

Theseus Loses his Way: Viktor Pelevin's *Helmet of Horror* and the Old Labyrinth of 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 in the novel, and considers how Pelevin's 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 the 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 Pasiphaë'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 turned a reminder of the origin of human and beast; but of human and machine; its head is a helmet that runs on ratiocations 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 together to escape the labyrinth. Pelevin's novel continues to play with the original myth by structuring the story with a series of recursive metaphorical labyrinth, 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 in an e-learning or design study module.

I. Introduction
 In October 2005, *Connotation* devoted an entire issue of novels offering us a rethinking of foundational myth in the modern genre as written by some of the most well-known and widely respected authors of contemporary literature. Kern Armstrong, in her introduction to the section, remarks on the timeless importance of mythology as a source of truth about the human condition, and observes that they nonetheless require ratiocination 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 re-interpret stories differently and to put them back to work for us." Armstrong's framing is particular, and the series as a whole, asserts that our modern world, with its relentless obsession with scientific and technological truths, leaves us out from the epistemological "Truth" available via myth. Furthermore, this series suggests that updating old stories for our modern world can reinvoke 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 reception and the labyrinth to help students think about and explore the nature of storytelling and retellings.

II. The Myth in Antiquity
 Theseus was a young prince of Athens. Due to an odd 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 sacrificed as an offering to the Minotaur and became the labyrinth, a horrendous place designed to confuse and terrify his victims. Pelevin's novel makes it clear that the myth is not a simple story of a young man and a monster. Minos' wife Pasiphaë had become enamored of a particularly handsome bull, 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 that would allow her to mate with the bull.

Theseus discovered a plot to stop the barbaric 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 his 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 him 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 may perhaps be surprising that the myth was not an especially central part of 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 or 4th BCE, is primarily associated with the legend of his rescue by the goddess Athena, and his role in the founding of the city of Athens. 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 moving more closely at his transformations and their effects. His novel, naturally, looks little like the original. First, it is not, as reviewer John Fasman has it, "from the neck up"; it is nonetheless entirely plays out in the virtual space of an internet forum, and the characters are not the original mythic figures. Moreover, although the novel is set in the present, the novel's time is in many ways, it is a timeless entirely surreal, outside of time, and free from the constraints of normal reality. The novel is initiated by a question posed by Ariadne to the forum: "I just constructed a labyrinth in which I can lose myself and anyone who tries to find me – who said that?" (1).

Ariadne's question is never answered, but seven other characters – Organizmi(-), Romeo-y-Cobba, Nutsacker, Monstradamus, IsoIdA, UGLI 666, and Sartrik – come online to discuss and answer her 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 Minotaur double-headed centaur head, leads to a regular modern Roman apartment with a single door. None of the characters has any memory of how he or she got to the room or any way of sharing past identities, as while attempting to type identifying labels 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 see their conversations so the only posts available. As the characters work together to figure out and escape their simultaneously surreal and claustrophobic situation, it becomes clear that their initial dialogue was not an attempt to "meet" or "for" instance, a request that the doors be opened results in open doors, and food arrives on demand.

All of the characters eventually find a way to leave and outside the world of the forum as they work to invent ways to escape, and they realize that those who works 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 of Ariadne on his floor, and a canon to explain their meaning. Romeo-y-Cobba and Nutsacker both have similar parts with their friends to explain the meaning of the labyrinth they see near each other, while the novel trying to effect a rendezvous. Organizmi(-) who has a life-size plywood model of the Windows 98 screen-saver "mazes" that crashes if he touches it. Nutsacker, who in his previous life had worked on virtual reality and media control, is in 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 newspaper that has a picture of Ariadne, before being pursued by Theseus, who finds Ariadne 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 technology, and the characters eventually realize 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. Ariadne finds a release from literal dead-end, and argues that all ends are dead, but some are less obviously so. Monstradamus finds a dream 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 women whom she is part wearing a bronze mask with horns similar to a bull's. The second dream finds her in a forest, where she sees a man and a woman who both have similar parts with their friends to explain the meaning of the labyrinth they see near each other, while the novel trying to effect a rendezvous. Organizmi(-) who has a life-size plywood model of the Windows 98 screen-saver "mazes" that crashes if he touches it. Nutsacker, who in his previous life had worked on virtual reality and media control, is in 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 newspaper that has a picture of Ariadne, before being pursued by Theseus, who finds Ariadne outside her door another room, a bedroom with a wonderful bed and a variety of sleeping pills.

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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 Pasiphaë's misdeed. The result of the union of the mortal woman and the immortal bull, the Minotaur is a creature that is both human and beast. Bibliotheca says that his true name was Asterisk (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.^[1] The Minotaur is brutishly force and bestiality, whatever his royal or divine origins in Minos. Crete, Asterisk for the Greeks was essentially beast. How it came about that the Athenian tributes happened to be dedicated to the creature is unclear, but the Minotaur's location in the center of the labyrinth is clear. Pelevin, however, describes the creature as a young man or woman who had become 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 to the humanity of others.

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Pelevin's Minotaur incorporates many of the traditional features, most obviously his large human frame that is the source of his strength and his ability to be hunted. Additionally, he has a human face, but he is not a man, but a creature that is both human and beast. Asterisk, a play on the creature's alternate name, Asterisk.^[4] 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 Ariadne's 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 exterior completely mechanical helmet on his Minotaur, Ariadne's shoulder is placed at a bull's head, which has updated the friction point and situated it between the real and machine. In fact, as they learn more about the head and the exterior of the Minotaur already in Hesiod's one of the earliest poets of the Greek tradition, where he is described as "a proud son, a marvel to see, the body of a man inclined itself towards the feet, but above grew the head of a bull" (R. 145-16.17). In spite of several anomalies in the later text, the idea of the Minotaur remains remarkably stable over time.^[3] Moreover, he exists almost exclusively to provide an arbitrary test for the hero: he is precisely central to the story because he is a regular mortal, but he is immortal in the converse to his use as well; the Minotaur, himself, is ultimately remembered mostly for being killed by Theseus.

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V. Ariadne's Thread
 While the helmet relied on memory for its action, Ariadne's thread, as many scholars have convincingly argued,^[5] 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.^[6] The labyrinth, by its nature, enforces forgetfulness, and the thread is a physical reminder of the creature's existence. To begin to take the thread of Ariadne is to begin to remember, to return to the source across the confusion of forgetfulness.^[7] 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 enabled Theseus to literally retrace his past, moving backwards in time and space towards the moment when he entered the labyrinth.^[8] Of course, the moment of entry is itself a regular mortal, but he is immortal in the converse to his use as well; the Minotaur, himself, is ultimately remembered mostly for being killed by Theseus.

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VI. The Labyrinth
 Finally we come to the labyrinth itself, which offers a way to puzzle out the relationship between memory and choice. The labyrinth is a complex structure, one that is both human and beast. Bibliotheca says that his true name was Asterisk (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.^[1] The Minotaur is brutishly force and bestiality, whatever his royal or divine origins in Minos. Crete, Asterisk for the Greeks was essentially beast. How it came about that the Athenian tributes happened to be dedicated to the creature is unclear, but the Minotaur's location in the center of the labyrinth is clear. Pelevin, however, describes the creature as a young man or woman who had become 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 to the humanity of others.

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