

Map 1.06

Offerings left at tombs show that the practice of “opening a gateway to the underworld” by inscribing three x’s on the surface of a tomb seems to knowingly involve the negation magic of chiasmus. The three X’s constitute the portal to which the dead spirit is invited to give prophecy. Coincidentally, three twists structure the Thesean labyrinth, model of the tortured pathways of the underworld, which insulate the living from the dead.



Unmarked tomb, St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo by author. At this site, the most frequently consulted tombs were those no longer identifiable. The loss of the name is significant, since burial itself, as Lacan remarks, is based on the idea that an otherwise negligible collection of decayed matter has a relationship to an order established by genealogy: the names of the father.



Three x’s call forth the dead, St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo by author. Attributing the x’s to negation would seem to be a premature academic speculation, but the connection of a graphic indicating both negation and crossing seem to fit other general eschatological practices relating to “rites of passage.”

1.06 / The Curtain and the Voice

Pythagoras was one of the first cult leaders to achieve permanent philosophical respectability, but his stagecraft retained certain key tricks of the Sophists’ trade. He positioned himself behind a curtain when speaking to his followers. Only a small inner circle had direct access to the fully visible philosopher. “So it is said,” since most of our information about Pythagoras is based on hear-say and romanticizations of his life in Croton during the late 6c. BCE. The curtain is famous in the service of “truth that is created out of the conception of the listener who believes him/herself to be detached from the truth.” Thus, the Wizard in Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) does not fully lose his powers when the dog (the traditional animal for protecting boundaries) de-XXXs his control room where the sound-and-light show is produced to frighten all visitors. Rather, he becomes ethically obliged to restore the missing piece that has been imagined by Dorothy’s magical companions to be their bar to full humanity: thought/consciousness, love/compassion, and courage/self-control. The Wizard notes, when he “confers” these powers that they were already present but unrecognized, invisible.

The curtain in modern times figures as the central prop in the “Turing test,” the experiment where a subject is paired with either a computer or another human and instructed to try to tell which by asking a series of questions. Curiously, the issue of the automaton and *tuchē* — the main ingredients of Mikhail Bulgakov’s reconstruction of Pilot’s interview of Christ in *The Master and Margarita* — come to the fore. The unconscious that emerges from such exchanges does not have a specific subjective owner. Its place is the “non-place” of dislocation as a temporal process. The unconscious is a wanderer, a soul in Hades (literally, “the invisible”). The classic emblem of this wandering, the Thesean labyrinth, thus has three folds, akin to the three questions asked by all monsters of the margin. Sometimes, as in the case of the Sphinx interrogating Œdipus, the answer has three parts as well: man as infant (the id); man as adult (the ego); man as old (the super-ego). From Thebes to Vienna, the three-part subject is the *Geist*, the guest, someone who is by definition “away from home,” displaced, wandering, who answers to the call of three, the XXX — which is at the same time the map of its displacement — and is chiastically disposed to answering great questions.

The curtain that is cracked open to reveal the crucifix in Hobein’s *The Ambassadors* combines the theme of 3 with the secret of the anamorphosis: an “unconscious” and a “collective memory” whose “time has come.” No more wandering. Guest and host have met. Hostility and hospitality have resolved their differences and returned to their etymological home, the g/host. The place of the skull is a “no-place” that resists all attempts to place it, all instrumentality, but is a function of curvature and (so sayeth the lute that directs the horizon line and gives the first ∂ angle) displaced sound as a sign of truth, the offstage “acousmatic voice.” The harmonics of the lute’s plucked strings engages the idea of the Platonic ratios, 1:2, 2:3, 3:4, etc. These could be arranged in an order of ascending double and triple multiples, the “lambda,” the figure relating twos and threes, by which an architect could construct the essential relationships of any building. In a painting where two ambassadors are shown amidst a coronation of trip-lets, nothing could be better.

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, 21–23.