking, which forms the basis of
> interactive media, objectifies the process of association, often taken to be central
> to human thinking. Mental processes of reflection, problem solving, recall, and
> association are externalized, equated with following a link, choosing a new image,
> or a new scene. […] In short, we are asked to follow pre-programmed,
> objectively existing associations. (61)

If we imagine the labyrinth as a metaphor for the mind, the convoluted twists and turns of

another's thought processes, then to enter a labyrinth is to enter another's perspective quite

literally – not just to take on another persona, but to walk along another's path. And so to return

from such a journey would mean a return to the self, regaining control after giving oneself over

to another's plan. Though labyrinths are used for such diverse purposes as meditation, spiritual

penitence, and thrilling amusement, all of these variations require a surrender of one's will to the

designs of another. We must play someone else's game, and take the paths dictated by another,

whether it be God, artist, or architect. The fundamental characteristic of a labyrinth is that it is a

highly constructed space. Postmodern readers often find themselves in similarly designed

spaces, and they must submit to the poet's construct. To read the postmodern text is to enter this

other space, a space engineered by the poet. Readers are not simply passive though, and

postmodern texts often require involvement and choices. The reading experience thus described

seems contradictory, and yet the experience of space within a labyrinth is similarly paradoxical.

Readers of the postmodern poem can be both in control and controlled if one imagines the poem

as a maze. Inside the labyrinth, space seems both suffocating and expansive, with corners

implying both immobility and movement simultaneously. The current debate in hypertext

poetics over authorial constraint versus the reader's freedom can be resolved in the figure of the

labyrinth. It is both at once. Using the labyrinth as a metaphor for all contemporary poetics

makes it clear that the text can be coersive and engineered, while also allowing for the reader's

exploration.

If we consider the poem as a labyrinth we can understand making our way through the

text as a journey or process of finding a way. By piecing together fragments or accumulating

choices along the path, readers construct an outcome from the pieces provided by the poet. Thus

the postmodern poem invites the reader to become part creator, in a sense building or

constructing an interpretive route. Brian McHale, in *Postmodern Fiction,* his study of

contemporary writing, draws a distinction between the dominant themes and goals of modernist

versus postmodernist writing, and his arguments correspond to this idea of "constructedness."

The modernist text, McHale claims, focuses on questions of epistemological import, such as how

one can interpret the world, the nature of truth, and how language is transmitted. For the

postmodernist text, however, the focus shifts to questions of ontology, questions about the nature

of existence itself: what is the text, what is the world, what is the self, or what are the boundaries

of text, world, and self? (McHale 9-10). McHale's categories explain the blurring of the

boundaries of postmodern textual artifacts. He cites poets who experiment with incorporating

more and more outside voices, various media, and found objects into their poems, in an attempt to discover the limits of their craft through trial and error, testing how much a poem can consume. Postmodernism, McHale concludes, is an aesthetic of construction. Instead of a destructive impulse, the postmodern text McHale describes is one of consumption and incorporation, one that is inclusive and multiple. Like today's spiritual labyrinths made of every conceivable material, postmodern poems are often constructed from diverse materials and include multiple voices. McHale contends that narrative events are often erased or called into question, as characters must be skeptical not only of what they've been told, but also whether they truly were told anything in the first place. Scenes, events, and characters can be recalled or revised within the postmodern novel, having their existence revoked within the narrative (103). Everything is up for grabs. The postmodern reader must either make a selection from these alternate possibilities or become comfortable with hybridity, allowing for multiple truths to exist at once in the text.

These alternate realities present in the postmodern narrative, often competing realities that exist simultaneously, recall the forking paths and loops in Borges' consideration of time and the labyrinth metaphor in his writings. The looping narrative, the shifting realities, the recursive strategies of author and reader – all of these can be found in texts from different eras of course, but they are uniquely foregrounded in postmodernist fiction. Instead of creating narratives where the words are transparent, allowing the reader to dissolve into a fictional world, postmodern writers are constantly trying to draw attention to the processes of construction, making the reader aware of the fiction's very fictiveness, and the boundaries of the text. We cannot immerse ourselves in illusion, but most always contend with the words on the page:

> The action fades, the lights go off behind the scrim, and we are left facing the
> words on the page: this happens again and again in postmodernist writing, and not

only when tropological worlds collapse. It also happens whenever our attention is distracted from the projected world and made to fix on its linguistic medium. […] To call attention to the lowest strata at the expense of the highest is to drive a wedge into the ontological structure of the literary work, splitting it into "words" and "world." The differing ontological statuses of words and world are brought into sharp focus, the words being made to appear more "real," more present, than the world they project. In a sense, this is only a kind of optical illusion, for words, no less than projected worlds, are intentional objects of the reader's consciousness, and as such are no more real or present than the higher strata of the literary work. But it is a potent illusion, and one that blocks and reverses our normal habit of effacing the level of words as we reconstruct the world of the text. For once, it is the world that seems, at least momentarily, to have been effaced. Thus the foregrounding of the linguistic medium induces a kind of ontological flicker. (McHale 148)

McHale argues that by drawing us again and again to the words on the page, the linguistic

medium, these postmodernist writers are privileging words over world, language over meaning,

form over content. Readers must contend with the surfaces of things, as the text resists our

interpretive attempts. This conception of the postmodern text recalls the agenda of the

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets who try to derange the language. Because the communication of

meaning or content has been relegated to myth, these postmodernists draw attention to the

medium of language itself, delighting in word as word, and not something that points to anything

beyond itself. As a result, the reader has unrivaled agency in the postmodern text. The reader

must piece things together, must bridge the widening gaps between signifiers, constructing

coherence out of fragments and selecting from multiplying alternatives and options within the

narrative. This deliberate and conscious navigation among choices in the text turns the reader

into an explorer, and these competing alternative realities can be reconciled only if one imagines

them as a branching network of passageways intersecting within a labyrinth.

Perhaps one of the most famous labyrinthine narratives, Vladimir Nabokov's 1960 novel

Pale Fire, illustrates this aesthetic of construction, or more accurately reconstruction. Half poem

and half prose, *Pale Fire* is often referred to as a metafictive novel, and the reader is always

brought back to the structure here, the text's form. The premise of this text is that another author

has come along to reconstruct a poem, the posthumous reconstruction of another poet's

fragments. It takes as its domain coming to terms with a postmodern poem. Again we encounter

a text that is made up of writing upon writing, with multiple authors or editors, and the result is a

textual labyrinth like we've explored in Phillips' *A Humument*, or Danielewski's *House of*

Leaves, or in a later chapter with Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red.* As in these other

labyrinthine texts, Nabokov's narrative is structured as a compilation or compendium of

information with a fictional genuine artifact at its core. And again as in all these other texts,

someone has come along later to revisit material and offer a new perspective, a new pathway, a

new reading. A fictive narrator, Dr. Charles Kinbote, is our guide through this labyrinth, as he

pieces together this 999-line poem of his colleague, trying to discern the poem's missing final

line. Eventually Kinbote's sanity and his very identity are called into question, and the reader

realizes he or she is essentially alone in navigating this puzzling text.   Nabokov does not provide

his readers with a trustworthy guide to communicate some essential truth or fundamental

meaning, but abandons readers in the middle of his vast textual labyrinth. Only after we have

ventured well into this maze do we realize that the author has led us into amazement, that our

narrative guide cannot be believed.

Throughout the novel, the narrator functions not as storyteller, but as editor, and by

having his narrator manipulate and construct this poem in front of us, Nabokov foregrounds the

writing process. This narrator is reassembling a dead poet's lines not to form a cohesive text, but

to introduce all the variant readings, what he calls the "canceled readings" (Nabokov 16). The

novel's hybrid form and labyrinthine structure also force the reader to think about the boundaries

and characteristics of the text, as McHale would argue, to put words before world. A brief

editor's note precedes the poem's four cantos, and a lengthy commentary comprises the bulk of the novel. The commentary is arranged sequentially as notes on the poem's lines, although these notes are often only tangentially related to the poem itself and have more to do with the narrator's own concerns and his relationship to the original poet. One continuously feels lost in this text, in often futile attempts to fit the commentary with the poem, and the reader sometimes feels as if he or she has wandered into the musings of a madman. The reader must continually flip back to the poem while reading this commentary, looping back recursively, continually rethinking the position of this narrative voice. The reader, together with this fictional editor, unpacks this poem written by a fictional dead poet. The levels of artifice and the constant turning and recursive reading make the reader feel lost in an elaborate labyrinth, a textual labyrinth with a hybrid or composite author.

Several figures vie for authority over the text, and this novel is as much about reading as it is about the writing process and issues of authorship. This novel illustrates McHale's theories of the postmodern aesthetic in that it asks readers to consider the boundaries of the text and to examine their own attempts at interpretation. Nabokov creates what many have referred to as a proto-hypertext, a nonlinear text with multiple pathways to follow that resembles a labyrinth in design and function. And danger lurks within Nabokov's labyrinth, as the various authors and editors of this text are either killed or commit suicide; death and danger surround and infuse the core cantos of this novel, like a Minotaur inhabiting the central room of a labyrinth, awaiting the reader or editor attempting to penetrate its secrets. The disoriented reader must piece together fragments, reconstructing a text, a text whose author cannot possibly finish, a text which may be finished already without adding this final line for all we know. When Nabokov reveals that Kinbote might be insane, that in fact the dead poet's lines reconstructed at the heart of the text

may have been written by Kinbote all along, readers must come to terms with their idea of who authored this text. Nabokov reveals to us that the author is merely a construct when he undermines our ability to attribute this text to one character. By taking away our ability to map these words onto any character, Nabokov forces readers to think about how and why this text was written. The shifting and unstable characters become too slippery, and we must think of Nabokov as the one pulling the strings here, and imagine this as a work of fiction. We are denied the luxury of sinking into this text and immersing ourselves in illusion; the text resists the reader's notions of author, character, and genre, as all of these are multiple. The author(s), the poet(s), the reader(s), and the text(s) are all constructions here. As our unreliable narrator pieces together the fragments of a poem in the center of this novel, the readers attempt to piece together the various authorial intentions at play. Finally, all of these possibilities exist simultaneously, a labyrinth of infinite permutations enclosed within a single text. Within his novel, Nabokov explores the labyrinthine nature of poetry while rethinking narrative.

This multiplicity of possible meanings is a key feature of hypertext documents, and several media theorists have attempted to describe a new aesthetic made possible by the digital environment. These descriptions are often evocative of the labyrinth metaphor. In *The Language of New Media,* Lev Manovich claims that we are operating on a new looping aesthetic based on cinema, which manifests in the recursive nature of many hypertexts. Computers and cinema both operate in this paradigm, with looping film reels and looping programs; the controlling structure for each medium is the loop (Manovich xxxiii). Peter Lunenfeld argues in *The Digital Dialectic* that the new aesthetic is one of "unfinish," and that new media make us appreciate the unfinished text (Lunenfeld 7). Whatever new aesthetic emerges in the wake of electronic media, it is clear that print media will attempt to incorporate it into its own machinery.

So many of the texts in this study approach this aesthetic associated with new media but in print form. Lunenfeld contends that hypertext documents are considered more open, dynamic, with nonlinear information, no hierarchies, incorporating multimedia, with everything linked together in an associative maze of data. Yet this labyrinthine aesthetic is evident in postmodern poetry regardless of medium. Creating an unsolvable puzzle of intricate design and artistry is the contemporary poet's response to postmodern theoretical threats to the linear, to meaning, to absence. If language is an imperfect system, then what better way to ensure some sense of meaning for readers than to have them retrace their steps, revisiting words and lines, getting lost in the syntax and forcing them to discover their own pathways, their own connections? In this way, the labyrinth can be viewed not as a frustrating structure, but a site of potential multiplicity. No two readers will forge the exact same path. In a labyrinthine aesthetic, where one must meander through the poem independently making choices, the reader is foregrounded. If poets can no longer trust signs, if the text is unstable, and if Barthes' and Foucault's charges are correct and authorial intent cannot explain a text, then the reader becomes paramount. In this way, the postmodern poet's use of labyrinthine complexity, multiplicity, and misdirection is possibly a reaction to contemporary frameworks of knowledge, and not merely a symptom of the text's medium. Instead of comparing everything to a hypertext, it is more specific and relevant to call these works labyrinthine, as these qualities transcend media and are specific to the writing and reading processes, and not the media technologies.

Contemporary critics have been exploring the boundaries of a text and multiplicity for years, but they have focused on hypertext documents almost exclusively. A digital text that must be clicked through online involves the interactive processes of the reader in obvious physical ways, and this resulting multiplicity, this array of different versions is often celebrated as a

feature of new media. Yet the wandering and recursive reading strategies we have seen at work throughout this study would imply that this multiplicity is a function of postmodernism, and not a feature tethered to a specific medium. To revisit Robert Coover's essay "The End of Books" for a moment, Coover boldly claims that a new era has arrived that will destroy hierarchical narrative and meaning. He argues that in hypertext documents, there is no longer linear or structured order; the author's control over the text has been replaced by the reader's ability to click through in random order, and the various parts of the text have been spread out in a network, no longer arranged in linear sequence. As a result, the text has been decentered and meaning accumulates or accrues in patterns. Coover states in his essay that this new media represents a revolution of writing; now nonlinear narratives are possible, and hypertexts allow for new methods of building anticipation and suspense, new forms of incentive and energy circulation are made possible by this medium.

Again though, all of this was possible before. We can see a shifting focus from linear plot to patterns of symbols in postmodern novels like Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49,* as the Tristero symbol winks in and out of the reader's peripheral vision throughout the book. Or a constant revisiting of similar plot elements in the mutating stories in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler,* where a linear narrative keeps getting interrupted as the characters are altered, motives are changed, relationships evolve, and possibilities begin overlapping. The exhaustive and contradictory footnotes in Danielewski's *House of Leaves* invite the reader into confusion and doubt, and one must choose which voices to believe in order to construct the narrative, becoming part author or the novel, and part architect of the house. Coover makes the assumption that texts are closed systems and hypertexts are more flexible, open, and adaptable. Yet we've explored postmodern texts and poems bound to the codex medium that display these qualities he attributes

solely to digital media. And so again it is a function of postmodern texts regardless of media that one begins to see a breakdown of hierarchical structure, a shifting of possible pathways through. Readers find themselves disoriented in a text with shifting and unstable characters, or in a poem where visual elements compete with textual signs, and in the absence of clear order or linearity they must explore. As Coover argues about readers of hypertext documents, postmodern readers must look for patterns in the absence of linear structure. Like the labyrinth traveler lost in the dark, floundering around for a way out and trying to discern a design or order, contemporary readers often find themselves making connections, constructing order and finding patterns, and in a way becoming authors of their own text.

The Oulipo and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets apply various procedures to their writing, opening up the texts to multiplicity and the possibility of emergent meaning and pattern found from noise. Found poetry also engages multiplicity in its aesthetic, as it often incorporates other voices in a polyvocal utterance; one gets the sense of words overhead and voices overlapping. This is yet another group of contemporary poets whose work can be understood better by applying the labyrinth metaphor to the aesthetic and functions of their poetry. This school of poetry involves the appropriation of words from other sources, as poets rearrange words, phrases, or sometimes lift whole passages from other sources and reframe them as poetry. Like visual poetry, found poetry often can resemble collage when poets assemble various texts and media in one hybrid poem. This juxtaposition of different voices or original texts creates an aesthetic of displacement and disorientation. The context of the original can never be understood completely; nor can these origins be erased entirely. In a found poem, readers can hear echoes of what the original texts might have meant before and now their new implications after the found poet's treatment. The poet, who recasts a new poem out of one or many original voices, texts,

signs, or objects, is building a hybrid construction, and readers must thread these fragments together into a unified whole. Found poetry celebrates the hybrid, the imagetext, the multiple. Instead of becoming overwhelmed or distraught by slipping signifiers and the proliferation of meaning, found poets embrace hybridity and in a sense tame the Minotaur, reconciling disparate entities in one unified work. By rescuing these original texts and framing them as poetry, the found poets create art out of fragments, constructing or building something new out of the detritus of the mundane. Even when they are forming poems out of other poems, or recasting parts of literature, they are constructing something, building new pathways of readings, allowing for a plurality of expression. To take a poem and create a new poem out of its constituent parts, or to reframe the original, is to construct new emergent networks of possible meaning for the reader to traverse.

Found poetry demonstrates quite literally the postmodern anxiety of authorship and authenticity, as the purest found poem is one where the fewest alterations have been made. Many found poets follow an aesthetic not of construction, but of pure appropriation. The goal is not to construct new texts from various fragments, but to find a poem almost intact, to lift words entirely from the world and grant them the status of poetry. In these instances, the poem does not garner authenticity from its author, but from its materiality. The poet becomes a witness or archaeologist who discovers this object and labels it as poetry. Found poets are not so much generating writing as they are unearthing an object. The focus is on the original object, how it was found and where it came from, its materiality. Michael Davidson's essay "Palimtexts: Postmodern Poetry and the Material Text" is relevant to this discussion of the material object, as he argues that contemporary poets have a newfound awareness of the page as a medium, as an object that the reader encounters:

> Postmodern poets, in this context, are no different from previous generations in the way that they keep notebooks, use paper, and revise their work. But recent poets have incorporated the material fact of their writing into the poem in ways that challenge the intentionalist criteria of traditional textual criticism. (79)

Davidson claims that these postmodern poets foreground the material page in their writing, turning a piece of paper into a visual, textured, tactile compositional field for the reader to enter into. Like the found poets, Davidson's postmodern poets foreground process – the process of writing and erasing and writing again, the process of finding an object and calling it a poem. The postmodern poem is not merely something written, but it is "writing." Found poetry reveals the process of thinking and writing, reveals the speculation and internal monologue of its production. We see the process of creation, the multiple erasures and marginalia of these palimtexts, or the traces of the original object in found poetry. Revealing the poem's origins both makes the text seem more authentic, more tangible, and it provides readers with a sense of immediacy. The text must be worked, in real time, traversed by each new reader who proceeds through the poem's lines. Readers witness the accumulation of ideas, and as with journeying through a labyrinth, the focus is not on the end result, but the process of going through. Since postmodern theory no longer allows us to envision a poem as having any sort of stable "meaning," poets focus on the writing process and not the written product, revealing the thought processes and revisions, showing readers the poem's inscription. If an end result cannot be guaranteed, if the postmodern world does not allow for us to believe in a poem's inherent meaning, if a poem means nothing objectively, but only subjectively, then contemporary poets must focus on process and not product. The material object, the inscription practices, the writing process, these things all become paramount in the postmodern aesthetic, as they allow the reader to become part poet. Though language may be an imperfect system and words elusive, by giving readers access to the

poem's methodology, the contemporary poet allows them entrance to the labyrinthine possibilities of interpretation.

Jean Baudrillard's theories may serve to elucidate the postmodern poets' focus on the material object, while also providing evidence of this death of meaning felt by postmodernist writers. For Baudrillard, contemporary society and one's sense of identity is based upon a civilization of signs. Capitalism has shifted from a system of production to one of signification. Advertising and focus groups inform us of who we are and what we want, and the pervasive marketing of commodities is inescapable: advertising dictates our reality. In his 1978 essay "Symbolic Exchange and Death," Baudrillard argues that there has been a structural revolution of value itself. Baudrillard claims that referential value has been annihilated, and that advertising has taken on a life of its own and no longer has any grounding in or reference to the real world. Instead of referring back to or corresponding to something in reality, advertising media operate in their own closed system, "excluding the referential dimension" in what he calls "the death of reference" (Baudrillard, "Symbolic" 488-89). Instead of finding an anchor in reality, these signs now proliferate in free play: "The systems of reference for production, signification, the affect, substance and history, all the equivalence to a "real" content, loading the sign with the burden of 'utility," with gravity – its form of representative equivalence – all this is over with" (489). Baudrillard concludes that signs have been emancipated from the real; words and pictures, all acts of signification, no longer refer back to anything tangible, but now merely operate in a closed system of combinatory play. He determines that "from now on, signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real" (489). Instead of a system of reference, we now have a system of simulation, and in Baudrillard's terminology, the collapse of our former system leaves us "hungry for the real."

In an essay published ten years earlier in 1968, "The System of Objects," Baudrillard had claimed that advertising created a brand new system of signification, and yet this system was not exactly a language. These signs and images lack syntax, and so the system of meaning advertising ushered forth was an incomplete program of communication. So we are left with a system that has no order, producing patterns of reduplicating signs (Baudrillard, "System" 415). The signs and codes of advertising and capitalist speculation combine and recombine in endless variations, creating their own reality, what Baudrillard calls hyperreality. For Baudrillard, we have witnessed "the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real" for advertising purposes, and because this system operates in a sort of vacuum, untethered to any real object it refers back to, we long for the real all the more, experiencing "a fetishism of the lost object which is no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of degeneration and its own ritual extermination" (Baudrillard, "Symbolic" 497). Because of all this indeterminacy of signs and our attendant longing for something real and substantial, postmodern artists celebrate the object, the materials of their craft. The object has become fetishized in this hunger for authenticity.

Because of this desire for the real, contemporary artists and poets must strive to make their art objective, literal, visceral, in order to "eradicate all psychology and subjectivity from it in order to give it a pure objectivity" (497). If contemporary artists want to transmit information or communicate effectively, they must be aware of the possible loss of meaning from signs that have no basis in reality, signs that take on multiple meanings depending on context. Because of the indeterminacy of signs, the anxiety of accurately referring to anything, artists have begun to rethink how their art is perceived. How one approaches or "looks at" an art object becomes key. Artists concerned with these matters must try to eliminate all subjectivity from their art, making

it more direct, more objective, often by quite literally focusing on art as material object. Baudrillard claims that since we can no longer trust in representation or stable signifiers, "The old illusions of relief, perspective and depth (both spatial and psychological) bound up with the perception of the object are over with: optics in its entirety, scopics, has begun to operate on the surface of things – the gaze has become the object's molecular code" (Baudrillard, "Symbolic" 497). Perception and interpretation must happen on the surface, according to Baudrillard's argument. If there is no longer depth of meaning, then all meaning must take place on the canvas and on the page, on the very surface of the art object.

This is ultimately a post-structuralist theory of materiality, a linguistic argument proving that we must look beyond language and focus on what's happening with the poem as an object. Because most contemporary theory questions the stability of the text, postmodern poets must involve the reader on some fundamental level. If meaning, stable meaning, no longer resides within the text, locked into words that mean something objectively, then the poet must focus his or her attentions on what comes before and after the word, the writing and reading processes. To do this, the postmodern poet unveils his or her writing mechanics, stripping bare the apparatus so that we as readers can witness the procedures behind the poetics, the labyrinthine structure glimpsed momentarily. For visual poetry, the page must be viewed as an object, a system of signifiers for the viewer to explore with his or her gaze. For found poetry especially, the page is an artifact, often a compendium of collected objects that have authenticity and veracity in their objectivity. The page becomes a collection of real found objects, and meaning or authenticity is located in the textual artifact, on the page and independent of what the reader "gets out of it." Even poets working in more traditional forms exhibit this postmodern desire for the real, for the authentic. As we will see in a later chapter examining Mark Strand's *Blizzard of One* through

the labyrinth metaphor, this anxiety for realness acts as a motif throughout the volume. Strand's personae continually winnow things of great number down to the singular, singling out just one leaf from a pile, or just one snowflake from the blizzard, to closely examine this one object. And throughout Strand's volume, several of his personae mention desiring or even capturing a momentary glimpse, a brief and elusive bid for truth or meaning that is ever evasive but continually haunting the poet's lines.

Found poetry forces readers to examine an object, to explore the surface(s) on the page and wander around as in a labyrinth. In hypertext documents, as well, wandering and recursive reading is not only encouraged, but a function of the medium. We have explored the restlessness of the eye in visual poetry as well, and the confused multiplicity inherent in the procedures of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and the Oulipo poets. All these schools of poetry that are supposedly experimental, on the outskirts of poetic endeavor, are all illustrating these labyrinthine tendencies: recursion, misdirection, multiplicity, the fear and anxiety of feeling lost, the need to construct one's own path and forge ahead. There is a valuing of process over product. New media critics contend that hypertexts are dynamic, unfinished, multiple, and malleable. This is partly a function of the media, but I would argue that these characteristics are ultimately symptomatic of postmodernism. Contemporary poets are creating poems to be experienced in space and through time, recursively. The poem's signifiers, even in traditional codex form, exist in inexhaustible combinations, a labyrinth of possibility in a single text. I will also examine Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, a novel in verse, in a later chapter, and at turns this text exhibits the characteristics of first hypertext, then found poem, then traditional narrative. Similar to Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* Carson's work includes poetic lines surrounded by paratextual elements that make this a polyvocal text of many accumulated genres. Carson uses

postmodern poetics as a way of rethinking narrative in a way that's similar to Nabokov's endeavor. This novel is visibly put together in front of us. Carson shows her readers the fictional fragments she's assembling, and throughout the work she foregrounds the writing process, inviting her readers into a labyrinthine character study of her central figure, a monster she rescues from myth, giving us his perspective much like Borges' "The House of Asterion," a short story from the Minotaur's point of view.

Perhaps the ultimate aim of this project was to try and locate the reasons why one would continue to read poetry in light of postmodern theoretical discourse. How does one begin? Now that the text has been destabilized, meaning has been called into question, and the author function debated, how does one go about justifying his or her love of poetry? The same questions might be posed about labyrinths, and yet they continue to thrive as sites of amusement and spiritual renewal. The value and importance of the labyrinth and the poem are remarkably similar, and similarly two-fold. There will always be people who read for diversion and delight, to pass the afternoon like the figures in Pozzoserrato's painting of the garden maze. The poem and labyrinth offer distraction, dalliance, an aesthetic of wandering and discovery by chance similar to Coleridge's concept of poetic fancy. And yet some approach the labyrinth and poem as sites of mystery where one enters a different type of space, a delving into a more profound place, searching for something beyond the self, or beyond this world like those seeking redemption in the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral. For these travelers, the poem and labyrinth represent deliberate encounters with disorder, a purposeful foray into the dark wood to then try and find a way out. They are courting amazement. They then can return recentered, edified for having gone through this adventure. For those seeking inspiration, Coleridge's imagination, the

poem is a site where one can attempt to communicate with the divine, or by chance catch a

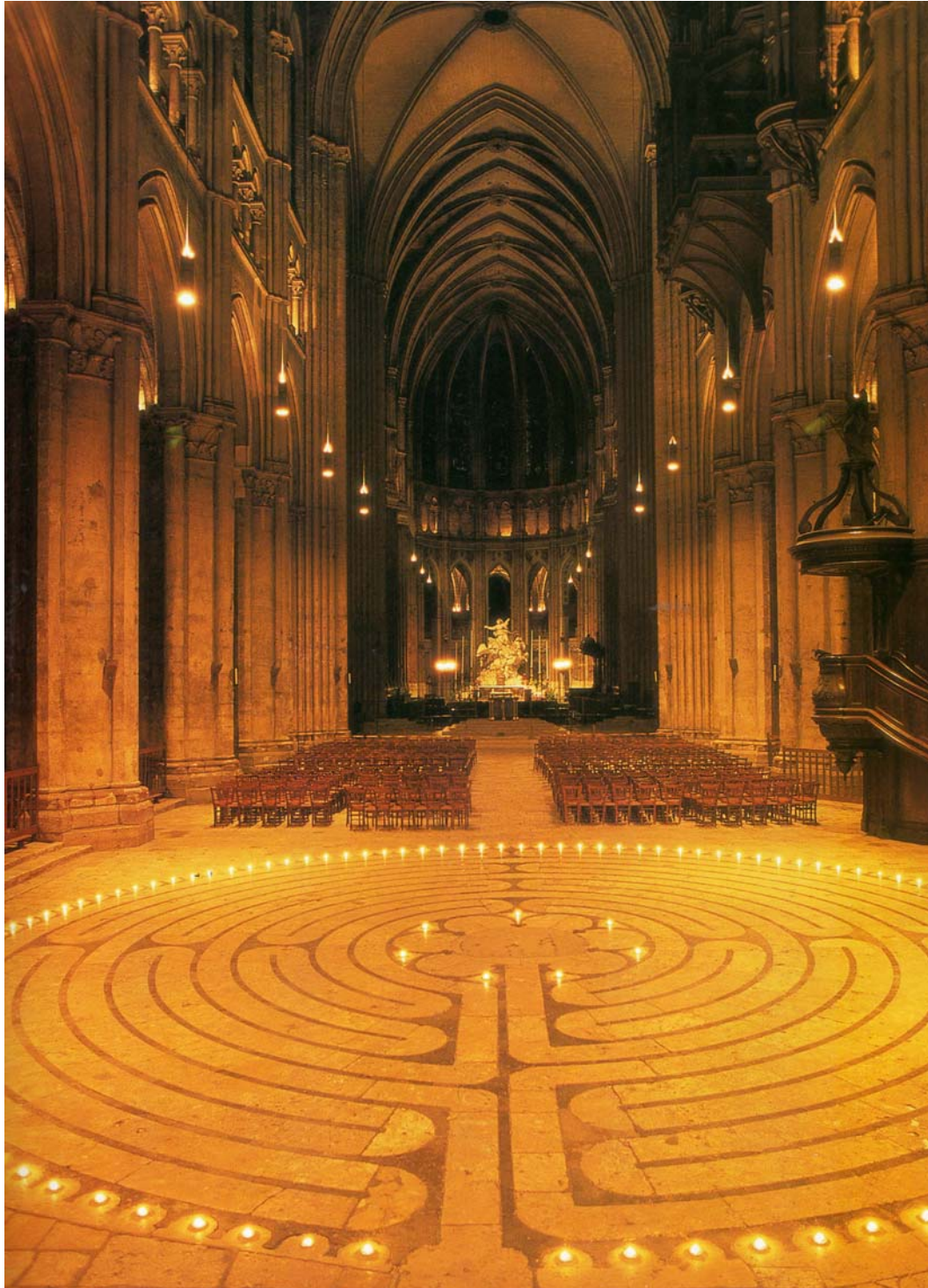fleeting glimpse of the complexity of language, its beautiful design and symmetry.

Figure 5.1
The labyrinth in the nave of Chartres Cathedral, an example of a labyrinth used for spiritual purposes (Saward 14).

Figure 5.2
"Pleasure Garden with a Maze," c. 1579-84, painted by Lodovico Pozzoserrato, from the workshop of Tintoretto, showing an example of a secular maze.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MONSTER AS POSTMODERN HERO IN ANNE CARSON'S
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RED

Anne Carson has written several works of hybrid style, undefinable in form, combining elements of essay and verse, classical mythology, postmodern pastiche, fiction and nonfiction, even literary criticism. Her prose and poetry mixture, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*, recreates ancient Greek myth and transforms it into a sort of romance, a present day coming of age story. This text combines two forms and spans centuries in its scope; readers are granted the opportunity to revisit classical mythology, in a realm of mythic import, gods, and monsters. I would like to examine one monster in particular here, the fearful Geryon, who inhabits the labyrinthine verse and prose of Carson's hybrid novel. In a postmodern novel/poem, the lurking Minotaur should be the lurking threat of nonmeaning, the absence or void of meaning, or language's inability to convey meaning without some sort of loss. Carson takes this threat and makes it a character, giving us a literal monster. We see through this monster's eyes; he is in fact searching for meaning, just as we all are. Within Carson's labyrinth of interlacing styles, time periods, and forms, we see from the monster's perspective. In the ancient labyrinth myth, this monster would be at turns the Minotaur, Theseus, and even Daedalus, as Carson rewrites the monster's fate, granting him access to the role of hero and artist, while fusing different forms of writing in her hybrid text. By looking at how she reinvents her monster, we might begin to understand what she is attempting with language as she rescues fragments from antiquity and pastes them together in postmodern play. As a postmodern poet, Carson embraces this account

of the other, the monstrous, and she constructs a labyrinth of story in verse around this central

figure, reclaiming the mythic monster and making him a modern hero.

Carson makes the reader circle the story; we aren't allowed to enter right away. Readers

must first circle along the outer rings of the labyrinth, reading various Appendixes that precede

the text itself, gathering information on the outskirts, before we enter into the inner chambers and

meet the monster. Instead of finding a traditional epigraph, a snippet of verse to set the

appropriate mood, readers must sort through assorted notes, historic debris, and afterthoughts

preceding the text. Before allowing her reader into the story proper, Carson sets up elaborate

obstacles, a series of Appendixes that at first seem tangential to her purpose, as if she were

putting her afterthoughts at the beginning. The reader therefore is forced to build relationships

among these Appendixes, creating pathways through seemingly unrelated fragments in order to

make his or her way into the story. Carson does not make this process easy, constantly shifting

her tone, point of view, and form. This front matter only lasts for twenty pages, and yet they are

a difficult twenty pages to traverse, and readers must enter into these rhetorical games with

focused attention and a strong desire to make connections if they are to gain access. Aside from

the fact that these "forethoughts" seem perplexing, they often overlap and interconnect, offering

the reader opportunities to circle back or jump ahead and simulating the multiple pathways of a

labyrinth. Even if readers remain focused on the text in front of them, they can still feel the

effects of these branching references. Monique Tschofen describes Carson's front matter as

simultaneously alienating and metaphorically appropriate for her endeavor of piecing together

fragments:

> Generically, the text refuses to blend its constituent parts. Juxtaposing the scholarly and the lyrical, the narrative and the journalistic, this is a hybrid text, what Judith Halberstam describes as a "stitched body of distorted textuality." […] Carson's mission in this text – to resurrect *a monster* and demonstrate the powers of revision – hinges on her deliberate mating of disparate things. Form, content, and purpose could not be less at odds than they are here. (33-34)

Tschofen argues that these various elements in Carson's front matter are disparate and yet cohesive. Carson's stitching together of these fragments creates a new hybrid entity, a Frankensteinian endeavor, recycling material into complex new networks. Instead of offering her readers a linear narrative or welcoming entrance into her novel, the author sets up an elaborate system or network of confusing switchbacks. She presents readers with information relevant to her purposes, but the reader has no way of knowing this yet. As a result, the front matter becomes labyrinthine for the reader and seems obscure or at best diversionary. Kept in the dark but glimpsing only faint possibilities, the reader stumbles through Carson's opening sections at a snail's pace, afraid of not making the correct turn, or missing some crucial key or compass to make all of these thoughts cohere. It takes a long time for the reader to become acclimated to this text, and Carson's technique of littering the opening pages with debris acts as an orienting feature.

Carson's front matter includes several confusing, interconnected fragments that she invites the reader not to decipher or unscramble, but to deliberately mix up. After the initial title page, Carson includes five brief sections that precede her prose poem, which incidentally has its own separate title page. The organization or structure of this front matter is as follows:

1. Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?
2. Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros
3. Appendix A
4. Appendix B
5. Appendix C
6. Autobiography of Red: A Romance
7. Interview

Each of the sections listed above lasts only a brief moment, excluding the sixth section that comprises the heart of the novel. The five preceding sections and the last section, the interview, surround the poem, opening and closing the reader's thoughts on the text, acting as entrance and exit to the verse within. All of these surrounding sections are from outside perspectives, and deal with Stesichoros and Helen of Troy, not Geryon directly, and they certainly do not offer Geryon's voice, his compelling point of view we find in the autobiography. The result is that these outer sections feel like distractions, false paths or outer pathways in the labyrinth that mislead, or misdirect us, keeping us from our goal, prolonging our reading, but not furthering Geryon's narrative, and thus frustrating us.

Carson begins her experimental work with a section entitled "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" devoted to Stesichoros, the ancient poet who first wrote about Geryon. She begins irreverently, with extreme understatement that seems humorous and intimate, a personable first line to put the reader at ease: "He came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet" (Carson 3). This opening acts as a knowing wink between author and reader, an warm invitation to join in on this literary joke, and yet just as the reader settles in and feels comfortable, confusing references to later material disorient and surprise, threatening one's place within a cozy narrative or linear reading experience. On the very first page, Carson refers readers to Appendixes A, B, and C. A few pages later, references to these Appendixes become even more intrusive, as the author not only cites them, but urges the reader to skip ahead: "This is a big question, the question of the blinding of Stesichoros by Helen (see Appendixes A, B), although generally regarded as unanswerable (but see Appendix C)" (5). The author tempts us with other passages, different corridors to go down. Immediately as we enter this labyrinth we are presented with options. And these Appendixes are fragments, some filling

only a page, like so many branching corridors that seem to immediately dead end as soon as they

begin. It's as if we need a bit of backstory and exposition before launching into the narrative.

The narrative is in verse form and the Appendixes are in prose, as Carson reverses and subverts

the reader's expectations of where textual elements go and what form they should take. One

would expect the narrative to be in extended prose and the contents of the Appendixes more

fragmented, poetic. It is within these outer rings surrounding the text, in the notes and fragments

before the "novel in verse" begins, that we first see Geryon.

Our first introduction to the monster Geryon is through a detached historical account of

his appearance in literature. We meet him from afar, in a manner of speaking. It is from

Stesichoros that Carson takes her cue to give us the monster's side of things:

> Geryon is the name of a character in ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros
> wrote a very long lyric poem in dactylo-epitrite meter and triadic structure. Some
> eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive, which go by the
> name *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon matter") in standard editions. They tell of a
> strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia (which is an
> adjective meaning simply "The Red Place") quietly tending a herd of magical red
> cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get
> the cattle. […] If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have
> taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory
> of culture over monstrosity. But instead the extant fragments of Stesichoros'
> poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from
> Geryon's own experience. (5-6)

From these fragments, one can witness events from Geryon's point of view, watching the

monster witnessing his own demise. Stesichoros gave us scenes from Geryon's childhood, his

little red dog helping as he herded cattle, scenes of Herakles' approach and the gods' will that he

should be defeated, scenes from the battle, and the demise of both Geryon's dog, who gets

clubbed by Herakles, and Geryon himself, whose skull Herakles pierces with an arrow. All of

these scenes are presented in the following Appendix, though reimagined through Carson's

interpretive lens. Before giving us the fragments, the fictive rewrites of historical fiction and

myth, Carson tells us to imagine them in a box and tells us "Here. Shake" (7). Carson ends her

brief opening section with this command, and this is an image of both order and disorder. The

fragments remain stable, but the order in which we read them is up for grabs, and thus the

relationships between the fragments are unstable. The relationships between things are

highlighted throughout Carson's text: relationships between people, between word and meaning,

between objects, between inside and outside. Here the reader, depending on his or her shake of

the box, contributes to the meaning of the text. Each time through the labyrinth is likewise

determined by the individual, his or her various choices along the way, often random in nature,

determining the path. Carson invites us to get lost in these fragments of ancient poetry

reinvented, from a time in between past and present and a space between prose and poetry,

between fact and fiction, myth and reality. She invites us to insert both ourselves and an element

of chance into the narrative. These words are ours to assemble as we wish. As readers move on

to the second section, they recognize the instability of this text, or at least the nonlinear aspect of

Carson's endeavor. As we enter this next brief moment of her work, we realize that the burden

of meaning making, of placing things in order and making sense of things, is entirely upon us.

Carson switches from prose to verse for her second section, "Red Meat: Fragments of

Stesichoros" and recreates fictionalized fragments recovered from ancient texts. At first the

reader might be fooled into thinking these verse fragments are authentic, recovered from an

ancient source, because of their abstract language and odd juxtapositions; they seem the work of

a half-hearted translation and strange idiom. Carson inserts anachronistic details that spoil this

effect, references to hot plates and glass-bottomed boats. These first two sections share similar

titles and yet their form and tone are vastly different. Carson writes in verse for the first time

here in this second section, and it is supposedly Stesichoros' fragments, the voice of another

speaking to the reader from a distant past. The entire section is a mere six pages long, consisting of sixteen brief stanzas of verse about Geryon's life, his family, his sense of destiny, and his eventual demise. Time and space expand and contract through these verses, and Carson's method creates a sort of collage of Geryon's life, a series of snapshots spread out upon a table for the reader to try and put in order. She begins with Geryon as a young boy, but then flashes forward to his death at the hands of Herakles. Then she shifts to capture a moment of battle, and the following verse returns to Geryon's childhood and his first day of school. Some of these fragments are from Geryon's point of view, some from an omniscient perspective, and still others from Herakles' vantage point. The one thread of consistency through this labyrinth of verse fragments is that they all concern Geryon and his poignant, tragic trajectory.

As we enter into this interactive space of the second section, our focus remains on Geryon, beginning with his demise in Stesichoros' lines and then imagining backwards to his idyllic childhood with all its attendant innocence. Throughout all the dizzying shifting of form, tone, time, space, and perspective, our one clear agenda is a character study of Geryon. This is the pathway we follow amidst all this confusion, and Carson offers us many sides of this key figure, allowing readers to figure out his importance, what he and his story might symbolize. In Pound's *Cantos,* Geryon is the name of the demon of usury, and yet Carson turns him into her hero, the postmodern rescue and rehabilitation of what the modernists once deplored and condemned. Geryon, like the Minotaur, is a hybrid form, variously said to have three torsos and heads, a serpent's tail, a scorpion's tail, or perhaps wings, as Stesichoros speculates. In Dante's *Inferno,* Geryon appears between the seventh and eight circles of hell, and Dante describes his flight as both beautiful and terrifying. His wings, of special fascination for Carson, give him the potential for freedom and artistry. In her account, Geryon is at once human and not human, and

his hybrid monstrosity makes him an outcast. His wings, however, are things of beauty, and marks of Daedalus, as Geryon is the Minotaur and Daedalus combined, destruction and creation in one tragic figure.

Carson's interpretation of Geryon is consistently sympathetic. Readers are introduced to a sensitive lonely boy, Geryon under the covers before bedtime, wanting to wear a mask to supper, wanting to stay up late and read, the domesticated childhood of cultural nostalgia. These sweet images are interrupted by fragments describing Herakles' approach and his brutal slaughter of everyone and everything in his path. Our first glimpse of Geryon as an adult is in the fragment where he describes his own demise. Characterizing Geryon as an innocent, childlike and matter of fact about his own demise, Carson makes the reader feel immediately sympathetic with this pathetic monster:

IV: GERYON'S DEATH BEGINS

Geryon walked the red length of his mind and answered No
It was murder And torn to see the cattle lay
All these darlings said Geryon And now me. (10)

His sympathy elicits our own, and we find ourselves in the monster's interiority, identifying with the classic antihero of postmodern literature, a demonized character rescued from the remnants of classical myth. Carson's syntax in these passages furthers the sensation of fragmentation. Capitalization gives us our only clues to where the line breaks, where one idea starts and another begins, and this running together, caused by both her enjambment and her lack of punctuation, enables Carson to create a sense of immediacy, as if all these things are happening at once. There is no pausing here, no separation of one event from the next, but all is continuous, equivalent, concurrent. In these fragments, we learn that Carson's Geryon is tormented by his own monstrosity, and sensitive to the pain around him; Carson also hints at Geryon's

homosexuality in one of these fragments, a theme explored later in the novel, describing a

weekend encounter with a centaur who tried to coax Geryon into intimacy, slyly patting a couch

cushion next to him. Carson alternates between earnest pathos and playful wit, going as far as

describing Zeus and Athena looking down from the heavens through a glass-bottomed boat (11).

We witness Geryon's first day of school, his mother neatening his little red wings, a moment

both tender and ridiculous. Our sympathies are firmly secured to Geryon in the following lines:

> **XI. RIGHT**
>
> Are there many little boys who think they are a
> Monster? But in my case I am right said Geryon to the
> Dog they were sitting on the bluffs The dog regarded him
> Joyfully (12)

Carson deploys every sympathetic archetype here, and the reader identifies with Geryon's

adolescent longing to fit it, his alienation from the world below. With his dog for his only

companion, Geryon is the solitary figure, doomed to a grim reality that most of us thankfully

escape. He is a real monster, not just a misfit, and he knows it. It pains him, and this awareness

of his own unloveability is apparent. Like the Minotaur, Geryon too is an innocent; both are

ostracized for their very nature, the monstrosity they were born with and unable to control. The

last fragment Carson gives us cuts Geryon's life short, a brief matter of fact ending: "The red

world And corresponding breezes / Went on Geryon did not" (14). Such an abrupt end, the "not"

following behind to negate his existence at the end of the sentence, when there is no more room

for mitigation. It is on this dead end that Carson's fragments end and the Appendixes begin.

Following a path that ends abruptly, the reader must now turn and find an alternate route.

The three Appendixes subvert the reader's desire to continue along Geryon's narrative.

By no means were the first two sections linear, but they were focused on Geryon, and just as

readers feel drawn into this character's plight, they are immediately thwarted by three brief

Appendixes in quick succession that divert readers away from this central character. It is as if

readers were approaching the center of the labyrinth and then the passageway abruptly turned

and forced them back to the outer corriders. We face an obstacle in our reading and must circle

back to the beginning, back to Stesichoros' writings about Helen. Appendix A is entitled

"Testimonia on the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding By Helen" and consists of three short

prose paragraphs that are written in the style of disjointed footnotes. The third paragraph ends

with an ellipsis, adding to the fragmentary or disembodied quality of these footnoted

interjections. Appendix B's title is almost longer than its contents, entitled "The Palinode of

Stesichoros by Stesichoros (Fragment 192 Poetae Melici Graeci)" (17). The entire Appendix is a

scant three lines:

> No it is not the true story.
> No you never went on the benched ships.
> No you never came to the towers of Troy. (17)

This all fits on one page and reverberates on this page as a repeated negation. The anaphora of

these lines, the refrain of "no" repeated three times in a row echoes in the reader's mind. As we

approach the beginning of the novel in verse, Carson seems to warn us that nothing is true, that

we must read with a sense of doubt, making us wary of the connections we attempt to make.

Following this negation, Appendix C entitled "Clearing up the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding

by Helen," is a numbered list of twenty-one axioms in a progression of questionable logic.

The third Appendix, Appendix C, offers twenty-one bivia (or choices), like forks in the

labyrinth. These choices, a constant process of decision making, make the reader feel anxious

and disoriented, compounding the negation and doubt of the preceding Appendix B. The logic

employed in these choices is ridiculous and faulty at best, adding to the anxiety of choosing

correctly. The narrative in verse begins right after these false paths, this panorama of options,

and it's as if Carson grabs the readers, spins them around, and then shoves them into the text. The section begins with what appears to be Sophoclean logic, with the opening line "Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not" (18). This simplicity quickly devolves into absurdity, conjecture, and non sequitur. Carson enacts a playful dialectic here, a dizzying ride for the reader, in which she imagines what Stesichoros really thinks of Helen:

> 15. If we call Helen up either she will sit with her glass of vermouth and let it ring or she will answer.
> 16. If she answers either we will (as they say) leave well enough alone or we will put Stesichoros on.
> 17. If we put Stesichoros on either he will contend that he now sees more clearly than ever before the truth about her whoring or he will admit he is a liar. (20)

The reader does not get to choose here, but must follow along behind Carson, along the twisting and turning path of logic she concocts. Each numbered choice seems like a true choice, but these choices become increasingly ludicrous, and the reader understands that there is no agency here: the author controls all. We are about to enter the heart of the text, Geryon's story, and are just beginning to realize the complexity of Carson's text, the Daedalian intricacy of what lies ahead.

After all of these obstacles, these opening sections about Stesichoros and Helen, the reader faces a second title page with the words "Autobiography of Red: A Romance," and it is here that Carson begins her novel in earnest. After all the brevity and shifting form of the opening sections, the reader finds an extended narrative in verse form lasting for over one hundred and twenty pages, forty-seven sections of poetry that recount Carson's imaginings of Geryon's life in which the reader can immerse his or her attention. Geryon's autobiography begins with a poem by Emily Dickinson, poem number 1748, a number that will resurface at the end of the novel, ending the way it begins, as a labyrinth must. Here it denotes the number of a poem, and in the end it will represent one of Geryon's photographs, or more accurately, the end of his photographs, the end of him. Throughout the novel, many of the various sections contain

descriptions of photographs Geryon has taken, furthering the reader's identification with the

character, allowing one to enter into his subjectivity. He is constantly taking photographs, a

monster with an eye for artistic composition, and the medium's ability to play with perceptual

relationships disturbs him greatly. His camera also divides his subjectivity further. When taking

pictures of a volcano at the end of the novel, Geryon remarks ambiguously and somewhat

ominously, "Raising a camera to one's face has effects / no one can calculate in advance" (135).

This photography places Geryon in the artist's role, himself an observer as we, the readers,

observe him. We know him all the more intimately for not only seeing him, but seeing what he

sees, and how he frames his world. This poem foreshadows the final photograph, the absence of

a photograph; the poem here describes a volcano, one that keeps its secrets, exhibiting a deep

reticence unlike human nature. Dickinson's poem warns that people should feel ashamed of

their need to confide and talk: "Admonished by her buckled lips / Let every babbler be / The

only secret people keep / Is Immortality" (22, lines 9-12). Just as with the labyrinth, this volcano

guards a secret, housing danger and mortality. These mysterious lines mark the threshold, our

entrance to the narrative in verse. Dickinson's lines evoke a paradox of presence and absence, as

the secret that we keep is the one thing we do not possess, although through art one could argue

we approach immortality. We know that Geryon takes photographs and has wings, both markers

of the artist, but we also know his fate, to be done in by Herakles; he is a mortal monster, if

monsters can be mortal, and in the end he will strive for immortality.

Right from the opening section, the reader sees Geryon the young boy, already

possessing an artist's imagination. Hurrying after his older brother, he grants nature surrounding

him an inner life, even the rocks: "So many different kinds of stones, / the sober and the

uncanny, lying side by side in the red dirt. / To stop and imagine the life of each one!" (23) His

fascination with words and their meanings again resembles that of the poet. He would collect and cherish words, fortified by their strength, their individual meanings. His older brother abuses Geryon, molesting him when they are forced to share a room, and the abuse causes Geryon to compartmentalize, to separate from himself, lying in the dark, thinking "about the difference / between outside and inside. / Inside is mine, he thought" (29). He begins his autobiography then: "In this work Geryon set down all inside things / particularly his own heroism / and early death much to the despair of the community. He coolly omitted / all outside things" (29). Here one realizes at last that we are not reading his autobiography, but a biography. We never see this autobiography that Geryon writes, the inner core of Geryon, but are kept at a distance, seeing him from without. What is interesting here is that his desire to write, his autobiography, is borne of violence. The incestuous abuse turns him into a writer. Like the moral wrongdoings of Pasiphaë creating the Minotaur, the sexual violation by Geryon's older brother turns him into not a monster, which he was already, but an artist. Both the Minotaur and the autobiographical Geryon are figures created by sexual transgression, and in both their cases, they must be kept separate from the outside world. The artful labyrinth is constructed to protect the world from the Minotaur, and perhaps in Geryon's case, the artful novel in verse, his autobiography of labyrinthine construction, is built up around him to protect him from the threatening world outside.

Geryon's first attempts at autobiography are sculptural, before he learns to write. In a beautiful notebook given to him later on, he begins a written account of his life in earnest by setting down the following facts:

> *Total Facts Known About Geryon.*
> *Geryon was a monster everything about him was red. Geryon lived*
> *on an island in the Atlantic called the Red Place. Geryon's mother*
> *was a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River Geryon's father*

> *was gold. Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings.*
> *Geryon was red so were his strange red cattle. Herakles came one*
> *day killed Geryon got the cattle.* (37)

Young Geryon imagines his ultimate fate, knowing that Herakles will end up killing him.

Perhaps Carson imagines it would be more interesting for her character to know and accept his

own destiny. She turns the myth on its head here though, making the original story Geryon's

childhood fantasy, and rewriting the myth. His foreknowledge here, his childhood inkling of the

original Geryon's fate, raises the question of responsibility. If he knew all this, would he not

avoid Herakles at all costs? Does he somehow cause his fate, making events occur; does he have

a hand in his own downfall? Years later, Geryon will have a revelation about destiny: "A man

moves through time. It means nothing except that, / like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive"

(81). When they meet as adolescents, couldn't Geryon have escaped Herakles' cruelty? When

they finally do meet, Carson creates a moment in which their chemistry appears electric,

unstoppable, unavoidable:

> Then he met Herakles and the kingdoms of his life all shifted down a few notches.
> They were two superior eels
> at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics.
> Geryon was going into the Bus Depot
> one Friday night about three a.m. to get change to call home. Herakles stepped off
> the bus from New Mexico and Geryon
> came fast around the corner of the platform and there it was one of those moments
> that is the opposite of blindness.
> The world poured back and forth between their eyes once or twice. (39)

They develop an instant connection, seeing each other every day, falling in love and discussing

art. Geryon feels his old self slipping away, an emptiness that was once filled with selfhood:

"The instant nature / forming between them drained every drop from the walls of his life /

leaving behind just ghosts / rustling like an old map" (42). His love or infatuation empties him

out, and now all that's left are empty walls, like the walls of the labyrinth echoing in absence of a

monster.

The lurking danger at the center of this novel is not the monster, but the volcano and its

eruptive potential. Taking Geryon home to Hades to meet his family, Herakles tells him about a

volcano that once erupted there, and its sole survivor, Lava Man. The Lava Man was badly

burned, but survived and toured with the Barnum Circus. Herakles' grandmother describes when

she saw him as a young girl in the carnival:

> *He gave out*
> *souvenir pumice and showed where the incandescence had brushed him*
> *I am a drop of gold he would say*
> *I am molten matter returned from the core of earth to tell you interior things –*
> *Look! he would prick his thumb*
> *and press out ocher-colored drops that sizzled when they hit the plate –*
> *Volcano blood!* (59)

Geryon is fascinated by this monster, a man turned freak by the volcano, who calls himself a

drop of gold, precisely what Geryon calls his father. The volcano almost killed this man,

engulfed him in lava and flame, but he escaped. The Lava Man is like the Minotaur had he lived,

free to leave the labyrinth and tell people the secrets of its inner depths; he is a fusion of Theseus,

the man who survives the labyrinth, and the Minotaur, the freak trapped inside.

This journey they take, at the center of the novel, has the volcano as its destination, and

Geryon is both enthralled and repelled by the volcano's destructive force. This is not the only

trip to a volcano; another visit ends the novel, as Carson has the reader circle back through her

labyrinth to revisit the same corridor with new knowledge, in a symmetrical maneuver.

Preceding this first pilgrimage, Geryon and Herakles embark on their sexual affair, the volcano

representing this heat and potential explosiveness. We see their brief blissful phase, and then

immediately the strain of their relationship as they snap at one another, restless and irritated.

Always needing Geryon's happiness, Herakles is depressed by Geryon's art, "*All your designs are about captivity, it depresses me*" (55). Yet Geryon is the monster, and feels trapped by his own form; he can only reflect his fears at this point – his art cannot transcend his own experiences. He feels captive and projects this sense of captivity in his actions and writings. We even witnessed his desire for enclosure and protection when he was a small boy, wanting to stay snug within blankets in bed, afraid to leave home and go off to school. When asked what his favorite weapon was by his older brother, he replied "cage," foreshadowing his later entrapment, and the sense of irreversible destiny that seals his fate (33). In his relationship with Herakles, this is not a physical cage but an emotional one. Geryon's art that depresses Herakles so is his graffiti "LOVESLAVE" with red wings attached, an emblem of himself (55). When Herakles abruptly breaks with Geryon, telling him that he should get back home and that they'll always be friends, Geryon reacts with an inner fire, becoming the volcano incarnate. He is at the height of infatuation here, a highly combustible state, and feels as if "a red wall / had sliced the air in half […] Flames licked along the floorboards inside him" (62). He calls himself "a brokenheart," and wishes for the world to end; the world has become his cage, his existence a terrible trap: "*If the world / ends now I am free*" (70). His wings, unused until now in the novel, are used here to wipe away his tears. Carson's images of flies drowning and birds floundering in bucketfuls of water reflect Geryon's inability to free himself from Herakles and their "wrong love" (75). Ian Rae, in his article "'Dazzling Hybrids': The Poetry of Anne Carson," links this imbalance of power between Geryon and Herakles to Carson's poetic method: "Dominant-subordinate relations – particularly their inversion – fascinate Carson, whether the relations be between men, between women, between men and women, or between a master-text and its adaptation" (30).

For Rae, Geryon's loveslave status is indicative of the imbalance of power between Stesichoros' fragments and Carson's modern adaptation.

Years later in Buenos Aires, after three years of studying German philosophy at college, Geryon attends a lecture on Skepticism with a stranger he met in a café. His favorite question that recurs throughout the novel concerns time. What is time made of? For one trapped by destiny, awaiting fate, this is an important question. For the Minotaur, as well, time would take on a tangibility, palpable in all that dark absence. His constant grief, one that eventually turns to a dull numbness, has become his cage, the labyrinth that houses his monstrous form. Everywhere he goes, Geryon asks people about time, what it's made of, what it's for. He cannot escape his state of constant misery. And so Herakles, the cure that was also the cause of his heartbreak, returns to him; Geryon bumps into Herakles and his new friend Ancash in a bookstore. The pair have been traveling around South America recording volcanoes, not for a nature film, but for a documentary on Emily Dickinson, recalling the opening epigraph (108). Ancash seems like another version of Geryon, a sensitive soul with a tape recorder to perceive life through instead of a camera. The pair share their recordings of all sorts of disasters with Geryon and he bolts out the door after listening for just a few minutes. Herakles, the storm chaser, leaves a wake of destruction in his path. Fascinated by natural disaster, he seems oblivious to the damage he inflicts on others. He jokingly refers to himself as "a master of monsters" to Geryon, cruelly acknowledging his power over him, but insensitive to its ramifications.

Ancash plays the role of Ariadne for Geryon in this novel, both reminding him of himself and guiding him on his path. When Ancash discovers Geryon's carefully guarded wings, he tells him about the Yazcamac, explaining important aspects of Geryon's destiny to him:

> *Now listen to me Geryon,*
> Ancash was saying.
> *there's a village in the mountains north of Huaraz called Jucu and in Jucu*
> *they believe some strange things.*
> *It's a volcanic region. Not active now. In ancient times they worshipped*
> *the volcano as a god and even*
> *threw people into it. For sacrifice?* asked Geryon whose head had come out
> of the blanket.
> *No not exactly. More like a testing procedure. They were looking for people*
> *from the inside. Wise ones.*
> *Holy men I guess you would say. The word in Quechua is* Yazcol Yazcamac *it means*
> *the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back.*(128)

These Yazcamac, what Ancash claims Geryon might be, are like Theseus, descending into the

labyrinth and coming back to tell the tale, or the Minotaur if he were somehow to escape.

Ancash tells Geryon that these people are real, that stories are still told about them:

> *Eyewitnesses,* said Geryon.
> *Yes. People who saw the inside of the volcano.*
> *And came back.*
> *Yes.*
> *How do they come back?*
> *Wings.*
> *Wings? Yes that's what they say the Yazcamac return as red people with wings,*
> *all their weaknesses burned away –*
> *and their mortality.* (128-29)

Like a guide arriving to help him through the labyrinth, Ancash enlightens Geryon to his

potential destiny. This revelation seems so direct and powerful, reflected in the short choppy

exchange, a stark contrast to Carson's longer fluid lines. Readers feel as if they have come to a

crucial section of the story here, these staccato lines like rapid short corridors in the maze,

synapses firing quickly, the end approaching rapidly, everything coming together. But Herakles

bursts in and interrupts their talk, frustrating their progression towards Geryon's fate, forcing the

reader to wait, as if we approached the exit but find ourselves winding back towards the center.

Ancash is continually interrupted, and this frustrates the reader even more. He knows the secrets

of this place, his home of South America, and he is their guide in a way; he also knows the

secrets of the Yazcamac, and often when he begins to explain something to Geryon, events

conspire to stop him short. In addition to this constant deferral and delay, Carson constructs a

labyrinth of interlaced imagery here. The volcano hides its secrets, the Dickinson poem suggests

that humans hide the secret of immortality, and here we have our monster Geryon, somehow able

to transcend death, to potentially withstand the annihilation of the volcano.

The next day, they all set out on their journey, the final journey of the novel, to see the

high Andes in Peru, in Jucu, Geryon, Herakles, Ancash, and Ancash's mother. The drive is a

tortuous one, winding up through dangerous switchbacks carved out of bare rock:

> The road had been getting steadily
> rockier during their ascent and now was little more than a dirt path strewn
> with boulders. It seemed
> that darkness had descended but then the car rounded a curve and the sky
> rushed open before them –
> bowl of gold where the last moments of sunsets were exploding – then another curve
> and blackness snuffed out all. (133)

The winding and dark curving road seems like the tortuous inner circles of the labyrinth they

must pass through to reach their goal. Carson begins to pick up the pace here as we near the

apex, angling towards the volcano's summit. Each section of verse gets briefer and briefer, and

they seem like snapshots compared to her longer more cinematic descriptions earlier. Carson

also focuses more on Geryon's photographs in these last chapters, and the sections approach

photoessay writing in their brevity; however, the photographs are absent, and so the descriptions

are gestures to absence. Everything comes to a shuddering halt when Geryon and Herakles sleep

together one last time and Ancash discovers their infidelity. He hits Geryon, but then asks him

for a favor: he wants Geryon to use his wings. This plea, this encouragement, this bargain, is

what enables Geryon to achieve his upcoming moment of transcendence. Ancash, Geryon's

Ariadne, gives him a purpose, direction, and hope. With Ancash's help, Geryon slays his own

Minotaur, his inner LOVESLAVE, the part of him forever enamored of Herakles. By seeing

Ancash's suffering, and recognizing himself in that suffering, he is freed from his infatuation.

Like Ariadne showing Theseus the way, Ancash guides Geryon towards his goal, showing him

the way out and encouraging him to use his wings. It's as if at the height of romantic intrigue in

the novel, Geryon has reached the center of the labyrinth and has found Ancash as a mirror,

someone else betrayed and wounded by Herakles.

In the next to last section of verse, Geryon grants Ancash his wish, and takes Ancash's

tape recorder with him to preserve the memory, to keep a record of his attempt at immortality:

> He has not flown for years but why not
> be a
> black speck raking its way toward the crater of Icchantikas on icy possibles,
> why not rotate
> the inhuman Andes at a personal angle and retreat when it spins – if it does
> and if not, win
> bolts of wind like slaps of wood and the bitter red drumming of wing muscle on air-
> he flicks Record.
> *This is for Ancash,* he calls to the earth diminishing below. This is a memory of our
> beauty. He peers down
> at the earth heart of Icchantikas dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he
> smiles for
> the camera: "The Only Secret People Keep." (145)

Geryon enters the volcano and survives, bringing the inside secrets out to share with the world

by using his artist's wings. Instead of the monster from classical myth, Carson's Geryon escapes

his fate; he endures. Carson's endeavor both preserves the historical fragments of Stesichoros

and alters them forever, rewriting history like a palimptext. As in a labyrinth, we exit the way

we came in, through the aperture of the volcano. At the beginning, the volcano was the focus,

the giant reticent beast of nature. In the end, we envision Geryon's flight, entranced by his

transcendence just as Dante was, just as Stesichoros must have been to imagine his life before

Herakles' grand entrance. Finally, what we see is not just Geryon flying, but Geryon's careful

recording of his flight. His whole life was about keeping a record, writing things down, preserving memory, the constant need to make things permanent. In these final sections of verse, we see Geryon smiling for the camera, pressing the record button, becoming the transcendent artist his wings allow and for once embracing his monstrosity, his otherness allowing him to bear witness to a world that would destroy anyone else.

Carson's final verse section entitled "The Flashes in which a Man Possesses Himself" gives readers a glimpse of Geryon after his mythic flight. He, Ankash, and Herakles all are covered with flour, dusted in symbolic ash, as they walk along the walls of the outside of the volcano where men bake bread in square holes cut into the volcano's back wall. The three lovers stand apart from one another, joined by their contemplation of this liminal space. This ending is an entrance, a way into the volcano, a threshold that Geryon has successfully passed through. It is a hybrid space of both inside and outside, where space is interrupted, spaces bridged by apertures. They stand and watch the flames in the dark:

> We are amazing beings,
> Geryon is thinking. We are neighbors of fire.
> And now time is rushing towards them
> where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality on their faces,
> night at their back. (146)

This is a place of great beauty, where two different spaces converge. Geryon attributes this awareness and awe to their adjacency to the fire, the fact that they are standing near the threshold, threatened by possible annihilation. This is a place where worlds come together and merge, where inside and outside converge, like the forms and styles of Carson's experimental text. Here is where the art of breadmaking is made possible, an art that will provide nourishment. Here is where Carson ends her novel and rests her aesthetic argument. This

merging of self and other in Geryon, the champion of this place, this place of hybridity and multiplicity is where we find sustenance.

This ending is of course not the same as the work's ending; Carson concludes her novel with yet another form of discourse, a fictional interview with Stesichoros tacked onto the ending like a final misdirection. After the forty-seventh snapshot or verse about Geryon, this section circles back to the beginning. By ending with these other voices, Carson reminds us of the fragments we started with, and we feel compelled to circle back and try to make sense of what we could not understand before, the opening sections that felt like afterthoughts and footnotes. In this last brief interview, the interviewer asks Stesichoros about what he has concealed, if he somehow celebrates an aesthetic of blindness, referring to both his infamous blinding (Helen blinded him for his portrayal of her in his verse) and the gaps the modern reader finds in trying to reconstruct the fragments of Geryon's story. And so the final meditations here are on seeing and what it means to see, to not see, to look unflinchingly, how to be an artist means to see for the world. Ironically, we are not looking unflinchingly at Geryon any longer, but considering him obliquely, distanced by considering his character through the lens of Stesichoros. We end not with seeing, but with perception. This ending three page interview wrenches us away from our immersion in Geryon's life story, forcing us back into an irreverent tone, and Carson's fanciful toying with a historical figure. Stesichoros tells his interviewer that everyone in the world saw what he saw because he was "(very simply) in charge of seeing for the world after all seeing is just a substance" (148). The poet sees for the world, and in what is titled his autobiography, Geryon survives through art, in the lines written about him and in the photographs and writing he uses to preserve his experience and shape others' perception of him. He survives because of his artist's wings, and he survives because he is a monster, a hybrid that can withstand the heat of

the volcano. His otherness gives him durability, affording him to penetrate the inner core of the

volcano where others cannot trespass. Like the hybrid novel in verse that can bridge fiction and

nonfiction, ancient writing and postmodern, Geryon is stronger for his supposed faults, more

powerful because of his monstrosity. He defies normalcy and so must be taken on his own

terms, just like Carson's experimental text. The closing question of this interview section

remains unanswered, as Stesichoros, the reluctant interviewee denies the interviewer his last

question about the fate of Geryon's little red dog, simply replying "That's three" (149). This

negation recalls the repeated "no's" from the earlier opening section, and reminds the reader that

this is an unconventional text. It is an abrupt ending, a refusal for more information that

frustrates the reader as if he or she walked into a dead end within the labyrinth. This shuts us out

of the rest of the story, a key detail, reminding us that we are only working with fragments here,

and that we are always only working with fragments. Both Carson's monster and novel

transcend genres and achieve artistry; as she rescues this mythical figure from death, enabling

him to survive the cataclysm of lost love, she also manages to rescue the postmodern novel by

turning it into a sort of pieced-together monster that the reader embraces entirely. In Carson's

text, there is an inversion of expectation. In rehabilitating this monster from myth and giving

him a voice, she also rehabilitates the postmodern poetic. We expect prose to be linear and

poetry to be difficult, abstruse, yet we find just the opposite here. The core of Geryon's narrative

is told in verse, and this section is the most clear, the most direct and emotive. Comparatively,

the surrounding prose sections, these layered Appendixes seem disjointed and mystifying.

Carson's central section of poetry allows us intimacy with the monster, and readers find

themselves fully immersed in his story, a narrative in verse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DUALITY AND PARADOX IN MARK STRAND'S *BLIZZARD OF ONE*

Mark Strand, a contemporary poet who embraces traditional form in his poetry, often employs paradox in his writing. Despite his reliance on form, the architectural structure of traditional poetry, his writing is highly postmodern in its focus on absence. His content and form seem to be at odds with each other, constantly on the verge of tumbling down. His formalism evokes a definite architecture here, a structured poetics that seems highly constructed and arranged, even as Strand attempts to erode meaning, causing his images to crumble and fall. The tension of opposites existing at once in so much of his work becomes an identifying feature of his craft. He does use elements of labyrinthine confusion, and one will also recognize spaces of absence or negation, moments of stillness and silence that evoke the center of the maze, but the most labyrinth-like feature of his writing is his constant focus on paradox and duality. The labyrinth itself is an image of duality, both a complex work of artistic design and confusing disorder. Viewed from above, the labyrinth appears whole, systematic, complex and beautiful, but from inside the labyrinth, the process of solving the labyrinth, like the process of reading Strand's poetry, is all disorder, wandering around, grasping after fleeting meanings and elusive goals. Throughout his poetry, readers must double back and retrace their steps, racing past familiar themes and then pausing to consider the impossible, as Strand contemplates the order inherent in chaos, the plural within the one, the stillness in the midst of movement in his verse, in this space of inversion and continual return.

To make our way through his Pulitzer Prize-winning volume of poetry *Blizzard of One* from 1998, one begins in uncharted territory, in the no man's land of an untitled poem. Trying to

get your bearings or a sense of direction is virtually impossible amidst so much abstraction. The

opening lines serve as entrance to this volume:

> As for the poem The Adorable One slipped into your pocket,
> Which began, "I think continually about us, the superhuman, how
> We fly around saying, 'Hi, I'm So-and-So, and who are you?'"
> It has been years since you bothered to read it. But now
> In this lavender light under the shade of the pines the time
> Seems right. The dust of a passion, the dark crumble of images
> Down the page are all that remain. And she was beautiful,
> And the poem, you thought at the time, was equally so. (Strand 3, lines 1-8)

Right away we feel a telescoping backward and forward through time. The vague designations

contrast with the specificity of this one poem. The forgotten poem is quoted but still a hazy

memory, both unknown and exactly remembered.

Strand creates nostalgia right from the start of his volume, in the opening lines, and here

we feel the first stirrings of paradox. The reader has only opened the book, turned to the first

page, and immediately becomes enmeshed in another So-and-So's memory of a poem, a

different poem from the one being read, that serves as inspiration for this one (as well as

displacement for the reader). The persona points to the dark crumble of images pouring down

the (other) page, but for the reader this is an empty signifier. We can only see the images

mentioned within these lines, the ones tumbling down our page, the lavender light and shade of

the pines that only half belong to the reader, for they are mentioned only because of their

evocation of memory, how they set the stage for the reading of a different poem we cannot

witness. In a postmodern move, Strand directs our attention to something that is not there, the

absence of another poem evoked by this one. In the final four lines, the traditional turn occurs

and Strand's persona utters the paradox that opens this volume:

> The lavender turns to ash. The clouds disappear. Where
> Is she now? And where is that boy who stood for hours
> Outside her house, learning too late that something is always

About to happen just at the moment it serves no purpose at all? (3, lines 9-12) Memories dissipate and disperse, and we are finally in the present with a regretful persona uttering what sounds at first like bitter irony. Things happen only when they no longer matter. The lines are more complex than this, though. Trying to orient oneself in the dark corridors of the persona's memory, the reader must assume that the persona is the boy standing outside her house, and the girl is "The Adorable One" from the first line. Is this untitled poem we are reading a belated response to her crumpled note of long ago? Is this volume of poetry a gesture towards the dust of a forgotten passion? The persona does not know her whereabouts, so if she is the intended listener he is writing into the void. One feels privy to a private musing here though, an inner truth confessed because of the safety provided by time's passage, all those intervening years when everything crumbled away. The use of second person assures us that we're in private meditation here, as well. And so we are left to tackle the final lines of this opening poem with little guidance.

As evidenced by the years in which the persona never bothered to read the poem slipped into his pocket, this cannot be simple pining or unrequited lost love here. One could project romantic longing onto the persona, but circling back to the beginning, we see that this poem is ultimately about the *poem* and not the girl. So this untitled entrance to Strand's volume can be read as a treatise on poetry, and perhaps what happens to it over time. Poetry captures imagery, nostalgia, beauty; it can freeze time, but also make one aware of time's progression. It also threatens to mean something even as it edges towards purposelessness. On the edge of nonmeaning, just when there is no hope for recovery (of meaning, of memory, of the girl), is the threshold of possibility. In the realm of poetic language, recalling a poem within another poem bemoaning the loss of meaning – the crumbling of images that still somehow seem beautiful –

we feel both hope and despair at the end of this first poem. Which direction should we choose? The reader could decide that this volume is full of the dark horrors of heartbreak and continual loss, slippage of meaning from the poem slipped into a pocket long ago. Or, one could focus on the something always about to happen in the last lines, a possibility of "something" not realized in this poem, but tantalizing enough for us to turn the page and enter the volume. Entering into the poem's internal logic, we must believe there is purpose here. Despite the fact that the persona tells us no purpose is served, he also hints that there is a sense of order – that there is an "always" to count on, even if is a negative experience that always repeats. This image of duality and paradox, of something always meaning nothing, is the threshold we must cross over to enter into Strand's volume. The last lines of his opening poem leave readers with the paradox that meaningless or purposelessness is always a risk. The persona, even in the midst of his regret, gives the reader a thread to follow out of the poem – one attached to anticipation and the possible recovery of something or someone beautiful.

The next poem in the volume, "The Beach Hotel," establishes a haunted, eerie mood for the reader. We are stranded here in this strangely empty place, and with the immediate use of the pronoun "us," Strand invites the reader into this curious space. The ship from the opening line has sailed, and we are stranded at this hotel for another year, this place where: "the rain never stops, / Where the garden, green and shadow-filled, says, in the rarest / Of whispers, 'Beware of encroachment'" (4, lines 3-5). Here we have our first signpost, our first indication that trouble lies ahead: this whispered warning, the garden threatening to engulf passersby. Beware of encroachment, beware of dog, beware of the lurking Minotaur – this sleepy little seaside resort transforms into a far darker labyrinth in the last few lines of the poem:

                                                        The window panes
        Will shake, and waves of darkness, cold, uncalled-for, grim,

> Will cover us. And into the close and mirrored catacombs of sleep
> We'll fall, and there in the faded light discover the bones,
> The dust, the bitter remains of someone who might have been
> Had we not taken his place. (4, lines 8-13)

Again we end with a paradox, or a sense of duality, impossible opposites existing at once. "We," the persona and perhaps the reader along for the ride, have taken the place of someone, and thus they never were, and so there were no bones…this last line, a thirteenth line tacked onto the end of the traditional twelve line form makes us retrace our steps, edging back into the dark. The last of it overturns the first, and so phrase by phrase we must back up and try a different reading, as if we had hit a dead end in a maze. We will not dream of this other's dusty bones, and because we have taken his place, the unspoken logic would dictate we are bound to dream of our own end. The waves of darkness, the grim, the catacombs, the whispered warnings, all of these images evoke the labyrinth, and the syntactical dead end would make this a multicursal labyrinth.

What's most haunting about this space is the echoing last line, reverberating in all the white space surrounding it, all the more apparent for the fullness of the other twelve lines of the text. Whether we understand the space we've entered or not, whether we willingly undertook this journey, this last line absolutely implicates us. The "we" forces us to identify with the persona and realize that in the reading of this poem, somehow, somewhere, we have entered into this creepy space along with the persona. As readers, we are complicit with the poet, and are "placed" by him in this last line, placed in another's place, replacing a body with our own. This duality recalls the bones mentioned earlier, but which turn out not to be there. Their image remains in the poem, though, in the images crumbling down the page. Throughout we have future tense – will shake, will cover, we'll fall – and yet the last line implies the past tense. Time collapses and we are at once there and not there. The reader cannot get a foothold amidst the shifting spatial and temporal dimensions. All we are left with is a gruesome image of these

bones in the fading light, as if we had just stumbled upon an unsuccessful predecessor in this labyrinth.

From the bones in darkness, Strand's next move takes us into the realm of the physical body, in "Old Man Leaves Party." The persona here celebrates his corporeal form, stripping in the moonlight to "stand in the wilds alone with my body" in order to "Be only myself, this dream of flesh, from moment to moment" (5, lines 10, 14). From this sonnet of singularity, where the persona declares his body beautiful and at one with the world around it we proceed to yet another sense of duality. It is almost a retreat, a negation of the affirmation of self in the last poem. The reader must double back. From a man naked, triumphant, flesh and spirit united, we move to the detached dinner party guests in "I Will Love the Twenty-first Century." The guests seem less inclined to spirituality, instead "hoping for quick, / Impersonal, random encounters of the usual sort" sprawled in the bedrooms upstairs (6, lines 1-2). In the midst of this meaningless groping, the reader is presented with a moment of perfect stillness and beauty. This paradox is a labyrinth in and of itself, and requires some untangling.

As the persona makes casual observations about his unremarkable surroundings, another man steps forward and presents the reader with the following declaration:

> Then a man
> turned
> And said to me: "Although I love the past, the dark of it,
> The weight of it teaching us nothing, the loss of it, the all
> Of it asking for nothing, I will love the twenty-first century more,
> For in it I see someone in bathrobe and slippers, brown-eyed and
> poor,
> Walking through snow without leaving so much as a footprint
> behind."
> "Oh," I said, putting my hat on, "Oh." (6, lines 9-18)

These lines force the reader into the persona's reaction, unable to respond with anything more coherent than "Oh." There is hope here in the most mundane image that seems at the same time

magical, someone walking in a bathrobe through the snow and leaving no footprints. This image recalls Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," and the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. All we can determine is that this shabby image somehow inspires an overwhelming altruism and love in this unknown speaker. Is it the hopelessness of humanity, someone poor and vulnerable in the snow, that elicits such love? Strand moves from dark imagery to light, the dark weight of the past to a single figure walking in the snow noiselessly, leaving no visible signs of passage. He ends with duality, the double "Oh" in the chiasmus of the last line, a balance between two poles. It's the only centered line, and our understanding of this moment hangs on this fulcrum. Are the "Ohs" repeated acknowledgments, or are they worlds apart in understanding? Is the first "Oh" dim and the second enlightened? In this moment of confession, an overheard moment of quiet significance, Strand stills the reader's mind, and this stillness resembles a trap or a dead end mimicking the architecture of a multicursal labyrinth. The mind cannot quite imagine what is being described, let alone why it would evoke such a declaration of love. Maybe, such a mundane image, just the very fact that such a thing continues is what's being celebrated here. All we have are maybes though, and two acknowledging "Ohs." Strand's mysterious image and the persona's equally ambiguous response make the reader circle back to try and penetrate the end of the poem.

This circling gets perpetuated with Strand's next poem, the three part "The Next Time." The poem opens with a swirling vortex of energy, with time overlapping itself: "Nobody sees it happening, but the architecture of our time / Is becoming the architecture of the next time" (7, lines 1-2). One has a sense of Yeats' spiraling gyres here, with one age replacing another, or lasting through, returning again. Time has real substance in these lines, a tangible physicality, and we feel enclosed within an architectural structure, just as the words we read are enclosed in

Strand's traditional form. In the heart of this poem, within part II, Strand's persona issues a clear

call to adventure. Presenting images of western motels, idyllic front yards, and people waving

on the surface of warm lakes, the persona invites the reader on a pastoral quest:

> The highway comes right to the door, so let's
> Take off before the world out there burns up. Life should be more
>
> Than the body's weight working itself from room to room.
> A turn through the forest will do us good, so will a spin
>
> Among the farms. Just think of the chickens strutting,
> The cows swinging their udders, and flicking their tails at flies.
>
> And one can imagine prisms of summer light breaking against
> The silent, haze-filled sleep of the farmer and his wife. (8, lines 21-28)

Here the West is presented as an antidote to the cold and complications of the space within the

poem, a restorative cure. There, in the West, everything is clear and out in the open, with

purpose to counteract the numbing ennui expressed in the lines above, the body merely going

through the motions of living, moving for movement's sake. Here there is a destination for the

quest, in the West where "everything / Is tirelessly present – the mountains casting their long

shadow / Over the valley where the wind sings its circular tune. / And trees respond with a dry

clapping of leaves" (9, lines 33-36). The persona never goes on this journey though, only

imagining the wind's circular tune, and remains to watch the leaves fall and a blanket of snow

cover the ground. The dry leaves will sound again in the next poem, in a moment of

diminishing.

Of all the poems in Strand's volume, the next piece, "The Night, The Porch," threatens

the reader with absolute dissolution. Here is the center of the labyrinth, where everything gets

stripped away and we feel the true absence, the power of negation, the nothing Strand has been

making something of all along. We begin focused on this nothingness. Because this poem best

represents the labyrinth's inner core, I will quote it at length here:

> To stare at nothing is to learn by heart
> What all of us will be swept into, and baring oneself
> To the wind is feeling the ungraspable somewhere close by.
> Trees can sway or be still. Day or night can be what they wish.
> What we desire, more than a season or weather, is the comfort
> Of being strangers, at least to ourselves. This is the crux
> Of the matter, which is why even now we seem to be waiting
> For something whose appearance would be its vanishing –
> The sound, say, of a few leaves falling, or just one leaf,
> Or less. There is no end to what we can learn. The book out there
> Tells us as much, and was never written with us in mind. (10, lines 1-11)

From the first line we feel the duality and paradox, the tension among so many opposites: staring

at nothing implies a physical looking as opposed to an intuitive knowing by "heart." There is

"nothing," and yet if we are all swept into it, it must be something. The wind is an image of

duality in itself, a force yet invisible, ungraspable. When laid bare, we feel something

intangible; we feel something lacking physicality. In the next few lines, there's a reconciliation

of opposite possibilities, a coming together of yin and yang: the trees can sway or be still.

Maybe these are not opposites here, but just different options. All is possible in this night on this

porch – day and night can be anything they wish. Here all the pathways are available. This is a

multicursal situation, in that we are surrounded, bombarded by choices and yet we remain lost.

The crux of the matter occurs at the center of the poem, and this seems the deepest of all

paradoxes, "the comfort / Of being strangers, at least to ourselves" (10, lines 5-6). These central

lines contain the core mystery around which, before and after, all the pairs of opposites fan out.

The poem's center is guarded by twisting convolutes, difficult to decipher images that force the

mind to pause, considering how these things are possible. One could read the poem's structure

as a circular labyrinth with a center room, the corridors leading one around in circular logic and demanding frequent pauses for processing, deciding which way to proceed.

One would miss this central "crux" if Strand left it unremarked upon, imagining it as just another paradox, another apparent impossibility. Is this a real thing? Is it even possible to be a stranger to oneself, and if so would it be a comfort or a nightmare? How can one become a stranger to the self without suffering amnesia? Here the anxiety of forgetting where one's been in the labyrinth is mirrored by not recognizing the self. And yet one recognizes this as a comfort, simply because the inability to get away from oneself, never to get outside oneself, to be trapped in one's own mindset forever, seems equally terrifying. We must believe that escape (one could call it growth) is possible, to not recognize oneself because the self has changed. And so the "waiting / For something whose appearance would be its vanishing" is the waiting for time's passage, since the future ceases to be once it arrives (10, lines 7-8). This positive reading, that we are all waiting for growth and rejuvenation, of course willfully ignores the opening and closing images of threatening dissolution. The dazed staring off into space, into nothing, is where we will all end up, and we are of no consequence to "The book out there" (10, line 10). Hope buttresses hopelessness though, because this book can teach us anything, everything, world without end.

The only lines left unexplored are the true "crux" of the poem, the lines syntactically marked by Strand's ending dash on line 8. This is the most descriptive image we have to go on in imagining Strand's ungraspable somewhere close by. We are told that we are all waiting for something, "The sound, say, of a few leaves falling, or just one leaf, / Or less" (10, lines 9-10). This progression of images proceeds from plural to singular, to less than singular – partial; perhaps we can perceive things only partially. And although it is a visual image we are given,

we must imagine it as a sound, much like poetry itself, a verbal art form divorced from sound by the written word of visible print. As Strand's leaves figuratively fall across the page, gradually reduced in number, dwindling down to one and then some of one, and then none, the reader imagines dissolving into this nothingness. The leaves of autumn fall and decay in the chill of this metaphorical season. The image invites imagining the death of the image, the inability to imagine, because the subject of the image is gradually taken away. The leaves of course also evoke the pages of poetry, and Strand invites us to imagine a vanishing art. And yet the leaves remain in the mind even as Strand takes them away from us. The echoing idea, a shadow perhaps, remains even if we are told to imagine less than a leaf. The mind traces a leaf first and then removes half, and the two images remain simultaneously. Imagining less than a leaf cannot occur in itself. This trick of images, this progression from many to one to less than one, allows the reader to imagine mortality. Here we feel the weight of the threatening nothing, the nonbeing we might get swept into, the desire for a kind of annihilation, of being a stranger to oneself, and the book of time or the good book of destiny or fate marching onward, of ages passing with no thought to the singular consciousness, an idea that resurfaces once we reach the center of Strand's poetic labyrinth. Strand's cocentric binaries, his symmetrical dichotomies, surround this central image of leaves and no leaves. It is an ungraspable image, too abstract for concrete representation, this sound that seems so elusive to capture. How could one leaf falling make a sound without others to rustle against, let alone less than a leaf? And yet the wind makes sound with little apparent substance. The reader is convinced this leaf would be audible, would make a sound, that the singular leaf (person/poem) would register (matter/mean). And even if consciousness, life, sentience, were gradually swept away, something would remain – imperceptible to the human ear maybe, but the echo of an aftersound. This progression of leaves

is introduced with the equivalent of a verbal stutter, a retracing of steps or interruption, "The sound, say," that makes the line all the more poignant. It is crucial that the reader decipher this image that is not an image, but a sound, or less than a sound. This may persist as the only unexplainable paradox, and it is not a duality like the others, but a progression. From several to one to none, and this progression is the only forward movement throughout the poem, a movement into something we can't quite see, something mysterious. All the rest of the unfolding binaries double back on themselves and enclose the reader.

The final key to this intricate labyrinth of lines, aside from the one asymmetrical line of leaves, would be the outlying title, "The Night, The Porch." Again, Strand presents the reader with duality, and the night and the porch are given equal weight on either side of the punctuating comma, as both articles are capitalized. One imagines a particular porch, a particular specific night because of these definite articles, yet Strand provides us with no details to imagine any one porch, any specific event to mark this night. His binary title, instead of locking in a particular time and place, providing figurative coordinates to map the poem onto, instead remains ungraspable, somehow out of time or place in an eternal night, on any or every porch, in an endless contemplation. The articles, instead of indicating singularity, say Strand's porch, effect the opposite and generalize the poem, as if Strand refers to Plato's forms of "the night" and "the porch." Again we see the many and the one simultaneously, another theme to resurface in the center. We proceed from all the nights and porches of the world, to figuring out which one night and porch, only to realize that the poet never allows us to make the location tangible or concrete. And yet because of the title, we imagine it; it places us even in its everywhereness. We are located within the absence of locale, pinpointed amidst universals. We stand alongside a persona who does not exist in these lines; there is no lens here, no evidence of a speaker, and yet we

stand next to this voice – the sound of a persona perhaps – to witness the walking through of an intricate labyrinthine logic. On the page, we read lines intended for us about the book never intended for us, and even in our not knowing, our ungrasping, we are comforted. Even as Strand presents us with a seemingly impossible image, the sound of less than a leaf falling that should frustrate readers, we are impressed by the symmetrical design of his construction. Like a labyrinth that is tortuous from within and beautifully planned from without, Strand's poem shows us a glimpse of possibility even as the images are swept into nothing.

"Precious Little," the next poem in this volume, takes the reader on a literal journey. The persona address us in second person, explaining the way ahead, almost as if we were reading instructions:

> You open the door that was your shield,
> And walk outside into the coils of wind
> And blurred tattoos of light that mar the ground.
> The day feels cold on your skin. (11, lines 3-6)

We enter into this quest by opening "the door that was your shield," and this description tells us instantly that we will be undertaking a dangerous mission. The shield that we abandon to enter also evokes ancient mythological imagery, as does the wind further down in the poem, stirring the leaves like a harp. The persona tells us that the path is clear and we push people out of our way, in a hurry to get where we're going. Again we head to the mythic West "through canyons into an endless valley" where "The air is pure, the houses are vacant" (11, lines 11-12). And as if nature bends to our quest, granting us courage, the personified wind aids us in our journey:

> Off in the distance the wind – all ice and feeling –
> Invents a tree and a harp, and begins to play.
> What could better – long phrases of air stirring the leaves,
> The leaves turning? But listen again. Is it really the wind,
> Or is it the sound of somebody running
> One step ahead of the dark? (11, lines 13-18)

Again we have a dual image, at once indicating the beneficent universe and a shadowy figure in flight – one of peaceful nature, one of a human in flight. This poem opens and closes with references to literal and figurative blindness, and in lines 16 through 18, the reader feels this blindness, feels lost and alone in the dark, more alone because of the unknown figure ahead. We are dropped into a dark cavern here, with either the wind as our guide or faint echoes of footsteps playing tricks on our mind. To add to the reader's disorientation, Strand ends the poem with a dead end, lines that circle back to the beginning in an endless feedback loop, another conundrum that effectively traps us inside the poem. The ending leads back to the beginning, and as in the labyrinth with only one opening, we must walk back through these corridors again, traveling through the lines once more. And so it becomes clear that it is our own footsteps in the dark we are pursuing. We were the ones just here, and weren't we here before, but somehow it looks different this time. No matter how many times this poem is attempted, it always leads back to the beginning. The ending question can only be answered by the opening statement. Strand ends with the unanswerable, if "nothing turns out / As you thought, then what is the difference / Between blindness lost and blindness regained?" (11, lines 19-21). The reader cannot see the difference here, can only vaguely imagine what the subtle nuances would be in all this hypothetical pondering, and so must continually return to the opening lines for an answer: "If blindness is blind to itself / Then vision will come" (11, lines 1-2). Only if we were ignorant to our own blindness could we understand, and yet the persona has pointed it out to us; we are mired in endless self-reflection and unable to unsee what we've seen; we cannot escape our newfound awareness that we are ignorant. On this roundabout in the labyrinth, the reader suddenly becomes cognizant of his or her blindness, layers upon layers of blindness.

A possible cure to our floundering arrives in the form of a savior, an evangelical poet arriving in "A limousine with all white tires and stained-glass windows" in Strand's next poem, "The Great Poet Returns" (12, line 3). Here, finally, is our guide through the labyrinth, our Virgil appearing at the end of the first of four parts to the volume. He will carry us through to the heart of the book. It is somewhat less comforting that he is portrayed with such sardonic gusto, as one would imagine a poet with the outer trappings of Elvis. The limousine with stained glass windows signifies that the poet might be disingenuous, a poet, priest, and politician arriving for the big show. The crowd grows silent at his approach, waiting for their miracle:

> He strode into the hall. There was a hush. His wings were big.
> The cut of his suit, the width of his tie, were out of date.
> When he spoke, the air seemed whitened by imagined cries.
> The worm of desire bore into the heart of everyone there.
> There were tears in their eyes. The great one was better than ever.
> "No need to rush," he said at the close of the reading, "the end
> Of the world is only the end of the world as you know it."
> How like him, everyone thought. Then he was gone,
> And the world was a blank. It was cold and the air was still. (12, lines 5-13)

The poet's wings seem like those of an angel, or like those of Daedalus the labyrinth's architect. He has been away, and now returns after some time, perhaps after having to fashion his wings and escape the labyrinth he created. He's unfashionable, out of date, perhaps speaking from the past to those in the hall. Here the persona imagines his own poet, Strand, with wry amusement. Although the outfit is dated, the poet still commands the room, altering the very air that surrounds him. Is it desire that he elicits from the crowd through his words? The only words from him that we hear are of course the mysterious and circuitous words that echo the nothing we get swept into and the ungraspable somewhere, even the blindness of being blind and hoping to become strangers to ourselves. The world is only what we know of it, and endings may not be as final as they appear, an intriguing sentiment placed as it is in the last poem of part one of

Strand's volume. These words appear at the end of his reading, maybe lines of his poetry or maybe an elusive closing for his performance, a Confucian paradox to still the mind, to offer a sense of comfort if only in mystery. Looking at these words, our only evidence of the poet's greatness, this might just be a thread to lead us through the poems yet to come. If the end of the world is only the world as we know it, then we are dealing with perception. Perhaps the "worm of desire" is the audience's desire to see more clearly via the lens of the poet's words, a desire the great poet encourages with his final bit of circular philosophy. If only we could break through the veil and perceive the truth, understand, and the poet comforts us with a linguistic loop that endlessly turns back on itself, that only dimly suggests the world is unknowable and all we have is our own perception of it, the world as we know it.

At the end of the poem, Strand's final question addresses the reader directly. The facing page is mostly white space, with only the roman numeral II serving as another gate, another doorway down another corridor to more poetry. As this final question reverberates in the reader's mind in all that blank space, we find ourselves at one with the audience within the poem, in their midst. The blankness of the white space faces the audience members as well, as they experience a chill after the great poet's departure:

> How like him, everyone thought. Then he was gone,
> And the world was a blank. It was cold and the air was still.
> Tell me, you people out there, what is poetry anyway?
> 　　Can anyone die without even a little? (12, lines 12-15)

The world is a blank without the poet's words filling the void, and crowd can only blink in the following silence. The two questions fill this absence after the poet has spoken, and the reader must pause to think before continuing on, must take a moment, if only to process that he or she is crossing a threshold by turning the next page and proceeding with the next part of the journey.

Structurally, the second part of Strand's volume is the more complex, with most poems containing multiple parts. The reader can see the multicursal paths on the page here, feel the multiplicity in the very form itself. "Our Masterpiece Is the Private Life" has three parts, "Morning, Noon, and Night" also has three, "A Suite of Appearances" contains six sections, and "Some Last Words" has seven. Only two poems in this part of the volume are "singular," not divided into smaller sections, broken into various parts: "A Piece of the Storm" and "Here." It is the apparent unicursal poems I would like to explore, as they stand alone and seem key in understanding Strand's form. The architecture branches here as we leave the first part of the volume. Instead of fairly straight (although sometimes circular) corridors, poems with only one section, we have division and postmodern fragmentation. As only two poems remain "whole," these are where we will begin.

"A Piece of the Storm" gives us our volume's title in its second line. We are in a room, our own room, witnessing the smallest of moments. We witness a single snowflake melting on the arm of a chair:

> From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,
> A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your room
> And made its way to the arm of the chair where you, looking up
> From your book, saw it the moment it landed. That's all
> There was to it. (20, lines 1-5)

This blizzard of one, while singular, contains the potential for many; the snowflake implies the blizzard. Singular and multiple are equivalent in this room's space; in our imagination of this room we see the storm and just the piece of it. Our perception is multiple, able to envision one and many simultaneously. Like the leaves we are to imagine less than one of, Strand wants us to imagine this isolated piece of storm apart from the blizzard. In this moment of dissolve, of melting away, the reader experiences an awareness of mortality, of what it means to live and die

and perhaps live again, according to the last lines. The poet walks us through an ending, the end

of this snowflake, a little death. In the fifth line, the persona tells us the flake's melting was

nothing really, "No more than a solemn waking / To brevity, to the lifting and falling away of

attention, swiftly, / A time between times, a flowerless funeral" (20, lines 5-7). The poem allows

us to memorialize this time between times, slip into a sacred time of memory, an eternity within

an instant, a timeless time like the weightless flake.

   We are in the center here. All is still and silent. There is no movement, no twists and

turns, no paradox, just the briefest of moments recorded to symbolize the brevity of existence,

how inconsequential this storm, this piece, the individual. All is negation here until the end. The

repetition of "No more" in lines 5 and 7 shows how little this snowflake mattered, and yet it also

echoes the sentiment that it exists no more. Again Strand offers a turn at the end of this poem,

some hope for renewal, small words of comfort from the great poet once more. The snowflake's

melting was no more than an awareness of brevity:

<div style="text-align:center">No more than that</div>
>Except for the feeling that this piece of the storm,
>Which turned into nothing before your eyes, would come back,
>That someone years hence, sitting as you are now, might say:
"It's time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening." (20, lines 7-11)

A new time is promised here, a future when the snowflake will have reformed to fall again, and a

future when another will witness the miniature spectacle and would even anticipate its return.

This future moment, an imagined moment, is an attempt to redeem the present. The present

snowflake came and went with such suddenness, as life occurs to us with time always racing by,

the future vanishing at the moment of its arrival. But to predict the snowflake's return, to

imagine that someone else could know and appreciate and wait for it, that the entire sky would

collaborate in its arrival, is to imagine a world full of consequence. In this fleeting image of

something weightless and seemingly inconsequential, Strand presents our lives, our awareness of time in microcosm. Ultimately, it is a poem of such kindness. The pronouns used, the "you," allow for a redemptive act on behalf of the reader. The snowflake "turned into nothing before your eyes," and so it is for "you" that this poem enacts this memorial, this flowerless funeral. Even "your" lack of awareness of the poignancy of each moment, "your" inability to perceive the passage of time, is ultimately redeemed in the figure imagined in the future who will know, who will understand and recognize all of this importance. Strand accomplishes all of this in such stillness. Nothing moves here except the weightless drifting flake. All the movement is within the mind, a silent reverie or meditation on mortality in the center of Strand's volume.

From the architectural complexity of the city of domes, the landscape in "Here" is a desolate one. The way out from the center is foreboding, with the sun hidden by clouds leaving the sky "Something less than blue" with dead plants dangling from balconies, darkness and death along the path (27, lines 3-4). The air may be clear, but the way is not. Streets, houses, and cemeteries interconnect in architectural confusion:

> Unoccupied for months, two empty streets converge
> On a central square, and on a nearby hill some tombs,
> Half buried in a drift of wild grass, appear to merge
> With houses at the edge of town. A breeze
> Stirs up some dust, turns up a page or two, then dies.
> All the boulevards are lined with leafless trees.
> There are no dogs nosing around, no birds, no buzzing flies. (27, lines 5-11)

Dust gathers on everything and again the only thing moving within the poem is the wind. This vista of abandonment, of stillness, is in contrast with the meditative interior quiet of "A Piece of the Storm." In "Here," we are vulnerable, outside and alone, yet not really in the space. The persona does not place the reader (or himself) in the poem; the only subject is a hypothetical one, someone who might visit the church, "whose massive, rotting doors / Stay open, it is cool, so if a

visitor should wander in / He could easily relax, kneel and pray" (27, lines 15-17). This is not a place where anyone has lived for years, and it barely offers reprieve for the wanderer. The tombs, roads, houses, grasses, these all merge into a complicated maze.

After passing through the abandoned streets and alleys of "Here," the reader soon must face the mythical guardian in the form of a beast with many heads, a variation on Cerberus. Just as Cerberus guarded the gates of Hades and let people in but not back out, the labyrinth allows easy access into the structure, but extrication becomes difficult. Part III of the volume contains just one poem in five sections, "Five Dogs." All five sections are of the same length except for the very last, which ends one line short. Strand has mentioned dogs earlier in the volume; in "Here" there were "no dogs nosing around" (27, line 11) and in the poem right before, "A Suite of Appearances," the "roaming dogs, let them become / The factors of absence, an incantation of the ineffable" (26, lines 10-11). These dogs, the factors of absence, fill up the third section of the volume. This one poem alone seems to stand guard over the final fourth section, guarding the exit – our last obstacle. "Five Dogs" begins with the voice of Spot, our trusty persona, about to climb the poets' hill and sing. The second voice belongs to Rex, the "last of the platinum / Retrievers, the end of a gorgeous line" (36, lines 7-8). The third dog is an old dog who has given up hope for love, given up on all of life: "So be it, / I say, let the tragedy strike, let the story of everything / End today, then let it begin again tomorrow. I no longer care" (37, lines 2-4). The fourth dog declares the end of an age to his love, Gypsy, watching as men and women dance with their eyes closed: "The wave of the future has gotten / To them and they have responded with all they have" (38, lines 8-9). This fourth section recalls "Old Man Leaves Party," the old man celebrating his body, "this dream of flesh" (5, line 14) and foreshadows the most intricate poem in the volume, "The Delirium Waltz." In all three of these poems, everyone within

becomes lost to sensation, adrift to desire, swaying under the moonlight. The ecstatic dancing

and celebration of the body is followed by the fifth dog, who bids farewell to earth. The last dog

does not speak to us directly, but the persona describes him in a phone booth trying to call home,

"But nothing would ease his tiny heart" (39, line 4). The fire from the celebratory section before

dies out in the fifth dog's wintry world. Here "The streets and walks had turned to glass. The

sky / Was a sheet of white" (39, lines 2-3). The song of the body has fled and for the dog,

"Those hymns to desire, songs of bliss / Would never return" (39, lines 6-7). No one answers the

phone and the last lines indicate that the dog, the world, is passing:

> Those hymns to desire, songs of bliss
> Would never return. The sky's copious indigo,
> The yellow dust of sunlight after rain, were gone.
> No one was home. The phone kept ringing. The curtains
> Of sleep were about to be drawn, and darkness would pass
> Into the world. And so, and so…goodbye all, goodbye dog. (39, lines 6-11)

In fable form, Strand presents the reader with a life, representing each stage of a life, each age of

conviction, with these dogs. This little death we witness, or preparation for death, darkness

passing into the world, this is the beginning of the end for us. The fifth and final section of

Strand's volume begins on the next page, and one can hear the telephone ringing, echoing

unanswered as one turns the page. Again we cross a threshold here as sleep is about to come,

and we enter into a different realm, a dreamworld.

Four poems make up the fourth section, a poem of memory, a poem of loss, a poem of

getting lost, and a poem that captures a single moment of beauty. "In Memory of Joseph

Brodsky," a poem of memory, is a meditation on what remains following the death of the

preceding poem. The persona concludes that "What remains of the self unwinds / Beyond us, for

whom time is only a measure of meanwhile / And the future no more than et cetera et

cetera…but fast and / forever" (43, lines 17-20). This telescoping time mirrors that of the

opening poem, another poem about memory, The Adorable One who was so beautiful. Strand's

volume seems to be attempting some sort of structural symmetry here, ending where it began.

This harmony of form is violently disrupted by the next two poems, however. In "What It Was,"

the reader enters a dark corridor, lost in an echoing void. The persona attempts to pinpoint

something. The first section of the poem is riddled with questions, unable to resolve itself. The

second section then offers answers, filling in all the blanks and gaps. The reader surmises that

this poem attempts to define loss, and the "What It Was" of the title refers to what exactly, what

things, what feelings or actions, what moments, were now lost. The rhythm of the lines, the

repetition of the phrase "of itself," all the repeated phrases syntactically mimic the desperate

circling of the search for answers. Trying to isolate lines to quote is almost impossible, as the

lines all run into each other, continuing on in an endless pacing enjambment as we fall deeper

into the mystery of what "it" could be, and deeper into the darkness along with the persona, lost

with him in the shadows of his memory:

> It was impossible to imagine, impossible
> Not to imagine; the blueness of it, the shadow it cast,
> Falling downward, filling the dark with the chill of itself,
> The cold of it falling out of itself, out of whatever idea
> Of itself it described as it fell; a something, a smallness,
> A dot, a speck, a speck within a speck, an endless depth
> Of smallness; a song, but less than a song, something drowning
> Into itself, something going, a flood of sound, but less
> Than a sound; the last of it, the blank of it,
> The tender small blank of it filling its echo, and falling,
> And rising unnoticed, and falling again, and always thus,
> And always because, and only because, once having been, it was… (44, lines 1-12)

The reader tumbles into this darkness, an attenuation of abstraction, falling from the blue into the

dark and then falling again, and we are not so much in a labyrinth as lost to a bottomless pit of

"endless depth." Again we see the duality of Strand's language in the "flood of sound, but less /

Than a sound," like the falling leaf and then the sound of less than a leaf falling, only we're the one falling here.

Not until we make our way through the second section of the poem do we begin to understand that we were falling through a memory, lost within the aftermath of loss. The persona begins to list all of the things "it" was: "it was the way / The ruined moonlight fell across her hair. / It was that, and it was more. It was the wind that tore / At the trees; it was the fuss and clutter of clouds, the shore / Littered with stars" (45, lines 3-7). The reader conveniently finds many answers, many possibilities that help to fill the blank of the loss, in an attempt to determine what it was that we just went through, to look back and imagine where we came from. These answers compete with each other for attention, crashing against each other in irregularly spaced rhyme. Strand employs end rhyme, then alternates to internal rhyme, then returns to end rhyme that extends over several lines. Structurally, this section is unsound, forcing the reader to race ahead and stop abruptly, in a state of constant flux. Here we see Strand interlacing rhyme, the way memories are interlaced, the way the paths of a labyrinth employ interlacing. Like the tumbling through space of the first section, the syntax tumbles forward here, racing ahead of the reader. All of these explanations, refinements on the definition of what it was, they accumulate so rapidly in a profusion of possibilities, a multicursal labyrinth where all paths lead back to a single entrance, a single answer.

Strand's treatment of space here, at once empty and full, again shows his preoccupation with duality. The persona fills up the absence of it, what it was, with a laundry list of reflections and impressions, trying not to recreate, but maybe just revisit "a moment so full" that eventually "went, as it had to" (45, lines 10-11). We have emptiness and fullness, all these things listed in the poem and more. Strand makes the reader feel all of these things, see all these images, and

always points to what's missing, what's not on the page. It is a zen philosophy we witness, as throughout the volume Strand shows us objects as tangible, filling up space, and their subsequent vanishing. The imagination retains these fleeting images, as does the page, and so even as they go we have them before us. The sound of less than a leaf is present and absent. From the opening "Untitled" poem, "The lavender turns to ask. The clouds disappear" before our eyes on the page (3, line 9). We discover "the bones, / The dust, the bitter remains of someone" who "might have been" and understand that these bones are physical, palpable even in their potentiality (4, lines 11-13). Just as language evokes concepts from out of the ether, and they are present even while absent, Strand evokes the idea of loss with these images that constantly disappear, in a space where everything is on the verge of vanishing.

In 1983, years before *Blizzard of One,* Strand edited a compilation of American artists entitled *Art of the Real: Nine American Figurative Painters.* These artists, like Strand, were all preoccupied with the real, the tangible object and its visual representation, artists "committed to paying close attention to what was around them, whether it was the highly nuanced character of light or the more obvious order of figure and ground." Describing their aesthetic similarities, Strand argues that a concentration on the physical object has real value and import in their art:

> It is this attention that has the power of compensating for our ever increasing
> sense of estrangement from the natural world. One of the shared assumptions in
> the work of the artists in *Art of the Real* is that our relationship to the physical
> world, a relationship that is perpetually in danger of being destroyed by
> inattention, can be salvaged. Again and again, we see in their work the world in
> all its variety not merely alluded to but revealed, with visual incident becoming
> illumination. (Strand, *Art* 9)

Strand recognizes that these figurative artists are seeking illumination from the physical senses, capturing beauty in the surrounding mundane world. And yet in his poetry we do not encounter transcendent objects, a still life made up of language offering redemption. Rather we see a

reduction of objects, the presentation of a thing and then the taking away. Strand repeatedly sets

a vivid scene and then asks the reader to imagine its vanishing, leaving only an afterimage of

trace of the original object. He goes a step beyond the figurative aesthetic here in that the poetic

medium allows him to both trace and erase, to name a thing and put it in the poem, and then take

it out. We see leaves and then a leaf, and then less than a leaf. We envision a blizzard and then a

single snowflake, a constant reduction or erasure. In *Reading Mark Strand: His Collected*

Works, Career, and the Poetics of the Privative, James F. Nicosia argues that Strand's use of

negation spans his entire career. Nicosia believes that Strand's continual elimination of objects

in his verse is a strategy enacted to reduce the world to a bare minimum: "Creating a subjective

world within the imagination is a vital task. Erase the real world, says Strand, and from the

darkness of possibility erect a new one. Immerse yourself in this creation and, for the moment,

you have redemption" (17). Perhaps this fixation on the singular object and its removal is

Strand's attempt to begin again, to wipe the slate clean and start fresh. Like the leaves

winnowing down to just one, or just the one snowflake, or the stripping off of clothes in "Old

Man Leaves Party," the objects in Strand's poems are always on the verge of disappearance,

reducing down to the singular in order to begin again. And the poem often ends at this precipice.

In another example of Strand's use of paradox, his poems often end right at the moment of

possibility.

This space of disappearing and reappearing objects, moments that might have been or

could be, is also always echoing with voices and sounds that never quite form, the imaginings of

sound. Sounds we thought we perceived are second guessed in "Precious Little" as the wind

stirring the leaves morphs into footsteps running ahead of us in the dark. In "The Next Time,"

our comforting message never manages to come; the voice never tell us "that this / Is the way it

was meant to happen, that if only we knew / How long the ruins would last we would never complain" (7, lines 12-14) and yet these lines take up space on the page; this message sounds in the reader's mind, is perceived in its erasure, partially negated yet still persisting. This image of fullness and emptiness, memory despite loss of memory, the "snowflake, a blizzard of one" that signifies so much even in its weightlessness is a moment Strand reconfigures for the reader time and time again (20, line 2). This volume is labyrinthine, winding around in circles, the reader continually recognizing familiar landmarks along the way. It is as if we are constantly on the threshold of loss, moving away from what once was, and only then able to appreciate it in our grief and regret. The last of the five dogs suffered the loss of desire, the "songs of bliss" that "Would never return. The sky's copious indigo, / The yellow dust of sunlight after rain" that have all vanished (39, lines 6-8). As we progress through the volume and the images of an idyllic past or a dreamed of future fade, the space is littered with their debris, the crumbling images "Down the page are all that remain" from the opening poem (3, line 7). As we get further and further along in Strand's labyrinth, our options disappear one by one, and the pathways we didn't take, though long gone, still haunt us. Everything is inverted in this space, the plural blizzard existing within the single snowflake, the "moment so full" that actually never happened at all, and a glimpse of infinite expanse held within a small speck, a speck of a speck that we see as we hurtle through the dark space of "What It Was." This faint memory, a tiny dot, contains volumes: "a something, a smallness, / A dot, a speck, a speck within a speck, an endless depth / Of smallness" (44, lines 5-7). Nothing contains everything and the all is contained within this smallest of spaces. Like the shifting, turning space within the labyrinth, its architecture simultaneously evoking order and chaos, the duality of space reoccurs throughout Strand's volume.

Strand's preoccupation with time resurfaces here in the second section of the poem. In the midst of defining "What It Was," the persona offers the following:

> It was the hour which seemed to say
> That if you knew what time it really was, you would not
> Ask for anything again. It was that. It was certainly that.
> It was also what never happened – a moment so full
> That when it went, as it had to, no grief was large enough
> To contain it. (45, lines 7-12)

Here is a moment and its antithesis, what happened and what did not, like figure and ground. The paradoxical nature of time, how it is fleeting yet eternal, ungraspable and yet we feel the weight of it, that somehow memories can capture an instant of time while simultaneously making us aware of the span of years stretching between then and now – all of these themes are revisited throughout this volume. Traditionally, the poet's lines immortalize, preserving moments of beauty, making them, life, the poet, the reader, timeless. The poem enacts a sort of sacred space and time, what Mircea Eliade would call recursive and eternal, the poem acting as a ritual to preserve these lines in an eternal present. Although when we read our way through a poem it does take time, this poem is also timeless and forever on the page for new readers to experience, or for us to revisit. Poetry inhabits this double space, both temporal and timeless, to be read now and preserved for all time. Seen from above, as a figure in space, the labyrinth is an image, a design. When experienced though, the labyrinth is a complex structure that takes on a temporal dimension; it cannot be traversed in an instant, and thus there's a duality of time and space inherent in the labyrinth. We conceive of the labyrinth as a journey or quest from the classical mythology, but our mind sees the labyrinth as a pretty design, a form only, lacking duration. Strand isn't just writing about loss in his volume, but the moment right before, the moment before its vanishing, before all is lost. These glimpses, these fleeting moments seem to be running ahead of us in the dark, something the poet and we try to capture but find elusive

somehow, just out of reach. Strand seems to be in pursuit of time, always on the move, running just a little bit faster to grasp that ungraspable somewhere that's just ahead of him in the labyrinth, and his readers are along for this chase. Strand's fleeting glimpses, time that he attempts to capture, these could of course represent life and mortality, as we chase our future through these chaotic corridors, or perhaps try to reimagine and remember the past. Strand could also be looking at language itself here, though, and the fleeting glimpse would symbolize the shifting mind, the patterns and diverging pathways of thinking. Here we can envision the labyrinth as a metaphor for life and language, representing our desperate chase through time and the evasiveness of language to communicate what we mean exactly and entirely. In *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change,* David Harvey recognizes such fleetingness, what he calls "ephemerality" as a component of both modernity and postmodernity, a thread connecting the two concepts:

> I begin with what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism: its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity. But postmodernism responds to the fact of that in a very particular way. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define 'the eternal and immutable' elements that lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is. Foucault instructs us, for example, to 'develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction,' and 'to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic. (44)

Here we can imagine Strand's proliferation of glimpses, moments, ebbing and flowing, recurring through the volume like a current. Multiple, fleeting time can only be remedied by a nomadic persona who wanders through time, accruing meaning. The persona is never fixed in this volume, free to wander in and out of time and place, to address the past or the reader or foresee the future with a shifting perspective.

From "The Next Time," Strand shows us vast ages rolling past as "the architecture of our time / Is becoming the next time" (7, lines 1-2) and hints at a dreamed of eternity, one that exists in the lines before us on the page, but never exactly comes about. Desire has fled:

> Leaving only a trace of perfume in its wake,
> And so many people we loved have gone,
>
> And no voice comes from outer space, from the folds
> Of dust and carpets of wind to tell us that this
>
> Is the way it was meant to happen, that if only we knew
> How long the ruins would last we would never complain. (7, lines 9-14)

No voice comes through, and the reader realizes this as a wish, the potential of eternity and its reassurance, like the hoped for witness of the snowflake's return in "A Piece of the Storm." Strand continually presents the reader with a hope that could be, leaves that would fall in "The Night, The Porch," and what "might have been / Had we not taken his place" in "The Beach Hotel" (4, lines 12-13). Always the language of the conditional, indicating Strand's desire to rewrite the past and reimagine the future. Strand does not want to freeze time, but rewind it and begin again. The persona from "The Next Time" tells us "It could have been another story, the one that was meant / Instead of the one that happened." (9, lines 1-2). Speaking from the future and envisioning what would have been better, what life could have been like, the persona concludes that wishing for a different life is no life at all, is not what he wants to be doing, even as he wishes. All we have is wishing, and a life full of wishes is always a life deferred. This is the human perception of time, a continual revisiting of the past, a projection into the future, a recursive experience of should and could, wanting things to have been different, but wishing we didn't want for anything, another circular argument in Strand's maze. Our way out is through the paradox of time: "What else would there be / This late in the day for us but desire to make amends / And start again, the sun's compassion as it disappears?" (9, lines 12-14). This echoes

the opening poem's something about to happen "the moment it serves no purpose at all" (3, line 12) and the "something whose appearance would be its vanishing" during our vigil in "The Night, The Porch" (10, line 8). It is the snowflake we notice only in its disappearance in "A Piece of the Storm," and in imagining its return. It is the time between times when we mourn and remember the snowflake. It is time as merely a "measure of meanwhile" in the poem "In Memory of Joseph Brodsky" (43, line 18). All these meditations on endlessness, on origins and endings, on what lasts and what vanishes, and what remains, and how we recover, how we remember – the reader returns to these temporal images again and again, passing them in the twisting corridors of the labyrinth, maybe revisiting the same path several times in trying to find the way out.

Temporality, for Strand, is not linear, but circular, or at least recursive. It is two things at once: the moment and its vanishing. We notice things only as they disappear, or we understand only once it no longer matters. What Strand is really concerned with here is not time itself, but our perception of time. In "A Suite of Appearances," in the last of a six part poem in part II of the volume, the persona describes a sunset for the reader, both the sunset itself and how one perceives it:

> Of occasions flounced with rose and gold in which the sun
> Sinks deep and drowns in a blackening sea, of those, and more,
> To be tired. To have the whole sunset again, moment by moment,
>
> As it occurred, in a correct and detailed account, only darkens
> Our sense of what happened. There is a limit to what we can picture
> And to how much of a good thing is a good thing. Better to hope
>
> For the merest reminder, a spectral glimpse – there but not there,
> Something not quite a scene, poised only to be dissolved,
> So, when it goes as it must, no sense of loss springs in its wake. (26, lines 1-9)

Again we witness a focus on loss, an anxiety of retrieval, and a flickering of there and not there, the paradox of all memory. This sunset, this "spectral glimpse," foreshadows Strand's final poem, but first the reader must pass through the shifting tumult of "The Delirium Waltz." And it bears repeating that Strand presents another moment of vanishing, something "poised only to be dissolved," giving the reader all the postmodern poetry can hope to offer: a glancing truth, a image fading and slipping away before our very eyes.

Before the stillness of the final poem, one must survive Strand's most twisting and convoluted poem in the entire volume. "The Delirium Waltz" contains many separate sections, but they are not neatly cordoned off. Everything is crammed together here, and the form constantly shifts throughout, from free verse to regular quatrains, from complex philosophical musings and complicated emotional memories and wrestlings with inner demons, to over-simplified formulaic verse, enacting a sort of dance for the reader, a mental shifting from one form to the next. The poem begins in free verse, then progresses to quatrains, and alternates like this three times, to end again as it started in free verse. The opening paragraph is a startling break from the more formal style in all the other poems, and one feels immediately pulled into the persona's memories:

> I cannot remember when it began. This lights were low. We were
> walking across the dance floor, over polished wood and inlaid marble,
> through shallow water, through dustings of snow, through cloudy
> figures of fallen light. I cannot remember but I think you were
> there – whoever you were – sometimes with me, sometimes watch-
> ing. Shapes assembled themselves and dissolved. The hall to the
> ballroom seemed endless, and a voice – perhaps it was yours – was
> saying we'd never arrive. (46, lines 1-8)

The typesetting makes this section visually arresting, justified on both sides, something impossible to reproduce here, but both sides are even, creating a corridor or room of text, a perfect block of rectangular verse. We move through this highly reflective space, vividly

described with light bounding from every surface, the polished wood, the marble, the shallow water. Objects appear and disappear, dissolving into intangibility, and again a voice we cannot hear (we don't know whose), that is a statement of negation, that predicted something that didn't happen – another false path. The persona begins to dance, or remembers the beginning, imagining that he was always almost dancing in a timeless rapture and the space opens up into a dramatic vast expanse: "The rooms became larger and finally dimensionless, and we / kept gliding, gliding and turning" (46, lines 19-20). As the reader adjusts to this anchorless space and time, as the persona is adrift in reverie, an abrupt shift in form occurs, jarring in its regularity and repetition. This section begins immediately following the gliding and turning:

> And then came Bob and Sonia
> And the dance was slow
> And joining them now were Chip and Molly
> And Joseph dear Joseph was dancing and smoking
>
> And the dance was slow
> And into the hall years later came Tom and Em
> And Joseph dear Joseph was dancing and smoking
> And Bill and Sandy were leaning together (47, lines 21-28)

These sections in the poem mimic a constant turning, with the "and's" piling up, a constant accumulation of turns; one feels almost dizzy, as if nearing the center of the labyrinth, a quickening of pace in the absence of any punctuation, with ever tightening turns around one fixed point. Very little new information is added with each line, and the reader circles the dance floor through nine quatrains of couples turning and dancing in constant movement. Another section of free verse interrupts the dance, and it's as if the mind pauses, the music stops, and we once again focus on the text.

There are so many rooms here in this maze, with everyone "afloat / on the floor, on the sea of the floor, like a raft of voices" (49, lines 60-61). These rooms all lead to one another, and

with so many names inhabiting this poem, our first specific names applied to people, the space is

crowded and all is profusion. The only other proper names, aside from the memorial to Joseph

Brodsky only in the title of that one poem, would be the names of the dogs in "Five Dogs," Spot,

Rex, Gypsy. With so much confusion in this population in the poem, one barely recognizes the

call in the middle of the name, in the midst of all the names turning against each other:

> And Rusty and Carol were there
> And Charles and Holly were dancing
> And the sea's green body was near
> Hello out there hello
>
> And Charles and Holly were dancing
> So thin they were and light
> Hello out there hello
> Can anyone hear out there (51, lines 92-99)

Could this be the voice of the poet? The past? The present-day persona trying to reconnect with

all these shadows of the past? This voice attempts to break through and then suddenly the poem

breaks into free verse like a crashing sea, washing away everything but the self, including the

self. Here we see the moment of annihilation. This poem acts out the labyrinth myth, taking the

reader through twists and turns through harrowing trials, painful loss, shifting time and space,

only to confront the possible destruction of self. Here we face our figurative Minotaur:

> And the rush of water was loud as if the ballroom were flooded. And
> I was dancing alone in the absence of all that I knew and was bound
> by. And here was the sea – the blur, the erasure of difference, the
> end of self, the end of whatever surrounds the self. And I kept going.
> The breakers flashed and fell under the moon's gaze. Scattered
> petals of foam shone briefly, then sank in the sand. It was cold, and
> I found myself suddenly back with the others. That vast ungraspable
> body, the sea, that huge and meaningless empire of water, was left
> on its own. (51, lines 100-109)

The self gets buffeted by wind and sea here, separated from everyone else and then rejoining

them. Strand tests the limits or boundaries, "the difference, the / end of self," throughout with

his attempts to invert time and space. It's as if to make his poetry more true, his images more real, he must push the boundaries of matter, so that things really matter. He presents an image and it vanishes; in its vanishing we see it more clearly. We see the object along with the space it once filled. We watch the sun only when it disappears over the horizon; we can appreciate it only when it is about to leave, in its immanent absence. Here in this near annihilation, the self becomes that much stronger for having been tested. Along with the persona in this indeterminate space, we have faced the Minotaur, and survived.

One by one the dancers reenter the scene, the silver sparkling and the crystals overhead shaking in the draft, lending an ethereal otherworldliness to the dancing couples. Time telescopes forward as the persona imagines the couples' children entering the dance, this mad waltz. Even those who wished to stop, "Would never sit down together / The season of dancing was endless / And many who wished they could / Would never be able to stop" (54, lines 141-44). Trapped to circle endlessly, this dance of circuitous delirium, perhaps a metaphor for life, for memory, for selfhood, resembles a labyrinth of infinite complexity, a dance of complex choreography that tests the soul. The closing free verse walls us into the poem and circles back word for word to the opening lines of the poem. Strand's poem refuses to end, looping back in symmetry of form and content. The only way out is the way we came in.

Finally, we have reached our last poem of Strand's volume, "The View." The poem begins, "This is the place," and the reader knows that he or she has arrived at the finish line – the end is near and now we reflect upon our arduous adventure through the maze. Strand used first person in the poem before, but here we are distanced by third person. A man sits at a table, staring out at the sunset. Strand positions the reader as observer now; having made it through the labyrinth, we can sit back at a safe distance and watch. This is a poem of stillness, a quiet after

the storm of the crazed dancing before. Strand ends his volume in the present, and so we feel a

progression here through the past of the opening poem, the memories and nostalgia, and the

whirling couples barely remembered. It is not our moment to witness; we watch the watcher as

he gazes out to sea:

> This is the place. The chairs are white. The table shines.
> The person sitting there stares at the waxen glow.
> The wind moves the air around, repeatedly,
> As if to clear a space. "A space for me," he thinks.
> He's always been drawn to the weather of leavetaking,
> Arranging itself so that grief – even the most intimate –
> Might be read from a distance. A long shelf of cloud
> Hangs above the open sea with the sun, the sun
> Of no distinction, sinking behind it – a mild version
> Of the story that is told just once if true, and always too late. (55, lines 1-10)

The first line, so stilted in its cadence, acts as a simple counterpoint to the free verse of "The

Delirium Waltz." We are no longer within the labyrinth here, but outside, outside of the maze

and outside of the poem, looking on from without instead of inside a persona's subjectivity.

Space and time adjust back into their normal parameters, the space protectively enclosing his

body, time slowing down to show him each tint of color in the sunset. Even the familiar regret is

milder here, the story always told too late that echoes the something about to happen that serves

no purpose of the opening poem mitigated.

In the opening poem, the persona described a boy learning a lesson too late. Have we

moved out from memory into the man's perspective now? Is this man so fond of "the weather of

leavetaking" the boy grown up? This weather of leavetaking describes the moments of

vanishing, the empty spaces and silences, the absences Strand returns to so often. We see him

watch the sun's leavetaking in the poem, holding his glass up to the light in a kind of farewell

toast. As the sun sinks below the horizon, the poem comes to a close:

> The waitress brings his drink, which he holds

> Against the waning light, but just for a moment.
> Its red reflection tints his shirt. Slowly the sky becomes darker,
> The wind relents, the view sublimes. The violet sweep of it
> Seems, in this effortless nightfall, more than a reason
> For being there, for seeing it, seems itself a kind
> Of happiness, as if that plain fact were enough and would last. (55, lines 11-17)

The rhythm and syntax here in these last lines force the reader to slow down and appreciate this view, the view of a man taking in a view. Strand compartmentalizes his lines, breaking them into two sections, and then three with increasing punctuation. The images and thoughts become simple here, clear and pure. He gives us a direct image, although we still see it through this other person's eyes; the perception is not truly ours. We finally get a glimpse of the sublime, that moment at its point of vanishing, the spectral glimpse – not a time in between times or a meanwhile, but a sliver of an instant of beauty and its perception. The waitress who hands him his drink appears as a modern-day Ariadne, handing Theseus his thread. The drink is penetrated by the sun's light, burning through the glass onto his shirt in brilliant red from the prismatic separation. This is the moment of reflection we witness, light forming a prism, "but just for a moment" (55, line 12). The red color, the color of blood, of life, is slowly replaced by darker and darker hues, until the moment is washed away in "The violet sweep of it" (55, line 14). It is not the sunset that makes this beauty that would last, because the sun was merely "the sun / Of no distinction" (55, lines 8-9). The long shelf of clouds before the sun might be what makes this moment beautiful, a lens through which the sun can almost disappear, both there and not there, on the threshold of vanishing. Everything is perceived indirectly here. We see through his eyes, and the man sees through his glass, or through the clouds, after the sun has gone, as if we can only glimpse beauty despite something, or through a veil. Earlier, in "A Suite of Appearances," the persona imagines that in the future, in another time, we will be "prompted / To say that language is error, and all things are wronged / By representation. The self, we shall say, can

never be / Seen with a disguise, and never be seen without one" (24, lines 46-49). So we can never see the self in this paradox. Direct and indirect both fail. But maybe that is Strand's aim here, to catch the spectral glimpse on the threshold of direct and indirect. In the moments of vanishing we might see, in the time between times. The sun does not make the moment in this poem, nor does the glass; the glass is only the tool, the thread to guide him along on his journey through the labyrinth. The thing that is captured here, the elusive snowflake, the sound of less than one leaf falling, the ungraspable somewhere close by, is the reflection this glass makes upon his body. What lasts is the perception of light, the seeing of it, the witnessing. Strand ends his volume with the word "last," indicating that we finally have our moment captured, something to endure, and yet this is all in the conditional, "as if that plain fact were enough and would last" (55, line 17). Ending on a note of duality, Strand points to something that will last even as he undercuts it with doubt and uncertainty. Even though this lasting is just hoped for, the idea has been put upon the page and in the reader's mind, and lingers. What we finally experience is the mediated moment, and we understand that all of this beauty is captured and viewed through language, which conceals as it reveals.

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