

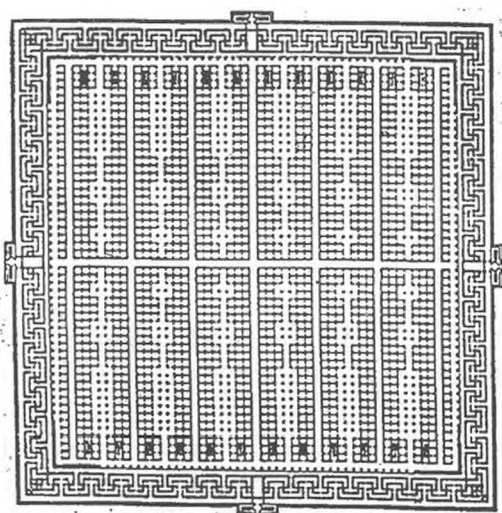
ON LABYRINTHS, IN LABYRINTHS

1. A labyrinth is, as it is widely accepted, in Ancient Greek language, mythology and poetry an intricate structure or enclosure containing a series of winding passages hard to follow without losing one's way.¹

2. *Labyrinth* — a well known Greek phenomenon for European students of classics (remember the story of Theseus killing the monster Minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth) — is in fact not a Greek word. The term has no Greek etymology, and since Antiquity it was the learned opinion that the allegedly Egyptian expression *lopa ruhunt* 'temple at the outlet of the canal' was the origin of the Greek term which was simply a phonetic imitation of the Egyptian word. Herodotus and Strabo (5th century B.C. and 1st century B.C.) on the memorial temple of Pharaoh Amenemhat III (1842-1795 B.C.) in Fayyum, at the mouth of the river Nile at an artificial lake constructed at the Pharaoh's bequest. Herodotus said that, it is a more interesting construction than anything in Egypt, including the pyramids. A two level system of buildings, with about 3000 rooms, of which the upper level is an endless variation of rooms, exits, gardens, meandering paths between palaces and yards; and the lower one is an underground construction containing the tombs of sacred kings who have built the labyrinth and the tombs of the sacred crocodiles. The guards did not allow Herodotus to see the lower level what he knew all came from hearsay.

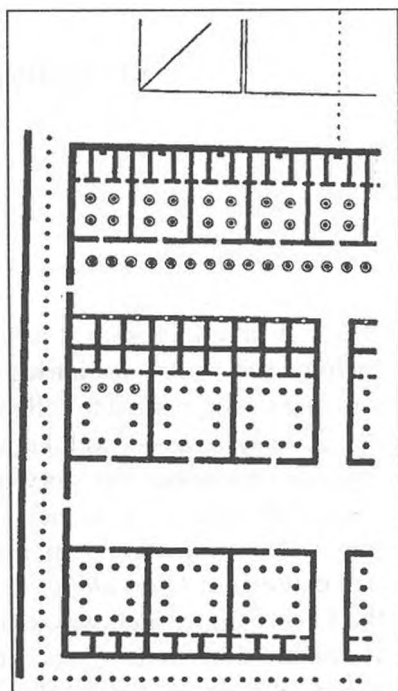
The prototype of the Greek (Minoan) labyrinth is thus not a two level construction: it is a maze underneath hiding a monster. While the Egyptian one is of that type: an upper part which is a tourists' attraction, for guided tours, and the subconscious and invisible part of it is a cemetery for the venerable ancestors: rulers and carnivores alike. The Herodotian tradition hints at that in the very center (in the so-called „heart chamber”, most impossible to reach) there are the graves of the founders: men and crocodiles.

1 See Bord, J. 1976. and Fischer, A.-Gerster, G. 1990.



Egyptian Labyrinth: restored plan

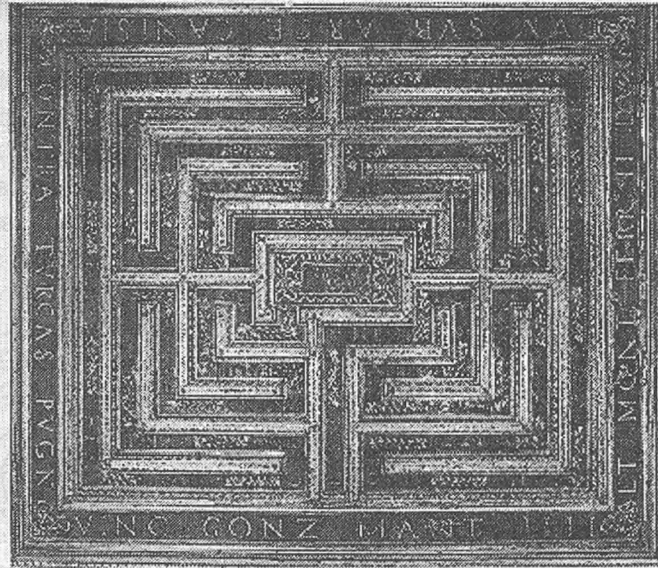
Egyptian Labyrinth. Restored Plan of Western Half of buildings within the complex



3. Umberto Eco, amazing as ever, said in his theoretical work on the philosophy of language (first 1984) in which, of course, he is not speaking about labyrinths, but on the crucial problem of classificatory terms „dictionary vs. Encyclopedia“ : there are three types of labyrinths, all of which are subcases for the, by Eco fervently beloved Porphyrian tree. „The first, the classical one, was linear.“ (Theseus entering the labyrinth of Crete.) „The second type is called in German *Irrgarten* or *Irrweg*; a good English term for it is *maze*.

The maze is a Manneristic invention; iconologically speaking, it does not appear before the late Renaissance. A maze displays choices between alternative paths, and some of the paths are dead ends.” And, finally, „In a labyrinth of the third type is a net (maybe the word *meander* characterizes it as different from a maze and from a *plain labyrinth*).”² Eco speaks of semiotics referring to labyrinths. But we understand that he is interested primarily in theory of classification, and his three types of „Labyrinths” are mere metaphors for that sake. For a closer semiotics of labyrinths his sentences are but dead ends.

2 Eco, U. 1984. 80-81.



Mantova, Palazzo Ducale, Room of the Labyrinths. Between the walls inscriptions. The heart-inscription refers to Daedalos. "Forse che si. forse che no" the repeated inscription refers to the uncertainty of force

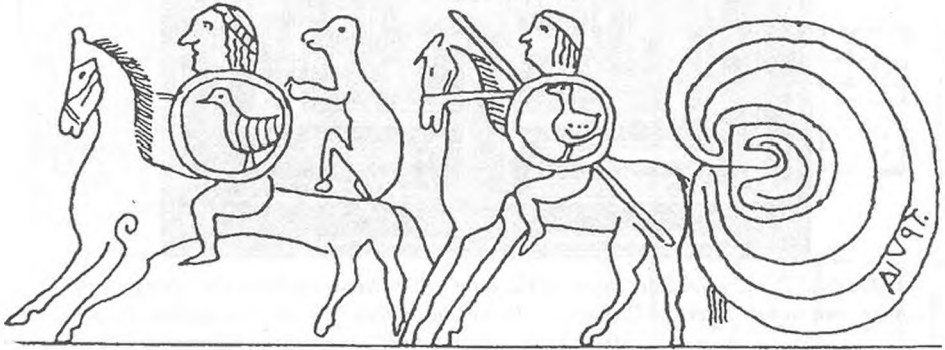
4. Why is Eco wrong in this respect? Because he does not refer to the primary semiotics of labyrinths. There are at least dozens of important studies devoted to that. I try to list only some of the most important ones among the most important ones.

4.1. W. H. Matthews, a characteristically English private scholar wrote an excellent book (First edition 1922, a not well known reprint 1970) on cultural history of labyrinths. The author is unsurpassable in analyzing Egyptian, Cretan (as well as those of English turf, floral and hedge) labyrinths and mazes. Thanks to him the „stone labyrinths of Finland” became famous among experts. Dr. E. von Baer in 1838 had observed curious patterns formed in the ground by means of large pebbles. Johan Reinhold Aspelin (1877), father of Finno-Ugric archaeology, published a



A North-European labyrinth of stones and pebbles

paper on „stone labyrinths in Finland”, and later it became evident that from Iceland to the eastern parts of the Finnish Gulf there are similar stone constructions. Their names are very different in today's traditions (referring to Völund, to the giants, to medieval churches or to maidens), a most interesting name is among them *Troy* (as Trojin, Trojeburg, Trojenborg, Tröborg, Tröjeborg etc.). Hence the German archaeologist, Krause (1893) called them „Troy-castles”. As the subtitle of his book („Die nordische Herkunft der Trojasage”) shows, he was of the opinion, the labyrinth-like constructions are the source of the Trojan War stories.



*Horsmen and maze design from the Tragliatella vase. (Etruscan, 7th century B.C.).
The inscription in the maze design read "Truia"*



*Drawing on a pillar in Pompeji (before 79 A.D.)
with a perhaps humorous inscription LABYRINTHVS HIC HABITAT MIN OTAURVS referring to the
owner or to a dog as "big beast"*

4.1.1. By the way in the Roman empire *Ludus Trojae* or *Lusus* to Roman traditions it was introduced into Italy by Aeneas. The game consisted of a sort of processional parade or dance, in which some of the participants appear to have been mounted on horseback. In the so called Tragliatella Vase (Etruscan) there are two riders (with shields and spears, and with some unclear motifs), the second horse having an elaborate „labyrinth”-shaped tail, with a retrospect: AIVRT (=Truia). Virgil says :

*Ut quondam Creta fertur Labyrinthus in alta
parietibus textum caecis iter ancipitemque
mille viis habuisse dolum, qua signa sequendi
frangeret indeprentus et irremeabilis error.*

*As when in lofty Crete (so fame reports)
The Labyrinth of old, in winding walls
A mazy way inclos'd, a thousand paths
Ambiguous and perplexed, by which the steps
Should by an error intricate, untrac'd
Be still deluded*

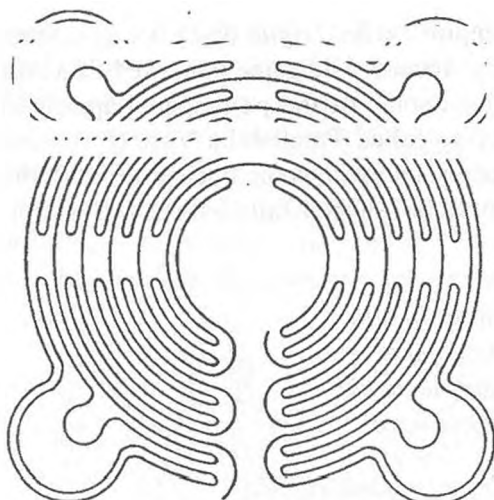
(Aeneid V, 585-591)

[The 1718 English translation by Trapp does not reflect the for semioticians most important phrase: „qua signa sequendi” = even when following the signs.]

For (Virgil), the best propagandist of Trojan = Roman equation, labyrinth was so important, and Suetonius and Tacitus wrote on the same topic. On the reverse of a medal of Nero the same horse-parade was associated with the labyrinth. Thus there might not be much doubt about the connections between Troy and the (Cretan ?) labyrinth in the eyes of Roman intellectuals.

4.1.2. One of the most important masters of German philology and mythology, Jan de Vries in his monograph (1957) gives a detailed analysis of Troy-castle construction in European hopscotch games. Their relation with medieval church building plans is evident, but there are more ancient traces both in the schemes and in the jumping (mounting) practice.

4.2. Károly Kerényi, Hungarian mythographer wrote in Budapest his first studies directed towards to the heart of the labyrinth problems. (A shorter version: 1941a, a longer version: 1941b. Perhaps it is necessary to mention that Kerényi's views were not formulated in the 1950s, as some scholars may think,

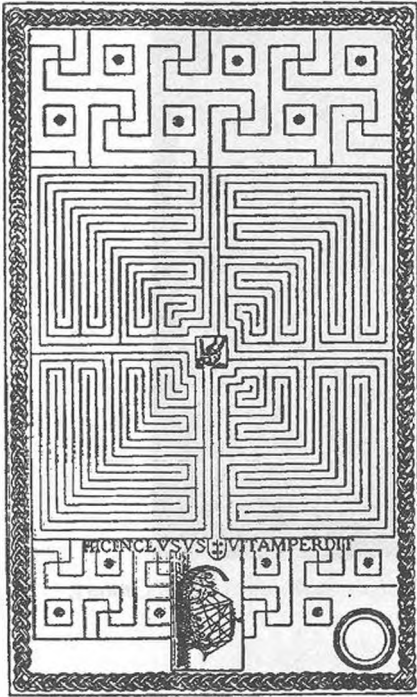


Turf Labyrinth, Saffron Walden, Essex

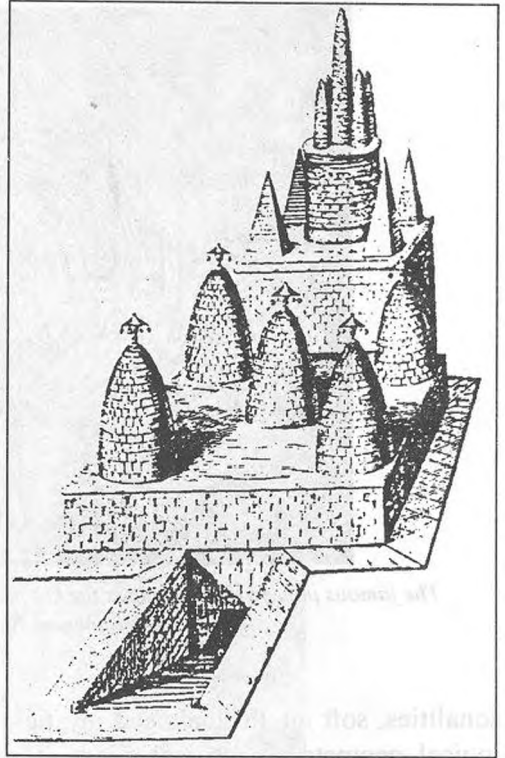
but about a dozen years before) A wanderer never lost in Greek mythology, Kerényi is full with allusions and suggestions. It is not easy to say, what his main idea was in summarizing the concepts of labyrinths. According to my best assumption the labyrinth for Kerényi as a *Linienreflex* (chart) is a sign for the way to birth, to the woman's womb, and at the same time to death (and finally to rebirth afterwards). Kerényi in his later papers returned to the same topic, giving more general statements on the meaning of labyrinths; for him it was a myth, a mystery, and not a scholarly problem.

A problem can be solved, but a mystery can only be approached and repeated. Kerényi sees the ritual dance in the labyrinth as the original motivation. He was the first, who understood among the scholars (for the common people it was always self-evident): that erring in the labyrinth is an analogy of the way of life – a path from birth to death. And, being a mystery, it reflects the human wish to transcend the walls of being, and to secure rebirth after one's death. In its „*Linienreflex*” the ultimate border (= end) of our life will be (against all the odds) permeable. We can come through. (But this is only possible in mystery, in myth – as all of us know.)

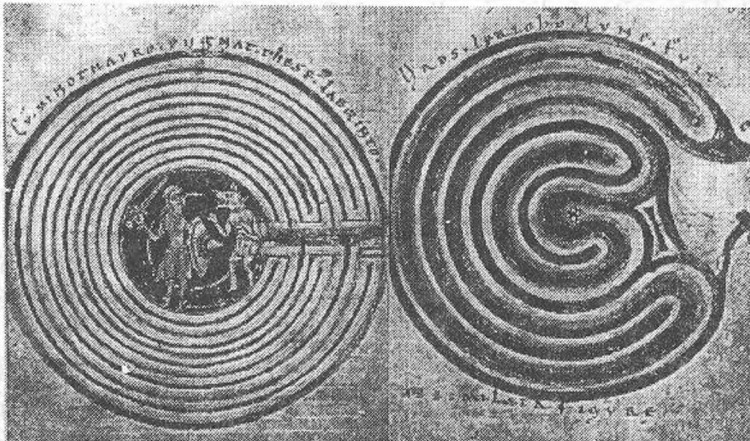
4.3. A true friend of Italy and a keen *connaisseur* of Mannerism, Gustav René Hocke published a seminal book (1957) on history of European literature and art. The focus of his interest is the period between 1520 and 1650, but he refers to Antiquity and to contemporary avantgarde art as well. Inexhaustible in his knowledge of not-main stream art and literature, his data are about the new meaning of labyrinth. From renaissance through mannerism and romanticism (and of course widespread again in avantgarde arts) the unforeseen, haphazard, zig-zag and misleading became justified ways of creation. Hocke is familiar with European cultural history, quoting well known and forgotten authorities. According to his own view, a labyrinth is an appeal for liberation: one has to find the way out of troubles and restrictions. In the labyrinth and loosing one's way in it, there is a madness („Irr-Sinn der Irr-wege”) fascinating to feeble per-



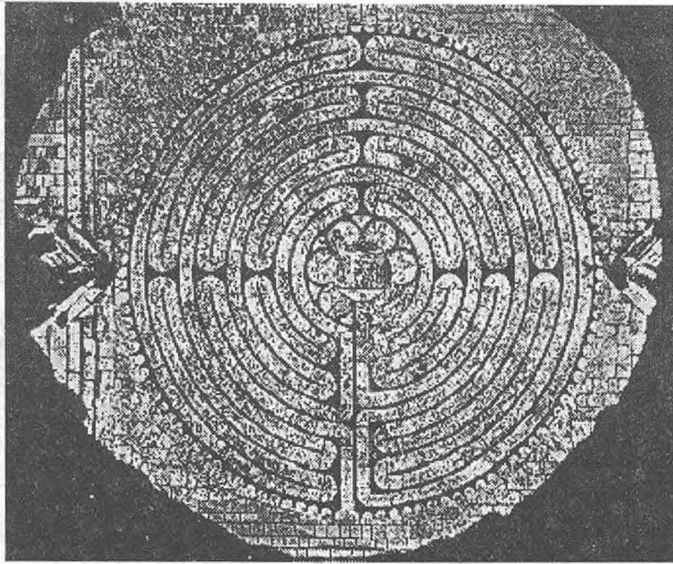
Roman Mosaic at Susa, Tunis, with elaborated labyrinth motivation.
The translation of the Latin inscription is:
"One closed here loses his life"



Tomb of the Etruscan Lars Porsenna at Clusium.
Three-dymensional labyrinth construction.
Conjectural restoration



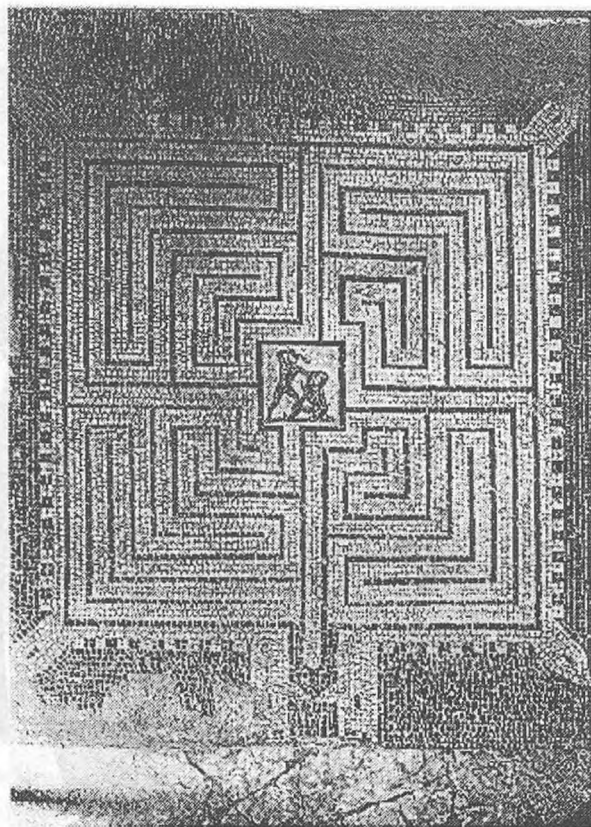
Illustrations with labyrinths from a manuscript of Honorius Augustodunensis:
De imagine mundi (12th Century A.D.)



The famous pavement labyrinth is the Cathedral of Chartres (France) XIIIth Century, diameter 12,87 meter

sonalities, soft intellectuals and mystics. At the same time it is a challenge for logical–geometrical–musical minds. There exists a system behind the walls of mazes. Hocke is the qualified authority in describing, why so many intellectuals tried to enter into the labyrinth. Most people do not like straightforward paths but follow them anyway. Spiral ways seem to them to lead further and deeper.

4.4. A Hungarian–Italian intellectual, Paolo Santarcangeli wrote the concise cultural history of labyrinth. His book (1967) has a very proper title. The author knows virtually everything on the topic, he can comment and develop further the statements of the philologists and cultural historians. His own views are sober and small. For him „symbol” is a widely used word, and not a special term in semiotics, literary or art history. He was in the position of using not only the 1922 edition of the monograph by W. H. Matthews, but also his original collection of illustrations, and, most likely, some of his additional notes too. Santarcangeli was able to include later studies: such as by Kerényi, Jan de Vries and Hocke. He makes references to archaeology, ethnology, psychological tests, art history and modern forms (e.g. advertisements). Of course a book of 350 pages could not include everything concerning the history of the labyrinths.



Mozaic from Cremona (1st century A.D.)

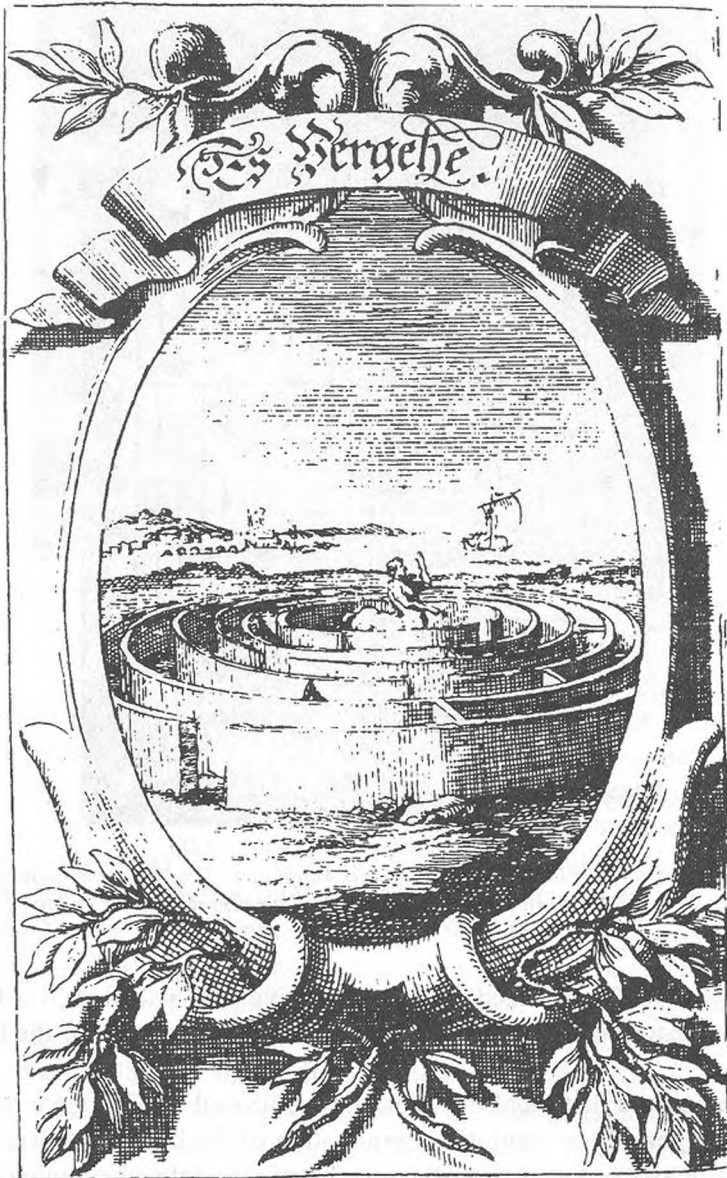
In the heart of the labyrinth Theseus kills Minotauros. The labyrinth pattern, seen from upside-down is a plan of a medieval fortress with walls and towers

4.5. The last 25 years made new comparative data available. But for a concise cultural history of labyrinths the book of Santarcangeli is still the best introduction.

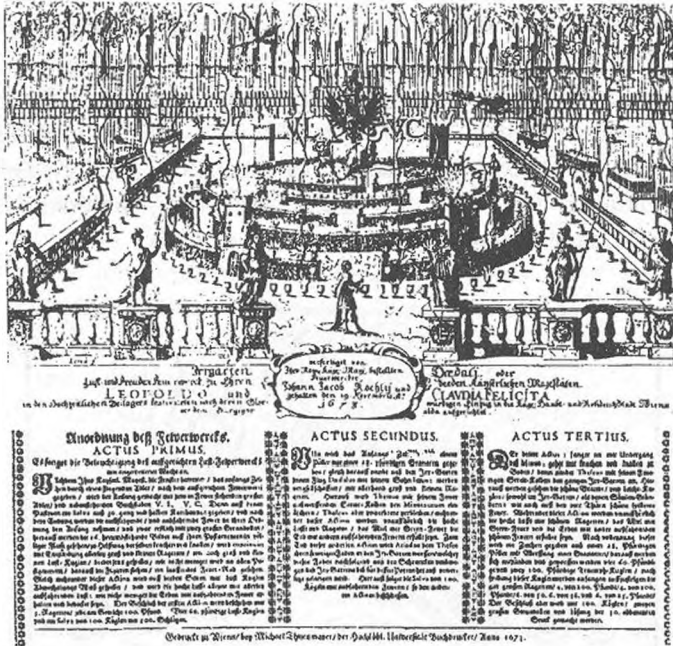
5. The cultural historical material, not mentioned by Eco gave us the possibility to suggest a new semiotic interpretation of the labyrinth. Here I want to give just some parts of my „semiotic interpretation” of the phenomenon.

5.1. Definition of the labyrinth

There are at least three major classes in defining the labyrinth. The first is an architectural plus horticultural one. According to that a labyrinth is a special kind of construction. The second definition is a geometric-mathematical one: it is about an algorithym, how to construct a structure, which has the necessary



*Illustration to an Emblematic Catechism. Nürnberg, 1683.
The World as Labyrinth the Inscription means: It (the world) passes away*



Advertisement of a firework (1673 Wien) entitled "Irrgarten Daedali" (Daedalus' Maze)

properties of being a labyrinth. This second definition gives the foundations to the first type of definition, in fact the first definition can be considered only as the actualization of the second type of definition. My own choice is a third type of definition: a functional one. A labyrinth is a construction we use in a special way: we enter a labyrinth and we must find the correct way within it. This third type of definition is a part of cultural history itself. But it is not easy to say, what kind of a function a labyrinth is representing. Is it a myth, a ritual or something else? My assumption is that a labyrinth is a *sign*, more precisely a sign construction. It sounds trivial for semioticians, but I think we can check some facts for accepting the semiotical interpretation of the functional definition of labyrinths.

5.2. Semantics of labyrinths

In spite of several attempts, nobody knows what the exact meaning of the labyrinth is. In Ancient Egypt it was an „endless” construction commemorating the early rulers and their sacred/venerated animals (crocodiles). For Theseus it was the place where he had to kill the monster Minotaur, saving thus the tribute from Athens to Crete. If we interpret the story in a symbolic way, as most of the

scholars have done, we could think of the importance of disrupting the ancient ties with old (cultural and ritual) dominants. Being freed from old bondages: matrilinear, foreign or non-human, was the main significance for the popularization of the Thesean myth in Athens. But English or French mazes, the cross-word-puzzles of today, Troy-castle pebble constructions in Northern Europe are of different character. The semantics of the labyrinth is understandable only in the framework of their actual semiotics.



Labyrinth manuscript by Johan Caspar Hiltensperger (1754), the calligraphic text is from the beginning of Jesus Sirakh Book, and the locus is announced at the heart of the labyrinth

5.3. Syntactics of labyrinths

Mathematicians (and Umberto Eco) have tried to classify several types (kinds) of the labyrinths. On the primary level it is a wall construction with a roof, a maze construction with visible perspective but no way for crossing the lines, a vertical, intricate structure descending and ascending in an endless and meaningless order, a chart for drawing, a psychological test for rats or for the

unemployed – these are its subcategories. On a more elaborate level characteristic features (as e.g. the number of the entrances, a symmetry or asymmetry of the patterns, whether there is only one central room [„heart“], are there many exits, etc.) determine the actual syntactics of the labyrinths. In fact we can describe it, when we have already understood the sign function of its forms.

5.4. Pragmatics of the labyrinths

According to my assumption pragmatics gives the clue to the semiotics of the labyrinths. The labyrinths are special kinds of roads, ways, paths we have to follow. Any labyrinth is a *sign* for a way, and not in its pure form, but the way as a task, where the entrance and the exit are functions or rituals. We have to pass through the labyrinth. All the strange movements associated with it: jumping in the children games, mounting horse parade as in *ludus Trojae*, to follow Ariadne's thread, to understand Dante's 'spiral erring', to read James Joyce's work (who has called himself Stephen Dedalus, the master builder of the Minoan labyrinth in his early work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), to solve any jigsaw-puzzle, to make a definition for the „shell-fish“ (which is not a fish at all), to match airline connections between New York airports, etc. all those are subclasses of pragmatic „moving“ within labyrinths.³ We have to explore all kinds of labyrinths, and return safely from that. A labyrinth is a task to match, an enigma to solve, a problem to master, a sign difficult to understand. It is one of the most genuine signs in its pragmatic characteristics. Very often in semiotic researches the actual description of pragmatics is a dull chapter without any theoretical flavor. How to boil a soup from a can, how to find a term in an encyclopedia, how to play Beethoven's symphony by using the orchestral score – all those are very good cases for pragmatics in semiotic research, but boring as regard for their actual description as well. Dangerous labyrinth patterns are better tokens for the same type of pragmatics of signs. Entering an amusement park, with a labyrinth of mirrors, we try to find our way out by looking at already existing fingerprints on the mirror-glasses, footprints on the pavement following thus the strategies of other captured persons in order to learn, where *not* to go and where one might go – it gives a hint, how important and personal labyrinth pragmatics is.

6. Now we can conclude. All the labyrinths are *signs* for way/road/path. A „normal“ way is a way. An everyday road leads without much difficulties from *A* to *B*. A common path is from room (space) *n* to *m*. But labyrinths are not the common forms of moving, passing or reaching. They are signs for the difficulties, for extraordinary forms, dangers, irrational or mythical interpretations.

3 See e.g. Doob, P.R. 1991.; Koerner, J. L. 1983.

6.1. A common way is a predicted connection between *A* and *B*. It must not be linear or direct, it can have curves and windings. The paved road do not allow to drive in any directions. Streets in a city „flow” between the „walls” of the buildings. Modern, multilevel highways have in fact fences. But in principle common ways are not predicted in every respect. There are more or less „free” parts in them, like in sea routes or flying directions.

A labyrinth is a fully ordered way, in every part of it, and it exists between impermeable „walls”, where the sense of direction is strictly prescribed. It is in short a sign for a „non-free” path.

6.2. A common way is a reasonable connection between *A* and *B*. There are, however, several possibilities how to reach e.g. Dallas from New York. One can travel trough St. Louis, Missouri, or through New Orleans, Louisiana (or there are some other good possibilities as well). When arriving to an unknown city, you can go usually by an intuitive walk from the railway station to the central square. In a large market or department store one can find the way to the place where they sell cheese or shoes. A map of an unknown city, or its subway lines’ network, the plan of the various sections of the *Louvre* might be difficult to understand, but still there is a common sense principle in the net, which only looks like a labyrinth, but, in its essence, it is *not* a labyrinth.

A labyrinth in the proper sense of the word is a sign of a different type of connection. Crossings of roads are marked by uneven sorts of ways. Some ways are good, others have a dead end. A corridor to the seemingly good direction leads usually to a strange and different place. Meanders and spirals make a „short” way very long, very complicated or even impossible. If the labyrinth has a central room, not all the entrances are connected with that. There are several exits which lead you halfway out of the net, without reaching the heart of the roads. If there was a simple principle for entering the labyrinth (e.g. at a crossing one has to turn always to the right), most probably the same principle will not work in getting out from the center to the exit. Labyrinths are signs for the difficulties, the unforeseen, the impossible on roads. Not only the dangerous monster hiding in a labyrinth is a sign of those, but the unreasonable connections between parts of the labyrinth are themselves the signs for the uncommon and perplex way.

6.3. Usually limits of the roads are natural, and in fact the limits are directing and helping the passanger to reach his goal.

In a labyrinth the walls are borders you cannot go through. Borders are not between two equally logical realms but between the rational realm outside of

the labyrinth and the different system of corridors inside of it. Labyrinths are signs for those different types of paths and borders.

7. I think that our postulate that labyrinths are signs for roads can be understood at least on two levels. Thus semiosis too occurs in labyrinths at least in two different forms.

7.1. For primary signification of the labyrinths the roads are taken in their common characteristics. D'Alembert, in his famous preliminary discourse on the Great French *Encyclopédie* (quoted *in extenso* by Eco, when he speaks of the tree-and-labyrinth character of systematizing the knowledge) describes the system of entries in a perfect encyclopedia. „The general system of the sciences and arts is a kind of labyrinth, a tortuous road which the spirit faces without knowing too much about the path to be followed.” ... A well founded encyclopedia has a system of knowledge. „It is a kind of world map which must show the principal countries, their position and their reciprocal dependencies. It must show the road in a straight line which goes from one point to another; a road often interrupted by a thousand obstacles which might only be noticed in each country by travelers and its inhabitants and which could only be shown in very detailed maps.”

Here the terms „road”, „map” and „labyrinth” are used as signs for an activity: how to reach *B* from *A*. It is a typical form of primary semiosis in labyrinths.

The primary signification of the labyrinth is based upon its physical (geometrical, constructional) principles, encompassing all subclasses of the semiosis (semantics, syntactics, pragmatics). It is an *objective* sign system.

7.2. There is another way for signifying labyrinths, when we start from their personal use. Here the signifier is not the maze itself, but the person who goes into it, who wanders and errs there, hoping he will still find his way. The labyrinth is the sign for one's life in such capacity. There are world famous interpretations of the labyrinths according to this secondary, *subjective* semiosis.

Dante in his wanderings on earth, hell and heaven, John Bunyan's famous *Pilgrim's Progress* are easy to understand as signs for the life-way of the individuals. For them life is to pass through a labyrinth, even if it is not the explicit *archetype* in their works. But we could refer to works, where exactly the labyrinth is the central sign.

Jan Amos Comenius wrote his most important literary work *Labyrint sveta a ráj srdce* ('The Labyrinth of the World and the Heaven of the Heart') in a biographic manner. (In fact he wrote two versions, the early version in 1623, with a first edition in 1631, and a much later, second, corrected one is from

1663.) One of the most beautiful ethical and philosophical allegories, in which the author is describing his life's way. He calls himself the „Wanderer". In chapter two he starts to „see the world". Then suddenly a person (named later as All-Exploring) meets him, asking him about his plans. Wanderer tells, he wants to see the whole world. All-Exploring warns him with the following words.

Have You ever heard of the Cretan labyrinth? - I know something on it. - It was one of the wonders of the world. With so many rooms, corridors and dead-ends, that if somebody entered it without a guide, he was erroneously wandering there for ever, never finding his way out. But all that is a simple joke to compare with the labyrinth of the world, especially: in our days. (Chapter II.)

The two protagonists start together the way which leads through towns and sea and on the roads they meet all groups and classes of the society. Finally they enter the Castle of Wisdom, where King Solomon is ruling the world, then suddenly the King leaves the castle, enters the sinful world and soon he dies. In chapter XXXVI the Wanderer sees the misery of the world, and desperately weeps because of the fate, asking God for mercy. In the last chapter (XXXVII) the wanderer enters into his own heart, where he finds the ruins of his life, but silence and all those promise a new start.

Philologists have detected various sources of the work, and the basic symbolism is also a widely accepted one.

All our life is wandering in a labyrinth. It is the *personal* sign system of the labyrinth. It is not difficult to find out the highest possible symbolism in the book. There are thousands (!) of personified or allegoric names, heroes, descriptions and remarks in the book. Biblical, classical, philosophical allusions enrich the meaning. The most important sign is the contrast between the „labyrinth of the World" and the „Heaven of the Heart". But in fact the second one is also part of the first. After all wanderings the hero arrives to the „heart of the labyrinth", into a secret, dark room, with fragments of ruined pictures, platforms, blocks and ropes, wings and feathers and clockworks. A is truly a „shipwreck" of life. The hero does not understand the situation. But one is sure: here reigns complete silence, without the violence of the outer world. It is the symbolic inversion of Minotaur's cave.

Perhaps it is already the third level in the symbolism of the labyrinth.

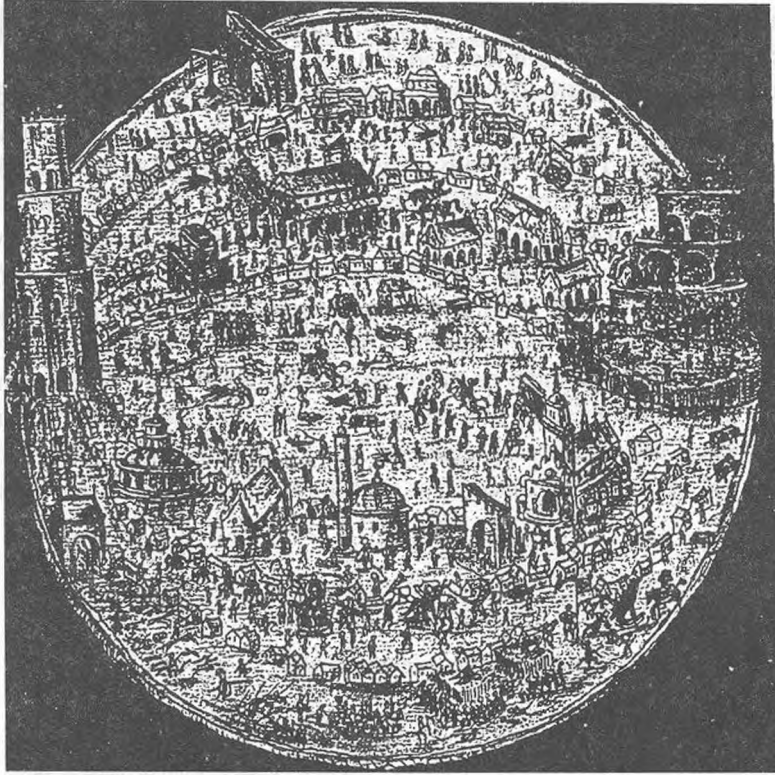


Illustration to Comenius: *Labyrint sveta a ráj srdce*

8. It would be very simple to suggest that labyrinths somehow exemplify a path between *chaos* and *order*. For the first glance the metaphors „chaos” and „order” fit well into the interpretative framework of labyrinth analysis. But after a closer look this assumption seems to be hasty. If a „normal” road represent the order of directions and journeys -- labyrinths seem to be „out of order”. But it will be a false impression. Labyrinths may represent an uncommon algorithm⁴ for starting, walking and arriving – but they might have even higher order of construction principles than of „normal” roads. Erring in a maze might cause a feeling of being lost in a chaotic „jungle” of crossings and dead-ends – but it is only a feeling, and the proper construction principle of building labyrinths. Circular and symmetric (!) labyrinths are well-known in the entire history of culture. However, the personal tendency to identify labyrinths with un-

⁴ See Tokaji, A. 1989.

comfortable disorder are not to disregard. They represent the „personal” and chaotic character of the systemless and dangerous labyrinth symbolism.

This *personal* semiotics of the labyrinths (encompassing a virtual connection of order *versus* chaos too) occur often in art, music, and in many important literary works of art. I have already referred to some of them. Now I have to mention only in a short remark, how deeply this actual characteristics of labyrinths have influenced some of the most important literary works. Octavio Paz (1994) in his famous essay *El labirinto de la soledad* (originally conceived 1942 in Paris, and finished 1953 in Mexico) stresses the personal loneliness as motivation for the labyrinths. Jorge Luis Borges (1985) has started his lasting penetration into the labyrinths as early, as in his essays (?) to the journal *Sur*, by the very end of the thirties. His attempts⁵ is built up like a cultural-historical endeavour, speaking directly on „general history of labyrinths”. His most personal fear appears there disguised(?) as within the history of civilizations.

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5 See e.g. see e.g. *Tlön, Ugbar, Orbis Tertius*, quoting a fictional „scholarly” monograph by Silas Haslam *A General History of Labyrinths* in *Sur* May 1940

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