the labyrinth and its sorrows

The world-famous Thesean labyrinth is in fact a meander, not a maze. Its twisting paths are not random but in fact two nested sets of left-right-left turns that indicate a fractal pattern characteristic of mathematically recursive figures. Stories associated with the labyrinth — most famously the stories of Dædalus and later Theseus and Ariadne — suggest close interplay between the geometry of the physical space and the topology of narrative itself.

1. the origin of architecture

It is easy to dismiss the story of the labyrinth as sheer mythology until the patterns are detected. The labyrinth is a meander, not a maze. You can still get lost, however, if you stop and forget which way you were going. This pattern was designed as an idealized place for burial: the dead could not get out, nor the living in, without ‘special permission’. Likewise, it was an emblem for the winding paths of Hades, which were a ‘test’ for the soul in search of eternal rest. The idea and sometimes the literal pattern of a design serving as a test for the soul ‘in between the two deaths’ makes us think that this Lacanian theme (the lamella) is in truth a psychic constant.

The upper half of the labyrinth differs from the lower. The upper suggests the pattern made by the sun in its seasonal rise and decline. The lower is a menagerie of twists and turns that suggest that the sun itself had to tread Hades in order to get reborn every day. The night sky was the celestial place of Hades — we got to see it only in the ‘death’ of the day — and its ‘stories’ manifest in constellations, crossed by planets which were the variables of the soul and body in its traverse during birth, were a cosmic gallery of the eternal.

So, it is natural that the labyrinth has peculiar mathematical properties. In some respects, it is identical to the Golden Section, a recursive process that incorporates the results of any one iteration into the starting-point for the next. The fractal that results is the pattern of two parts held together by a twist, the results of which are held together by a twist, and so and so on.

2. labyrinths in other forms of art

We don’t have to see the literal labyrinth or a building by that name to recognize its presence in a variety of other arts, including literature. The main example is ‘chiasmus’, a V-shaped logic that combines a main line of narrative with a sub-plot through clues and glimpses until the two lines join in an event involving surprise, conversion, or catastrophe. Chiasmus is a mirror-form that can be poetically miniaturized in such formulations as the palindromic (‘Able was I ere I saw Elba’; ‘A man, a plan, a canal ... Panama!’) or a witty saying (Alexander Pope: ‘He was a wit among dunces and a dunce among wits’). Chiasmus in larger doses involves a use of three forms of time: the venatic (the main action line), forensic (the sub-plot’s backwards form of time), and festal (the preferred time for catastrophes and chase scenes).

Chiasmus is nearly ubiquitous wherever surprises and suspense are required. Details that will later be important are concealed from the audience ‘in front of their noses’ through clever misdirection. Sometimes whole places and times are assigned to the ‘para-site’ of the sub-plot line, and travellers often get their by digging tunnels or stepping through 4th-dimensional gateways, such as the rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland.

Labyrinths are clearly the reference point for such optical effects in literature as ekphrasis (interruption of action to describe an object or feature in detail), mirroring (the unaccountable duplication of action or text), or the déjà-vu of coincidence or return.

In the visual arts, labyrinth ideas are behind mirroring, impossible apertures, gateways, visual chasms, vertiginous spaces, gaps, and spaces glued together in impossible ways. For example, Picasso’s ground-breaking ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon’ shows a doubled opening in the front of the scene (a curtain held back by a masked figure) and a similar gate-keeper in back — except that the ‘curtain’ is the sky itself, complete with clouds. A similar idea had been employed by Giotto in the Arena Chapel, where an Angel announcing the Apocalypse does so by calmly rolling up the ‘illustration’ of the human world. Sic transit gloria!