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Theseus Loses his Way: Viktor Pelevin's *Helmet of Horror* and the Old Labyrinth for the New World

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Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, and Viktor Pelevin's 2006 adaptation of it, *The Helmet of Horror*, particularly how it can serve as a case study for the nature and significance of adaptation. It examines the idea of memory, a central theme of the novel, and considers how three aspects of the original myth – the Minotaur, Ariadne's thread, and the labyrinth itself – shape and inform Pelevin's retelling. Each of these is unique to this myth in antiquity, and together, they structure the story. Each is also fundamentally connected to the idea of memory: the Minotaur is a living reminder of Pasiphae's transgression, Ariadne's thread is the mnemonic that allows Theseus to escape, and the labyrinth is a structure whose very nature is designed to challenge memory by creating confusion.

In Pelevin's hands, the Minotaur is no longer a reminder of the union of human and beast but of human and machine; its head is a helmet that runs on reiterations of the past. Ariadne's thread is re-imagined as a literal thread on an Internet forum where the characters discuss their situation and report their activities as they work towards escape. Finally, Pelevin's novel multiplies the power of the labyrinth to enforce forgetfulness by structuring the story with a series of recursive

metaphorical labyrinths, each of which suppresses memory in a different way. Pelevin's novel dramatizes how both individuals and cultures use the past to make meaning in the present and thus illustrates the appeal of adaptations. The article closes with some suggestions for inviting students to reflect on the idea of adaptation, such as creating their own retellings, as well as for using the labyrinth as a theme for a larger study module.

I. Introduction

In October of 2005, Canongate Books launched a series of novellas offering up retellings of foundational myths in modern genres written by some of the most well-known and widely respected authors of contemporary literature. Karen Armstrong, in her introduction to the series, remarks on the timeless importance of myths as a source of truth about the human condition, and observes that they nonetheless require retellings to retain their efficacy as transformative stories. "There is never a single, orthodox version of a myth," she writes. "As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truths" (11). Armstrong in particular, and the series as a whole, asserts that our modern world, with its relentless obsession with scientific and technological truths, leaves us cut off from the ephemeral "Truths" available via myths. Furthermore, this series suggests that updating old stories for our modern world can rekindle the richness of non-objective reality.

This paper will explore Viktor Pelevin's contribution to the Canongate series, *The Helmet of Horror,* which re-imagines the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. Before turning to the novel, however, we will first revisit the original myth, clarifying the details of the template on which Pelevin's novel is based. Next we will consider the novel itself, exploring the ways it reflects and builds on the original. We will then consider what Pelevin's adaptation reveals about the nature of retellings and reflect on the cultural tenacity of the symbol of the labyrinth. Finally, some suggestions are provided for how teachers might use receptions and the labyrinth to help students think about and explore the nature of storytelling and retellings.

II. The Myth in Antiquity[1]

Theseus was a young prince of Athens. Due to an old dispute, his city was required to send a tribute of young men and women every nine years (or, in some versions, annually) to Minos, king of Crete. The youths were dedicated as an offering to the Minotaur and sent into the labyrinth, a convoluted space designed by the consummate craftsman Daedalus to contain the beast. Daedalus also had a hand in the creation of the Minotaur himself: Minos' wife Pasiphae had become enamored of a particularly handsome bull, and Daedalus constructed a hollow cow that would allow her to mate with the animal. The result of this union was the Minotaur, a ferocious creature with the body of a man but the head of a bull.

Theseus decided to put a stop to the barbarous practice of the sacrificial tribute and volunteered himself as one of the selected youths when the third tribute came due. When they arrived in Crete, Theseus met Ariadne, Minos' daughter, who fell instantly in love with him. She gave him a spool of thread, advising him to use it as a marker so he could find his way out of the labyrinth. Theseus entered the labyrinth, killed the beast, and emerged victorious, saving the lives of the young Athenians and freeing Athens from further obligation to Crete. On the trip home, however, he abandoned Ariadne on an island and then forgot to change his sail according to a prearranged signal to indicate his success, and his father killed himself in sorrow before the oversight could be corrected. Back in Athens, Theseus unified the various villages into a single political structure and ruled as a just king.

Given its prominence in the modern imagination, it will perhaps be surprising that the myth was not an especially central one in antiquity, and most of its figures are more celebrated for their after-stories. Theseus himself, perhaps as a result of conscious propagandizing in Athens in the 5th C. BCE, is primarily associated with the legends of his local labors.[2] Ariadne, after being betrayed by Theseus, is rescued by Dionysus and becomes his consort. Daedalus, punished by Minos for aiding Theseus, escapes from Crete with the artificial wings that became so famous for costing his son Icarus his life. Neither the Minotaur nor the labyrinth that housed him appears in any other story. The labyrinth thus seems to exist primarily as a proving ground for Theseus. The story was not part of the epic cycle, and, although there were several lost tragedies dealing with it in the Classical period, it is really only a regular motif in Roman poetry of the late Republic and early Empire. However, the myth is very ancient and almost certainly predates Greek culture as we know it.

III.   *The Helmet of Horror*

We can turn now to Pelevin's version, which we will summarize briefly before looking more closely at his transformations and their effects. His novel, naturally, looks little like the original. First, it is told, as reviewer John Fasman has it, "from the neck up": the entire novel plays out in the virtual space of an Internet forum, and the only action is what gets reported by the participating characters. Moreover, although they are in a world that resembles ours in many ways, it is nonetheless entirely surreal, outside of time, and free from the constraints of normal reality. The novel is initiated by a question posted by Ariadne to the forum: "'I shall construct a labyrinth in which I can lose myself and anyone who tries to find me' – who said this, and about what?" (1).

Ariadne's question is never answered, but seven other characters – Organizm(-:, Romeo-y-Cohiba, Nutscracker, Monstradamus, IsoldA, UGLI 666, and Sartrikn – come online to discuss and analyze their situation. They are all in unfamiliar, nondescript, identical rooms with nothing in them other than a computer and a bed. Each room has two doors, one of which leads to a bathroom, and the other of which, decorated with a Minoan double-headed axe, leads to an isolated but more or less realistic private external world.. None of the characters has any memory of how he or she got to the room or any way of sharing past identities, as any attempts to type identifying details are automatically replaced by x's. Expletives are also edited out with x's, while spelling mistakes are automatically

corrected. While their page looks like a typical forum page on the Internet, there is nowhere else to go; their conversation is the only site available. As they work together to figure out and escape their simultaneously shared yet isolated situation, it becomes clear that their virtual dialogue impacts their external world. For instance, a request that the doors be opened results in open doors, and food arrives on demand.

All of the characters eventually explore and describe the world outside their doors as they work towards escape, and they realize that those worlds are specifically tailored for each person's history and personality. Sartrik, a drunk who spends little time on the board, finds two refrigerators of alcohol behind his door and presumably spends most of the novel drinking it off-screen. The fanatical Christian UGLI 666 finds a cathedral with famous church labyrinths decorating its columns, a large mosaic labyrinth on its floor, and a canon to explain their significance to her. Romeo-y-Cohiba and IsoldA both have similar parks with hedge labyrinths, and, believing they are near each other, spend the novel trying to effect a rendezvous. Organizm(-: has a life-size plywood model of the Windows 98 screen-saver "maze" that crashes if he touches it. Nutscracker, who in his previous life had worked on virtual reality and media control, finds a TV editing room with tapes of candidates making campaign speeches for the position of Theseus. Monstradamus, who claims that his labyrinth is the most mystical, finds a dead-end alley with a table, paper and pencil, and a gun with a single bullet. Ariadne finds outside her door another room, a bedroom with a wonderful bed and a variety of sleeping pills.

The characters attempt to analyze each other's labyrinths on the message board, but it is a highly unstable signifier. It is the site of devotion, repentance, and memory for UGLI 666, whose walk through it is a tour through her past. For Nutscracker, who suggests that the point is not the way out, but every next choice, it is a place of conflict between man and beast, a symbol of discourse, and a metaphor for life. Monstradamus finds a literal dead-end, and argues that all ends are dead, but some are less obviously so. Ariadne finds a release from reality in the form of dreams, although the dreams are also real.

The only explanations for their situation come from Ariadne's dreams, in fact. In her first dream, dreamt before the novel begins, but reported in the early pages, Ariadne finds herself in an ancient, deserted city and sees two dwarves attending to a giant wearing a bronze mask with horns similar to a bull's. The second dream finds her in a lecture hall with one of the dwarves, who proceeds to explain the mask to her. It is the helmet of horror, he tells her, although it is not a helmet, but a mind, and is the site of the creation of everything, including itself and its wearer. The description is of a machine that is both extremely complex and completely paradoxical: everything comes into being when the past is filtered through the horns, which are called the horns of plenty, naturally, and then bubbles up to create the future. The helmet's wearer, therefore, always sees only the past in new form.

The final dream is a question-and-answer interview with the dwarf in which Ariadne asks for details of the helmet and is given access to records related to the Minotaur's past. Partway through the interview, which is, of course, reported in the chat room after the fact, the agitated dwarf runs out, claiming that his master is at risk of a murder attempt. Ariadne awakens to find that the files of explanation she had been reading in the dream are beside her on the table and she proceeds to share

them with the group. The files are philosophical reflections on the nature of existence and particularly on the existence of Asterius, which is an alternate name for the Minotaur. "Asterius' greatest secret," she reads, "is that he's entirely unnecessary" (253). When he realizes that he does not exist, however, the file goes on to say, he becomes enraged, and "ends up drenched in sweat and blood, which also do not exist. Though this does not make him any more real, it does mean there is no one left to tell him so—no one is left at his side but servant dwarves, drenching him in blood and screaming that vengeance will follow for the blood that has been spilled…" (254).

As Ariadne reads on, typing up what she finds in the files for everyone to see, they all begin to hear a horrible bellowing and pounding on their doors. Theseus appears on the board at last, if only long enough to yell "MINOTAURUS!" once (258). Then the pounding stops, and the group is transformed into a unified quasi-disembodied consciousness which, it is implied, is what they were before waking up in their rooms at the beginning of the novel. The characters finally understand and articulate their purpose: to trap the Minotaur in the helmet of horror so that everything can exist, even though they believe the beast always has and always will escape when he begins to doubt his existence, calling forth Theseus and his own death.

Pelevin's novel, I suggest, is a meditation on memory. This can be seen most clearly in Pelevin's use of three fundamental aspects of the original myth: the Minotaur, Ariadne's thread, and the labyrinth itself. In the next section of the paper, then, we will look at each of these in turn, first in the Ur-myth and then in the novel.

IV. The Minotaur

The monster at the center of the labyrinth is a rich and multivalent symbol, but for the purposes of this paper we will focus on his most obvious significance, as a physical reminder of Pasiphae's indiscretion. The result of the unnatural union is, naturally, a being that calls into question the nature of humanity. The compiler of the *Bibliotheke* says that his true name was Asterius (3.1.4), which was also the name of the mythical king of Crete who married Europa, but he is almost universally called the Minotaur, the bull of Minos.[3] The Minotaur is brute force and bestiality; whatever his royal or divine origins in Minoan Crete, Asterius for the Greeks was essentially beast. How it came about that the Athenian tributes happened to be dedicated to the creature is unclear, but Plutarch, citing the 5th c. BCE mythographer Pherecydes, observes that the tributes were either destroyed by the Minotaur or became lost in the labyrinth and wandered until they died (*Life of Theseus* 15). The creature was thus a challenge to the integrity of humanity in his very being as well as a threat to the humanity of others.

Although there was an Etruscan tradition of painting that explored the Minotaur's childhood, he is in general not a monster that has garnered much sympathy, in spite of the appearance of humanity implicit in his bodily form.[4] The creature is a fairly unambiguous symbol of duality and unnaturalness, the bull's head representing the savage animal part, and the body his imperfect, and therefore grotesque, share in humanity. Like many primordial monsters in Greek antiquity, his form and nature are almost unchanging over time. There is evidence for the Minotaur already in Hesiod, one of the

earliest poets of the Greek tradition, where he is described as "a strong son, a marvel to see, the body of a man inclined itself towards the feet, but above grew the head of a bull" (fr.145 16-17). In spite of several anomalies in the later artistic tradition,[5] the idea of the Minotaur remains remarkably stable over time.[6] Moreover, he exists almost exclusively to provide an initiatory test for the hero: he is precisely the force of savagery that allows the hero to perform his heroism.[7] The converse is true as well: the Minotaur, himself, is ultimately remembered mostly for being killed by Theseus.

Pelevin's Minotaur incorporates many of the traditional features, most obviously his large human frame that is topped not with a human head but a horned mask. Additionally, the name he has within the novel is not Minotaur but Asterisk, a play on the creature's alternate name, Asterius.[8] Whereas the Greek Minotaur's ancient king-god legacy was apparent only in the dim echo of the name, Pelevin incorporates a good deal of royal imagery into his Minotaur, giving his Asterisk two dwarves as servants, a palace to live in, and royal robes. Asterisk thus occupies multiple contradictory realms at the same time: subhuman, human, and superhuman.

The compromised humanity of the Greek Minotaur has been relocated: the central conflict that the Minotaur literally embodied in antiquity was that between man and beast. However, in putting the extremely complex mechanical helmet on his Minotaur's shoulders in place of a bull's head, Pelevin has updated the friction point and situated it between man and machine. In fact, as they learn more about the helmet and realize that there is no room underneath it for a head, the characters question Asterisk's ability even to think: "On the one hand," Nutscracker says, "the Minotaur's manipulating all of us, but on the other hand, he's got no head" (115). Technology, in other words, has subsumed the creature's imperfect humanity. This same conflict is played out throughout the novel, as the characters can interact with each other only through the computer; when they are away from their computers, they are in complete isolation. Their connections are exclusively mediated ones.

The ambivalent impact of technology personified by Asterisk runs throughout the novel, becoming explicit in an extended discussion about virtual reality. Nutscracker, before he came to the room, had worked on virtual reality technology and explains the tricks by which it can be used to control others. He calls the person in the helmet the "Helmholtz" and describes the work of the manipulator as allowing the Helmholtz to feel as if he is making his own choices uninfluenced, but actually using subtle tricks of light and sensation, coercive operations, Nutscracker calls them (97), to ensure that he will choose what the manipulator wants him to. As the characters explore their labyrinths, we see exactly the coercive operations he describes in action, working exactly as they should: the characters do not notice them but make the choices they are being guided to, even though it never becomes clear who the guide is. Asterisk is literally part machine, but the other characters are as controlled by technology because they are reliant on it for contact. The ancient Minotaur, with his imperfect humanity, forced people to think about the bestial nature they shared, but Theseus' victory asserted a triumph over the animal realm. Pelevin's novel, on the other hand, asserts that humans are, like Asterisk, at the mercy of the technology they thought they controlled.

Asterisk's helmet, however, is not just a representation of technology; more importantly, it is a representation of memory. In Ariadne's second dream, the dwarf explains the helmet, which, he says, is actually Asterisk's mind, to her in all its paradoxical detail. It is a very complex and technical process:

And so, he said, start by imagining the gentle glow of a summer day caressing your face. That's precisely how the frontal net, heated by the action of the stream of impressions falling on it, transmits heat to the now grid. The grid sublimates the past contained in the upper section of the helmet, transforming it into vapour, which is driven up into the horns of plenty by the force of circumstances. (78)

The description goes on for some time, ultimately describing a cycle whereby the past is filtered and cycled and becomes the future: "But since past is enriched exclusively with more past, the bubbles of hope consist entirely of past, they are simply past in a different state. Which means that when Asterisk peers into the future, he sees nothing but the past" (81). Moreover, as it goes through its cycle, it generates a desire for further cycling; the past, as it becomes future, is always simultaneously reinvigorating the past.

The helmet continually performs this unchanging function that results in the creation of everything, including itself. What it does, in short, is remember, eternally; the past is always bubbling up into the future so that wherever Asterisk looks, he always sees only the past in new form. While the ancient Minotaur was a cipher for the savage animal realm, the helmet, which both does and does not exist, and which both structures and creates the world based on the past, serves as an embodiment of cultural memory, providing purpose and meaning to the characters even though it lacks concrete existence. At the end of the novel, the characters begin to remember that they themselves are part of an eternal cycle playing out within the helmet, a cycle which always goes exactly as it has gone before, the memory of which both governs and guides them. Finally, the Minotaur is the embodiment of the fact that everything is shaped by the past.

V. Ariadne's Thread

While the helmet relied on memory for its action, Ariadne's thread, as many scholars have convincingly argued,[9] is a physical manifestation of memory: it is the literal connection to the past that reaches from Theseus back to the entrance of the labyrinth.[10] The labyrinth, by its nature, enforces forgetfulness, and the thread is a prophylactic against it. As Borgeaud argues, "To again take up the thread of Ariadne is to effect anamnesis, to return to the source across the confusion of forgetfulness" (23). To advance out of the labyrinth, it is necessary to retrace the path in, to remember the course already travelled—or to use the mnemonic of the thread in the place of memory (Borgeaud 24). Thus, the thread enables Theseus to literally retrace his past, moving backwards in time and space towards the moment when he entered the labyrinth.[11] Of course, the moment of entry is transformed into the moment of exit, and everything has changed, but it is because of the past and the foresight of Ariadne that this successful future was created.

Additionally, the thread as a symbol of memory recalls another productive metaphor active in ancient Greece: that of poetry as a weaving of stories in the service of memory. Already in Homer, poetry is envisioned as a metaphorical weaving, and a central concern in the epic tradition is securing *kleos*, getting oneself woven into the poetic tradition.[12] Poetry itself, of course, was the domain of the Muses, the daughters of Mnemosyne, whose name means Memory. Homer and Hesiod present us with a picture of Muses who had a complete knowledge of past, present, and future, and who assisted poets by remembering for them what no mere mortal could hope to remember on his own.[13] Poets, with the help of the perfect memory of the Muses, create *kleos,* memorials of language, as they weave their songs. As Nagy puts it, "[the poet] behaves as an instrument, as it were, in the hands of the Muse, whose message is equated with that of the creative tradition" (16). Ariadne's thread literally ensures that Theseus will survive to become part of the poetic tradition. Without it, he has no shot at *kleos*, but with its aid he achieves remembrance.[14]

Pelevin, of course, opens the novel with Ariadne's thread, playing with the metaphor of posts on Internet forums as threads. Because earlier posts are archived, newcomers can go back and read what the others have said: it provides a transcript of the past, a legible memory of earlier discussions. Like the thread of myth, Pelevin's thread provides a way to revisit what came before, to get back to the point of entry. More broadly, though, the entire novel revolves around the issues of memory and remembering that the symbol of Ariadne's thread raises, or, more precisely, the problems of forgetfulness that it implies. Ariadne's first question – the question that starts the thread – is itself a result of forgetfulness, as she had forgotten the source of a quote. Similarly, none of the characters can remember how they came to be in their rooms. Memory also plays a role as they try to situate themselves. In discussing the symbol on the door, Organizm(-: struggles to remember it: "The fascists used to have axes like that – or was it the ancient Romans?" (12). Monstradamus is the one who puts it all together, connecting Ariadne's name with the Minoan axe – the labrys – and the stars printed on the toiletries – for Asterisk. Remembering the myth, they recognize their world as one in which they are trapped in a labyrinth, awaiting salvation from Theseus and fearing the Minotaur. Cultural memory, however, provides them a structure for their experience.

The fact that the entire novel is experienced as a retrospective – that very little *happens* until the very end, that we, along with the characters, are only given after-the-fact reports about what *has happened* – means that everything relies on memory. All knowledge of Asterisk comes from Ariadne's memories of her dreams, but the novel opened with her memory failing, calling her reliability into question. Sartrik's failure to remember is highlighted near the end of the novel as well:

> **Sartrik**
>
> And my stomach's rumbling, xxx. Listen, Monstradamus. There's one thing I still don't get. Where did all this happen?
>
> **Monstradamus**
>
> Are you really that stupid or can you just not sober up? In the helmet of horror.

Sartrik

Oh. And who to?

Monstradamus

You. (273-4)

Individually, their memories fall short, but together, with the help of the thread, they are able to fill in the gaps.

This same cyclicality that was inherent to Asterisk's helmet becomes explicit at the novel's end, when the characters are complaining that everything has fallen apart and discussing what went wrong. Organizm(-: asks, "How did we give ourselves away?" (263). UGLI 666 blames Ariadne but implies that it has happened before: "This time it was Ariadne who blurted everything out. That's why he gave us the slip" (263). While it is far from clear exactly what is happening at the end of the novel, it is very clear that it, or something like it, has happened before:

Organizm(-:

So what, now we'll be the Minosaur. The ancient serpent.

UGLI 666

We always were, heh-heh. That human stuff was nothing but a nuisance. And all that bovine stuff too. (271)

The paradox of their situation—that they are somehow both themselves and the Minotaur (which has become the Minosaur), and that in any case nothing exists outside of the helmet of horror, which also creates itself – echoes the circular impossibility of the helmet's own functioning, but also, and with the same kind of reflexivity, performs the fruitfulness of myth. That is, myths belong to the ancient past but tell stories that still describe our current experiences and ask the same questions that still exercise us. Thus, Ariadne, given the opportunity to look through the endless files after the dwarf leaves her alone in her final dream, remarks on the banality of what she finds: "There's not much new in them. The eternal questions haven't got any cleverer – that's why they're eternal" (249).

VI. The Labyrinth

Finally we come to the labyrinth itself, which offers a way to reflect on the relationship between memory and choice.[15] Although the labyrinth was in antiquity and still is a productive metaphor, literary descriptions of it are rare, and in any case highly contradictory, so it is difficult to puzzle out exactly what people imagined it to be. Visual evidence presents exclusively a unicursal labyrinth, meaning that there was only one, unbranching path to the center, although it meandered in a way that

created the longest possible path. In other words, a walk through the labyrinth offered no opportunity to choose a path, and thus no possibility of getting lost. This model seems to contradict the literary descriptions, which consistently describe the labyrinth as a place of complexity and confusion, that is, as a multicursal labyrinth, with multiple branchings, each one of which requires a choice.[16] The place of choice is very different in the two different models, but equally central to both. For the multicursal model, of course, choice is a constant, required at each one of the many branchings. For the unicursal model, choice, no longer related to questions of route, becomes tied to both the moment of entry and the ongoing decision to continue.[17]

Finally, to return to the role of memory in this myth, it must be noted that the actual, historical labyrinths for which we have any evidence are essentially memorials.[18] Pliny the Elder, in his compendious 1st C. CE encyclopedia *The Natural History*, tells us of three labyrinths in addition to the one in Crete: an ancient one in Egypt on which Daedalus is said to have modeled the Cretan one; the tomb of Lars Porsena in Etruria; and one on the island of Lemnos, of which only the names of the architects survive (36.19).[19] Two of these, the one in Etruria and the one in Egypt, seem to have been at least monuments to their commissioners if not their actual tombs. The Cretan labyrinth is a kind of anti-memorial, on the other hand, as it represents an attempt to erase, or at least conceal, the memory of Pasiphae's misconduct. Along with everything else it is, the labyrinth is also itself a mnemonic.

Within the myth of the Cretan labyrinth in particular, we have already seen the way that Ariadne's thread reflects the place of memory in getting through the labyrinth. While Theseus received the thread from Ariadne, she herself got it from Daedalus, whose after-story provides us with several more ways in which the idea of the labyrinth continually calls up the need for memory. Minos, angered at Daedalus for the betrayal that allowed Theseus' victory and escape, responded by imprisoning the artificer within his artifact, from which he was unable to escape without the thread; that is, he had forgotten the way out, and lacked a mnemonic to guide him. Ultimately, he escaped using a new artifice, the construction of wax and feather wings by which he and his ill-fated son Icarus flew away. Later, he choreographed a choral dance that performed the path through the labyrinth so it would be remembered forever. Just as the labyrinth always implies choice, so does it always demand a mnemonic.

The degree to which choice is available to the one in the labyrinth depends on whether the wanderer's labyrinth is unicursal or multicursal. However, Doob argues convincingly that that distinction is primarily relevant to one looking at the labyrinth as artifact, for whom even the multicursal model appears elegant, ordered, and symmetrical. For the one within its channels, however, both models are equally bewildering. As Doob says, "Anyone immersed in either mazy process and unable to see the pattern whole will become disoriented and confused, either by endless choices or by the dizzying turns of the single path that distort all sense of direction" (52). Many visual representations of even the unicursal labyrinth depict Ariadne's thread winding through it, which at first seems redundant. However, if we think of the thread as representing the memory not just of the path – essentially unnecessary, in a unicursal labyrinth – but of the outside, of the world beyond and temporally before the labyrinth, then the thread itself serves as a reminder of the choice to enter the labyrinth in the first place and the choice to continue on towards the center. Where the choice occurs is very different in the two different kinds of labyrinths, as we saw above, and the importance of memory changes in response to it. In the

multicursal maze, choice is constant, and memory matters only when one decides to go back. In the unicursal maze, on the other hand, a single choice is what initiates the process, and memory is what pushes the wanderer to continue on in the face of disorientation. In both cases, though, memory and choice feed into each other and must work in tandem if successful passage through is to occur.

This same complementarity between choice and memory is at the heart of Pelevin's novel, if in the inverse. We saw in the discussion of Ariadne's thread how the characters' failure of memory is continually at issue; in tandem with that is continual evidence of the irrelevance of their choices. Pelevin has populated his novel with multiple labyrinths, both real and metaphorical: the personal labyrinths that the characters find outside their doors – Sartrik's alcohol, IsoldA and Romeo-y-Cohiba's hedge-mazes, Monstradamus' dead-end, and so on; the shared labyrinth in which they are all trapped and, presumably, through which Asterisk moves; and the existential labyrinth of discourse which is, albeit ambiguously, where the novel seems to end. In all of them, to varying degrees, choice and free will are consistently revealed as illusions.

The various personal labyrinths – some physical, some metaphorical, some a combination of both – illustrate numerous ways that the irrelevance of choice can look like free will. Organizm(-: quickly realizes that his maze, a physical copy of a virtual maze, is "not a real labyrinth at all, just a big concrete cellar with plywood partitions" (195). He is free to make choices about his progress through it, but they do not matter, as there is nowhere to go. Sartrik's refrigerators of alcohol, on the contrary, recall the unicursal maze: he made the choice—or, more probably, a long series of choices—long ago, and now simply continues along the same unbranching path. Monstradamus' labyrinth, on the other hand, is set, as it were, at the entrance of the labyrinth, before the choice is made. When Nutscracker, on hearing the description of the short alley and gun, asks Monstradamus where his labyrinth is, Monstradamus replies drily, "I think that starts afterwards" (214). The point, however, is that whatever Monstradamus' choice, whether or not he takes up the gun and kills himself, he will inevitably find his way into whatever it is that "starts afterwards," since eventual death is inevitable. For Isolda and Romeo-y-Cohiba, who have the same kind of multicursal hedge-mazes, their choices matter enormously as far as literally traveling through the maze. However, when it comes to attaining their wish, to find each other, they are ultimately horrified to realize that their respective mazes are nowhere near each other, making any meeting impossible.

The situation is somewhat more complicated, if no more optimistic, in the cases of the remaining three characters. Ariadne, whose labyrinth is both the second bedroom and the dreams she has while sleeping in it, has some agency within her dreams. For instance, she is able to interact with and question the dwarves. However, as her last interview with the dwarf shows, outcomes are already set: the dwarf, sitting across from her, has instructed her to write her question on a sheet of paper, place it in a kind of rotating tray, and spin it around for him to answer. However, he writes at the same time as she does, and passes his paper to her as she passes hers to him, and his paper contains the answer to the question he has not yet seen (230). Nutscracker's labyrinth is doubly dismissive of choice. On the first level, he is given tapes of candidates campaigning for the position of Theseus but is given no indication of how, or if, he is actually supposed to select one, or if his selection would matter. Moreover, within their speeches, the candidates lay out their plans for dispensing with the Minotaur, which

includes the series of right and left turns they propose taking in order to escape. Nutscracker shares one such route, which is proven to be utterly useless: repeating the pattern of two right turns followed by a left that the candidate offers simply traces out a closed cross, which allows no possibility for progress (202).

UGLI 666's labyrinth provides the most detailed – and most allusive – example of the superfluity of choice. Her labyrinths are taken from the Medieval Christian tradition, which made great use of the labyrinth.[20] One of the labyrinths in UGLI 666's cathedral is a large floor mosaic similar to the one in the church of Santa Maria di Trastevere in Rome. The tradition of floor mosaics emphasized the process of the labyrinth—not the elegance of it as artifact as seen from above, but the difficulty of it as experience, as seen from within.[21] The penitent was supposed to follow the path of the labyrinth while reflecting on her sins, revisiting her past so as to purify her future. As UGLI 666 progresses through the labyrinth on her knees, in spite of all the turnings, the crucifix is fixed before her: "I could always see the crucifixion with a ray of sunlight falling on it through a stained-glass window, suffusing it with ruby, emerald, and sapphire light!" (151). She feels herself to be reflecting on the choices of her life, but is not performing any kind of choice of her own: she follows the unicursal path, which, like any unicursal path, leads her unerringly to its center, and the crucifix, against the laws of physics, remains always before her, belying her twistings and turns along the path.

The same contradiction of apparent choice and actual impotence governs the whole of their experience in their shared labyrinth as well. They are essentially in exactly the situation that Nutscracker's Helmholtz is in, and they are even experiencing the same coercive operations: UGLI 666's magically stable crucifix, for instance, is achieved through precisely the operations Nutscracker describes. That is, while they may feel like they are making their own choices, they are being manipulated into them. As Nutscracker puts it, "The main problem is to eliminate freedom of choice so that the subject is led unerringly to make the decision required, while at the same time maintaining his belief that his choice is free" (97). Ultimately, of course, in addition to the manipulation, it becomes clear that events would unfold the same way regardless of what choices the characters made; they are going to do what they have always done, what they always will do:

> **Organizm(-:**
>
> What are we going to do here now?
>
> **Monstradamus**
>
> What are we going to do? Carry on with the discourse. (268)

Where the ancient myth explicitly and importantly related a unique event, Pelevin's characters are caught in a loop that requires them to repeatedly undergo the moment of confrontation and transformation. Ariadne's thread was effective insofar as it provided a space for the conversations that eventually helped them remember their situation, but finally, as with the irrelevance of choice, the way out does not matter, because there is no way out.

VII. Conclusions

Pelevin's novel, like his characters' world, is itself an act of active remembering, constructing a new story within the footprint of the ancient myth. Just as the helmet of horror recycled the past to create the present and the future, so the novel requires that not only its characters but even its readers use their memory of the old story to make sense of the new one. The myth itself, in an appropriately recursive fashion, serves as Ariadne's thread for the new retelling, guiding characters and readers through the confusing narrative. The act of remembering thus becomes the model of expectation for both the characters within the novel and readers outside of it. It is by no means a perfect model, and many aspects of the story remain confusing, but it is better than nothing, as Ariadne reminds her thread-mates: "You're all here on my thread. And there isn't any other" (267). Pelevin writes in his introduction, playfully entitled "Mythcellaneous," that "if we start to analyze this high-end glow in terms of content and structure, we will sooner or later recognize the starting point of the journey – the original myth" (ix). The novel proposes that, just as Asterisk's view was always colored by the helmet's filtrations of the past, so too we cannot help but see our world through the lens of our cultural past; the past is forever brought back as the means by which we make meaning of our present, because the fundamental stories never change.

Pelevin's novel thus compels readers to reflect on the process and purpose of adaptation and reinterpretation.[22] Why do we enjoy retellings? What does adaptation allow an author to do? This novel, and others like it, encourages reflection on the nature of narrative as well as allusion and perspective. As Pelevin says in his introduction, "what is a quest/return home for Theseus is a brutal God's sacrifice for Minotaur" (ix) – that is, what a story means can change depending on who is telling it. Alongside *The Helmet of Horror*, students might read and compare other adaptations, exploring the different ways that authors choose to reshape their source material and the impacts these different choices have. They could also compare adaptations of the myth of the Minotaur as told in different periods and consider how a given adaptation reflects its particular context.[23] Additionally, especially in the context of a class with a significant writing component, students could reformulate a historical event or a personal experience in terms of a well-known myth, creating their own adaptation just as Pelevin did.

Moreover, the idea of the labyrinth itself provides a theme for extended study. While this paper focused only on one aspect of the labyrinth, it has been a nearly constant presence in the imagination of every era in the west. Its significance varies from period to period, of course, and from region to region, but the idea itself is one that continues to exercise us as a culture. As Ladensack shows, too, it is familiar enough to students to be easily accessible, and the fact that it has been used as a symbol by authors and artists of every period allows it to serve as a thematic structure for the study of nearly any genre or period of western literary and artistic history.[24] Moreover, already in antiquity the labyrinth has been read as a metaphor for the arduous work of inquiry and intellectual investigation, and thus the students' work – in true labyrinthine fashion – would perform its own subject.

End Notes

[1] The myth in full is not preserved until relatively late, in the works of Diodorus Siculus, active in the 1st C. BCE, and the anonymous 1st C. CE *Bibliotheke*, but there are references to aspects of the story in literature and art from our earliest sources. Catullus 64.52-250 and Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.174-192, *Ars Amatoria* 1.527-564, and *Heroides* 10 preserve the fullest extant treatments from antiquity. Webster *passim* and Gantz 260-270 summarize the extant sources more fully.

[2] On the development of the Theseus myth, see Biraschi, Frost 68-86, Morris 336-361, Shapiro, Walker, and the chapters of Ward and Connor in Ward.

[3] Borgeaud 6-17 traces out the significance of this alternate name, arguing that it reflects an underlying myth of king-sacrifice. See also Deedes 22-30, Kuntz 490-494, and Santarcangeli 61-64.

[4] Compare the Cyclops Polyphemus, who becomes a sympathetic figure of Bucolic poetry in Theocritus and Ovid, or even Geryon, whose mother expresses affection for him in Stesichorus' *Geryoneis*. R. Armstrong 86-90 suggests that the story is meant to make us think about the degree to which bestial cruelty is every bit as evident within men. On the Etruscan tradition of the Minotaur, see e.g. Otto Brendel, *Etruscan Art*, London, 1997, 344ff.

[5] Most famously on a 16th C. Florentine wedding chest attributed to Bartolomeo di Giovanni and Piero di Cosimo that shows him as a centaur; see Kern 180-181.

[6] On the development of the Minotaur in art, see Morris 184-186.

[7] On his disposability, see e.g. R. Armstrong 87.

[8] As mentioned above, the characters in the novel observe that something automatically corrects their typos and mistakes; it is unclear if Asterisk was an automatic correction for Asterius or actually the creature's name.

[9] See e.g. Battistini 3, Borgeaud 17-25, De Freitas 411, Phay-Vakalis 187. Similar is Hillis Miller 12, who reads the thread as a manifestation of Theseus remembering Ariadne.

[10] This is by no means the only way to understand the thread, of course, nor is it a univocal symbol; Hillis Miller 146-7 explores the thread as an image of personal connection, sexual liaison, rebirth, and generational lineage. Kern sees it as a symbol of "cunning and caution" (47) and a representation of the salvation of Christ (146), but also, when stretched out as if Theseus had just reached the center, a literal tracing of the path through, a kind of labyrinth-in-negative (e.g. 31, 64, and fig. 1).

[11] On the path through the labyrinth as a movement away from one's past and then a reemergence into one's new self, see Jaskolski 60.

[12] Nagy 298. The weaving metaphor is rooted in the very language: one of the earliest names for the professional singers of epic poetry, *rhapsodoi*, literally means the "stitchers of song;" see Nagy 298 n.10.5.

[13] Detienne 39-52 discusses the relationship between the Muses, poetry, and memory in detail. See also Nagy 17, where he argues that the verb *to remember* "means not so much that the Muses 'remind' the poet of what to tell but, rather, that they have the power to put his mind or consciousness in touch with places and times other than his own in order to witness the deeds of heroes (and the doings of gods)."

[14] The obverse of Ariadne as Theseus' memory-keeper holds as well, interestingly: Theseus is a famous forgetter. He forgets to change the sails on the trip home, resulting in his father's suicide, and of course forgets his promises to Ariadne when he abandons her on Dia (or, in the later tradition, Naxos). See Catullus 64.52-250, where Theseus is consistently described as forgetful, unmindful, foggy-minded, and so-on. For a full treatment of this poem's presentation of Ariadne and memory, see R. Armstrong 38-48 and ch.5 *passim.* On Theseus' memory problems, see R. Armstrong 213-14.

[15] Among other things, of course; more even than the Minotaur or Ariadne's thread, the labyrinth is open to a wide range of interpretations that are beyond the scope of this paper, which necessarily focuses on one particular aspect. On the labyrinth more generally, some useful starting places include Borgeaud, Deedes, Doob, Jaskolski, Kern, Matthews, and Santarcangeli.

[16] See e.g. Pomponius Mela's description of the labyrinth in his 1st C. CE *Chorographia* 1.48. See also Doob ch.2, and Kern ch.1 and 4.

[17] Doob 46-51 discusses the relationship of choice to the two models.

[18] Doob 23 and n.9 talks about the functions and provides references to the ancient evidence.

[19] Doob 20-25 discusses this section of Pliny in detail.

[20] The labyrinths she sees in the novel are all historical examples. On the labyrinth in the Medieval tradition, see especially Doob Part Two *passim*.

[21] Doob 54-57 summarizes the contradictions of the experience of the labyrinth from within as opposed to from above.

[22] Batstone and Kennedy provide lucid discussions of reception theory in the Classics in particular. See also K. Armstrong 137-147, which provides a summary of several important modern interpretations of various myths, including that of Theseus and the Minotaur.

[23] For a discussion of the myth as interpreted in 20th century literature and art, see Ziolkowski *passim.* Jorge Luis Borges has made great use of the labyrinth as symbol in his work, as in the story "Asterion." Pelevin himself, in his 1999 novel *Generation P* (translated into English as *Homo Zapiens* and *Babylon*), relies heavily on the metaphor of the labyrinth.

[24] See especially 402-3. See also Faris, who structures her book around the uses of the labyrinth in 20th C. fiction. Doob chapters 10 and 11 look at the interpretations of the labyrinth in Dante and Chaucer respectively.

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