

**The house of dead ends. Myths, labyrinths and
interconnectedness in M. Z. Danielewski's House of
Leaves**

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The House of Dead Ends

Myths, labyrinths and interconnectedness in M. Z. Danielewski's
House of Leaves

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A S.D. : même dans ton absence, tu n'es pas oublié.

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Introduction

House of Leaves has created a small revolution among literary circles: it indeed allowed a certain reconciliation between print books and the digital age with its broader and faster treatment of information and the possibilities these media offer. To many, the development of the Internet, the predominance of visual media and the possible combinations with both images, texts and sounds, threatened the durability of print book, now considered a purely obsolete and rigid support.

More than a century ago, the emergence of photography and its faithful rendering of reality triggered the same concerns considering the becoming of art. Rather, it prompted a new era questioning the very idea of an objective truth to the benefit of individual perception. Cameras and recorders have now to welcome a whole new panel of tools which can not only render reality, but even *modify* it, with the fraud being purely unnoticeable.

The Navidson Record opens on such concerns, when Zampanó discusses the matter of authenticity: “with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth.”¹ (3)

And yet the diegetic documentary is constantly refuting its fictitious nature, as we can see from the huge amount of studies cited, and the numerous pictorial representations of the *House*² analyzing every aspect of its content. In his book, Danielewski acknowledges these new media but rather than simply mentioning them, he skillfully plays with them, creating a hybrid book whose content and format expand the possibilities of the genre. The prose is backed up with collages, photographs, letters, interviews, even music.

It is important to add also that with its release in 2000 the book was inter-connected to other media: *The Whalestoe Letters* (a publication of the letters of Johnny’s mother with some nonexistent to *House of Leaves*³, published a few months after), the musical album of the author’s sister Poe the lyrics of which are set within the environment of the book and casts new light on the latter, and finally the official

¹ The references are from the Full color edition published in 2000.

² *House* in italics will be referring to the house on Ash Tree Lane.

³ Shortened as *HOL* from this point.

website of the novel hosting a discussion board allowing thousands of readers to share and complete their reading experiences.

Thus, as Jessica Pressman has stated: “[I]t is a print novel for the digital age.”

The book is prone to changes, additions; in other words, it exists outside its “fictional frame.” It is not intended to be “a sacred book” –left as it is, *uncorrupted* by its readings,– rather, the point is to participate in this production, and encourage freedom in the comprehension of the novel (let us for example point at the different footnotes going back and forth the narration, or passages where certain words are simply missing.)

Reading Danielewski's interviews clarifies his motivations a little more and follows the lines of this present dissertation. He always refuted any definite explanation, and always stressed the role of the reader who, through a process of *mise-en-abîme* ends up identifying with the characters he reads about in his own reading process. As Danielewski commented in an interview when asked about Johnny modifying Zampanó's text and its implications:

Not only does the book permit that, it is really saying to the reader, “Now *you* modify it.” That invitational aspect of the book has been very successful. [...] Let us say there is no sacred text here. That notion of authenticity or originality is constantly refuted. (*Haunted House* 120-121)

The color blue with which every instance of the word “house” is characterized in the novel has often been supposed to be reminiscent of the color used for hypertext links on the Internet, underlying the fact answers may lie elsewhere, and requiring an active reading. Or, as Jessica Pressman puts it:

House of Leaves prompts its reader to be a “good reader”, as Danielewski calls his “idealized reader,” and not only to analyze information but to pursue its meaning across media forms and contexts.

Of course, being a “good reader” in this case requires a certain dedication and can be a time consuming experience, not only are there these numerous media to go through, the narrative is also peppered with various names and events that tickle the reader's curiosity. Novel-reading is then no longer a mere entertaining activity, but turns into an investigation to discover the missing links allowing a general insight of the book. Time consuming and fastidious, but in this process the reader can somehow identify with Johnny and his own quest for “authenticity.”

We shall not develop any further on the book's relationship to a digital environment (numerous articles and essays have been dedicated to these questions,) and shall

rather discuss and define the question of the genre, and of course the tricky matter of interpretation and authorship.

The very first difficulty a critic encounters with such a book is to define its genre. Danielewski made his novel unfit for any categorization and definite interpretation, or in his own word, through Zampanó:

Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antinomies of fact and fiction [...] the house itself, like Melville's behemoth, remains resistant to summation. (3)

Being a patchwork of stories and characters (separated by time, space, and dimensions) the novel has no actual plot, but rather many trails leading to a panel of more or less plausible interpretations.

It is a horror tale for sure, perhaps an existentialist narrative, and most certainly a satire of academic writings. Defining the nature of the book is surely one of the difficulties that we shall face on the course of our dissertation, and yet we should always bear in mind the tongue-and-cheek humor of the author; see for example this passage supposedly told by Stephen King, when asked about the *House* on Ash tree Lane and its symbol:

Symbols shmimbols. Sure they're important but... Well look at Ahab's whale. Now there's a great symbol. Some says it stands for god, meaning, and purpose. Others say it stands for purposelessness and the void. But what we sometimes forget is that Ahab's whale was also just a whale. (361)

This cunning remark seems first to deride the far-fetched comments that necessarily result from interpretation and analysis, as well as remind the reader that fiction remains fiction, no matter how complex the nature of the message, and its interpretation belongs to the reader.

Danielewski gives his idea of what books should be, considering their limitless possibilities:

[B]ooks don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page. . . . Words can also be colored and those colors can have meaning. How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed. Hell pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards. . . . But here's the joke. Books have had this capacity all along. . . . Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities. . . . But somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of papers have been forgotten. (Hansen 597)

The existence within *HOL* of all these layers of narrative and fictions proves confusing, and the author's choice quite surprising. In an interview Danielewski

gives details of his life but more importantly, of how he came up with *HOL*. He says it took him ten years to come up with it, after he had been working on random characters and stories deprived of any plot—houses of their own, he adds:

I had one of those flashes of recognition that every struggling artist dreams about, and I suddenly found myself saying “Oh, my God! All the characters I’ve been working on live *in this house!* And all the theoretical concepts that I have been wrestling with *are represented by this house!*” My unconscious had showed me how all the threads of meaning I had been considering—all these riffs I had about memory, death, art and life, youth and old age, the nature of fear, and so on, as well as all the storylines I had been entangled in—could be compressed into one icon. (*Haunted House* 105)

Thus we see how, according to the author, *HOL* had no plot in the first place but was more like a “home” to all these solitary bits, a fiction house big enough to contain all these twisted stories and unique characters. Under this light the jagged rhythm and complex structure of the novel seem to make a little more sense. And yet, even if Danielewski gave life to all these concepts and stories, he constantly conceals his authorial role over the novel, see for example how in the book under the title page, the reader finds Zampanó and Johnny’s names where it should have been Danielewski’s. The use of the mysterious “Editors” (often shortened to “– Ed.” in the novel) adds to the confusion the reader is led to by the very beginning of the novel.

Who is who, and who wrote what? At first Zampanó’s *Navidson Record* is shown as the main source upon which Johnny and The Editors comment. The footnotes, although sometimes taking over the main text are still organized enough to make sense: in the margins of the text that Johnny is obsessively recreating, he takes the liberty to note down his remarks, observations, and occasionally gives us accounts of his uninhibited lifestyle in Los Angeles.

And yet soon the narrative shifts and gets harder and harder to follow: footnotes from the different narrative voices seem to struggle for their messages to be heard, their numbers taking the reader forward or backward the narration. The typography grows unusual and uneven: text written backward, upside down, crowding the pages, or leaving blank spaces. Moreover the connections between the characters and their role within *HOL* are questioned: Johnny proves to be highly unreliable concerning his treatment of the work of Zampanó in spite of his initial statement that he remained faithful to the original, and the bizarre analogies between *The Navidson Record* and his writings raise legitimate doubts over the existence of one or the other character. By the end of the book, the letters of Pelafina—Johnny’s institutionalized mother, whom he has repressed all memory of—is the final twist which once again makes

uncertain the whole understanding of the book. Not only does she bear similarities with Karen from *The Navidson Record*, but page 615 is a coded message where she addresses Zampanó directly (whom she could not have known) in a letter she sent to her son Johnny.

Katharine Cox in her article says a few words on this authorial mystification:

The breakdown of textuality offered by Pelafina provokes comparison with the most complex areas of material presented by Truant and Zampanó. As the exchange and ambiguity of narrative ownership suggests, there is a lack of residual authoritative figure.

In spite of some confident claims, there is still no absolute and solid interpretation of the novel. By this we mean, no indubitable explanation that would uncover everything, as Danielewski himself claims:

I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that I had not anticipated. I have yet to be surprised, but I'm hoping. (*Haunted House* 106)

Most of the works that were conducted on *HOL* dealt with its unusual form and structure, the originality of its typography which represents “physically” on the page the events the words themselves relate. On the one hand studies concentrate on the treatment of words and the massive paratext, its assemblage in main text, footnotes, annexes, index... On the other hand, critics have highlighted the significant use of various media within the book, the latter being primarily the *ekphrasis* of a movie told by a blind man... As well as giving the Internet a significant place (ironically the book was first released on the Internet, which is echoed in the diegesis when Johnny realizes the book he has been assembling has made its way on the Internet.)

The content however, and the matter of interpretation have yet to be explored in depth.

Writing a novel that had no linear plot to begin with, with main characters either dead or nonexistent even in the diegesis, was in the first place a risky bet. But one that would not reveal what exactly was going on, or who is writing what and what for and still captivate thousand of readers is somewhat of a tour-de-force.

We will analyze in the present dissertation the strategies and devices Danielewski implemented for his debut novel to encourage a highly personal reading which, although focused on a restrained number of people and settings, covers very general concepts and notions. What are we to make of this “icon” he refers to? What is expected from us readers when given so few ways to make sense of the narratives?

What are the effects sought in the duplication of the trope of the labyrinth? Why are we lost in this maelstrom of stories? And what in this very confusing and puzzling work is the reader seeking?

Mark B. N. Hansen has dedicated a few lines on these matters as he remarks that the unreliability and flaws of the different narrators

insistently stages the futility of any efforts to anchor the events it recounts in a stable form. [...] the novel's challenge—to generate belief without objective basis—becomes acute only when the role of the reader is taken into account. For as Danielewski explains in an interview, the novel's true protagonist is the figure of interpretation, which is to say, the act of reading, or even, perhaps, the reader herself. (602)

The intimate bond tying the reader and *HOL* is one of the critical aspects of the novel. Danielewski mentions “pathways” to apprehend the book, in the interview we mentioned above, he demonstrates how the character you chose to penetrate the narration from will permanently modify your opinions of the novel. Most young readers will naturally turn to Johnny's point of view, thanks to his language, his lifestyle or the identity quest he undertakes. For others, Zampanó's or Pelafina's might be more appealing, although their language and personality is at first discouraging. The reader has the choice anyway, for even if Pelafina's letters are located by the very end of the novel, as soon as page 72, he is offered a different insight of Johnny through the writings of his mother, by the Editors intervention:

Though Mr. Truant's asides may often seem impenetrable, they are not without rhyme or reason. The reader who wishes to interpret Mr. Truant on his or her own may disregard this note. Those, however, who feel they would profit from a better understanding of his past may wish to proceed ahead and read his father's obituary in Appendix II-D as well as those letters written by his institutionalized mother in Appendix II-E. – Ed.

The free navigation within the book estranges *HOL* from the genre of the novel: if we really are “hooked” to the story, the suspense and the longing is never rewarded with a solution. The narrative is so obscure that it simply rejects the reader at times. For the lack of a more fitting word, we shall abide by the general term of “novel,” but our reader should be aware that the book goes beyond the genre. His latest novel to this day, *Only Revolution*, reflects as well the deceiving notion of truth, through the same story told by two characters—although this time displayed on the same page. In *House of Leaves* however, the reader has to deal with at least 3 voices, and gets drawn within the deceptive memories of each of them; analepses and prolepses are the means to grasp a clearer insight of the characters by witnessing their evolution

through time. Yet the author is always careful not to impose himself; his authority upon the narrative being barely perceptible, the fiction gains in verisimilitude, explaining why some critics went as far as leading claim to the realistic aspect of the novel.

To clear up this question of interpretational challenges, and analyze what is expected from Danielewski's "idealized reader" he is addressing, it seems necessary to consider the main themes of the novel, in the light of precise examples, and see how our reading is affected. The overwhelming presence of myth and history within the novel, and the way it constantly comes down on the characters' evolution in the novel is of primary importance; an evolution which is turned into a constant and painful struggle through the trope of the labyrinth, in turn affecting our reading. Finally we shall concentrate on the layering of fictional existences and their interconnectedness, most of them sharing a notable unreliability which prompts a careful and active reading, constantly compromising their existence.

Partie 1

MYTHICAL TALES, PERSONAL HISTORIES

Myths are traditionally accounts—sometimes generated from actual events or personalities—explaining specific aspects of a civilization (its origins, or interpretation of unexplained climatic events for example.) It is historically an attempt to give meaning to existence, and hence somehow gaining a slight control over it.

[L]e mythe est un récit collectif, transmis de génération en génération, ayant pour fonction d'éclairer à travers l'histoire de dieux ou de héros, les questions que l'homme se pose sur sa propre naissance et sur celle de l'univers. (Huet-Brichard 5)

Scientific reasoning has slowly laid off in our civilization the need for such device, and yet myths are still very much part of our cultural background. Perhaps because one would forever be amused by the twists and turns of the Greek pantheon, or baffled by the obsession for afterlife in ancient Egypt. But as is highlighted in the quotation above, myths (although featuring gods or heroes) are always useful to the mere mortals creating them to answer their interrogations. They are necessary tool for civilization which by such means tends to attain a comforting knowledge of who we are, and where we come from, or simply a civilization creating a story bearing similarities with our owns. Nevertheless, myths do still exist and spread in our society, they have simply taken another form but their use remains basically the same: “Langage indirect et médiatisé, il montre la dimension obscure d'une réalité qui, sans lui, ne pourrait être dite.” (Huet-Brichard 3)

As Barthes states quite bluntly:

[L]e mythe est une parole.[...] Tout peut donc être mythe ? Oui, je le crois, car l'univers est infiniment suggestif. [...] Cette parole est un message. Elle peut donc être formée d'écritures ou de représentations : le discours écrit, mais aussi la photographie, le cinéma [...] (193, 194)

What is then the common point between myth, history and books? They are all bound to the words which make them intelligible. The deciphering of their written content is the condition to their perennality and existence. And yet, being only written “entities” without any witness to perpetuate their contents, they are prone to modifications (through personal interpretation or the misreadings that necessarily occur when dealing with an obscure text) and to oblivion—the destruction of the written material, leads to the obliteration of the very memory they contained.

Intruding the texts

In the book, both instances are illustrated: the most obvious occurrence of a change having critical incidence on the reader's comprehension of the book is of course Johnny's intrusion within Zampanó's written legacy. Although on several occasions he insists that his task is only to sort and revive the old man's fanatical enterprise, page 12 of the novel, as Karen remarks that "the water heater's on the fritz", Johnny, in a note, tells us his own defective water heater forced him to have a cold shower that morning, he goes on adding:

Now I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just a coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampanó only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there—I added that.
(16)

Not only is Johnny admitting his fraud, he seems proud of the effect his "practical joke" will inevitably have on the reader. Here, Johnny breaks the promise he made to us and the pact that goes along with it, our only point of entry to Zampanó's story being his treatment of it. He also penetrates *The Navidson Record*, going beyond the line that circumscribes on the pages his writing space (the footnotes,) to enter the old man's one. Moreover, corrupting the text for such a trivial detail raises several interrogations: what is the purpose of such a modification? Why would he desire to create a link between his reality and the fiction he reassembles? From this point on, everything becomes dangerously doubtful and uncertain, now that the text has been altered by another source, to what extent is *The Navidson Record*—or for that matter, any other writing in *HOL*—further modified?

What does the reader know about authenticity or fraud in a work of fiction? Why would it matter? We are presented with a story of fiction, that we have no way to verify in any way after all, the author fools us all along, and this is what we seek when reading. To be tricked, surprised and deceived. Amazingly, although we know the features of fiction we nonetheless look for an explanation, struggling our way into the text to "make sense," look for the hidden meanings and build the missing connections, in other words, we try to clear the mist.

Most authors never reveal the trick, they do not expose their devices; the shock comes from the revelation. When Johnny reveals the existence of an acquaintance of his: "Trenton is an old friend who doesn't live here and who I've not mentioned

before.” leading the reader to a footnote containing only empty lines with no word, the reader is left with interrogations concerning the existence and the importance of this mysterious character. Of course, we cannot be told everything—ellipses are the necessary device of literature—but being openly concealed elements of the story with no way to make out more has a frustrating effect.

Later but still at the beginning of the book, Johnny slyly reveals he intended to erase a passage which was insignificant in his opinion:

Easily that whole bit from “coffee arcing tragically” down to “the mourning [sic] paper” could have been cut. You wouldn’t of [sic] noticed the absence. I probably wouldn’t of either. But that doesn’t change the fact that I can’t do it. Get rid of it, I mean. What’s gained in economy doesn’t really seem to make up for what you lose of Zampanó, the old man himself, coming a little more into focus, especially where digressions like these are concerned. (31)

First, we will note the irony of such a comment under the light of the revelation which took place a few pages before. But more importantly there seems to be, in these questions of modification, a lot more at stake, and here we should bear in mind the comment of Danielewski himself we added in the introduction, about the “invitational aspect” of the book. Johnny’s liberty with the text, has a “performative” function, the reader is thus welcomed to appropriate the text as well. Let us remember also that it is through the experience of *The Navidson Record* that Johnny re-accesses and apparently comes to term with his past. He has used another’s story—a fictional one—to navigate within his own memories simply because, as he states:

See, the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanó knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same. (XX)

Remediations

Through a phenomenon of mise-en-abime the reader is led to a personal questioning as well. And if myth is word, Zampanó exists through his writings, deleting any word he created would mean losing parts of the character as Johnny rightly remarks, for “the consequences are the same.” Johnny never met Zampanó, he knew him posthumously; his only means to get an insight of the character is through what remains of him. The old man is thus revered through his fictional production, his entity transposed within the words he is the author of.

Katherine Hayles has observed in her article “Saving the Subject: Remediation in House of Leaves,” a similar event, this time involving Will Navidson and the haunting memory of “Delial.”⁴ The young girl he shot in Sudan and whose picture earned him a Pulitzer Prize, as Hayles remarks, it is not exactly the name of the girl he tried to save in vain but really the name of the photograph. When Will in his letter to Karen before returning to the *House*, finally confesses the origin of the name that came out so often, he does so in these terms: “the name I gave to the girl in the photo that won me all the fame and gory [sic], that’s all she is Karen, just the photo” (391). And in spite of his efforts to refocus the subject on the being, and not her representation, Will seems unable to relegate the medium through which he can establish a contact to the actual memory of the event. Of course, there must be repressive mechanisms at work here, but he also flagrantly “sacred” the medium. Throughout the book, the preservation of writings—or objects in the case of the photograph—works as sorts of relics, which are kept frantically to make up for emotional failings. As an example, Johnny mentions at one point a locket pendant shaped like a deer he received from his mother. The comments he makes on the jewel are rather peculiar:

Hers I didn’t get. It was awkward, ornate and most of all cold, every now and then blinking out odd bits of light, a warped mirror, attempting a reflection when she took care of it. For the most part only achieving a blur. [...] I often thought about the locket, dangling from her neck. Sometimes it made me hurt. Often it made me angry. (350, 351)

The use of a “locket” is a notable choice, for Pelafina's memory and being seem trapped in the hermetic object which explains the rage Johnny experiences just thinking of it. The locket, being the sole object left by the mother, serves us to get a glimpse of the ambivalent feelings Johnny has for his mother at this point. He has yet not come to recover the memory of the events he had repressed, but he nonetheless overcome his fear and apprehension, and opens the pendant he never dared to, only to find the very first letter he ever wrote his mother, one she kept constantly around her neck. And although Johnny claims he was ignorant of the locket's content, he had been warned:

⁴ Perhaps here we should add that Will Navidson is based on an actual photojournalist, Kevin Carter, who did shoot a little girl in a similar position, and who also earned a Pulitzer Prize. Carter, after leaving a suicide note (bearing similarities with Will's last letter,) committed suicide for he could not cope with the atrocities he had witnessed.

Your letter arrived last week—the first ever! [...] Do you really love your mother so much? I shall guard this letter forever and even if there's never another one it will always restore me. I will wear it like a heart. It will become my heart. (592)

The event seems to have triggered a certain chain of events, as the memories of his mother resurface from this point. A while after, when in need of money he sells the object, adding: “I felt an extraordinary amount of rage surging through me.” (411)

Although when he first described it, he announced: “I’d sell body parts before I’d consider taking cash for this relic.” (351)

The need to get rid of the object and the subsequent wrath seem the necessary step to overcome the stifling influence Pelafina has—although long dead—on him. The “relic”, as he himself calls the jewel seems to permanently haunt the young man to the point where he asserts the locket weighs on his very neck, although he never wore it. “The holy ghost” as Johnny calls her in a coded passage, has a critical role in the book, her absence is so unbearable that she seems to inhabit every corner of the novel: Johnny finally wearily realizes page 502: “My mother is right before me now, right before you.”

Interestingly the object “holds” both mother and son in a sacred way: the writing of the child, and the jewel she wore to the very end, thus physically representing the inextricable bond tying them. A destructive alienation resulting from an unbearable separation none of them could ever recover from, and even when Johnny finally acknowledges her memory he realizes:

She could have laid this world to waste.
Maybe she still will. (502)

The mother has become a “concept,” a holy, mythical figure stretching far outside the memory of her son as we will further analyze.

But by selling the locket Johnny has most certainly not achieved any sort of ritual of purification; a close reading informs us that he kept the gold necklace. But only by the end of the novel do we realize where the jewel has ended: Johnny had—right after selling the pendent—offered it to Thumper, a stripper Johnny is obsessed with, and with whom he will never get physically involved. One of the main characters of Johnny’s story, although her appearance and activity make her importance go unnoticed. It is highly improbable that Johnny himself realizes what is the nature and implication of this “crush” he has on this older woman, mother of one, and whom he calls “Thumper” for the tattoo she made at the studio he worked in. Although he claims to have finally known what her real name is, he never reveals it but as we are

told the name of his mother, Pelafina Heather Lièvre, the connection between Lièvre and Thumper makes little doubt. As his mother, Thumper is described in mystical terms, turning her into some sort of a goddess or a saint, incongruously sacralized as her manners and personality do not deserve such grandeur. Of course Johnny is exaggerating to create a comical effect:

Gratefully I received her clothes, lifting them from her finger tips like they were some sacred vesture bestowed upon me by the Virgin Mary herself. [...] I saw still giving serious thought to petitioning all major religions in order to have her deified. (52, 53)

But when Johnny tries to comprehend the nature of his feelings and his inability to keep his cool in front of her, he sinks into confusion and cannot express what conclusion he came up with:

“[S]he still really only exists for me as a strange mixture of daydream and present day edge, by which I mean something without a past or a future, an icon or idyll of some sorts, for some reason forbidden to me, [...] her image feeling permanently fixed within me, but not new, more like it’s been there all along, even if I know that’s not true, and come last night going so far as to entwine, entangle and finally completely replace her with the (— can’t write the word—) of—” (54) [Followed by a blank space.]

This unhealthy transfer over Thumper seems a necessary step for Johnny, and on their last encounter—page 511—near the airport where she works (reminiscent of Johnny’s father, who was a pilot) he gives her an “almost paternal hug” and a kiss on the cheek, although aware she expected more. As a matter of fact, she informs him at this point that “she was also starting laser surgery to get her tattoos removed.” Bidding her “adieu” he is finally able to turn the page and start a new life; hence, at last, managing to exorcise the memory of the absent mother by transposing her on “Thumper.”

Johnny has had to reinterpret the memory of the mother and lessen her awing influence on him. Distorted by the years, and the young age at which he was separated from her, the “holy ghost” that had haunted his years is finally slain through the remediation and re-channeling of her subject onto another character. Here not only—as we will see later on—is Johnny using the writing of someone else to explain his own anxieties, he has to transfer the absent mother on a character bearing similar features with Pelafina.

HOL dwells much on our need to transfer the memory of a loved one unto an object he/she had a link with. On the one hand, it is understood as a desperate attempt to

make up for an absence filling every inch of the longing one's existence, on the other, it is always a desperate call for help.

Maupassant—who dedicated most of his stories to the effects of mental disorders—explores in *La Chevelure* the destructive effects of obsession on an apparently sane mind. A young man develops a sickly fondness for a golden braid found in a piece of furniture, the proprietor of which he never met. Applicable to both the sad protagonist of this story and to Johnny, the short-story ends in a simple yet telling statement: “L'esprit de l'homme est capable de tout.” (13)

For in the novel, the scars left by an incident never seem to heal.⁵

The Minotaur

If myths are sacred tales of a collectivity intended to give meaning to their existence, the situations they depict are usually not unfamiliar to the ordinary man. Consider for example the inconsistency of the Olympus gods, or the grotesque and amusing adventures of the Norse pantheon. Their divine nature does not account for an unimpeachable behavior, rather, it serves as a warning or a means to lessen guilt for our own faulty deeds.

The mythological references in *HOL* are too numerous not to catch attention, and Danielewski himself has made sure their importance will not go unnoticed. Indeed most mythological references are struck and appear in red in the full color edition and in the diegesis, Johnny explains in a note:

Struck passages indicate what Zampanó tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect. (111)

The laborious process of recovery from Johnny—in a way the “spiritual son” of Zampanó—duplicates the importance of these interventions. The reader is convinced he is being offered a privileged route to the old man mysterious tale and will most likely expect enlightening information from it. In truth, the part brings nothing but more uncertainty, Zampanó gives a very personal opinion of the Cretan Minotaur's legend, simply stating King Minos was concealing in the labyrinth a deformed child. He goes on describing a play he watched as:

⁵ Consider Johnny's forearms and the whirling scars left by Pelafina after a domestic incident. Like the jewel, the scars react to his emotions.

only eight people, including the doorman, got a chance to see the production, I produce here a brief summary. (110)

The shift of tone in the narration is confusing, there seems to be little correspondence with *The Navidson Record* and the story of the Minotaur, “a gentle and misunderstood creature.”⁶ This part being in the first person, it seems an open window on the old man's sensitivity far from the academic gibberish with the countless bibliographical references, the tone is intimate and favorable to wholehearted comments: “I am convinced Minos' maze really serves as a trope for repression.” (110)

The unusual mythological tale—turning the Minotaur into a victim of the brutal and idiotic Theseus—echoes within every layer of the novel. Being itself a trope within the maze, the beast haunts every character of the book. A means perhaps to highlight within each character the victim and executioner they embody, and their relationship to an alienating labyrinth. Moreover, turning to the myth of the Minotaur was in itself a skillful choice, for the myth offers various interpretations and versions depending on author, time, and geographical location and raises many interrogations and questions. Santarcangeli remarks:

Ainsi l'histoire du labyrinthe et du Minotaure a traversé intacte plus de trois mille ans d'histoire. “C'est peut-être le conte le plus populaire de l'Antiquité, dit Samivel, et son succès n'est nullement l'effet du hasard. Il contient en effet, un thème mental d'une portée et d'une résonance universelles, mêlé d'angoisse et d'espoir, et capable à la fois de nourrir une sorte de cauchemar intellectuel très proche de la folie, et sur un autre plan la méditation des sages.”(14)

As we will later turn to the matter of the labyrinth, let us in the first place mention the content of the myth and its implications in *HOL*.

King Minos eager to access the Cretan throne summons the help of Poseidon to assert his power, the latter sends him from the water a magnificent bull, but demands Minos to sacrifice him the animal in return of his favor. Facing such a fantastic creature, the King decides to keep the animal for himself, in spite of the promise he made to the god, and sacrifice another bull to make up for the substitution. Poseidon infuriated by the affront, finds no better way to avenge himself than to strike Pasiphaë—King Minos' wife—with an uncontrollable lust for the bull. With the help of the cunning architect Daedalus, she finds a way to mate with the beast by hiding herself in a

⁶ Danielewski surely makes reference here to the short-story *The House of Asterion* by Borges (from *El Aleph*.) A monologue by the Minotaur, bored and lonely, protected by his maze for his appearance is appalling to the outside world and eventually slayed by Theseus.

wooden cow and deceive the animal. From this unnatural union the Minotaur comes into the world, Pasiphaë raises him as her son, but the beast grows fast and soon becomes ferocious, prompting Minos—again with the help of Daedalus—to build a labyrinth complex enough to retain forever the Minotaur from the outside world.

Defeated by Crete, Athens is to pay a tribute of seven maidens and seven young men to be fed to the Minotaur every nine years, eighteen years have already passed when the young Athenian hero Theseus, son of Aegeus (although it seems to be the offspring of Poseidon,) volunteers to go, to slay the Minotaur.

It is with the help of Ariadne (Minos' daughter, the Minotaur's sister), who grew fond of the young Theseus, that the latter succeeds in his mission with the help of the famous thread.

The story, although following the typical scheme of the myth, bears many trouble spots as Paolo Santarcangeli has brightly highlighted:

Car si le Minotaure naquit, innocent et victime, d'une union monstreuse, pourquoi doit-il expier une faute qu'il n'a pas commise? Si néanmoins il lui faut l'expier, aucun de nous n'est, en fin de compte, ni plus ni moins responsable que lui et par conséquent aucun de nous n'est responsable : la même Moïra pèse sur nous tous. (14)⁷

The malaise comes from this innocence, enhanced by the ambivalent nature of the creature: not entirely a beast, and yet not a human being. Being an animal, the creature is hence ignorant of our moral codes, and can hardly be judged upon them. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* the wise but wild beastly Enkidu (often dubbed as “the innocent,”) becomes civilized after the intervention of a “harlot” who introduces him to the customs of mankind. Although he strongly befriends King Gilgamesh (a man of promiscuous living) he constantly mourns over the state he has lost. Recognizing in civilization a certain moral corruption absent to the wild world he originates from, the “beast” has hence a paradoxical value in both tales, its ferocity bearing no mischief, it is implicitly inherent to its nature. See as he dies, how he curses the ones who subtracted him from his wild life:

Après avoir maudit le chasseur de tout cœur,
son cœur le porte a maudire aussi la prostituée, fille de joie [...]
Car moi, si pur, tu m'as humilié derrière le dos de mon épouse,

⁷ He adds a few lines below:
Sur le Minotaure pèse le destin de l'innocent, de l'innocemment cruel, de l'être prédestiné par les dieux à être cruel, et en même temps à être frappé pour cette cruauté. Il porte le poids de la faute de luxure de sa mère et du monde entier; en lui se réalise non seulement le destin de la bête – qui est d'être sacrifiée – mais aussi l'irruption de la bestialité dans l'homme [...] Et nous qui peut-être nous croyions innocents, nous nous retrouvons dans le Minotaure, l'infortuné habitant des ténèbres inextricables, confiné au fond d'une *inremeabilis error*, impliqués dans des fautes qui se seraient obscurément accumulées. (15)

et moi, si pur, tu as péché contre moi dans ma steppe. (*Gilgamesh* 168)

Moreover, the couples forming these two stories are also constructed upon the same plan, for the characters are mirror images of the other, by fighting with/alongside their alter ego, their goal is always to come to terms with themselves. The implications are the same, which explains their similarities. Not only mentioning they more or less originate from the same father, Theseus' murdering the Minotaur brings no honor, for the young man has more to do with the anti-hero: he abandons Ariadne in spite of a promise to marry her, and his impulsiveness provokes the death of his father Aegeus. Theseus indeed forgets to change for a white sail in spite of his promise to his father, which prompts the old man to throw himself in the sea in despair for the son he believes has died. The accession to the throne of Theseus is one marked with failure and inexperience.

In *HOL* the beast stalking all the characters is no more than a projection of their own primal fears in a book built under the sign of oppression and alienation the psychic distresses are objectified and take the form of one's most imprinted fears⁸.

The first occurrence of the “beast” occurs early in the novel: Lude, Johnny's friend, informs him he has noticed “gouges in the hardwood floor, a good six or seven inches long.” (XV) beside the corpse of Zampanó. Considering the redundancy which characterizes the stalking creature, we have all reasons to believe there is there an allusion to this Minotaur haunting *HOL*. Where it is more present though, is within the tale of *The Navidson Record* although the beast is never witnessed by any of the characters pacing the labyrinth—apart from a recurrent “growl” and shadows shrouding Holloway's body. Yet for Johnny, the growl from the *House* muffled beyond the pages of the story he reads, for he constantly feels stalked by a hideous creature, all claws and teeth. Being at first described as an entity estranged from Johnny, an actual beast—the reader might be drawn to believe there is an actual threat—as the story moves on though, there is no more doubt the beast comes from the troubled mind of the young man, a mere mental projection.

By the beginning of the book, the “presence” of the beast is referred to as an “attack” by Johnny, clearly showing he feels mugged by a relatively tangible source, an example lies on page 26:

⁸ Consider also Tom's reaction in *The Navidson Record*, when he addresses the supposed beast as “Mr Monster” (from page 253), the childish games that follows to fill the wait, seems to denote a certain understanding from Tom of the inconsistency of their fear.

But then my nostril flare with the scent of something bitter & foul, something inhuman,
reeking with so much rot & years, telling me in the language of nausea that I'm not alone.
Something's behind me.
Of course I deny it.
It's impossible to deny.

Another “attack” occurs page 70:

There's that awful taste again, sharp as rust, wrapping around my tongue.
Worse, I'm no longer alone. [...]
This time it's human.
Maybe not.
Extremely long fingers.
A sucking sound too. Sucking on teeth, teeth already torn from the gum.
I don't know how I know this.

The reader, having already witnessed one of these suffocating crises, is led to think this is once again nothing but a disturbing daydreaming experienced by Johnny, a thought which is at once shattered to pieces when: “Later a patron points out the long, bloody scratch on the back of my neck.” (72)⁹

The idea of the creature evolves with the young man: at first a terrifying sight, the beast becomes a tool for the young man to exert a certain vengeance. His disturbing “dreams” or fantasies take a turn when incarnating the beast brings a certain comfort and allows him to unleash the rage and violence gnawing at him. The beast is no longer stalking Johnny, it is making its way into his dreams, but this time, the beast and the boy are one. The boy has lost all contact with the outside world, his flat is crowded with rams and rams of paper, his walls black with enigmatic drawings. After nights and nights of hectic yet unremembered dreams, he wakes up cold and shocked for he has remembered his first dream in weeks. His recollection of it is built in the same way as Borges' short-story *The House of Asterion* (the reader is aware of the identity of the narrator at the end, starting from the environment, the story revolves in spiral to the final revelation.) Johnny has now “absorbed” his alter ego, perhaps finding in the story of the Minotaur and its bestiality a salutary compromise to his repressed memories, its “house,” the labyrinth, being besides the perfect setting for his psychic struggle. The dream is a critical element of the story for myth and personal history are explicitly entwined, Zampanó's reconsidering of the myth leads Johnny to an allegory of his own distress.

⁹ Interestingly, Pelafina often calls herself a beast, the account she makes of this supposed attempt to strangle her boy is reminiscent of this scene, she says she wore “long, ridiculous purple nails back then”, and that the attack left: “some half moons cuts on the back of [Johnny's] neck.” (630)

Johnny's dream starts with the awareness that he is trapped in a labyrinth “endlessly descending into dead ends,”¹⁰ but oddly, a labyrinth he has no desire to leave: “It's as if I know the way perfectly but I walk them to forget.” Until the lonely soul realizes that for the first time ever, he is not the only one wandering in those corridors, a “drunken frat boy wearing a plum-colored Topha Beta sweatshirt” makes his appearance. The reference to the fraternity goes most likely in the way of an academic criticism (as well as illustrating the “retarded” Theseus of Zampanó's aside), but more importantly, it is when trying to communicate with the violent boy that Johnny realizes he is not quite human: “Excuse me, mind explaining why you're coming after me?” which I actually try to say except the words don't come out right. More like grunts and clouds, big clouds of steam.”

Appalled by the realization, he investigates his body further to discover he has become a hairy and dreadful monster, with the same scars as his, but this time running along his whole body. With this image comes the understanding of why he had been put in this place, just like the Cretan Minotaur:

And even though I have no idea of how I got to be so deformed, I do know. And this knowledge comes suddenly. I'm here because I am deformed.

As the frat boy intends to crush him with his ax, Johnny, now a monster, understands that “for the first time, I have a choice: I don't have to die, I can kill him instead.” The realization of his new-born power is linked to the discovery of his inner bestiality, in the dream—realm of the subconscious—the repressed personality can finally make a way out (it is the first dream he remembers in a long time) and hence toll the bell of a confrontation to come with his past. Following this, the dream goes on—as one could expect—on a symbolic confrontation with Pelafina, his mother, the one responsible for his deformity. Johnny not being yet mature enough to accept her presence, confounds her with the numerous women he had tried to console himself with:

The frat boy I realize is not the frat boy anymore but someone else. At first I think it's Kyrie, until I realize it's not Kyrie but Ashley, which is when I realize it's neither Kyrie nor Ashley but Thumper, though something tells me that even that's not exactly right. Either way, her face glows with adoration and warmth and her eyes communicate in a blink an understanding of all the gestures I've ever made, all the thoughts I've ever had.

The mother completely paralyzes the beast she gave birth to both physically and figuratively, even when she starts raising the ax and violently murdering him, Johnny

¹⁰ All following references: *House of Leaves*, 403 to 405.

cannot react. This symbolic infanticide, melted with the myth of the Minotaur efficiently encapsulates the complex and painful story he could never quite comprehend, and the image seems to have triggered an important reaction to the young man:

I've made a terrible mistake [...] and I realize with a shade of citric joy, that at least, at last, it will put an end to the far more terrible ache inside me, born decades ago, long before I finally beheld in a dream the face and meaning of my horror.

It is by impersonating the Minotaur that Johnny comes to realize the dreadful crippling he suffered from his mother's condition, by realizing the innocence of the beast which is doomed to take on the sins of others, he comes to apprehend his own miserable existence. The myth has hence performed its function: it allowed him to explain the darker spots of his personal story by transposing them he finally succeeds in taming them.

The particularity of the Cretan Minotaur is duplicated in the “beast” of *HOL*: an impending disaster, faceless, shapeless, but like most imprinted fear, it is often a fear of the darkness, intangible, a fear generated by an absence, which, in Johnny's case, is generated by the “holy ghost”: Pelafina. The final recollection of his memories of her dismiss the idea he previously had: that his mother was institutionalized because she had tried to strangle him as a boy, from what he can finally gather, the gesture he mistook for an attempt to end his life was nothing but a gentle stroke on the day of her leaving to the asylum:

She started to scream, screaming for me, not wanting to go at all but crying out my name—and there it was the roar, the one I've been remembering, in the end not a roar, but the saddest call of all—reaching for me, her voice sounding as if it would shatter the world, fill it with thunder and darkness, which I guess it finally did.

The roar can be easily linked to the one troubling the alarming silence of the *House* on Ash Tree Lane. As we have pointed, Pelafina seems to have an ability to haunt every corner of the space she inhabited, in fact, quite like an echo would: spreading into empty spaces.¹¹

Surprisingly Santarcangeli too, in his analysis of the myth of the Minotaur, pinpoints the fact Theseus fears most the labyrinth and its darkness rather than the beast itself:

De temps en temps, des bruits et des échos, le long de murs lisses, et comme si le vent se mettait à souffler, à mugir. Le vent? [...]

¹¹ Chapter V (starting from page 41) is dedicated to echoes: dwelling on both the mythological character rejected by Narcissus, and its physical properties, echoes are a critical feature, and backs up several themes of the novel. Here, of course, it is highly relevant as the “concept” of the mother is conveyed through a sound: the roar.

Selon d'autres, le danger résidait davantage dans l'obscurité que dans les enchevêtrements du chemin." (23)

With nothing the eyes can rely upon, is not the psyche forced to fill in the pitch black space?

Sacrifice to the God House

After briefly mentioning the notion of sacred book in the introduction, we shall get back to this idea, because after all, it is a house of leaves we analyze. Danielewski creates the illusion of a fiction "monster," the book seems to be *inhabited* to the point where Johnny feels "created" by it. And yet this is a paradoxical statement for, as we have seen, the text is intended to be hermetic to a linear reading. This ambiguity becomes less confusing if one considered the book as a myth itself: we have shown in the previous examples, the juxtaposition of myth (mythology) and personal histories. The novel plays constantly with these two notions, rendering our need to transpose unto another's story to focus on our own, and the book itself intends to becoming a myth of its own, or in Danielewski's words, an *icon*.

Physically, the book is a rather complex entity: four narrative layers, collages, pictures, photographs, musical score, an index, etc. Its content is even more complicated for the diegesis constantly aims at losing us in its succession of existing and non-existing mentions, to the point where everything seems doubtful, or rather, plausible. The mayhem of extra textual references drastically extends the reading time, also, most readers will be confounded by the very special feeling prompted by the reading, they might be experiencing a fear rather uncommon to a written work.

From this point on, let us consider the book as a myth: the characters are often linked to tutelary mythological figures, Zampanó follows the tradition of the mythical blind poets (both Homer and Thamyris are cited in the novel), and we have already developed some of the analogies concerning Johnny and Pelafina. Although the reader is tricked into thinking these characters evolve into a definite fictional background, they are nonetheless constantly in touch with the conceptual, and quite often even, their link with the divine is impossible to miss.

Although we have not yet mentioned it, the *House* is in itself the most striking example of a sacred presence within the book. Not only it is implausibly ageless, its configuration is merely impossible: infinite and changing in a flash. Chapter XVI of the novel recounts the scientific analysis of the wall samples picked in the *House*, the results clearly states the *House* out-stands our notion of time itself. If this passage is an example of Danielewski's tongue-in-cheek humor, the implications of this impossible fact are critical to the understanding of its nature:

“Your samples all fall into a very consistent scheme. Sample **A** is pretty young, a few thousands years old, while **K** is a few hundred thousand. **Q** over here is in the millions and these—” referring to **MMMM** through **XXXX** “—well, in the billions. Those last bits are clearly meteoric.” (378)

Later, Zampanó remarks:

Primarily thanks to O'Geery's conclusions, some fanatics of *The Navidson Record* assert that the presence of extremely old chondrites definitively proves extra-terrestrial forces constructed the house. Others, however, claim the samples only support the idea that the house on Ash Tree Lane is a self-created portal into some other dimension. As Justin Krape dryly remarked: “Both arguments are probably best attributed to the persistent presence of schizophrenia plaguing the human race.”

Keener intellects, however, now regard scientific conjecture concerning the house as just another dead end. It would seem the language of objectivity can never adequately address the reality of that place on Ash Tree Lane. (378-379)¹²

As the last statement shows, it seems the place simply cannot be apprehended on a rational basis; ageless and impossible to picture for its dimensions are ever-changing, the *House* is an absurdity confounding any reasoning.

Only one character seems to realize the potential of that place: Will Navidson, the reckless photojournalist, who in his last letter, upon returning for the last time in the *House* on his own, writes:

I need to get back to that place one more time. I know something now and I just have to confirm it. [...] Do you believe in God? I don't think I ever asked you that one. Well I do know now. But my God isn't your Catholic varietal [...] No burning bush, no angels, no cross. God's a house. Which is not to say that our house is God's house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house is God. [...]

Pretty crazy you have to admit. I just made God a street address. (390)

¹² In the “Various Quotes” section of the book, page 651, is this rather similar metaphor of Galileo in *Il Saggiatore*:

“Philosophy is written in this grand book—I mean the universe—which stand continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and interpret the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one is wandering about in a dark labyrinth.”

In *The Navidson Record* when God is mentioned, it is always to stress how forsaken he must be: he is the fatherless father, the lonely creator, and what Will realizes, is that the *House* needs to ease its torment, and for this purpose, there is no doubt Will has to be sacrificed to the archaic godly figure. Following the example of Jonah (who was thrown to his death into the sea to calm its restlessness) Will's return to the nightmarish construction, produces a relief of the symptoms the characters related to the *House* had developed (page 406). Perhaps it is really in this example, that we realize the influence Will has on the place, it is right before Tom's death (Will's brother) after he had just saved Daisy, (Will's daughter):

When Navidson returns to the window, he cannot believe his brother is standing still. Unfortunately, as Tom demonstrates, whenever he takes one step forward, the floor drags him two steps back. Navidson quickly begins to crawl through the window, and oddly enough the walls and ceiling almost instantly cease their oscillations. (346)

Being a voluntary sacrifice, it is of course not without reminding us of Christ's crucifixion who did so to atone for humanity's sin, Danielewski chooses instead to link the human sacrifice to the Norse god Odin. Odin actually “made of himself a sacrifice to himself” being a supreme entity, he hung upside down from the world tree Yggdrasil for nine days, and bore the agony... to access the mystery of the runes, that is, to master writing. As a compensation to his acquired wisdom, Odin loses an eye, Will Navidson does too, among other things:

Navidson began to recover, but the price he paid for living was not cheap. Frostbite claimed his right hand and clipped the top portion of one ear. Patches of skin on his face were also removed as well as his left eye. (523)

What Navidson has acquired then remains a mystery, the account of *The Navidson Record* ends on a Halloween day, a clever nod to Johnny's introduction dated “October 31.” Either way, considering the reference on the very last page of the novel to the world tree Yggdrasil, (an ash tree, reminiscent of the address where the *House* is located) and the link we highlighted between Will and Odin, writing is the central element of the whole novel; actually *HOL* (we mean here, the book as an object) is duplicating within every layers of the narrative.

A New Age myth

The link every reader is looking for to tie together the different stories, is ironically none other than the book. To back up this statement, let us first see how Johnny is constantly doubting his own existence:

More and more often, I've been overcome by the strangest feeling [...] by which I mean to say—to state the not-so-obvious—without it I would perish. [...] my sense of self derealized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe [...] that this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanó's work implies something that just can't be, namely that this thing has created me. (326)

These interventions can be seen as nothing but irony from Danielewski's part, always reminding a book's content is nothing but words laid on paper, but it is also a way to imply a kind of eerie creative power the book possesses. Johnny seems to grant the book a soul, and surely more than that:

I wash the sweat off my face, do my best to suppress a shiver, can't, return to the body, spread out across the table like papers—and let me tell you there's more than just The Navidson Record lying there—bloodless and still but not at all dead, calling me to it, needing me now like a child, depending on me despite its age. After all, I'm its source, the one who feeds it, nurses it back to health (326)

Although at first sight it seems not more than a bizarre statement from Johnny's deranged mind—an autopsy of the weirdest kind—the “physical book” haunting the novel appears to be bound to be destroyed once it performs its function: once the fear it raises is overcome, the cursed relic needs to be destroyed. When Will explores the *House* for the last time, we are told that, among his provisions, he brought along a book, only by the end though, when the *House* dissolves to a nothingness leaving Will falling endlessly, are we told its title:

Taking a tiny sip of water and burying himself deeper in his sleeping bag, he turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House Of Leaves*. (465)

Surrounded by an absolute darkness, his only way to make out the writings is by lighting a match, setting fire to the top of the page and read fast enough while the book is turning to ashes. It is a beautiful and rich image which apparently seems to have inspired Johnny in some ways for a few pages after he announces:

I light matches too. [...] I want to burn these pages. Turn every fucking word to ash. I hold the burning staffs a quarter of an inch from the paper, and yet one after another, the flames all die in a gray line. Is it a line? More like the approximation of a line written in a thin line of rising smoke. That's where I focus because no matter how hard I try I cannot close that fraction of space. One quarter of an inch. As if to say not only can this book not be destroyed, it also cannot be blamed. (493)

One quarter of an inch is also what triggered this whole demented telling: what the reader might not remember at that point is that when Will Navidson measured his house, it is the exact length that was missing from the exterior: the house was bigger of a quarter of an inch from the inside than it was in the outside. Metaphorically, one can see what monsters can a ridiculous quarter of an inch shelter in one's mind!

If we rely on *HOL* chronology a few days after though, after having had new insights of himself, he finally manages to set fire to the cursed book. In this example, one can immediately see how the tone has shifted:¹³

The book is burning. At last. A strange light scans each page, memorizing all of it even as each character twists into ash. At least the fire is warm, warming my hands, warming my face, parting the darkest waters of the deepest eye, even if at the same time it casts long shadows on the world, the cost of any pyre, finally heated beyond recovery, shattered into specters of dust, stolen by the sky, flung to sea and sand.

Had I meant to say memorializing? (518)

The burning seems more of a ritual of purification by fire, an exorcism of the tool that has finally performed its function for Johnny. The scene is made sacred, for in his last thought, the burning of the book is a funeral of some kind. A way perhaps to put the restless souls of the dead at rest.

The last entry to Johnny's notes (dated August 28, 1999) shows him homeless, but seemingly recovering from the horror he had witnessed, riding on trains with other hobos, he is attracted by music coming out of a bar, once in, he is shocked to hear these strangely familiar lyrics: "I live at the end of a Five and a Half Minute Hallway." (512) Eager to know where they got that from, great is his surprise (not mentioning ours) when the band informs him the lyrics were inspired by a book found on the Internet a while before:

"Take a look for yourself," he said, handing me a big brick of tattered paper. "But be careful," he added in a conspiratorial whisper. "It'll change your life." (513)

The cover is none other than the one from *HOL* (it is however said to be the first edition,) this last twist definitely asserts the book as being some sort of a "new age myth" virtually immortal for endlessly answering the existential needs of their readers, as Johnny remarks: "In a few of the margins, there were even some pretty stunning personal riffs about the lives of the musicians themselves." (514)

As if to add some more blur to the already labyrinthine reading, Johnny feels very sleepy all of a sudden and heading for the park to get some sleep:

¹³ The font too changes for the one and only time on this page.

I wandered back into the park, wrapped myself up in my brown corduroy coat with new buttons I'd personally sewed on—this time using entire spools of thread to make sure they would never fall off again—and stretched out beneath an old ash tree (514)

Of course the reference to the “old ash tree” is totally reminiscent of the Yggdrasil and the House on *Ash Tree Lane*. Moreover, the reference to the buttons (in the morse section, one of the coded message reads the same word, look from page 103 to 106) is most likely to be linked to this poem cited in the “Various Quotes” section written by Derick Thomson, *Return from Death*:

When I came back from death
it was morning
the back door was open
and one of the buttons of my shirt had
disappeared. (655)

There really seems to be no way to get hold of a definite answer to the interrogations raised by the book, but then again, one would not try to explain how Hercules could possibly tame a three-headed dog, or for that matter, how come there ever was a three-headed dog in the first place, for myth are stories, and stories have a function which has sometimes nothing to do with the rational: they are simply bearing a message meant to be appropriated by the many.

Partie 2

EXPLORING THE LABYRINTH(S)

As is often the case with a work featuring a physical labyrinth, the reader is confronted to a dual understanding of the term: if there is a tangible maze the characters go through, the implications of this crossing are most likely within the realm of the psyche. As in other accounts the cave, the labyrinth represents a sinuous construction, often linked to maternal principles. And it is perhaps because it allows a telling illustration of doubt and loss that human beings turned to this archetype from the earliest times. Labyrinthine representations are to be found all around the world and at all times, it seems to be in some ways intrinsic to any civilization, as Santarcangeli remarks:

A titre de vérification, que l'on nous permette une question: combien d'entre vous se sont mis à dessiner des labyrinthes dans des moments d'inaction ou de rêverie? (46)

Considering the complexity of the subject, which actually fills in volumes and volumes of studies, we can only briefly summarize some of Santarcangeli's reflexions on the subject. The etymology of the term is uncertain, Borges among others, linked the word with Carian word *Labrus/Labrys* meaning “double ax”: a symbol widely spread in Knossos. But this etymology is discussed, for, as Santarcangeli comments: “il semble qu'à l'époque de la construction probable du labyrinthe, “hache” ne se disait pas en Crète *labrys*, mais “pe-le-ky”.”¹⁴

Another hypothesis links the word *labyrinth* to *labra*, which originally signified: “caverne, mine à galeries et couloirs multiples.” (he adds that some ancient writers had placed the Minotaur in a cavernous labyrinth.) We will remain on these two etymologies: from the divine symbol of the double ax, to the underground construction, for they appear to be relatively complementary. Santarcangeli goes on to explore briefly the relationship between labyrinthine constructions and the “motherly”:

Celui qui traverse le labyrinthe, doit passer par les errements et les pièges de l'obscurité, pour vaincre la mort [...] Dans les profondeurs *gît la représentation sous forme de mystère*

¹⁴ On the etymology of the labyrinth, the following quotations are all from *Le Livre des Labyrinthes* from page 64 to 68.

du grand ventre maternel et du labyrinthe dans lequel devra errer l'homme destiné à s'engager dans la vie.

The usages of labyrinths are multiple and numerous: funerary construction (in Egypt for instance,) monumental prison, or entertaining structure (as is the case even nowadays,) the purposes of labyrinths are infinitely complex and archaic. The religious dimension they bear should not be put aside, for their meandres are never far from illustrating the metaphorical wanderings of life, and the opposition between life and death. As Kühn shows by drawing a parallel with the gladiator fights (as cited by Santarcangeli):

« Ces luttes et ces armes en relation avec le labyrinthe s'associent indubitablement aux concepts des Cerbères et de ces étranges êtres hybrides qui surveillent les entrées de la vie et de la mort, du Ciel et de la Terre, que nous retrouvons si souvent dans les légendes et dans les mythologies, et aussi au concept des *difficiles épreuves* qu'il faut franchir *pour pénétrer dans un nouveau monde ou un nouvel état*. La mort et la vie sont indivisibles, *il faut mourir pour renaître*, qu'il s'agisse de la mort réelle du corps ou de celle symbolique, des rites d'initiations et des autres rites de passage, en usage chez tant de peuples [...] » Du reste, la mort, c'est-à-dire le *passage* de la vie éternelle, n'est-il pas appelé *passage* par les croyants? (145)

Mazes of perception

In *HOL* the labyrinth is one of the central themes of the novel, in fact, chapter IX is dedicated to its notion, without much surprise, this chapter is by far the most chaotic in terms of typography, for substance and form in the novel, are always merged into one.

Danielewski intends in this part to draw—as we did—a small history of labyrinths, and from this, tries to shed a little light on what the *House* could (not) be. Needless to say, we, readers, as well “[a]s the Holloway team soon discovers, answers to these questions are not forthcoming.” (*HOL*, 111) And yet from the examples and quotations reproduced in the chapter, it becomes obvious that the *House's* labyrinth has no other function than to confront its explorer to his/her own psyche. Indeed the text stresses how a labyrinth's pattern cannot be addressed from the inside—only a

“god's eye” would realize the convoluted patterns of the maze—and none of the main characters ever apprehends the labyrinth from a distance:

[M]aze-traders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its artistry. What you see depends on where you stand [...] Our perception of labyrinths is thus intrinsically unstable: change your perspective and the labyrinth seems to change. (114)

This is evidently not expected to be taken as a warning to actual “maze-traders,” but reflects perfectly the relative need for self-assessment in *HOL*: Johnny is unable to keep a distance from the text he handles.¹⁵ In the *House* too, reaction differs from one character to another, and it is through their responses to the contact with the labyrinth, that we are told their personal history. It is true of all the characters within *The Navidson Record* as well as Johnny, who—as we have demonstrated—distills his personal story after being in contact with the writings.

Danielewski too gives a guess at the etymology of the word *labyrinth*; his hypothesis differs from the ones we have mentioned above, but is greatly interesting nonetheless:

[w]e should look at the etymological inheritance of a word like “labyrinth”. The Latin *labor* is akin to the root *labi* meaning to slip or slide backwards though the commonly perceived meaning suggests difficulty and work. Implicit in “labyrinth” is a required effort to keep from slipping or falling; in other words stopping. We cannot relax within those walls, we have to struggle past them. Hugh of Saint Victor has gone so far as to suggest that the antithesis of labyrinth—that which contains work—is Noah's ark—in other words that which contains rest. (114)

This definition applies perfectly to the dual laborious tasks the characters carry on: the explicit one—Johnny with Zampanó's text, Holloway and Will with the exploring of the labyrinth—as well as the implicit ones, dwelling beneath the surface—Johnny exploring his past, Holloway and Navidson (these characters function as obscure mirror images of the other) dealing with a death wish due to an irrepressible guilt. Resulting from their trauma, they are unable to “stop” within the labyrinth, in spite of warnings and pleas from their relatives, their need for a relief (perhaps from finding the “treasure” one necessarily thinks reward the maze-traders, or simply in death) forbids them to stop in their quests no matter the consequences.

¹⁵ As a reminder: Johnny is not the only one who has been in contact with *The Navidson Record*: Zampanó being blind, he hired young women to read to him and write what he would say. Also, Lude, Johnny's friend, although he is the one who found the old man's body, does not seem particularly affected by the strangeness overwhelming Johnny, nor is he interested in the old man's story.

Similarly the reader must find a reason to carry on such a laborious reading, if it is hopefully not death he or she seeks, it is an enlightenment or a revelation which would cast light on the impossibly complex narratives. Amusingly (or frustratingly) there is no such revelation at the end, for Danielewski warned us: “If the work demanded by any labyrinth means penetrating or escaping it, the question of process becomes extremely relevant.” And later, when commenting on the way out of a labyrinth “All solutions then are necessarily personal.” (115) The author places hence all the importance on the process rather than the result, and what he seems to imply is that we, readers, should be *modified* in turn after the reading, for the *House* is no place to rest, it is a place to lead: “back again to the us and hence back to ourselves.” (114)

As mentioned above, the labyrinth is both a theme and an actual layout within the novel, following the characters' wanderings, the reader is soon facing an unusual reading experience. Refusing any form of linearity, the text keeps on confusing its reader through mere impossibilities; the example are numerous, but in this chapter, consider the maelstrom of names and places arranged in lists gnawing at the main text, crowding the pages as if hundred voices murmured in the textual background a white noise of inconsequential information. The footnotes numbers are frequently prompting the reading ahead or back from several pages, which is when the footnotes are actually represented by numbers, and not a system of symbols. The extra textual references are brought up in a way that necessarily stimulates the reader and in the end the latter realizes he has been going the exact way the writer expected him to. As Ariadne's thread guided Theseus in the maze, we too, are given a path to follow, except in our case, it is more intended to lose and fool us than to get us out strong with wisdom.

The struck passages in a red font are the ones Johnny says he saved from Zampanó's attempt at deletion, rather, could not we see this line running along the text as a thread?¹⁶ Which would give a whole new importance to these passages where, as was remarked above, the tone is radically different and personal. The struck passages are

¹⁶

On the thread, here is what Santarcangeli writes:

Et quant au symbolisme du fil, il représente dans de nombreux contextes et il indique toujours – même sous la forme de chaîne, de corde ou de simple tracé graphique – un enchaînement des différents états d'existence entre eux et avec le principe qui les anime : nous trouvons toujours la représentation d'une ligne sans solution de continuité, d'un tracé plus ou moins compliqué [...] rappel[ant] le flux continu de la vie vers la mort et de la mort vers la vie. (25)

most of the times offering a different perspective of the characters, pieces of their mind they would not share otherwise, or advice to the reader; in other instances however, these passages deal with mythology... and casualties of war. Meant perhaps to differentiate these entries from the other narratives and moderate the somewhat heavy reading, they give the illusion of an existence beyond the text, a continuity to the fiction outside its frame.

Exploring the unknown

HOL is a book forcing the reader to *navigate* through its pages, thus the theme of sea traveling is one of importance in the novel. Here again, whether the references are genuinely reported in the fiction or mere metaphors of introspection is never made clear. Nevertheless the connection between sea traveling and labyrinth is not fortuitous, in *Le Livre des Labyrinthes* the author remarks: “L'association du labyrinthe avec la mer et les marins revient donc presque toujours : coïncidence due au hasard?” (159) If Santarcangeli cannot find a satisfactory explanation to this recurrent connection, *HOL* however develops an interesting link between the labyrinthine wanderings, and the maritime voyages. Perhaps an element of answer could be found in the similar state of tension felt both by the sailors in the middle of the sea, and the explorers wandering about a maze: in both instances, the odds to get lost and the subsequent confusion resulting from this knowledge are very similar.

Outside of *The Navidson Record*, Johnny has experienced a similar experience, or so he says, on a ship with the evocative name of *The Atrocity*.¹⁷ As a teenager, trying to flee from his violent foster father named Raymond, he applied for a job in Alaska and ended up on a “real wreck of a thing but supposedly as seaworthy as they get.” (104) The trip ends in a tragedy when an explosion leads the ship into sea.¹⁸ An old Haitian dies in the wreckage which leaves a profound mark on Johnny. Whether the event is expected to be taken for granted or merely seen as a metaphor is left to the appreciation of the reader. Anyway, the elaborate description (pages 298 and 299)

¹⁷ The ship's name is always underlined by Johnny, reminiscent of the treatment reserved to a book title.

¹⁸ This episode is crucial for, as we will later show, it is also mentioned by Pelafina.

bears many of the images favored by Johnny throughout the novel—the roar for example—and its rich imagery featuring a luxuriant language leaves the impression the tale is a romanticized fantasy illustrating once again his inability to cope with his past. The presence of Pelafina is to be found again, appearing in transparency when Johnny refers to the coded content of one of her letters.¹⁹

On another hand, the name of the institution Pelafina lived in, The Whalestoe, is often only called “The Whale;” not only is this detail following the same trope, it is also perfectly fitting the highly literate and knowledgeable woman: from Jonah to Moby Dick the mother's condition is thus backed up by a heavy literary heritage. The reader might at once draw a more accurate picture of the character, and develop a form of pity towards her fate.

Parallels are always drawn from one setting to the other: the Holloway Team—the explorers hired by Will Navidson to sort out the mysteries of the labyrinth—in spite of their experience, soon loses all landmarks and enters a state of deep confusion resulting in Robert Holloway shooting his companions, when he misidentifies them with the “beast.” Taking the example of mutiny during explorations, Danielewski illustrates the extreme confusion felt in those walls, and links this to the fate of two sea explorers, Magellan and Hudson:

Like Magellan, Holloway led an expedition into the unknown. Like Magellan, Holloway faced a mutiny. And like the captain who meted out a penalty of death, Holloway also centred the cross-hairs upon those who spurned his leadership. However, unlike Magellan, Holloway's course was in fact doomed (136)

If Magellan succeeded in taming the mutiny which arose on his ship, it is not the case of Hudson who “after beating about for months in a *“labyrinth without end”* was expelled on a shallop without food or water:

Like Hudson, Holloway found himself with men who, short on reserves and faith, insisted on turning back. Like Hudson, Holloway resisted. Unlike Hudson, Holloway went willingly into that labyrinth.”(137)

Holloway is not the only one being related to sea explorers²⁰, as is indicated by his name, Navidson (shortened as Navy) is linked to the same “class”. As Ahab obsessed by the whale, Will starts a relentless quest to uncover the mysteries of the dark corridors, a quest to nothingness.

¹⁹ As it will be analyzed later, we shall not develop on this, but the letter we are referring to is page 620.

²⁰ We could also stress the importance of the maritime distress signal SOS in Morse, which becomes sometimes a musical background: chapter VIII is simply called: SOS. As usual, Johnny uses the same image when telling the story of *The Atrocity*.

The similarities between labyrinth explorers, and sea explorers are convincing and they may have helped Santarcangeli to understand why drawings of labyrinths would often be found on shores, and why it was a recurrent symbol among sailors.

It is also in this chapter that we are first introduced with the characters named Quesada and Molino: whether they have a historical origin or are merely inventions on Danielewski's part is unclear, but the author makes them the instigators of the Magellan's expedition's mutiny. After Magellan was able to calm down the rebellion, he executed his enemies, but for these two characters, here is the punishment he imagined:

Quesada, however, was not hung, shot or even forced to walk the plank: Magellan had a better idea. Molino, Quesada's trusty servant, was granted clemency if he agreed to execute his master. Molino accepted the duty and together both men were set in a shallop and directed back to their ship the Trinidad, to fulfill their destiny. (136)

The reason we focus on this fact, is that the story of these two men seems to have particularly interested Zampanó; Johnny reports this thought found in the old man's journal:

“As often as I have lingered on Hudson in his shallop, I have in the late hours turned my thoughts to Quesada and Molino's journey across those shallow waters, wondering aloud what they said, what they thought, what gods came to keep them or leave them, and what in those dark waves they finally saw of themselves? Perhaps because history has little to do with those minutes, the scene survives only in verse: *The Song of Quesada and Molino* by [XXX]. I include it here in its entirety.”

As the reader should expect, even though there is a page in the appendix announcing the *Song*, the pages are simply... blank. We are left eager to discover “what they finally saw of themselves” or for that matter any other information concerning the story, as the old man himself recommends it in those terms. But right underneath this note, Zampanó adds ironically: “Youth always tries to fill the void, an old man learns to live with it.” Perhaps because words could not convey in a satisfactory way the horrible feelings of guilt, fear and apprehension that must have been experienced at that time. Words are simply not powerful enough when it comes to describe emotions crippling a being in its entirety. In *HOL*, the reader must often deal with this “insufficiency” inherent to written language, more often than not must he get rid of his habit of understanding through words, in favor of an intuitive perception of what is *meant*.

Rendering nothingness

Lost within the maze, the reader cannot count on a “writer-guide” but must instead draw from his imagination and personal experience to apprehend the fiction. As an example, it is by listing hundreds of things the *House* is *not* that he is expected to comprehend the “nothingness” of the place. Not only is it devoid of any objects, the reader must understand through this “negative description” that the *House* simply is *not*. By being composed with nothing we are used to, it ends up completely belonging to the realm of the conceptual, a huge absurdity of the mind. The reader is warned as soon as page 4: “There's nothing there. Beware.” And yet, never losing his humor, Danielewski, by the end of the list (running from page 119 to 142 in the blue squares) concludes:

“Picture that. In your dreams.”

A grateful invitation for sure, but one the reader might not gladly accept! Still, other characters are willing to *experience* what has only been *mentioned*, Johnny for example:

Dreams getting worse. Usually in nightmares you see what you're scared of. Not in my case. No image. No color. Just blackness and then in the distance, getting closer and closer, beginning to pierce some strange ever-present roar, sounds, voices, sometimes just a few, sometimes a multitude, and one by one, all of them starting to scream.

Do you know what it's like to wake up from a dream you haven't seen? Well for one thing, you're not sure if you were dreaming or not. (503)

In *The Navidson Record*, Chad (Navidson's son) also seems to realize the nature of the house:

The week before Navidson set out on the rescue attempt, Brookes had asked her third grade class to draw a picture of their house. The one Chad handed in had no chimney, windows, or even a door. In fact, it was nothing more than a black square filling ninety percent of the page. Furthermore, several layers of black crayon and pencil had been applied so that not even a speck of paper beneath could show through. In the thin margins, Chad had added the marauding creatures. (313)

Chad's sister, Daisy, represents the House in the same way although the black square is filling less space on the page.

“Inconscients délogés”

These two similar nightmares do not give an insight of what this place could be (considering it is something) but after all, Danielewski seems more interested in the reactions triggered by the *House* than the *House* itself. This statement by Gaston Bachelard sheds some light:

L'espace saisi par l'imagination ne peut rester l'espace indifférent livré à la mesure et à la réflexion du géomètre. Il est vécu. Et il est vécu, non pas dans sa positivité, mais avec toutes les partialités de l'imagination. (17)

In *HOL*, even the images rendering the events in the *House*—let us not forget Will Navidson equips everyone with cameras—prove insufficient to give an understanding of it. Images cannot render space, temperature or merely feelings, nothing can translate the impressions followed by a house of trauma. “Funny how incompetent images can sometimes be.” (344) Which in the end, matters not for there is no need to be authoritative when it comes to the description of a place that will necessarily be apprehended in countless ways; Bachelard warns writers that by saying too much, the reader will not find necessary to seek within his/her own experiences and memories to grasp the message. If the reader is perceiving the text in this way then: “Les valeurs d'intimité sont si absorbantes que le lecteur ne lit plus votre chambre: il revoit la sienne.” (32) The *House* on Ash Tree Lane is not only a labyrinth, many passages describe a heart-warming typically American home with hot chocolate and lemon pie waiting on the kitchen table, a place like many other places, simply this time, the initial anomaly (the closet appearing on the first floor) wrecks havoc.

Jung has illustrated the complexity of our soul with the image of a house,²¹ and Bachelard comments: “La psychanalyse vient en aide à des inconscients *délogés*, à des inconscients brutalement ou insidieusement *délogés*.”²² (29)

Although not ending in a “happy-end”, the Navidsons' still manage in a seemingly satisfactory way to live together and recover from the insane events they went through. In Johnny's case however, the “stray” does not seem to find solace in any ways, the absence of a house of his own and the constant wanderings from one family to another, have *disabled* the young man and forced him into a truly infinite maze: it is as if his inability to settle down—both mentally and physically—prompts

²¹ Bachelard quotes and summarize part of Jung's thoughts on the subject page 18.

²² Italics added for emphasis.

him to undertake a never-ending quest to finally gain a place he could call his own. The stack of Polaroids showing houses page 572 are supposedly shot by Johnny²³ although we might think they are an attempt to verify the existence of Zampanó's *House*—a resultant from his obsession—in the light of the previous comment, one could consider he is simply trying to fill in the void; to reconsider the meaning of a “home” through these random habitations. By the end of the novel, he goes back to the house he was raised in, a house within which he could picture both his parents together with himself.²⁴ His house is gone, and in its place is erected a large lumberyard. The subsequent pain in the “guts” he experiences indicates how tough the shock is on him, and what importance he placed in meandering about the walls bearing so much sentimental weight.

The wanderings seems thus a direct consequence of the absence of a home. Amusingly, whether or not a coincidence, Bachelard expressed an idea fitting Johnny's process in *La Poétique de l'Espace*:²⁵

Logé partout, mais enfermé nulle part, telle est la devise du rêveur de demeures. Dans la maison finale comme dans ma maison réelle, la rêverie d'habiter est brimée. Il faut toujours laisser ouverte une rêverie d'ailleurs.

Quel bel exercice alors de la fonction d'habiter la maison rêvée que le voyage en chemin de fer! Ce voyage déroule un film de maisons rêvées, acceptées, refusées... Sans que jamais, comme en automobile, on soit tenté de s'arrêter. On est en pleine rêverie avec la salutaire interdiction de *vérifier*. (69)

The notion of the “homely” is important within every layer of the narrations. Living spaces in *HOL* are always going from one extreme to the other: Zampanó's flat is insanely confined (and so will be Johnny's by the end): “All the windows nailed shut and sealed with caulking. The front entrance and courtyard doors all storm proofed.” (XVI) But contrary to what the reader may think: “Zampanó was not afraid of the outside world. [...] My best guess now is that he sealed his apartment in an effort to retain the various emanations of his things and himself.”

A fear to dissolve, a fear to disappear, an attempt to struggle against time and history perhaps? For sure, the initial description of the flat sets up a few elements we mentioned, introducing some of the tropes and particularities of the novel, consider Johnny's reaction when entering the place:

²³ Although he fails to remember it, look pages 498 and 499.

²⁴ Page 505.

²⁵ Both this book and Santarcangeli's one are referenced in *HOL* and some passages could lead us to think there was a direct inspiration on Danielewski's part.

What hit me first was the smell. It wasn't a bad smell just incredibly strong. And it wasn't one thing either. It was *extremely layered*, a patina upon progressive patina of odor, the actual source of which had long since evaporated. [...] These days I can no longer remember the smell *only my reaction to it*. Still if I had to give it a name, I think I would call it the scent of human history” (XVI)²⁶

Houses in *HOL* are the reflexion of their owners, sometimes absurd and worrisome (Zampanó and Johnny's) or at times, totally demented and impossible (the *House*.)

Perhaps it is to illustrate this connection that Zampanó cites this definition of Heidegger of the *uncanny* or *unheimlich*,²⁷ the original definition in German is in the novel, but we will humbly turn to the translation here: “uncanniness” also means “not-being-at-home.” (das Nicht-zuhause-sein)” (25)

Or in other words:

L'expression doit être prise au pied de la lettre : pour celui qui éprouve un sentiment d'inquiétante étrangeté, il n'y a plus de « chez soi » nulle part, parce que plus rien ne l'abrite et le protège ou le rassure. C'est dans le même sens qu'il faut entendre l'interprétation que Heidegger [...]. (Courtine 197)

As Johnny dryly admits, the whole definition is obscure, but the translation he came up with seems to have triggered something, at least the semantic translation from “unheimlich” to “nicht-zuhause-sein” finally to “not-being-at-home” for he admits: “That part's definitely true.” (26) This statement may explain his reluctance to leave his house, and the desire to confine it, to inhabit it in every ways (the drawings on the walls are yet another way to imprint his presence upon it.) The outside is the theater of imaginary attacks, the realm of an uncontrollable space, an “unhomely” space, soon turned into a hazardous dimension .²⁸

In the *House*, however, the danger has been creeping inside, turning the proprietors into hosts exploring their homes as great explorers went about the world, in both cases, it is an attempt to tame the *uncanny*, to assert a certain power and relieve the imagination from the monsters we must create to fill the void.²⁹ Chad imagines wolves, dragons and tigers because they are the beasts haunting a boy's dreams, but for the adults however, imagination does not as easily relieve their ignorance, adults naturally seek a more elaborate explanation to explain an irrepressible and intangible

²⁶ Italics added for emphasis.

²⁷ Although it is Freud's term, Heidegger in *Being and Time* explores this notion.

²⁸ We have already mentioned the beast's, but another example lies page 108, where he imagines he is being ran over by a truck, although he later admits there was no truck in sight.

²⁹ South America's conquistadors from the late fifteenth century onward would inhabit unexplored lands with wonderful treasures, and terrifying creatures. Maps featuring headless men or cruel amazons are testifying to this need to make up for the unknown.

fear. As a consequence, the roar is interpreted as the furious warnings of a fabulous beast—the Minotaur, guardian of the labyrinth—in fact, the threat is simply made of shadows, black as a *ink*, the final and most violent “assault” of the House is described as follows:

The whole place keeps shuddering and shaking, walls cracking only to melt back together again, floors fragmenting and buckling, the ceiling suddenly rent by *invisible claws* [...] Worse, the black ash of below spreads like *printer's ink* over everything, transforming each corner, closet, and corridor in that awful dark. (345)³⁰

The terminology should not surprise us for we deal with a house of *leaves*, but it is the recurrent blackness which is fairly interesting as if the danger resided in mere obliteration. Annihilation of the body (resulting in death), duplicating the constant threat over the disappearance of personality, the constant struggling to keep from sliding—as from the laborious effort to stop in the labyrinth—and keeping sanity.

A House of thoughts

Places and being are intimately tied in the novel, the House reacts to the mental state of its visitors, demonstrating the interconnectedness between psyche and topography. Perhaps we could thus try to give a clearer idea of what this labyrinth is about.

Although it is never explicit, there is an irrefutable link between mental projections and the layout of the labyrinth, we know that the place keeps on modifying itself, shrieking or expanding infinitely *at wish*. Indeed, it reacts to the emotions, knowledge, doubts or fear of its explorer. When Jed and Wax (the other members of the “Holloway Team”) are stalked by a demented Holloway, the rooms of the labyrinth shift to a small room closed by a door, as if providing the two exhausted character a shelter. In the same way, by the end, when Karen recounts in an interview how she fetched Will in spite of her crippling claustrophobia, the connection between her thoughts at the moment and the subsequent events is evident:

Karen: [...] I kept putting one foot in front of the other until I found him.
Q: You knew he was there?
Karen: No, but that's what I was thinking. And then he was there, right at my feet [...]
Q: How did you get him out of the house?
Karen: It just dissolved.
Q: Dissolved? What do you mean?

³⁰ Italics added for emphasis.

Karen: Like a bad dream. We were in pitch blackness and then I saw, no...actually my eyes were closed. I felt this warm sweet air on my face, and then I opened my eyes and I could see trees and grass. (524)

Earlier in the novel, another comment goes in the way of a “sentient” house, reacting to impulses:

[...] some critics believe the house's mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it. Dr. Haugeland asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory information forces the individual to manufacture his or her own data. [...] “the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self—collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual. (165)

All of which could explain why animals are simply unresponsive to the *House's* labyrinth. Their simplicity of mind leaves no room for extrapolation, no room for fantastic monsters of impossible construction, Escher style. The short chapter VI relates how the Siberian husky puppy and the tabby cat of the family run inside the entrance to the labyrinth... Only to end straight outside, where logic should have led them all.

The kids' reaction to the labyrinth is a little more complex. Daisy's trauma results in fear and scratches (forming little scabs on her wrists;) her brother Chad however, escapes from the *House* as much as possible and multiplies schoolyard fights,³¹ both children however, seem to shelter in mutism. Most likely unable to comprehend the complexity of their habitation, and unwilling to do so. And yet, as their drawings show, they seem to realize the nothingness of the house, which is a knowledge most of the adults seem deprived of.

Echoing voices

The book is constantly reduplicating and echoing the story it tells, allowing to exemplify also the necessary objectivity of thoughts. In chapter V dealing with Echo, Zampanó claims:

To repeat: her voice has life. It possesses a quality not present in the original, revealing how a nymph can return a different and more meaningful story, in spite of telling the same story. (42)

Although quite puzzling at first, the examples given to illustrate make more sense:

³¹ Chad resembles a lot Johnny's description of himself as a child.

Narcissus' rejection "*Emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri*" to which Echo responds "*sit tibi copia nostri.*"³² (44)

And a few lines below:

*Chi dara fine al gran dolore?
L'ore.*³³

Reading the chapter offers a rather unusual message: not only is Danielewski dismissing any possibilities of faithfulness to the original content, he places an equally important value on the way the same event is treated by different characters. The "memory" of an event is thus favored to the actual event, for its repetition, after having been *digested* by the viewer, grows rich with a panel of subjective emotions.³⁴

When considering the tale in a "pragmatic" way, what do we realize? First, that Johnny sorted out:

"reams and reams of *it*. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later—an old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage post; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years [...]" (XVII)

The description continues through a whole paragraph, but what would a rational mind realize then? That such a mayhem of words and papers could not possibly be sorted out without making any mistakes, how could Johnny possibly know what it was all about? Or how it was supposed to be arranged? Perhaps it is not what matters the most, but in the end the text is no more exactly Zampanó's, without even referring to the modifications, Johnny has clearly made his way into the text and altered its meaning in favor of the one he privileged. A doubt which is shared by "The Editors": "Mr Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanó's or his own. – Ed." written bottom of page 134, underneath a particularly chaotic typography.

Aside from this, as we are soon told, the old man was "blind as a bat" which means he could not have written any of this in a legible way, so he hired young women to read to him and report his words. Again, the initial story is filtered through their hands, slowly drifting away, mistake after mistake from the original.³⁵ In many

³² Translated as: "May I die before I give you power over me." "I give you power over me."

³³ "Who will put an end to this great sadness?" "The hours passing"

³⁴ We will dwell more on subjectivity in the next chapter.

³⁵ See also page 257. Tom makes an interesting joke on the subject.

instances, are we given the story by characters who have not witnessed the scenes, like Reston, in a note to the passage describing the rescue of Daisy again:

Navidson however, does not discuss any of these horrific moments in *The Last Interview*. Instead he makes Reston the sequence's sole authority. This is odd, especially since Reston saw none of it. He is only recounting what Navidson told him himself. The general consensus has always been that the memory is simply too painful for Navidson to revisit. But there is another possibility: Navidson refuses to abandon the more perspicacious portion of his audience. By relying on Reston as the sole narrative voice, he subtly draws attention once again to the question of inadequacies in representation, no matter the medium, no matter how flawless. [...] A pointed reminder that representation does not replace. It only offers distance and in rare cases perspectives. (346)

The whole note raises with humor the need for verisimilitude, reality however matters little. After all, the words chosen tell another reality: that of the consequences of the event, what mark it left on both characters. From his perspective, Navidson saw what he thought happened to his brother. With his words, he expressed this feeling to Reston who in turn uttered them to others.

Concerning the same event, another character saw, but the verbalization proves to be impossible: "Chad had seen what had happened but had no words to describe it." The barrier of language prevents Chad from uttering what he saw, as a child, he lacks the necessary distance to convey through words what he felt deep within.

If Danielewski chose to add these details about the story we read, it is to remind the reader of the impossible objectivity of any work (be it the *ekphrasis* of a movie, or an academic study,) and surely to prevent the reader from any easy interpretation of the book. It is by constantly stressing the inaccuracy of what is written, that the reader is led to go *elsewhere*, going deeper in the ideas, estranging from the main text (which is, besides, extremely heavy at times) and simply look for what is truly implied in the midst of so many stories. Or rather, what the reader wants it to be, decoding the metaphors with whatever content he/she thinks accurate, for after all, the fiction itself is never quite confident of its meaning.

Reckoning the disorganized spatial structure of the novel, it does not come as a surprise that chronology is a rather loose notion in *HOL*. Danielewski has dated most of the events related in the book, and yet time is purely relative when it comes to certain facts. Actually, there is the possibility to retrace a certain temporal linearity, several generations are represented in the book, and yet, when turning to Johnny's journal (chapter XXI) the entries' dates are going back and forth in time without

Johnny being able to realize why, or for that matter, if he is the author of their writing. The last chronological entry is stuck between older ones, as if Johnny was entangled in a loop, limbos perhaps, a confusing place where there seems to be no beginning or end. If this inconsistency sheds doubts on the very existence of the character, it definitely compromises any denouement. The last entry is dated “October 31, 1998” which is the same day Johnny wrote his note to the introduction of *HOL*, the parallelism proves that in terms of *results* nothing has changed, the knot is still untied. The process that went on however, has uncovered new areas of consciousness and the realization that absolute knowledge is impossible to reach, so far this is what Johnny seems to realize painfully:

There is something stronger here. Beyond my imagination. It terrifies me. But what is it? And why has it retained me? Wasn't darkness nothingness? Wasn't that Navidson's discovery? Wasn't it Zampanó's? Or have I misconstrued it all? Missed the obvious, something still undiscovered waiting there deep within me, outside of me, powerful and extremely patient, unafraid to remain, even though it is and always has been free. (516)

As we have mentioned above, the last sequence of *The Navidson Record* is also on a Halloween day, day of the celebration of the dead and the underworld, striking as an undeniable mention to life and death. In *HOL*, it is as though roles are turned upside down: the dead are overwhelmingly present, leaving so little space to the living that their appearances soon fade away. Considering the importance of Zampanó, Pelafina or Delial in the narrative, the dead literally haunt the pages, no wonder most of the critical events happen on the day dedicated to their celebration!³⁶

³⁶ In a letter of Pelafina found in *The Whalestoe Letters*, one can read:
Remember: I shall be your roots and I will be your shade though the sun burns my leaves. [...] And when you are lost and can tell nothing of this earth I will give you hope. And my voice you will always hear and my heart you will always share, for I will shelter you and I will comfort you. And even when I am nothing left, not even in death, I will remember you. (72)

Partie 3
INTERCONNECTED NARRATIVES

In the last part we will focus more thoroughly on the characters and their relationship to the novel. The book revolves around the “stories of stories of stories”, as we have analyzed in the first part, it tends to imitate a sort of oral tradition typical of myths and old tales. It also resembles an intricate web of voices addressing each other even though belonging to other dimensions, or estranged by the years. To summarize, let us imagine that Johnny is our nearest interlocutor (to be absolutely accurate, it should actually be The Editors, but their role in the plot is not important enough to be mentioned here,) he is leading the narration, and his stories add a certain consistency to Zampanó's narrative. Zampanó could perhaps be the second closest, for even if he is not “known” while alive, he nonetheless seems to have a tangible existence within the diegesis. Pelafina would be the third for she belongs to Johnny's past: here we have drawn the sketch of the characters inhabiting one dimension of the narrative. The characters from *The Navidson Record* belong to another dimension, a fictitious dimension to the first one, their existence seems only acknowledged by Zampanó and no other. So far, even though a bit complicated, the outline makes sense, that is, if it remained only a story embedding another story; the problem being, countless anomalies made their ways into the narratives, so that in the end the bonds and limits between one layer and the other are never quite settled.

Aberrations

The most striking example that was already demonstrated in a few instances of the present dissertation, are the recurrent misleading similarities between Johnny's account and *The Navidson Record*. The analogous elements are mostly details that might not strike the reader on a first reading of the novel, however, they clearly denote an interconnectedness that is confusing and which implications are obscure. As an example, turning to page 396 we find a “Post Exposure Effects Rating”—shortened as PEER—assessing with a scale going from 0 to 10 the effects of the

House on the characters. By the last entry of Johnny—the dark telling of a mother and her baby “having holes in his brain”—we are told: Dr. Nowell quickly responds by turning the infant's PEEP (Positive End Expiratory Pressure) up by 10 to compensate for the failing oxygenation.” (519)

The connection seems way too deliberate to be mere coincidence. The reader might also be disoriented when comparing the description of the *House* and the ruins of “The Whale”, Pelafina's institution.³⁷ Finally, when Johnny, after having recovered most of his memories, confesses:

And then one day, I don't know when, I forgot the whole thing. Like a bad dream, the details of those five and a half minutes just went and left me to my future. (517)

Johnny here refers to the few minutes it took to take away his mother to be “swallowed by the whale,” in duration meaning nothing, the blinking of an eye, but resulting in terrible consequences.

The Navidson Record did not first appear as it does today. Nearly seven years ago what surfaced was “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway”—a five and a half minute optical illusion barely exceeding the abilities of any NYU film school graduate. The problem, of course, was the accompanying statement that claimed all of it was true. (4)

Which conclusions to draw then? There seems to be at least two interpretations possible which would explain these bizarre elements. One would favor Johnny as being the author of the whole text, leaving clues now and then, a text to re-channel his emotional trauma unto another setting, another story, considering it from another perspective (metaphorically, the same concerns expressed for the labyrinth viewer/trader.) The other would make Johnny's tale the “result” of the text he manipulates, his obsession growing so extensively that he ends up incorporating it to the newly found memories. Both explanations make sense, but none actually dismisses the other.

Other incongruities are scattered within the narration, turning to Pelafina's letters, one soon realizes they must have been written on a word processor (page 627 for example) which would have been highly unlikely in the early eighties. Besides, *The Whalestoe Letters* are completed by a photograph of a manuscript letter.

As we quickly mentioned in the introduction, Pelafina addresses Zampanó directly in a coded message page 615 which reads: “My dear. Zampanó who did you lose?”

³⁷ Page 503. It is clear that one place reflects the other. Also, as mentioned earlier, the reference to *Moby Dick* is also undeniable here: another bridge linking one narration to the other.

Again, one could imagine countless ways to resolve this mystery, was Pelafina genuinely acquainted to Zampanó, and if so, in which way? If we thought so, the story would come out greatly modified. Another interpretation is possible though, considering the intimate language mother and son develop, one could conceive the young Johnny may have invented this name as a mere nickname.³⁸ In the introduction, Johnny recounts his inability to have found definite proof of the old man's identity:

He called himself Zampanó. It was the name he put down on his apartment lease and on several other fragments I found. I never came across any sort of ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person.

Who knows where his name really came from. Maybe it's authentic, maybe made up, maybe borrowed, a nom de plume or—my personal favorite—a nom de guerre. (XII)

Seeing things this way, it could only mean Johnny/Zampanó is playing on us an extremely elaborate practical joke. But once again, this is left to the reader's appreciation for, so far, there really is no possibility to root for one or the other explanation.

One last notable connection concerns Johnny and Pelafina, although we have none of Johnny's letters, by reading that of his mother, we can uncover new aspects of a few events he related. Among other things, she mentions “Marine Man Raymond” the foster father who maltreated the young boy, and her intervention offers the reader information that Johnny is unwilling to share himself; each time he mentions the event, he sinks into confusion leaving the reader in a blur. The tale of *The Atrocity* is duplicated in Pelafina's letter,³⁹ some of the quotations she reproduces are different from the account Johnny gives in his aside, and as we had previously remarked, the writing is exceedingly elaborate and at odds with the mortifying experience recounted:

The cold water lapping at your ankles, threatening to pull you down into “freezing meadows stretched to the horizon like a million blue pages” or “a ten second scramble to a life raft where all of a sudden the eighth second says no” (608)

Johnny's letter seems to have broken a silence that had put his mother in an awful state, in the previous letter to the one quoted above, she mourns: “I am doing my best to accept your decision to leave me in such silence. Hearing it makes my ears bleed.”

³⁸ Fellini's *La Strada* has a brutish strongman hero named Zampanó.

³⁹ The tale of *The Atrocity* starts page 298, for Pelafina's mention of it, turn to page 608.

Could we perhaps assume that *The Atrocity* event, was nothing more than a pretext? A beautifully written pretext to ease his mother and avoid a confrontation; metaphorically giving a piece of his mind through this telling?

In truth, we have all reasons to believe so, as in Zampanó's⁴⁰ journal in the appendix in an entry dated April 22, 1991, is written:

An atrocity sinking into waters pf darkness; without order or bars of earth; where light must mean shadow and reason dies in the hold:

((((((((((Jonah in the belly of the beast))))))))))

In the next letter, Pelafina growing exceedingly paranoid, she asks Johnny to put a little symbol in his correspondence: “As I indicated in my last letter, I've grown increasingly suspicious about the staff here [...] For now all you need to do is place in your next later a check mark in the lower right hand corner. That way I'll know you received this letter.” (609)

Johnny has really realized his mother's wish: in the lower right hand corner of page 97 is an insignificant check mark, located in the SOS chapter. Moreover, the definition of SOS is taken from The Oxford English Dictionary, a dictionary Pelafina offered him.⁴¹ *HOL*, a memorial or a posthumous homage?

Inheritances

All characters suffer from a “condition,” whether physical or psychological, diseases spread in their bodies and minds, in turn lurking in every corner of the book. Cancer strikes two characters (Raymond and Karen) and schizophrenia is plaguing both Pelafina and her son, all characters at some point physically manifest their distress.

Seemingly anecdotal, this fact actually offers a brand new understanding and should not be dismissed. Johnny is aware of what took his mother away from him, and this knowledge clearly wears him down, he feels cursed, and just like the Minotaur, cursed because of a fault of his mother. Only in his dreams can he transpose his psychological crippling unto a physical deformity. As his mother before him, Johnny

⁴⁰ It is clearly stated some entries had been written by other people, though. See footnote page 542. Following quote on page 545.

⁴¹ This is said page 591.

voluntarily imprisons himself—out of guilt perhaps, for his mother was taken to The Whale to insure “his own safety”—alienated to the fate of Pelafina. As we can see from this, Johnny realizes the nature of his sickness and how powerless he is against it:

Before I understood the significance of things like “auditory hallucinations,” “verbigeration,” “word salad,” “derealization,” “depersonalization” I sensed in them all kinds of adventure. To reach their meaning would require a great journey, which I eventually found out was in fact true, though the destinations did not exactly turn out to be Edenic places full of gold leaf, opal or intricately carved pieces of jade.

Count yourself lucky if you've never wandered by the house of Kurt Schnieder [sic] or Gabriel Langfeldt, or the criterias [sic] of St. Louis, Taylor and Abrams or Research Diagnostic leave you puzzled. The New Haven Schizophrenia Index should give more than enough away.

In my case, would Ogelmeyer have turned to those tools or would he have begun first with biological examination? [...] What sort of data stream would be generated and how conclusively could he or his specialists read them?

I'll never know. Which is not to imply it's the wrong road. Quite the contrary. It's just not mine. All I hope for is a moment of rational thought and one shot at action before I'm lost to a saddening madness, pitched at the hands of my own stumbling biology.(379)⁴²

As we might be lucky enough not to be acquainted with these “criteria,” to find clarity among these, a list of Schneider's criteria to determine a case of schizophrenia, would come in handy:

- Audible thoughts
- Voices heard arguing
- Voices heard commenting on one's actions
- Experience of influences playing on the body (somatic hallucination)
- Thought withdrawal
- Thought insertion - Thoughts are ascribed to other people who intrude their thoughts upon the patient
- Thought diffusion (also called thought broadcast)
- Delusional perception⁴³

The correlation between these and the nature of the book proves once again Danielewski's taste for confusing the issue. The inability to “make sense” and the permanent confusion reigning in *HOL*—whether concerning language, individuals or time—sounds as an attempt to reproduce with words the chaotic effects engendered by the disease. Johnny goes as far as to state: “This is not a hotel. This is not a refuge. This is an asylum.” (494)

⁴² Echoing his mother's “crumbling biology” page 587.

⁴³ Cf. Bibliography, entry 25.

Uncertain identities

Coupled with the disorder typical of schizophrenia, identity disorders are also distinctively present in the narration: people are mixed-up, unidentifiable or cannot be remembered. Johnny has trouble retrieving the memory of a girl named Ashley, and has an adventure with “Johnnie” a woman Lude thinks he knows and who, after rescuing a Pekinese pup, enigmatically asks: “Call me the momma to all strays.” (267) Johnnie is a seemingly mature woman who underwent heavy plastic surgery, with a figure: “so perfect(ly grotesque),” and “nails as long as kitchen knives”. Johnny feels pity for the pup to the point he considers the abandoned thing: “a projection of himself.” The odd woman insists on having the pup, and without notice, throws the dog out of her window with “an almost unimaginable amount of force.” The enigmatic woman ends up being not the person Lude thought she was, a mere evil apparition driving past the corner. Her role in the novel remains obscure, though her nickname implies a direct link with Johnny.

The character most inclined to confusing identities is Pelafina. When reading her letters, paying a special attention to her mentions of the Director of the institution denotes a bizarre evolution of her thoughts. The Director is mentioned in most of her letter as he is the one giving information on Johnny's adventures, coined first as “a good man” (589) then a “decent man” the page after, when she admits “hallucinatory condition” she once again stresses the good care received by the man. On page 605 however, Pelafina is expressing her disappointment after the replacement of the “old director” by a “New Director” she feels threatened by; it is because of his arrival, that Pelafina requires to coded messages. Her fit of paranoia might be coinciding with a crisis, but the “New Director” embodies much more in Pelafina's imagination as this passage shows: “This world, inside and out, is full of New Directors. We must watch for them and avoid them. They are here only to keep us from telling everything we know, revealing our little truths.” (613)

Perhaps due to her sickness she does not remember a visit of Johnny and supposes:

Either some marauding rabbit devoured the leaves of my memory, and thus deprived me of the sweet sight of you, or the woman you lingered with was not me. I'm

afraid it's the latter that makes the most sense. The New Director must really fear all I know. (617)

Her growing phobia is most likely repressing bits of her memories, and regaining a moment of lucidity, we are told the New Director never changed at all. These events—constantly putting the reader in a legitimate doubt—do not only stress the absolute fragility of Pelafina's sanity, but express the destroying influence she had on her only son. Her letters illustrate yet in another way, what terrible mazes entraps an individual into his self, obliterating the outside world, devouring it into a nothingness unimaginable to a sane mind.

“Words create worlds”

In her misfortune though, Pelafina finds a way out through words, always reminding what great powers they entail, illustrating it through examples, and always prompting her son to uncover their mysteries. Not only do words elevate spirits, for Pelafina, their might outstands persuasion, when she hears the tale of *The Atrocity*, she asserts: “I have to tell you for a moment your words succeeded in keeping the boat afloat and your Haitian's lungs full of air.” (608) In her case though, the words brought no consolation:

Once, a long time ago, I watched a little black girl fall off a street curb and skin both her knees. When she got up, wailing like a siren, I could see that her shins and the palms of her hands were flecked with hurt.

The mother had no gauze or antiseptic or even running water handy but she still managed to care for her daughter. She whisked her up in her arms and murmured over and over the perfect murmurs, powerful enough to fully envelop her child in the spell and comfort of only a few words: “It'll be okay. It'll be alright.”

To me, my mother only said “That wont' do.” She was right. It didn't do at all. (637)

The story Johnny says he heard from Doctor Nowell⁴⁴ pictures a mother's days spent at her baby's bedside. The story becomes an eerie tale of a failed miracle: the mother upon knowing her baby will not make it remains by his side day and night, refusing to sleep, refusing to eat, simply murmuring on and on to the baby's ear. The staff

⁴⁴ The pun on the name is obvious. One should pay attention to the names given in the book for they give important insight: Holloway, Reston, Draines, etc.

believes they will attend a miracle and everyone waits for something to happen. Even the doctor cannot leave because “Perhaps something about this scene stings his own memories”? He is mesmerized by mother and son “sharing a private language he can hear but never quite make out.” (520)

By the fourth day however, the miracle finally happens, but in an unexpected way: the mother simply asks the doctor to unplug the baby, greatly surprising everyone, and when he finally prepares for it:

The mother nods and requests one more moment with her child. [...] The mother returns to her boy, gently drawing her fingers over the top of his head. For a moment everyone swears she has stopped breathing, her eyes no longer blinking, focusing deeply within him. Then she leans forward and kisses him on the forehead.

“You can go now,” she says tenderly. And right before everyone's eyes [...] The child is gone.

Words performs actions, creating world, it is not without reminding us of the simplest attribute of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁴⁵

Rites of Passage

Although a proclaimed atheist, Pelafina being well-read as she is, has not missed the connection either for she constantly links Johnny to Christ: the Word of God. She repeatedly emphasizes what great powers he possesses turning him into a messiah, and at the end of one of her letters, she signs: “My darling J, I remain your only Mary.” (611)

We have already pinpointed the unhealthy transfer Johnny made on Thumper⁴⁶, Pelafina too seems to have developed inappropriate feelings towards her son. Her letters are filled with exaggerated love words, (“love hopelessly”, “I lovingly remain yours”, “Adoringly and always lovingly yours” among many others) and she recognizes confusing Johnny for her father on some instances: “I was not prepared to find you so beautiful. Like your father. No. not like, more. More beautiful than your father.” (604) And later “A vagrant thought had momentarily convinced me that I was dead and your father had been restored to me. [...] For a few hours, every yesteryear

⁴⁵ John 1:1.

⁴⁶ *Supra* to page 12.

repealed its hold. A school girl once again giggling out the day and in the presence of such a fine young man.” (637)

Love is overwhelmingly present in the book, but often expressed in an awkward or obsessive way. Danielewski never fails to link the characters' personal histories to the way they handle their relationship to the exterior world. Even secondary characters are introduced by the darkest events of their lives; in turn giving meaning to their current state of mind. Bound by their fate, taken in a downward spiral of negativity, hope is scarcely found within those page. As the chronological incongruities show, “retroactive crimes” (299) unfairly weight on the characters' lives; harmed in their young age, they reproduce mechanically on their peers their sorrow.⁴⁷ It is perhaps for this reason that Pelafina imagines she attempted to kill her son, not in a frenzy, but very deliberately, to *free* him from these never-ending errors:

[H]ow can you ever understand the awful weight of living, so ridiculously riddled with so many lies of tranquility and bliss, at best half-covering but never actually easing the crushing weight of it all, merely guaranteeing a lifetime of the same [...] and all for what? [...]
I tried before that great leaving to grant you the greatest gift of all. The purest gift of all. The gift to end all gifts.

She insists:

But it was love just the same Johnny. Believe me. For that, should I be ashamed? For wanting to protect you from the pain of living? From the pain of loving? [...]
Perhaps my shame should really come from my failure. (620)

The terribly harsh nature of her words shocks even when taking into account her condition, but they show how desperate she had become in the “fantastic attic where [they] both awaited [their] execution.” (610)

Pelafina claims rights to life and death over Johnny frequently considering him as *hers*. We can imagine the effects on a growing young man of a mother depriving of any free will; a woman powerful enough to cast curses on her enemies.⁴⁸ Given to the care of Raymond, Johnny grows rebellious and ferocious, expressing in the language of violence the frustration and sorrow he experiences. It is the loss of a tooth and a stay at the hospital which surprisingly turn the boy into a man, allowing him to leave

⁴⁷ The girls Lude and Johnny are involved with for example. Also, to understand the difficulties encountered by Will and Karen, the narration often goes back to their childhood. Their own failings affect their children greatly, who are neglected and denied their parents' care.

⁴⁸ Compare pages 597 and 325, Pelafina curses Raymond after he had beat Johnny, and as the latter says: Coincidence gave an improbable curse new resonance. Cancer had settled on Raymond's bones, riddling his liver and pancreas with holes. He had nowhere to run and it literally ate him alive. He was dead by the time I turned sixteen. (325)

for Alaska and cut the link with his mother. The beating turns into a rite of passage of some kind, as is performed in tribal societies. The event leaves Johnny “marked”:

Raymond took me somewhere else first, where I lost half my tooth, and a lot more too I guess, on the outskirts, in an ice covered place, surrounded by barbed wire and willows, where monuments of rust, seldom touched lie frozen alongside fence posts and no one ever comes near enough to hear the hawks cry. (93)

Note the theatrical background fixed and still and the gloomy details aiming towards an uneasy atmosphere of death. As he states, Johnny has lost more than his front tooth in the confrontation, it has changed him permanently.

Eliade studies Aborigines' tribal rites of passage: the boy is often symbolically abducted from his mother and has to die to be reborn into a man, a rite highly traumatic for both mother and son:

les femmes sont convaincus que leurs enfants seront tués et dévorés par une divinité hostile et mystérieuse [...] On les assure, évidemment, que la divinité ne tardera pas à ressusciter les novices sous la forme d'hommes adultes, c'est-à-dire initiés. Mais, de toute façon, les novices *meurent à l'enfance*, et les mères pressentent qu'elles ne les retrouveront jamais tels qu'ils étaient avant l'initiation : *leurs* enfants. (Eliade 1959; 36)

Introduced to the realm of manhood the initiated young man is scarred in some tribes in a curious way: “avec une dent en moins.” (45) As chance would have it, it is the front tooth which is removed to signify his new status. Whether the link is intended or not is unknown, but the incident clearly changes something in the boy, and the way it is displayed has a strong symbolic value—the boy being taken away to some mysterious and eerie place, the beating and the broken tooth, the consequent change in behavior. Raymond could be thus considered as a mentor to Johnny, in spite of the latter's apparent lack of interest in the man's outcome. In another instance, Raymond comes back to Johnny's mind, a piece of an advice he once gave him resurface in his mind:

Raymond knew a little about my mother's history and he used to say it was a bad dream that got her.

“Nightmares you know,” he once told me with a grin. “Can mess you up permanently. I've seen it happen to buddies of mine. That's why you'll never catch me without a gun under my pillow. That'll get any man through the night.” (381)

Resulting in Johnny immediately getting himself a weapon. The young man is surely desperate but he nonetheless gives a certain credit to Raymond's sayings.

These initiatory themes are recurrent in *HOL*, they are always followed by a physical loss as if to gain something, one had to sacrifice part of himself. Consider the button Johnny says he loses at times and the poem linked to it *Return from Death*.⁴⁹ We had also mentioned Will Navidson's physical loss on his last exploration.⁵⁰ Zampanó has acquired a new understanding of darkness when he became blind, it is perhaps after having lost his ability to see that he felt the need to create *The Navidson Record*. In turn, when Johnny finally apprehends his own past through the study of the old man's work, his physical and mental health have greatly diminished: he wears a “smile full of rotten teeth” (411) and loses weight alarmingly.

“Les rites de la mort initiatique,”⁵¹ as Eliade calls them, are part of the never-ending quest for identity and demonstrate a radical way of achieving this goal: to move on to a new self, the former identity has to be burnt to the ground, and only then can be erected a new self upon it. This hypothesis could give clarity to the issue of identities expressed earlier, and to the clearly self-destructive tendencies of most characters.

Seeking life in death

A novel of incertitude, one of *HOL*'s trickiest issue resides in the relationship Johnny/Zampanó. We have stressed the problem of authorship in the novel, the impossibility to clarify who fathered which part of the book. In the previous arguments, Johnny's mental condition could have made him the alleged writer of all this, yet there exist counter-examples to this point—provided of course that we imagine *two* characters, not merely one duplicating in his writings. Promoted by poems and subtle references, there is a recurrent theme emerging from the shadows of the text, a story of a dead son and a mourning father.

Johnny is constantly in doubts wondering whether the text had not created him, a consequence of his “depersonalization” or a subtle reference to his impossible existence? In Zampanó's journal, an entry chronologically related to Johnny's date of birth reads as follow:

⁴⁹ *Supra* to page 23, 24.

⁵⁰ *Supra* to page 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 79.

Perhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention; whose lusts, stupidities, and strengths carry him farther than even he or I can anticipate; who sees the world for what it is; and consequently bears the burden of everyone's tomorrow with unprecedented wisdom and honor because he is one of the very few who has successfully interrogated his own nature. His shields are instantly available though seldom used. And those who value him shall prosper while those who would destroy him shall perish. He will fulfill a promise I made years ago but failed to keep. (543)

As a matter of fact, the entry seems a note left by an author in the margins of his written creation, except perhaps the Christian reference implies a deep and quite supernatural quality to the fictitious character. Johnny becomes thus the concept of a blind man, an “idealized” son for making up for one not there anymore. Shaping with words what is missing in flesh; for Zampanó, Johnny may become:

(o) (ñ)
A sun to read the dark. (542)

The loss of a son is also mourned in this quotation from Chekhov: “The only wife for me now is the damp earth . . . He-ho-ho! . . . The grave that is! . . . Here my son's dead and I am alive . . . It's a strange thing, death has come in at the wrong door.” (652) The mysteries risen by this analeptical reference, uncover whole new spheres of meaning and interpretation; it shows nevertheless once again, the power of words to heal and substitute.

As we have demonstrated in the part dedicated to initiation, accessing a new status necessarily implies a death of some kind. Christ has had to die to resurrect to assert his power over his followers, in the same way, Johnny (the Christ-like character of *HOL*) is constantly caught between two worlds, unable to escape the limbo of his existence. It is no coincidence then that his last entry resembles so much a suicide note, (reminiscent also of Will Navidson's last letter to Karen before his “sacrifice”) his words now expressing nothing but an immense weariness:⁵²

Just as you have swept through me.
Just as I now sweep through you.
I'm sorry I have nothing left. (518)

The story which follows sounds without a doubt like a way to bid farewell to his former self, the one obsessed with a past it could not come to terms with.⁵³ The last words are as a ritual burial of the mother and her destructive influence:

“You can go now,” she says tenderly.

⁵² Interestingly, we are ignorant of the “you” he is addressing to: Pelafina? Us?

⁵³ *Supra* to page 39 for more on this story.

And right before everyone's eyes, long before Dr. Nowell or anyone else can turn a dial or touch a switch, the EKG flatlines. Asystole.
The child is gone. (521)

Johnny's story ends on this uncertain glimmer of hope. The tedious quest he underwent possibly giving way to a new life; one where words build other things than labyrinths, beasts and loss.

Conclusion

It is by commenting precise examples that we gave an insight of the difficulties raised by the book. As was displayed, expecting from *HOL* any kind of linearity or the relief brought by a plot eventually disentangling, dismisses all interest the book offers. It is by getting lost in its dead ends that the reader can truly savor the experience of this intense reading, one mostly constructed by the reader's mind. It is by eliminating the links tying each narrative, and simply *implying* them, that Danielewski has succeeded in erasing his authoritative imprint in the novel: we are never guided, simply put amidst the labyrinth, struggling our way out or rather, about it. Bachelard has expressed, when talking about Henri Bosco's literary labyrinth, this peculiar feeling gripping us, confusing us, and eventually fascinating us:

Le lecteur doit l'explorer [the figurative labyrinth] avec des songes qui touchent, les uns à la souffrance des couloirs, les autres à l'étonnement des palais souterrains. Le lecteur peut s'y perdre (au propre et au figuré). Il ne voit pas nettement d'abord, la nécessité littéraire d'une géométrie compliquée. C'est ici que l'étude phénoménologique va révéler son efficacité. Que nous conseille l'attitude phénoménologique? Elle nous demande d'instituer en nous un orgueil de lecture qui nous donnerait l'illusion de participer au travail même du créateur de livre. Une telle attitude ne peut guère se prendre en première lecture. La première lecture garde trop de passivité. (38)

More than ever before, *HOL* shapes its meaning from the experiences of its reader—the latter might at wish focus on the love issues, or the psychological ones—a first reading will most likely disregard a lot of what is at stake; the main reason being the novel crowds under dozens of references of all kind, a whirlpool of stories told by countless voices... As we have exposed earlier, it is perhaps to recreate the deranged thinking of a demented mind. One could also consider it as the result of a life of tales read, heard, or lived. Johnny never stops doubting the content of his thoughts, their legitimacy, their accuracy and most of all, whether they are theirs or not. In *HOL*, the layered narratives not only allow different stories to lie side by side, they recreate the “white noise” of existence; transposing in written words the complexity of thoughts. Actually, reducing *HOL* to a digital experimentation of print book seems to be rather

simplistic: coming works will perhaps focus on these sickly feelings of love, madness and depersonalization characteristic of the novel and a malaise of our time.

We have analyzed a book shattering genres and expectations and shown the author's pleasure in confusing us with mere impossibilities, thus, how could we interpret the success of this book? What does the emergence of chaotic novels reveal, or in other words, what do people need literature for nowadays?

These questions, although partially answered in this dissertation, could inspire future works on this fascinating but hermetic novel. *HOL* has such obscure and multiple meanings that it will most likely leave a deep impression on readers for some time.

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Key Words: Myth, labyrinth, remediation, transposition.

Ce mémoire a pour but d'analyser et de justifier les difficultés de l'interprétation de *House of Leaves*. A l'aide d'exemples précis et thématiques, nous avons tenté de dégager une tendance qui, bien qu'implicite dans le texte, est dupliquée à tout ses niveaux.

C'est en se penchant sur le rôle tenu par la mythologie dans l'œuvre, pour poursuivre avec l'étourdissante image du labyrinthe, que nous avons dévoilé les procédés de la « quête du souvenir » des personnages. Transposant l'objet de leurs traumatismes sur d'autres sujets, les protagonistes parviennent ainsi à *remédier* à leurs zones d'ombre.

Récit confus et complexe, *House of Leaves* entraîne son lecteur dans un flot continu et parfois absurde d'informations où une lecture linéaire est impossible, ainsi, ce dernier se reconnaît dans la quête laborieuse entreprise par la plupart des personnages. Indubitablement, Danielewski amène à une réflexion méta-fictionnelle constructive en allant loin dans les possibilités que renferment le roman à l'heure de l'hégémonie digitale.

This dissertation aims at analyzing and explaining the challenges of interpretation of *House of Leaves*. By commenting precise examples, we have highlighted a major thematic of the novel, implicit and yet duplicated within every layer of narration.

We concentrated first on the function of mythology in the novel and then moved on to a study of the trope of the labyrinth; through these two examples, we uncovered the devices of the personal quests of the characters. Seeking to come to terms with a traumatic past, their means to move on is by transposing the painful memory unto another subject.

Complex and confusing, *House of Leaves* leads the reader into a maelstrom of words—at times merely absurd or nonsensical—turning the reading into a laborious experience. The reader is ironically starting a quest of his own imitating the characters he reads about.

Undoubtedly, Danielewski brings us to a constructive meta-fictional reflection by going this far into the possibilities offered by print books in a time of digital hegemony.