

Postmodern Literary Labyrinths: Spaces of Horror Reimagined

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Postmodern Literary Labyrinths: Spaces of Horror Reimagined

The labyrinth provides both a metaphorical basis and a narratological mode for postmodernism's textual experiments. Critics such as J. Hillis Miller (1992) and Michel Foucault (2004) have used the labyrinth to reflect upon narrative theory and criticism, which Wendy B. Faris has proposed reflects a labyrinth-orientated criticism (1988). This return to the labyrinth is typically sinister. Postmodern labyrinths are complex (*The Unconsoled*), disorientating and overwhelming for the walker (*Hawksmoor*; *City of Glass*), where the labyrinth is reimagined as a textual prison without Minotaur (*The Name of the Rose*, *House of Leaves*, *City of Glass*), and as a space for undoing gender (*James Miranda Barry*, *The Passion*). In these spaces, the past erupts into the present (*Passing Time*, *Hawksmoor*, *The Passion*, *The General in his Labyrinth*), and specifically, in this essay, is represented as a confrontation with the archetypal mother (*House of Leaves*, *The Passion of New Eve*).

Labyrinths have long been spaces of horror. In its simplest iteration, the Cretan myth explores a ritualized home-prison for the monstrous Minotaur, a deformed child, born out of Minos's blasphemy and the coupling of his mother Pasiphae with a sacred bull. Other appropriations of the labyrinth have focussed on metaphysical transformation (Christian labyrinths in the middle ages), gender and fertility (turf mazes), and ritualized entrapment (gothic labyrinths). Modernist representations, in turn, inspired a different type of engagement with mythology.¹ Ironically, in their response to archaeological discoveries at Knossos and Troy, modernist labyrinths emphasized a discontinuity, the horror of a perpetual present broken off from the past whereby the artist-writer is entrapped in the labyrinth/world as prison.²

This essay explores representations of the postmodern labyrinth in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) as reimagined spaces of horror. These texts draw directly on the Cretan labyrinth (specifically

ideas of complexity, house and ritual) and represent the labyrinth as an *unheimlich* site of maternal horror. Both novels are concerned with the (re)construction of self. Similarly, Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Passion* (1987) communicates the potentiality of the labyrinth to provide a space for more diverse identities. In Winterson's novel, despite the murder of the Minotaur character in a labyrinthine city, depictions of horror exist outside of the labyrinth in the warfare of Napoleonic Europe. Other representations of the labyrinth in postmodern literature, such as *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and *Hawksmoor* (1985), are notable for their absence of women (though it might be argued the labyrinth symbolizes this absence).³ All these postmodern novels represent a return to the Cretan labyrinth that privileges the confrontation with an anthropomorphic architecture. However, unlike other postmodern representations of the labyrinth, which are typically nihilistic, I argue that both Carter and Danielewski's novels offer hopeful (though ambiguous) outcomes, achieved through the reimagining of the labyrinth as a space of horror, trauma, and transformation.

Both Carter and Danielewski represent the labyrinth as a physical site (or sites) to be explored. The labyrinths are usually described as difficult and complex (multicursal in form),⁴ in a deliberate engagement with classical labyrinths. These representations are corporeal (Aryton 1974). In Danielewski's novel, in particular, the textual form is also deliberately labyrinthine, with false starts and disappearing and elliptical passages of text. Footnotes and academic analysis foreground the relevance of classical examples, but representations of the labyrinth are multiple and used to represent the mother as house, the novel itself, the book as mother, and house as book. An encounter with the labyrinthine space is a bodily confrontation with origin, which threatens nihilism, but which I argue results in transformation.⁵

Horror is experienced both by characters in the novels but also by the reader-critic, who is confronted with overwhelming mythological and psychoanalytical play. Carter's work

pre-empts psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's emphasis on bodily horror and writerly excess, whilst Danielewski is responding directly to Kristeva's ideas. As systems of knowledge and myths of power are repeatedly deconstructed, the novels direct the reader to the *a priori* quality of the labyrinth to reflect the universal human condition through its close affinity to the body. Critical focus on Carter's writing has tended to emphasize the manner in which it "de-mythologizes" (Gruss 2009; Cavallaro 2011). Whilst the novel appears to debunk many systems of thought, including psychoanalysis, the motif of the labyrinth remains. This surviving mythological structure is hopeful and offers a space to undo and reimagine ideas of gendered identity. Similarly, Danielewski uses the labyrinth as a "mythical method" to give form to trauma and the process of recovery (Dawson 2015, p.285). Through a focus on scarring as a bodily trauma, I read Truant's body as marked by familial horror. His re-reading of his body enables him to recover his past. Ultimately, the overt complexity of Danielewski's novel belies an insistent return to "the family," achieved through the novel's labyrinthine form and content (Toth 2013, p. 182).

The Passion of New Eve

Both novels are set in the United States of America and use the labyrinth as an appropriated and defining myth of origin.⁶ Published in 1977, Carter's sf novel extrapolates the racial, gender, and religious tensions of the United States of America to the point of civil war. Read in 2017, the novel is unerringly prescient.⁷ In Carter's evocation of North America, she relentlessly parodies the Women's movement through examples of its radical militancy and worship of mother earth.⁸ The novel's English protagonist Evelyn is utterly transformed by his experience of the country. Evelyn lands in New York as male and ends the novel on the west coast of America as female and pregnant, having been captured, raped, and forcibly transformed into a woman by Mother, leader of the Women's movement. Despite the horror

of Eve/lyn's many un/fortunate experiences, including those at the hands of Zero and the Children's Crusade, the tone of the novel is that of a fantastical and humorous road trip. The novel is a complex exploration of gender through ideas of performativity and embodiment. Eve/lyn learns to perform femininity but is only truly transformed by the sexual awakening with Tristessa (a trans figure who is identified as a female old Hollywood icon but who is revealed as bodily male), her ensuing pregnancy, and return to maternal origins.

From the moment we begin reading *The Passion of New Eve*, we enter a ritualized space. Carter's rigorous exploration of labyrinths exaggerates and then subverts horror tropes. She first intensifies the labyrinth as site of feminine horror before reimagining it as a space of potential. In so doing, the labyrinth moves from a manifestation of horror (male confronted with female), remaking (male remade as bodily female), to undoing (beach cave) and potential evolution of the hermaphrodite (Eve's child). From New York as negation, Beulah female as abstraction, Tristessa's mansion as woman as symbol, to the final cave and Eve's womb, which act as places for this undoing of gender, these spaces stress a connection to origin. Carter directly engages with the labyrinth as a space for gendered transformation. Furthermore, the novel's narrative structure is also recursive and mazy, as Lizzy Welby notes, "the sequential chronology of the novel is synchronically distorted" (2014, p. 75).

Critics such as Dani Cavallaro (2011; see also Karpinsky 2000), taking Carter's lead (1983), have read Carter's persistent and over-elaborate engagement with myth as a deliberate attempt to "de-mythologize" systems of power and gender through the "anti-myth" novel (Gruss 2009).⁹ On the one hand, Carter demonstrates that symbols are socially constructed, whereby "[a] critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives" (Carter 1977, p. 1). However, Carter has always been a more sophisticated and slippery thinker.¹⁰ Another way of reading this relationship between self and symbol is to consider the bodily relationship between the two. Rather than debunk all mythology fully, I argue that Carter

reworks the phenomena of the labyrinth - stripped back and reclaimed as a metaphor of the female body - as a symbol for narrative and identity transformation. The labyrinth endures as a place of remaking, undoing, and rebirth in the novel.

The Passion of New Eve resolutely retains the imagery and iconography of the labyrinth, as a place that is born of the self and to which we return. It exists in “anteriority,” outside of time (p. 163). The symbol that defines Eve/Evelyn¹¹ has been waiting for her/him before birth. The labyrinth is both an external symbol to signify inner life but also an inner reality (the womb, brain, gut, inner ear, and fingerprints). His journey through and towards the labyrinths in the novel is actually a return to origin; every origin is a return to the mother. This promise of return is filled with terror and horror. Evelyn is repeatedly overcome by paralysis when faced with the representative of the female (such as Leilah and Mother). This horror is often parodic. The character’s sense of horror lessens as the journey continues, as Evelyn’s horror (at the symbols of the overwhelming female body) is commuted into Eve’s bodily sufferings (her passion) at the hands of Zero, before joyous unions as a hermaphrodite with Tristessa in the desert and finally pregnancy. It is Eve/Evelyn’s engagement with the labyrinth that forms the source of horror within the novel, but also the possibility for rebirth and freedom.

After landing in New York, the coherency of Evelyn’s identity is challenged immediately through emersion in the city-labyrinth. Described in a reimagining of a return to the womb, the city’s “lurid, Gothic darkness [...] closed over my head entirely and became my world” (1977, p. 6). The city is a body politic that is decaying and in revolt. Angry Women proclaim their threat through the graffiti of their insignia: “the bared teeth in the female circle” (p. 7). This *vagina dentata* finally “bites” and castrates Evelyn in the labyrinthine, subterranean caves of Beulah. Evelyn is lured to his castration by Leilah/Lillith. Supposedly a child of the city, Leilah is later revealed as Lillith (Adam’s first wife and

mother of demons), sent by her M/mother. The narrator describes her body in verbose, animalistic terms so that she is always more than a woman – “some in-between thing” (p. 16). Perhaps to absolve himself of his treatment of Leilah, his descriptions transform her into an enchantress. In doing so, Leilah is portrayed as both Ariadne and the Minotaur (half-human, half-nonhuman). Recalling Arthur Evans’s interpretation of Ariadne as a priestess and dancer of the labyrinth, Leilah understands the city as a bodily construction and is able to dwell there. Leilah (and her other incarnation as Lillith) represents what Elizabeth Wilson identifies as the fearful female deity, hidden within cityscapes (1992).

Evelyn’s sexual encounter with Leilah is a parody of gendered horror. In the darkness of the hallways of her apartment block, the narrator panics as the “darkness inside terrified me” (p. 20). This goes beyond the darkness of the city. This is the “archaic, atavistic panic before original darkness and silence, before the mystery of herself,” her body (1997, p. 20). Evelyn’s fear is based on his recognition of the female body as negation. Finally, as she leads him to her flat, the graffiti on the walls nudge at Evelyn’s memory: “INTROITE ET HIC DII SUNT [ENTER, FOR HERE THE GODS ARE]” (p. 21 and p. 44; author’s emphasis and translation).¹² Carter’s translation seems deliberate in suggesting that these gods (unlike their Greek counterparts) are geographically or domestically restricted. Evelyn falls further as ritualized space is intensified. The metaphorical fall is also physical, through a threshold, as “lured by gravity, [...] I plunged [...] into] the poisoned wound of love between her thighs” (p. 21). The descent into the classical underworld is achieved by passing through the Cumaean Gates, picked out with the iconography of the labyrinth (in Virgil’s *Aeneid*; Catto 1988). This notion of the labyrinth as descent into hell is used repeatedly by Danielewski. In chapters nine through thirteen, as Navidson’s team descends into the labyrinth, which is represented in the experimental narrative layout, Truant accesses his repressed traumatic memories and can be said to lead him back to his personal “hell.” The corporeal labyrinth that Evelyn enters

when he penetrates Leilah is the surrender of his descent into hell. The labyrinthine imagery of their sexual encounter is redoubled by the threat of her apartment in a house “with its many, many rooms” (1977, p. 20). The house is anthropomorphic. It reflects both the potential of the womb to act as a house or home, but also recalls the Cretan labyrinth as house-prison. Evelyn, having been born male, has exited this maternal house, dissociated himself from his origins, and is fearful of return. Having sex with Leilah is a reminder of this loss. The conflation of the house as bodily labyrinth returns both in the descriptions of Beulah and is transposed when Eve experiences orgasm as a female. So, this house turns from a metaphor of exile from the mother towards a place of pleasure and potentiality. As in Carter’s other writings, the experience of erotic pleasure as a woman has the potential to transform patriarchal narratives. Here, the space of the labyrinth is reclaimed.

Fleeing Leilah (his mirror of self) and the city, Evelyn begins a road trip west into the sterile desert interior (the mirror of his heart). This is a journey into self “through the curvilinear galleries of the brain towards the core of the labyrinth within us” (1977 p. 35). The landscape of the desert is both ancient and familiar in that Evelyn recognizes it as the mirror of his own interiority. The overwhelming landscape draws forth a “peculiar horror” as he confronts the landscape of his soul (p. 38). His machismo behind this trip into the “wild west” quickly unravels as he finds himself lost, famished, and alone before his capture and transportation to Beulah. Evelyn enters Beulah as Evelyn and leaves as Eve (bodily female but unreconciled to her new form), transformed by the monster at the heart of Beulah, Mother.¹³

Held in a cell at the centre of the maze, Evelyn’s surroundings intentionally mimic a womb. The subterranean labyrinth recalls the competing site for the Cretan labyrinth, prior to Evans’s excavations at Knossos, at the quarried caverns of Gortyna. In these vertical labyrinths, *katabasis* can be reversed, as to retrace your steps offers a means of return or a

path to redemption, but there is a price to be paid. Evelyn is encouraged to “[j]ourney back, journey backwards to the source!” but is utterly lost in the convolutions of Beulah’s geography (p. 50). This is the contortion of the Christian labyrinth realized in gothic literature. The planned intricacy of the labyrinth, without God as guide, confounds the walker (see Pope 1994, p. 45).¹⁴ Whilst gothic labyrinths are terrible spaces of transgression and fear, they lack the sustained evocation of bodily horror achieved in this essay’s postmodern examples. Evelyn is unable to navigate or dwell within the perplexing “female” geography of Beulah. However, in woman’s form, she is able to learn “the plan of the labyrinth” and escape (1977, p. 77). The labyrinth is the literal embodiment of the interior – of the inner ear, the brain – and, what remains unsaid, the womb (p. 53). This is a fragmentary return of Filarete’s concepts of architecture and bodily unity (1972). As Evelyn descends the labyrinth, his terror is kept just in check by the inevitability of meeting with a Minotaur-figure, this in the inverse of Truant’s expectations in *House of Leaves*. This is the meeting with that which he has suppressed and exiled to “the lowest room at the root of my brain” (Carter 1977, p. 54). Estranged from the mother in psychoanalytical terms, Evelyn’s labyrinthine journeys mimic her abject form, and so, despite his fear of her, it is an inevitable return. Unlike the hyper-masculine meeting between Theseus and the Minotaur, Evelyn is faced with a female abstraction made flesh.

Forever cast out of woman’s womb, at “journey’s end as a man,” Evelyn is stupefied with horror (p. 56). “The abject maternal body enrages the (male) subject as it is a constant reminder of his origins” (Welby 2014, p. 74). These are origins to which he believes he is unable to return, but the former scientist Mother has other plans. The horror of the castration is one of anticipation. Evelyn has been told his fate and is led to the altar/operating table like “a sacrificial animal” (Carter 1977, p. 65). Evelyn is raped, castrated by the phallic mother, his body remodelled and inner cavity carved out to form a womb that mirrors the landscape

of Beulah. In doing so, Carter makes manifest (and parodies) the symbolic fear of castration that underpins Freudian psychoanalytical thought. However, the horror of this assault is undermined by the hyperbole of the situation: the “mutilated” Mother wears both a false beard and medical gown. The reconstruction of the external and internal body does not initially result in a change in identity. Though this is a physical transformation into a woman’s form - created by surgery, with lessons on femininity from Hollywood and dosed with female hormones - Eve is not female. She is an “artificial changeling,” a “Tiresias,” whose “cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of my [female] self” (p. 68, 71).

Eve/Evelyn’s nightmare is not one she can immediately wake from. Eve/Evelyn’s journey takes her ever onwards, as “I have not yet reached the end of the maze” (p. 145). This movement through the labyrinth is associated with horror and experience for Eve/Evelyn. Indeed, there is no ultimate conclusion to the journey. “[T]he perfect circle, the vicious circle, [is] the dead end,” and such endings result in new beginnings (p. 168, 167). It is not until “Eve returns to her mother” and passes through a final, sulphurous cave that she can truly begin (p. 176). Entering the fissure in the rocks (a further labyrinth-womb), time runs backwards and allows an erasure of her entry into the symbolic order (the destruction of her love as symbol, the non-reflecting mirror). In a state of anteriority (represented by amber that reverts to a viscous state), her construct of self as a male and as a female is erased. She is released from myths of her own and others’ making. Like the symbol of the “archaeopteryx” she sees (“bird and lizard both at once”), Eve(lyn) is a union of contraries (p. 180). This symbol of her internal nature offers hope. She is the literal manifestation of Beulah, as she carries a baby with two fathers and two mothers. Finally, the character becomes reconciled to the ambiguous form that mirrors the “house” of the life growing within her and the umbilical cord, which “anchors” her foetus. Exiting the cave as Eve(lyn), she can reflect on her pregnancy and await her final transformation into mother. The complexity of the child is

unresolved. It is the unborn next evolutionary step; the promise of a hermaphrodite child born of contraries. America cannot be the place of its birth. Instead, the ocean, the female element “where, at the dawn of time, we were all born,” offers her passage the place of birth (p. 144). The labyrinth re-entered.

House of Leaves

House of Leaves is a notoriously complex and convoluted horror novel. Its narrative excess is the physical realisation of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which is both book and labyrinth. “The horror in the novel and the horror *of* the novel replicate each other” (Botting 2015, p. 243; my emphasis). Our transgression by reading the novel itself (“[t]his is not for you”) creates a reading experience that is itself *unheimlich* (p. x). Rather than see its horror as a type of “camouflage”, I read *House of Leaves* as being concerned with horror, its origins and processes of recovery (Hayles 2012). Horror erupts from places of familiarity and domesticity. Horror is found at home, and what is more fearful than a home that is also a labyrinth (Botting 2015)? Danielewski reimagines the trope of the classical labyrinth to engage with horror, fear, and a cycle of recovery. The text’s obsessive consideration of narrative, remediation, epistemology, and subjectivity has drawn significant responses from critics such as N. Katherine Hayles, Alison Gibbons, and Fred Botting.¹⁵ The layered and jostling narratives directly and repeatedly represent trauma and horror, whilst the textual experience for the reader becomes labyrinthine. As Gibbons has shown, the novel’s horror is engendered in part by the highly referential boundary-crossing act of reading, between text and reader (2012a, 2012b). Both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, the labyrinth is the expression of the book, the reading experience, the suppression, and re-emergence of trauma (Navidson with Delia, Truant with his mother), and of maternal origins. This is a multiplication of spatial horror, what Botting terms “horror-space” (2015).

The novel is presented as an archive of written texts, purportedly concerned with an investigation into a domestic labyrinth by filmmaker Will Navidson. The emergent labyrinth appears to respond to the psychological state of those who enter and is presented as the physical manifestation of Navidson's guilt surrounding his treatment of Delia,¹⁶ as well as a means to consider Johnny Truant's trauma and loss of his mother (Danielewski 2000, p. 392-93). In testing the validity of the Navidson record, Truant begins to explore his past through his relationships to his mother. In doing so, he is pulled into a consideration of the labyrinth (or is this a labyrinth of his own making?) and appears to draw the reader in, too. It is not a place to dwell, we can "only dwell upon it" (Slocombe 2005). It is easy to lose your way, to pause and double back, or to become overwhelmed by the novel's size and intricacy. The active reader/writer may follow Truant's invitation to write on and comment about the novel, and so continue the meta-commentary (p. xxiii).¹⁷ Though Alan Gibbs has chided what he sees as an over reliance on "centring," Truant's influence on the Navidson record and reading the record as a representation of his traumatic relationship with his mother, Truant's narrative often stands for a central analysis of the novel's invocation of horror (2014). It is Truant's address to "you" that directly draws the reader into the novel (p. xxiii).¹⁸ The horror is recursive, written on the body, and reaches out to the reader (Botting 2015).

Navidson, Zampanò, and Truant are concerned with the narration, criticism, and interpretations of the incursion into the house-labyrinth. Pelafina's story reveals the traumatic root of the textual labyrinth as grounded her experience.¹⁹ These narratives play with the idea of an anthropomorphic architecture, which is also textual. The unreliability of each narrative is evident. The Navidson record is supposedly a hoax, Zampanò is dead, Truant missing, and his mother, Pelafina, institutionalized prior to death. In these protagonists' stories, the female body is significant and is explored through the motif of the labyrinth. Navidson has moved to Ash Tree Lane to repair his relationship with his wife following the trauma of photographing

Delial, Zampanò appears haunted by lost guide Béatrice (in her many guises, p. xxii), and Truant's trauma is in symbiosis with his mother's (Cox 2006). Danielewski is playing with narrative reliability and developing a type of exaggerated writing cure, which is part critique.

Truant is remarkable for his textual curiosity. He experiences horror leading to prolonged uncertainty and phobia as a result of his reading of, and interaction with, the labyrinthine manuscript. His responses are located in his fear of textuality, specifically that he may be a textual subject written by his mother.²⁰ This leads to his fearful response to the signifiers of textuality and, by extension, his local environment (which is represented by the text). Truant presents his experience as horror in the introduction, caused by his task to recover the mass of words from Zampanò. For Zampanò, words have the power to "soothe" and provide "comfort [found] cradled in a woman's words" (Danielewski 2000, p. xxii). However, Truant recognises Zampanò's words as the "[e]ndless snarls of words," left after the beast has moved on (xvii). His remediated presentation of them is not initially one of comfort.

Zampanò's academic sections that respond to the Cretan labyrinth are struck through and so "under erasure," which ironically increases their significance. The passages reveal a complex architecture as site of familial horror. The myth explores nation building, blasphemy, betrayal, justice, technology, artifice, bestiality, disability, ritual, murder, abandonment, suicide, and finally threatened incest, and infanticide. Like Carter's protagonist Evelyn, Truant may have no choice over this transformation. These sections relate to the labyrinth as "a trope of repression," which denotes a familial tragedy and reveals the labyrinth-house as prison (p. 110). Like Evelyn's descent into the labyrinth, Truant is expecting to face the Minotaur at every turn. Partly the premonition of this meeting causes him anxiety but is it also the fear that he himself is the Minotaur. This appears to be brought about both by his mother's naming of him as a mythical creature and by his treatment by his abusive self-father,

Raymond, who calls him “beast.” Truant emphasizes this comparison through his clue, to turn “The Minotaur into a homie,” an anagram of “O Im he Minotaur” (p. 337). The hybrid Minotaur is the only character able to dwell comfortably within the labyrinth (as Leilah/Lillith demonstrated in New York). The structure serves both as his home and prison, until confronted and killed by his other (Theseus). However, Truant is not comfortable with the labyrinthine imagery. He struggles to dwell as the labyrinth represents and causes him to confront his traumatic engagements with his mother. The Minotaur is absent. Horror is elicited not by the expected confrontation with the monster but by encounter with the anthropomorphic labyrinth and its ability to entrap, nullify, and transform (Foucault 2004).

Pasiphaë is mostly overlooked in analysis of the labyrinth, and yet her role, as mother of the Minotaur and the birth as the impetus for building the labyrinth, is directly returned to by Danielewski. Similarly, Pelafina gives birth to Truant and also constructs him through her letters. In recognizing this, Truant’s textual fear is also physical. Whilst on occasion Pelafina is objected and passive (a book, a tree), she is also seen as responsible for marking Truant, both physically by her nails on his skin (his birth, through scarring his arms) and metaphorically by her writing (her tongue of ink). Truant suffers paralyzing horror through his encounters with text and ink, which in turn connote his mother. The textual layout, with its obscured and destroyed passages, represents the process of deconstruction as a threat to Truant. Chapter nine makes explicit the labyrinth as text. From page 199 in particular, the reader moves through and back, inverting and turning the book to follow the various narratives.²¹ The chapter reflects Danielewski’s extensive research into labyrinths and charts Truant’s increasing agoraphobia. In doing so, the labyrinth reflects both the novel’s form and its content in a more explicit way than Carter’s novel.

Horror erupts from within the home. Truant is physically scarred by his mother in the family home (burning oil, fingernails dug into his skin). To add to his mental scarring, she is

then ripped from the family home and institutionalized (an event that Truant offers as possible inspiration for the Navidson labyrinth). In the kitchen of his home, where he was burnt and permanently scarred, Truant replays the moment of trauma. The scars act both as a physical reminder of a traumatic historical event and of its ongoing effect as part of his present. The bodily scarring and the initially obscured origins of the trauma result in horror, as he is unable to emotionally interpret his marked body. His scars become speaking wounds. These scars are permanent but in a state of renewal.²² The scars take the shape of liquid in “whirls,” “eddies,” and “currents” and suggest a type of continuous movement away and towards the moment of their creation (p. 505). Truant’s engagement with them is recursive; he returns again and again to these traumatic marks on his body. Looking to his scars, Truant tells stories in order to protect both himself and others from the truth. “I’ve lost sense of what’s real and what’s not. What I’ve made up, what has made me” (p. 497). He later returns closer to the origin of the trauma as though tricked through the passageways in a labyrinth: “now I know exactly where I’m going, a place I’ve already managed to avoid twice” (p. 92). The story promises an elliptical return to an origin, both to his birth and also to his multiple scarrings as moments of trauma. Ultimately, the oil and the fingernail marks are recast as accidents, which enable Truant to reconsider his mother as nurtured rather than destroyer.

Truant’s protective mechanism of inventing stories to hide his past and his research into Zampanò’s writing cause him to start to access the repressed memories of his mother. As he reads her letters and explores Zampanò’s manuscript, he traces “something else. Maybe parallel [...c]ertainly personal” (p. 502). Truant’s stories and memory are represented in architectural terms. They build the labyrinth. For Truant, the labyrinth represents the terrible mother, which is then transmuted into a more positive reclamation of femininity. As Danielewski confirms, “it was my aim to address that [fear] - but it’s also [a novel] about recovering from fear” (as cited in Cottrell 2000). Despite Danielewski’s complex engagement

with representations of the labyrinth, ultimately for Truant, this is a return to the representation of the maternal body embodied by the text. Josh Toth emphasizes this recursive storying process as he claims, “it initiates a very sincere process of recovery that [...] knows that recovery can never be final or complete” (2013, p.194). The confrontation of Pasiphaë and the Minotaur, Pelafina, and Truant, is revealed as a reunion. Finally, their relationship is reimagined as a loving one.

Conclusion:

These novels reimagine the classical Cretan labyrinth as a site of horror. Drawing on a form that Barthes describes as notoriously rich in signification,²³ the transformative confrontation with (or within) the labyrinth is revealed as a visceral reencounter with the maternal body we lost at birth (Barthes 2010). The labyrinth is the physical manifestation of original horror caused by birth trauma and loss of the mother but also offers the means by which to recover. Whilst the labyrinth has always been associated with transformation, in these novels, the reimagined maternal space has the ability to (re)absorb and so threatens the protagonists with existential nothingness. Perhaps surprisingly, the experience of the labyrinth as a space of horror typically results in the potential for positive transformation.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, the labyrinth is explicitly bodily and transformative. The symbol survives the debunking of other mythical frameworks that inform psychoanalysis and closes the dichotomy between mind and body. In Evelyn’s male state particularly, this confrontation is perceived in Kristevan terms of abjection and horror. Passage through the various labyrinths ultimately commutes the horror, and Eve(lyn) is transformed to signify the promise of the hermaphrodite. This hybrid figure is perhaps the only one that can dwell within the labyrinth and so makes the space *heimlich*.

In *House of Leaves*, the idea of the labyrinth representing maternal space and origin is continued and complicated. The primal horror, that the labyrinth represents maternal bodily space is made complex as the labyrinth also reflects mother as house, book as mother, and house as book. The origins of trauma are recursively explored before offering a transformative outcome, “I know it’s going to be okay,” which suggests a release from horror (for now) (p. 515). In doing so, the labyrinth is both the locus of horror and the potential means to recover from familial horror. These texts anticipate the labyrinth in post-postmodern (or metamodernist)²⁴ literature, where horror is transmuted.²⁵

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¹ See Cathy Gere in *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (2010) and Theodore Ziolkowski in *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (2008). With these archaeological discoveries, the myth of the labyrinth was revised as historical by Arthur Evans (see Ziolkowski 2008).

² For James Joyce, escape from this labyrinth was possible but inaccessible. Franz Kafka's use of the labyrinth represented the overwhelming political and bureaucratic systems that entrapped the individual. Pablo Picasso's *Minotauremachie* series envisages a world where the walls of the labyrinth-prison are destroyed and the monstrous inhabitants of the labyrinth released.

³ In Umberto Eco's novel, the labyrinth variously represents a library and wider sign systems and is most closely associated with the mind rather than the womb. The subterranean labyrinths of Peter Ackroyd's novel are ritualistic; the space connects the blood sacrifice that consecrated their construction with a series of present day murders.

⁴ I use the term "labyrinth" to mean a complex path typically expressed in architectural terms (Shields 1997).

⁵ See Will Slocombe (2005) for an extended analysis of the novel as nihilistic.

⁶ The labyrinth symbol has been transported from initial Mediterranean cults through European migration (Matthews 1922).

⁷ I use the term sf to reflect recent genre concerns regarding the theorization of science fiction, science fantasy and speculative fiction. See, for example, Sherryl Vint (2015). Carter's work contains elements of all of these genres and resists classification.

⁸ She brings the same scrutiny and mockery to bear on religious fervour, hyper-masculinity, and women's (willing) subjugation to men.

⁹ Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the reworking of the biblical narrative of Eve.

¹⁰ See, for example, the response to Carter's *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978), which made it difficult to read her as a second wave feminist. Compare Patricia Duncker (1984) and Sarah Gamble's (1997) reading of her pornography or erotic agency. Sitting uneasily between second and third wave manifestations of feminism, her work is perhaps best understood within the emergent praxis of trans studies.

¹¹ Carter refers to the character as Evelyn (his ambiguous birth name), as the primary male form, after the sex transformation and inadequate psychological programming Evelyn becomes Eve. Though this differs from the novel, I have used the term "Eve/Evelyn" to represent the character at this point in the novel, as her identity is ambiguous. I have used the term "Eve(lyn)" to refer to the transformation of the pregnant character following her passage through the final labyrinth-cave.

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- ¹² Danielewski takes this a step further when Navidson claims to believe that his house (labyrinth) is god.
- ¹³ Mother has a counterpart in the monstrous male character, Zero. He is a circle (a zero), a negative, who, with an amputated half leg, resembles the truncated penis in the desert. These two god-heads are sustained by their female believers; their power “sustained by the force of [their] subjects’ belief” (Gamble 1997, p. 72).
- ¹⁴ Experience of the gothic labyrinths of Matthew Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, and T.J. Matthias is one of terror when faced with excesses of ritual (Catholicism), political machinations, and a doubling of attraction and repulsion (Botting 2013). Trapped by the convulsions of the path he has walked, Matthew Lewis’s Ambrosio cannot return to the surface (to redemption), even if he wished to (*The Monk* 1796).
- ¹⁵ Significantly, these critics have repeatedly returned to the book, as though it is a labyrinth they are unable to fully exit.
- ¹⁶ Despite this being a multimodal novel, there is no representation of the photograph of Delial. Its absence haunts the narrative. The description of the incident matches photographer Kevin Carter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of 1993, of a young Sudanese girl stalked by a vulture. After Carter committed suicide in 1994, his father claimed “his son always carried around the horror of the work he did” (McCabe 2014).
- ¹⁷ See Bronwen Thomas on MZD message boards and online fan sites (Gibbons 2012a).
- ¹⁸ See Gibbons (2012a and especially 2012b) for a consideration of the ways in which Truant’s address to the reader (“you”) plays with the boundaries of the text-world.
- ¹⁹ Pelafina’s letters to Truant (published and extended in *The Whalestoe Letters*) appear in an appendix and provide an additional vantage point to reconsider the other narratives. As early as page 72, the editors direct the reader to Pelafina’s letters to contextualize Truant’s narrative. Close reading of Pelafina’s letters reveals her knowledge of Zampanò: “zamp&no who did you lose?” (p. 615; in a coded letter).
- ²⁰ Botting’s exploration of Horrorspace (2015) examines this aspect in particular.
- ²¹ Critics such as N. Katherine Hayles (2002a, 2002b) and Slocombe (2005) explore this experimental layout in their work on Danielewski’s novel.
- ²² The reference to “scars” is missing from the novel’s lengthy index section (the term “scars” appears on pages 20, 48, 129, 411, and 505). Rather like J. G. Ballard’s short story, “The Index,” these absences point to a story.
- ²³ Labyrinths are constructed through the lens of 5,000 years of representation in art, architecture (Egyptian and Cretan examples), turf (Dalby, Rutland UK), hedge (Hampton Court UK, Palace of Versailles France) and stone mazes (Scandinavia), floor mosaics (Rheims, Chartres) and through 3,000 years of literary examples (Kern 2000).
- ²⁴ Critical consensus concerning contemporary literature (or after postmodernism) is currently being formulated. However, literature from the 1990s onwards has typically been more concerned with trauma, ethics, a response to digital media, political and financial instability, and the environment, which privileges affect.
- ²⁵ The labyrinth forms a reciprocal metaphor of the body and mind in Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* (2003) and David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* (2014). Both books end with the labyrinth as point of emergence where characters and narrative are transformed and made new.