

25 The maze and the labyrinth

I would now like to place our humanifying being on two legs, as it were, and to imagine what happens when he begins to walk. Earlier, I compared walking with drawing. What kinds of line does the humanifying being, the *animal homificans*, trace when he sets out on foot, where every step is an event of leading life, of humaning? We might begin, as indeed our pedestrian lives begin, with childhood. Perhaps you will recall, from your early days at school, a formation known as the ‘crocodile’. I certainly do. It is what teachers use for getting a class without mishap from one point to another. Children are expected to walk two abreast, in a neat line. If they pay attention to their surroundings at all, it is in the interests of safety, to avoid collision with traffic or passers-by. The path of the crocodile, however, is not a way of learning; this happens only at its destination, where once again the teacher stands before the class and addresses them. But when these same children – be they accompanied by a parent or guardian, with friends, or on their own – make their ways from home to school and back, they will walk quite differently. Now hurrying, now dawdling, alternately skipping and plodding, the child’s attention is *caught* – or, in the view of an accompanying adult, *distracted* – by everything from the play of light and shadow to the flight of birds and the barking of dogs, to the scent of flowers, to puddles and fallen leaves, and to myriad trifles from snails to conkers, and from dropped coins to telltale litter. It is these trifles that make the street a place of such absorbing interest to the miniature detective whose eyes remain close to the ground.¹

For the child on his way to school, the street is a labyrinth. Like the scribe, copyist or draughtsman whose eyes are in his fingertips, the child follows its twists and turns, ever curious, but with no commanding view and no glimpse of an end. The challenge is not to lose the trail, and for that he needs to keep his wits about him. Walter Benjamin, fondly recalling his childhood days in Berlin around the turn of the twentieth century, vividly describes the Ariadne’s thread that he would follow in and around the Tiergarten, with its bridges, flowerbeds, the pedestals of statues (which being closer to the eye, held greater interest than the figures mounted on them), and kiosks hidden in among the bushes. Here, says Benjamin, he first

experienced what he only later found the word for. That word was 'love'.² But growing up, one learns to banish such childish follies. The crocodile devours the detective as discipline gobbles up curiosity. To recover what is lost, one has to go beyond the city, to take a walk in woods, fields or mountains governed by forces as yet untrained. For the adult, Benjamin remarks, it takes some effort to apprehend the city streets once again with the same acuity as a path in the countryside. To achieve this – to regain the labyrinth and lose oneself in it – 'street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day ... as clearly as a mountain valley'. This art, Benjamin admits, is one that, having been lost in childhood, he acquired again only late in life.³

For most of us going about our business in the city, the streets are not a labyrinth. We walk them not for what they reveal along the way but because they afford transit from one point of call to another. We may still get lost in them, but that loss is experienced not as a discovery on the way to nowhere but as a setback in the achievement of a predetermined goal. We mean to get from here to there, and are frustrated by wrong turns and culs-de-sac. For the urban shopper or commuter, then, the streets are not so much a labyrinth as a maze. Technically, the maze differs from the labyrinth in that it offers not one path but multiple choices, of which each may be freely made but most lead to dead ends.⁴ It also differs, however, in that its avenues are demarcated by barriers which obstruct any view other than the way immediately ahead. The maze, then, does not open up to the world, as the labyrinth does. On the contrary, it encloses, trapping its inmates within the false antinomy of freedom and necessity. Whether over- or underground, whether navigating the streets or the metro, urban pedestrians have to negotiate a maze of passages flanked by walls or high buildings.

Once set on a particular thoroughfare, the city-walker has no alternative but to continue along it, since it is walled in on either side. A recent visit to the gardens of the Palace of Versailles, outside Paris, afforded the same experience. In each square-shaped garden, dead-straight pedestrian avenues were lined on either side by high walls of trees, and led to enclosed groves with statues or fountains. I felt, in these gardens, an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia. However, unlike the arboreal walls of formal gardens like those of Versailles, or the chessboard that Alice encountered through the Looking Glass whose squares were defined by hedgerows, the walls of the city are not usually bare. Rather, they are replete with advertisements, window displays and the like, which inform pedestrians of possible side-tracks they might choose to take, as and when the opportunity arises, to satisfy their desires. Every time there is a fork in the way, a decision has to be taken: to go to the left, to the right, or possibly straight ahead. A journey through the maze may thus be represented as a stochastic sequence of moves punctuated by decision-points, such that every move is predicated upon the preceding decision. It is an essentially game-like, strategic enterprise. This is

not to deny the tactical manoeuvring that goes on as pedestrians and even drivers jostle with one another in making their ways through the throng of a busy street or subway. But negotiating a passage through the throng is one thing, finding a way through the maze quite another.⁵

In walking the labyrinth, by contrast, choice is not an issue. The path leads, and the walker is under an imperative to go where it takes him. But the path is not always easy to follow. Like the hunter tracking an animal or a hiker on the trail, it is important to keep an eye out for the subtle signs – footprints, piles of stones, nicks cut in the trunks of trees – that indicate the way ahead. Thus signs keep you on the path; they do not, like advertisements, tempt you away from it. The danger lies not in coming to a dead end, but in wandering off the track. Death is a deviation, not the end of the line. At no point in the labyrinth do you come to an abrupt stop. No buffers, or walls, block your onward movement. You are, rather, fated to carry on, nevertheless along a path that, if you are not careful, may take you ever further from the living, to whose community you may never make it back. In the labyrinth you may indeed take a wrong turn, but not by choice. For at the time, you did not notice that the path divided. You were sleepwalking, or dreaming. Indigenous hunters, as we have already observed in connection with the issue of perspectivism, often tell of those who, lured on by the quarry they are following, drift into the prey's world, in which the animals appear to them as human. There they carry on their lives while lost, presumed dead, to their own people.

The maze puts all the emphasis on the traveller's intentions. He has an aim in mind, a projected destination or horizon of expectations, a perspective to obtain, and is determined to reach it. This overarching aim may, of course, be broken down into a number of subsidiary objectives. And it may also be complicated by all the other, competing aims that assail him from all sides. Choices are never clear-cut, and are rarely taken with sufficient information as not to leave a considerable margin of uncertainty. Nevertheless, in the maze, the outward cast of action follows the inward cast of thought. When we say that action is intentional, we mean that a mind is at work, operating from within the actor, and lending it a purpose and direction beyond what the physical laws of motion would alone dictate. Intentions distinguish the travellers in a maze from the balls in a game of bagatelle, which – we suppose – have no idea of where they are heading and are quite incapable of deliberating whether to go in one way or another. Thus the mind intends and the body extends. The walker must decide which way to go, but, having resolved upon a course, has no further need to look where he is going. In the maze, intention is cause and action effect.

Yet in so far as the maze-walker is wrapped up in the space of his own deliberations, he is perforce absent from the world itself. In the labyrinth, quite the opposite is the case. The path-follower has no objective save to carry on, to keep on going. But to do so, his action must be closely and continually coupled with his perception. Lest he lose the way, he should be

ever vigilant to the path as it unfolds before him. He has to watch his step, and to listen and feel as well. He must, in a word, pay attention to things, and adjust his gait accordingly. Path-following is thus not so much intentional as *attentional*. It thrusts the follower into the presence of the real. As intention is to attention, therefore, so absence is to presence. A person might intend to go for a walk; he might reflect upon it, consider the route, prepare for the weather and pack his provisions. In that sense, walking is something he sets out to do. He is the subject, and his walking the predicate. But once on the trail, he and his walking become one and the same. And while there is of course a mind at work in the attentionality of *walking*, just as there is in the intentionality of *going for a walk*, this is a mind immanent in the movement itself rather than an originating source to which such movement may be attributed as an effect. Or in short, if the walker's intention converges upon an origin, his attention comes from being pulled away from it – from displacement.

The maze-walker, we could say, is a navigator; the labyrinthine path-follower a wayfarer.⁶ In the carrying on of the wayfarer, every destination is by the way; his path runs always in between. The movements of the navigator, by contrast, are point-to-point, and every point has been arrived at, by calculation, even before setting off towards it. Or to phrase the same distinction in terms we have already elaborated in the preceding chapters, the navigator puts the travail he must undergo or suffer in the frame of doing, which lies in his determination to get from A to B within the space of possibilities offered by the maze. But for the wayfarer in the labyrinth, following the trail is a task which, like life itself, he is compelled to undergo; his doings – those moments of perception and action through which his movement is carried on – are thus framed within this undergoing. But this is also the difference between the march of the crocodile and the caprice of the child-detective on the way to school: on arrival at the gates, the child – an *animal homificans* par excellence – submits to a regime intent on humanising its subjects through the imposition of adult discipline. Walking in the crocodile is no longer an open-ended practice of inquiry but a test to which the answers are given in advance. In what follows I aim to link this difference to my earlier question of what it means to say of lives that they are led, by turning to the concept of *education*.

Notes

1 Ingold and Lee Vergunst (2008: 4).

2 Benjamin (2006: 54).

3 Benjamin (2006: 53–4).

4 See Kern (1982: 13).

5 The distinction between tactical manoeuvring and strategic navigation will be recalled from the conclusion to Chapter 11. See Certeau (1984: xviii–xix).

6 See Ingold (2007a: 15–16).