

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

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The Labyrinth and the Green Man, or foliate head, are two recurrent archetypal images, which, while teasingly ambiguous as to their individual meanings, seem to share a common theme of death, metamorphosis and rebirth. However, despite this commonality of theme and their tendency to occur at many similar times and locations, as subjects, they are, notwithstanding detailed scrutiny in their respective literatures, rarely, if ever, linked. This article examines one occasion from the distant past, namely, the myth of 'Theseus and the Minotaur', when the separate trajectories of the Labyrinth and the Green Man intersected in the same narrative space, thus establishing the beginnings of a thread which continues to link them through to our own time.

Joseph Campbell recounts a story of his being at a talk by Daisetz Suzuki at the Erano Foundation in Ascona, Switzerland. Campbell recalls:

here was this group of Europeans in the audience and there was a Japanese man (he was about ninety-one years old at the time), a Zen philosopher. He stood with his hands on his side, and he looked at the audience and said, 'Nature against God. God against nature. Nature against man. Man against nature. Man against God. God against man. Very funny religion'.¹

The wise Dr Suzuki pithily summed up a great many of Western religion's attitudes to Nature; something to be beaten into submission and put to work with the permission of a grumpy male god. But as the rivers die, the trees burn or fall under the axe and rising salt poisons the soil, other beliefs, other deities, once powerful but long exiled to the periphery, begin to emerge once more: the Great Mother and the Vegetation God have returned.

When I enter the phrases 'The Green Man' and 'The Labyrinth' into the *Google* search engine, I get about 21,500 and 142,000 hits respectively. When I enter 'Green Man + Labyrinth', I

¹ Phil Cousineau (ed), *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on his Life and Work*, Harper & Row (San Francisco, 1990) p172.

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

get 57, 500 responses.¹ Even with duplication, these numbers give a pretty impressive indication of the continuing power of these two archetypal images to create resonances in the contemporary psyche. The epithet of 'The Green Man' bestowed on the vegetation god in 1939 by Lady Raglan,² while giving him a popular brand name, has possibly also done him a disservice by making him quaintly Rackhamian and whimsical. For in having accessed a fair number of the above-mentioned internet sites during my research, it seems to me that, apart from a core of excellence, there is a danger that, in certain areas of the New Age mind, the Green Man seems to have settled down and become almost avuncular; a sort of greenwood Ronald McDonald (though considerably more prepossessing). In too many ways the Green Man has become an object of piquant nostalgia, gazing out of numerous virtual catalogues as a pendant, wall or garden ornament on a par with all the other spiritual bricolage; or else gainfully employed as a logo for ecologically-minded publishers.

The labyrinth too is in danger of becoming a sort of spiritual tranquilliser. As Virginia Westbury puts it:

[w]hat is its [the labyrinth's] purpose? Today, it is walked mainly for meditation and a sense of inner peace... it is being seen mainly as a tool for peace and guidance in a world which appears to have little to offer in these departments. Its allure may be simply that its one-track path implies that there is a way through the wilderness of our stress-filled lives. It offers us the hope of order in a disordered world, perhaps.³

All admirable sentiments, but we may have mistaken why the Labyrinth and the Vegetation God have returned: they are chthonic beings from a time when self-consciousness did not exist; when stone, plant, animal and human were one, when the gods spoke and people obeyed. They may be here to comfort us but perhaps, even more so, they are here to warn us.

The vast majority of us live an urban existence where our bodily needs are taken care of by a host of agencies, especially if we have more than enough money. Most of us do not directly depend on nature anymore, nor have done for a long time and tend to view it

1 As at 30/8/2002.

2 Lady Raglan, 'The Green Man in Church Architecture', *Folklore* 50 (1), pp45-57.

3 Virginia Westbury, *Labyrinths: Ancient Paths of Wisdom and Peace*, Lansdowne Publishing Pty Ltd (Sydney, 2000) p8.

The Dark Side

as our playground, unless we are reminded of its power by a cyclone, drought or bushfire. Our relationship to nature and its archetypes is one of nostalgic affection. Just as paintings of the landscape became more popular the more people were removed from fundamental involvement with it, so we have produced garden varieties of the Labyrinth and the Green Man who are essentially warm and beneficent, all Apollonian light and user-friendliness.

Or at least, so we would have it. But now that we have developed our technology to such a degree of savage sophistication that we are well on the way to realizing our pathological obsession with destroying the environment that ultimately sustains us, we would do well to think of the other, darker side of the myths that have nurtured these two images. For, as Rachel Pollack has put it,

[t]he vividness of Greek myth derives partly from its conjunction of clear and lucid thought – exemplified in the elegant columns of Greek temples – and wild violence, including murder, cannibalism, incest, rape, mutilation, and dismemberment.¹

Pollack goes on to surmise that

[t]hrough it all runs a sense of deeper layers, of other stories and meanings, disguised and twisted, some elements brought together, others torn apart, so that as you read the myths, you can almost grasp a similar truth – but not quite. It is almost as if a particularly neurotic genius has shaped these stories, filling them with their own brilliance, and their own overwhelming anxiety.²

She ascribes this neurotic quality to an anxiety induced in the Mycenaean and later, the Dorian Greeks, by their overthrowing of the religion of the Goddess, a religion they ‘recognized as older, and more deeply wedded to the land and to the natural facts of existence, than that of their brutal warrior Gods’.³

According to Julian Jaynes, to understand a thing is to arrive at a metaphor for it by substituting something more familiar to us;

1 Rachel Pollack, *The Body of The Goddess: Sacred wisdom in Myth, Landscape and Culture*, Element Books Ltd, (Shaftesbury, 1997) p141.

2 *Loc cit.*

3 *Loc cit.*

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

hence the feeling of familiarity is the feeling of understanding.¹ Joseph Campbell has described God as a metaphor for a mystery that absolutely transcends all human categories of thought, even the categories of being and nonbeing.² The Labyrinth and the Green Man are also metaphors, humbler yet, simply fingers pointing the way to the heart of the mysteries; powerful instruments for dealing with those categories of being and nonbeing, life, death, and regeneration.

This is, I feel, why the myth of 'Theseus and the Minotaur' attains such significance, for it is in this particular myth that the separate trajectories of the Labyrinth and the Green Man, and all that they connote, come together for (perhaps) the first time, thus establishing a thread which continues to link them through to the present day.

Theseus and the Minotaur

Zeus, in the form of a bull had carried Europa, daughter of the Phoenician ruler Agenor, off to Crete. Asterius ('the starry one'), King of Crete, married Europa, after Zeus had abandoned her, and adopted her semi-divine sons, Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon.

After Asterius's death, Minos claimed the Cretan throne and, in proof of his right to reign, boasted that the gods would answer whatever prayer he offered them. First dedicating an altar to Poseidon, and, having made all the preparations for a sacrifice, he then prayed that a sacrificial bull might emerge from the sea. At once, a dazzlingly white bull swam ashore, but Minos was so struck by its beauty that he sent it to join his own herds, and slaughtered another instead. Awestruck by the appearance of the bull, all Crete accepted Minos's claim to the throne.

Minos then married the voluptuous Pasiphaë, a daughter of Helios and the nymph Crete (Perseis), who bore him four daughters, Ariadne, Phaedra, Akakallis, Xenodike, and four sons, Glaukos, Katreus, Deukalion and Androgeos.

Poseidon was furious at Minos' ingratitude and swore to take revenge by taking possession of what the king held most dear: incarnating himself in the form of a bull he cast such a powerful charm on Pasiphaë that, utterly besotted, she decided to give herself to the animal. At that time, there was in the service of the king, a

1 Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, 1976) p52.

2 Cousineau, *op cit*, p36.

brilliant but secretive Greek craftsman named Daedalus, the inventor of the carpenter's square, who had fled from Athens after murdering his brilliant student and nephew, Talos. Daedalus claimed that Talos had stolen his inventions of the compass and the saw. Daedalus designed a leather cow within which the queen could secrete herself in order to be pleased by the disguised Poseidon. From this union was born the monstrous Minotaur, a creature with a human body and bull's head. Ashamed of both his wife's transgression and his own apostasy, Minos had this same Daedalus design a hidden prison for the Minotaur, modelled on the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Lamares (Amenemhet III), so complex that neither the monster nor anyone else who entered it could escape.

But Poseidon was not finished with Minos. The white bull, which had been his gift to Minos, rampaged about the Cretan countryside, destroying crops and killing people until captured by Herakles, who took it back to Greece and released it on the plain of Argos. Driven from there across the Isthmus to Marathon, it continued its murderous ways, killing hundreds, including Minos's son, Androgeos, until captured by Theseus, who dragged the bull in triumph through the streets of Athens, and up the steep slopes of the Acropolis, where he sacrificed it to Athene, or to Apollo. Athens was, at that time, a tributary city of Crete, so, in reprisal, Minos demanded that Aegeus, king of Athens, pay a tribute of seven youths and seven maidens every nine years. These young men and men were then sent into the labyrinth as sacrificial victims to be torn apart and eaten by the Minotaur.

The time for the third tribute was drawing near. Theseus, the illegitimate son of Aegeus (or Poseidon who had lain with Aethra, the mother of Theseus, the same night as had Aegeus) had recently come to Athens to be reunited with his putative earthly father. He volunteered to become one of the seven youths so that he could attempt to kill the monster. As Theseus left, he promised Aegeus that if he were successful he would hoist a white sail on his safe return in contrast to the mournful black sails of the two previous returning tribute-ships.

After arriving in Crete, Theseus seduced Ariadne, his cousin, who, to help her lover, disclosed secrets she had learned from Daedalus. She supplied Theseus with a sword and magical thread that would guide him out through the winding corridors. Laying down Ariadne's thread to mark his passage, Theseus found the Minotaur, his half-brother, asleep, and slew him. So as to avoid the wrath of Minos, he quickly gathered together the other youths and maidens, as well as Ariadne, and sailed from Crete.

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

Breaking the journey back to Athens on the island of Dia, now known as Naxos, Theseus abandoned Ariadne. Some say that he deserted her in favour of a new mistress, Aegle, daughter of Panopeus; others that, while wind-bound on Dia, he reflected on the scandal that Ariadne's arrival would cause upon their return to Athens. Others again, that Dionysus, appearing to Theseus in a dream, threateningly demanded Ariadne for himself, and that, when Theseus awoke to see Dionysus's fleet bearing down on Dia, he weighed anchor in sudden terror; Dionysus having cast a spell which made him forget his promise to Ariadne and even her very existence. Ariadne was succoured by the god Dionysos who quickly married her. Arriving on the island of Delos, Theseus celebrated his victory by performing a dance inspired by his conquest of the labyrinth, 'at once a tracing of a path, a procession, and a trance', called the *geranos*, or 'crane-dance'. Graves, citing Plutarch, Callimachus and Homer, describes how

Theseus and his companions danced the Crane, which consists of labyrinthine [involutions and] evolutions, trod with measured steps to the accompaniment of harps. The Delians still perform this dance, which Theseus introduced from Knossos; Daedalus had built Ariadne a dancing-floor there, marked with a maze pattern in white marble relief, copied from the Egyptian labyrinth. When Theseus and his companions performed the Crane at Delos, this was the first occasion on which men and women danced together. Old-fashioned people, especially sailors, keep up much the same dance in many different cities of Greece and Asia Minor; so do children in the Italian countryside, and it is the foundation of the Troy Game.¹

Hampered by contrary winds, Theseus did not reach sight of the Attic coast until the eighth day of Pyanepsion (October). For whatever reason, he had forgotten to hoist the victorious white sail, and Aegeus seeing the black one, was overcome by grief and fell to his death in the sea which now bears his name.

Theseus did not discover Aegeus' death until after he had completed the sacrifices vowed to the gods for his safe return; he then buried Aegeus, honouring him with a hero-shrine.² Having returned at harvest time, Theseus also instituted the Festival of Grape

¹ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Vol.1*, Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, 1955 [1979]) p342.

² *Ibid*, p343

The Dark Side

Boughs, either in gratitude to Dionysos and Athene – both of whom had appeared to him on Naxos – or to Dionysos and Ariadne.

The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur has continued to fascinate ever since because it has all the ingredients of a bestseller: deceit and intrigue, murder, cannibalism, rape, mutilation, not to mention unnatural sexual practices with animals! It also has, very strongly, that sense of deeper layers, of stories and meanings disguised and twisted which give it an enigmatic, puzzling quality. Underneath the thick carpet of much later Athenian political propaganda about assertive independence, decisive leadership, and the supremacy of male gods, there can be detected some very bulky forms of other more complex realities such as the worship of the Great Goddess and the cycle of life, death and regeneration, of which the Green Man (Dionysos) and the labyrinth are both symbols and actors.

On the surface, Theseus' abandonment of Ariadne is strange; equally strange is the sudden *deus ex machina* appearance of Dionysos and his scooping up of the abandoned heroine to a life of wedded bliss. However, if the focus of the Theseus myth is shifted from its eponymous hero to the worship of the Great Goddess (the matrifocal religion that first appears in the Neolithic period), then the situation becomes clearer and a different story begins to emerge. According to Robert Graves,

[t]he Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless and omnipotent; and the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought. She took lovers, but for pleasure, not to provide her children with a father. Men feared, adored and obeyed the matriarch; the hearth which she attended in a cave or hut being their earliest social centre, and motherhood their prime mystery.¹

The Great Goddess was One, but was seen as Three: the goddesses of the upper air (the moon who controlled the sun); the earth; and the underworld. Upon examination, all the female figures of the Theseus myth (Europa, Perseis, Pasiphaë, Ariadne) are aspects of the Moon Goddess.² William Anderson draws upon Marija Gimbutas' description of 'the ithyphallic masked god', who is son, lover and

¹ *Ibid*, p13.

² *Ibid*, p14.

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

guardian of the Great Goddess, often portrayed in sculptures wearing a bull mask with horns.¹

Both Zeus and Dionysos (as Zagreus) may have originated in Crete as vegetation/bull-gods, escorts to the Great Goddess who would have ritually coupled with her in her aspect as the Moon Cow. Originally, the Great Goddess' human (and, significantly, male) escort – embodying Zeus/Dionysos – would have been killed at the waning of the year so as to ensure the fertility of the following year's crops, and resurrected in the person of a new escort in the following spring. By the middle of the second millennium, the time of Minos (the dynastic name of the leader of the Hellenised aristocracy which had taken over in Crete some decades before²) a compromise between the religion of the Great Goddess and the newcomers' male theocracy had obviously been reached. It would seem that the practice of annually sacrificing the Great Goddess' consort had ceased and instead a tanist died in his place every Great Year; that is, the eight-year period (by Greek calculation) after which the solar and lunar calendars became aligned, thereby reuniting the sun with the moon.³ This tanist, a youth who ruled for one day, may have been the Minotaur (*μινου ταυρος*, *minou taros*, literally: 'the bull of Minos'). The seven youths and seven maidens sent from Athens would probably not have been human sacrifices but hostages from powerful families to ensure the good conduct of Athens as a vassal state, although Hermann Kern ascribes their status as victims for the Minotaur to their possible forcible use as bull-leapers which 'surely often resulted in death'.⁴

The description of the labyrinth as a complex underground structure at the heart of which lived the Minotaur was a later confusion between the sprawling multileveled building at Knossos – part palace, part religious compound – and the configuration known to us as the Cretan, or Classical, labyrinth which was a level, marked area for sacred dances, somewhat similar to the description

1 William Anderson, *The Green Man: The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth*, Compass Books (Fakenham, 1998) p34 citing Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images* (London and New York, 1982 [new edition used]) p220.

2 Graves, *op cit*, p345.

3 Hermann Kern, *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years*, Prestel Publications (Munich, 2000) p46.

4 *Loc cit*.

The Dark Side

in Homer of the *choros* depicted on the shield Hephaestus fashioned for Achilles:

Therein, furthermore the god of the two strong arms cunningly wrought a dancing-floor like unto that which in wide Cnossus Daedalus fashioned of old for fair-tressed Ariadne. There were youths dancing and maidens of the price of many cattle, holding their hands upon the wrists one of the other.... Now would they run round with cunning feet exceeding lightly, as when a potter sitteth by his wheel that is fitted between his hands and maketh trial of whether it will run; and now again would they run in rows toward each other. And a great company stood around the lovely dance, taking joy therein; and two tumblers whirled up and down through the midst of them as leaders of the dance.¹

This corresponds to the description given by Plutarch of the Geranos, or 'crane-dance' choreographed by Theseus on Delos as consisting in certain measured turnings and returnings, imitative of the windings and twistings of the labyrinth.² The third century BCE Greek poet Callimachus of Cyrene mentions that the Delian dance was performed at night by torchlight, necessitating a rope ('the thread of Ariadne') to link the dancers.³ It is not possible to say definitively what the meaning or significance of this dance was, but in the context of the Theseus myth it could possibly have been a fertility ritual to do with the marriage of the Sun Bull (Minos) and the Moon-Cow (Pasiphaë). Pollack suggests that spiral imagery may track the patterns of the Sun and Moon: the rising and setting of the sun implies a circle, with the bottom half invisible below the horizon, but this circle gets bigger or smaller with the change in the sun's position each day.⁴ Moving from the winter to summer solstice, the circle begins at a wider point each day, so that the apparent motion of the sun forms a clockwise spiral when facing south, the direction of the sun. The moon's path, even though it rises in the east and sets in the west, through the lunar month forms a spiral whose successive loops cross the ecliptic in a westward, anti-clockwise motion opposed to the direction of the sun and planets. Hence, the Cretan labyrinth, with its seven circuits and central area,

1 *Iliad* 18.590-606 as cited in *Ibid*, p44.

2 *Ibid*, p45; see also Graves, *op cit*, p342.

3 *Hymn to Delos* 300-315 cited in Kern, *op cit*, p45

4 Pollack, *op cit* pp96-7; see also Kern, *op cit* p46.

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

unites not only the opposing paths of the sun and moon but also the number of years of a Great Year.

A possibility that suggests itself is that the Moon Cow-masked Queen and the Sun Bull-masked King made a symbolic progress through a Great Year and then coupled in the central area, the womb of the Great Goddess, in celebration of their Sacred Marriage and signifying the next phase of Minos' reign. The scene can be imagined as taking place at night by torchlight: a line of dancers, female and male, moving somewhat in the way of modern Greek folkdances, singing sacred hymns and leading the masked figures of Pasiphaë and Minos through the serpentine convolutions of the labyrinth until they reach the centre. Here, they leave the Moon Cow and Sun Bull to ritually couple while they, still chanting, retread the labyrinth.

Kern suggests that in a myth replete with examples of initiation, the labyrinth is the perfect embodiment of initiation rites¹ since, as he puts it,

[i]nitiation signifies symbolic death and rebirth. Yet physical death can also be seen as the transformation of a former existence and as a passage to a new one. Accordingly, the labyrinth's path also represents the path to the underworld, the return to Mother Earth being associated with the promise of reincarnation. The path into the labyrinth represents the path to the bowels of the earth, the *viscera terrae*. I consider this to be one of the channels through which ideas deriving from cave cults could have been conveyed and transformed into the labyrinth concept.²

Dionysos

James Frazer postulates that Dionysos, both as a goat and a bull, was 'essentially a god of vegetation'.³ Besides being closely identified with the vine, almost all the Greeks sacrificed to 'Dionysus of the Tree', and in Boeotia one of his titles was 'Dionysus in the tree'.

His image was often merely an upright post, without arms, but draped in a mantle, with a bearded mask to represent the head,

1 Kern, *op cit* p47.

2 *Ibid*, p31.

3 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Macmillan Press (London and Toronto, 1967 reprint used), p615.

and with leafy boughs projecting from the head or body to show the nature of the deity.¹

Given the wide-ranging travels of his followers, the Maenads, this would imply that the image of the god needed no temple but could be easily set up in a grove wherever they came to rest.

Like other gods of vegetation, such as Osiris, Artemis, or Attis, Dionysos was believed to have died a violent death, but to have been brought back to life again. His followers, in their ecstasy, tore animals and even people to pieces and devoured them.² Believed for a long time to have been a latecomer to the Greek pantheon from Thrace (The *Iliad* hardly mentions him and then only slightly), or even further afield (he bears resemblances to Shiva), this Dionysos is now thought possibly to be a late manifestation of a revival of Goddess worship. That Dionysos is also a much older deity is attested by the appearance of his name on a thirteenth century BCE clay tablet in Cretan Linear B script found in Pylos, and, incidentally, wine is thought to have been introduced to Greece from Crete.³

Growth, Decay and Regrowth

Dionysos (originally a Thracian beer-god, Sabazius) is strongly attached to the Demeter/Persephone myths. Demeter is the grain goddess; her daughter Persephone, the goddess of renewed growth. In one story of his origins (as Cretan Zagreus) Dionysos' mother is Persephone, raped by Zeus in the form of a great serpent. Dionysos was born horned, his hair wreathed with snakes. Dionysos also plays an integral part in the Eleusinian mysteries as Iacchos. It was through the popularity of the Eleusinian and Dionysian Mysteries as they spread throughout the later Roman Empire that his image became grafted on to the tree worship of Gaul and northern Europe, then syncretised into Christian iconography in the Dark Ages.

The labyrinth was also carried throughout the Empire and again syncretised, appearing on the floors of Christian churches from late antiquity onwards. Medieval pilgrims, on their journey from Paris to Santiago de Compostela, crossing the great, horizontal expanse of La Beauce, would behold the looming vertical magnificence of Chartres cathedral soaring up from the flatness of the surrounding

1 *Ibid*, pp509-10

2 This is, of course, most famously recounted in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

3 Graves, *op cit* p109.

The Labyrinth and the Green Man

plains. Approaching the richly carved west end of the cathedral, they would see a huge rose window, which, when they entered the building, would reveal its full stained glass magnificence. Remarkably, they would also see covering the floor of the nave between the third and sixth bays, a strange, circular stonework of the exact dimensions of the rose window, glowing high above them on the western wall. The outer perimeter of this circle is scalloped with one hundred and thirteen lunations, engraved with the verses of the *Miserere*. Inside the circle are coiled eleven elongated, concentric loops, a unicursal path demarcated by a band of black stone, contrasting with the brown quarry-stone of the cathedral floor. The pilgrims would follow this path in prayer, the most devout on their knees, recapitulating the straight and narrow path of mankind to Paradise, or the pilgrim to inaccessible Jerusalem. As the pilgrim reaches the fifth loop, just next to the centre, the path winds away again, changing direction six times and making three hundred and seventy hairpin turns, so that the pilgrim walks a total distance precisely ten times the height of the nave before reaching the centre, which is shaped like a six-petalled rosette, an exact replica of the shape of the rose window. At the centre of the rosette is a copper plaque engraved with the images of Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur, symbolising Jesus liberating the human soul from the grip of the Devil.

The pilgrim present in the cathedral at the summer solstice will, moreover, see the image of the rose window fall exactly on the floor pattern, itself located precisely halfway between the summit of the cathedral vault and the underground river running beneath it, turning the whole building into a cosmic omphalos.¹

It would appear significant that the vegetation god should appear in such large numbers (seventy in Chartres cathedral alone) inside as well as outside the churches and in such close proximity to labyrinths when the veneration of the Virgin Mary was at its height in the Middle Ages, thus renewing the ancient relationship between the Queen of the Heavens – the God Mother – and the genius of growth and continuance.

After the Reformation, the labyrinth and the Green Man were banished from churches but continued to thrive on the wilder shores of northern Europe and in various guises in folk tales and fairy stories. Paradoxically, they made a reappearance with the revival of Classicism in the Age of Enlightenment, finally beginning to

¹ Jacques Attali, *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*, North Atlantic Books (Berkeley, 1998) p10.

The Dark Side

reassert themselves with increasing strength in the atmosphere of polite paganism and growing ecological awareness of the latter twentieth century.

The moral of the tale seems to be that the Great Goddess and her consort are not only immortal but also irrepressible. Even if we manage to choke the world and ourselves in our own pollution, so long as the sun and moon still rise and a few hardy plants still struggle for existence, the labyrinth will turn and the Green Man will live again. We, on the other hand, may not. We have been warned.