

## The Thread of Ariadne

*Sister M. Nicholas Maltman, O.P.*

STUDENTS ARE FOREVER BEING TOLD: "Study, keep the mind on the page, organize." The truth is, however, that some of the more interesting adventures of the mind come about not through study or organized endeavor, but seemingly by chance. We move within a web of being. Coming at us from all directions are sounds, sights, sense data of every variety. And the mind, like some enigmatic fastidious spider, digests what it pleases, rejects much, ignores much. Curious. Why the mind lets one bit of information go, stores another deep away, allows another only a tentative stay on the periphery is a puzzle the solution to which I have not the answer. The mind is a mystery.

In that short novel, *Thésée*, written by André Gide in 1944, Daedalus talks to Theseus, who, bent on killing the minotaur, is about to enter the labyrinth. He gives this bit of advice concerning the thread of Ariadne: "This thread will be your link with the past. Go back to it. Go back to yourself. For nothing can begin from nothing, and it is from your past, and from what you are at this moment, that what you are going to be must spring."<sup>1</sup> The advice is sound. The real problem is not the literal labyrinth; the real problem is the complexity of the human mind at whose center sits the Self.

The *Thésée* is an autobiographical novel. Gide is looking for his true self and finds his way back to the past through the Greek myth of Theseus and the minotaur. He is doing what so many modern novelists, musicians and poets have done and are doing—he is looking for his past in the past of western culture. Ariadne's thread is not just one thread; it is any thread that leads us back to the great storehouse of our cultural memory, and to the mystery at the center.

Ariadne's thread, then, is a very versatile bit of magic. I would like to use it and the myth of Theseus and the minotaur to look at one path of learning, at one way by which knowledge gets into us. It might be called the piecemeal way of learning, and I would like to use the piecemeal way I came to a knowledge of the Theseus myth as an example—if not as an exemplum. Yes, it is perfectly proper to talk of one's self in an essay, to use "I." As one of my favorite graduate professors used to say, "If you mean I, say I." And I mean I. But the "I" could be anyone, any student with open eyes, who wants to see, wants to know.

I was not a particularly earnest student, but I loved a good story. Among the good stories were the myths of Greece. I came to them young, and that is a fine thing. Still, one can come to them at any time; now is not too late. My two favorite myths were that of the Argonauts and that of Theseus and the minotaur. The Argonauts, you remember, were the mariners who, led by Jason, sailed out in the ship *Argo* to find the golden fleece. Its appeal was the appeal of adventure. The Argonauts were our first space travelers; they invented the ship and sailed away beyond the boundaries of the known world. The Theseus story fascinated for other reasons; it was a story of sacrifice. Theseus offered his life to save the seven Athenian youths and the seven Athenian maidens from the minotaur. He had, of course, the lovely Ariadne, who offered him the golden thread by which he found his way into and out of the labyrinth. The story is filled with what scholars today call "fairy-tale motifs," bits of stories that keep recurring in tales of all ages: the quest, the helper, the thread, the fighting of a monster. Note that I have been using the words *myth* and *story* interchangeably. For to those who come to myths early, myths are merely fictions, marvelous stories belonging to ancient peoples. And, quite rightly. Whatever a myth is or is not, it is first of all a *mythos*—a story. I was, however, naive to think that a myth is no more than that.

By the time that I was a sophomore in high school, I had grown out of myths as well as of much else. The myths turned literary. I met them at the bottom of the page in footnotes—not the true myth but the desiccated bones of the myth. The note, perhaps, made clear some allusion in an ode of Keats or in a dramatic monologue of Eliot or explained the source of a plot in Chaucer or Shakespeare. I kept meeting Theseus as a pale shadow of his former self. There was Theseus of the "Knight's Tale" and Theseus of

*Midsummer Night's Dream*, but how little they resembled the swashbuckling hero of the old minotaur story. We got points, however, for knowing the myths, and, if called upon, I was pleased to elaborate on the footnote. The myths, then, persisted in the memory even though my interest in them had been quenched.

In college my interest in, at least, the Theseus myth revived. We read the *Phaedo* of Plato, that marvelous dialogue which revolves around the circumstances surrounding Socrates' death and which gives us Socrates' last conversation. The dialogue begins sometime after Socrates has been put to death. Echecrates had been away from Athens at the time and wants Phaedo to tell him the details of the last conversation. He says, "We were rather surprised to find that he did not die till so long after the trial. Why was that, Phaedo?" I give now Phaedo's reply and the ensuing dialogue:

Phaedo: It was an accident, Echecrates. The stern of the ship, which the Athenians sent to Delos, happened to have been crowned on the day before the trial.

Echecrates: And what is this ship?

Phaedo: It is the ship, as the Athenians say, in which Theseus took the seven youths and the seven maidens to Crete, and saved them from death, and himself was saved. The Athenians made a vow then to Apollo, the story goes, to send a sacred mission to Delos every year, if they should be saved; and from that time to this they have always sent it to the god, every year. They have a law to keep the city pure as soon as the mission begins, and not to execute any sentence of death until the ship has returned from Delos; and sometimes, when it is detained by contrary winds, that is a long while.<sup>2</sup>

Well, that passage startled me. Was the Theseus and minotaur story not a myth, not a fiction? I asked questions of the professor, but this was a philosophy class and his interests did not extend to minotaurs. All that I could learn was that the myth had been kept alive. But alive from when? Was Theseus a legendary rather than a mythic figure? I had begun to know that there was a difference. Still, I sensed something "fishy" about Phaedo's explanation. How could the ship that sailed out of the harbor of Athens on the day before Socrates' trial be the same ship that sailed with Theseus on his mission to Crete? King Minos, I had been led to believe, was a historical figure, a real person, who lived somewhere around 1300-1250 BC. We meet his grandson Idomeneus fighting the Trojans in Homer's *Iliad*. How could a ship have lasted from 1250 to 399, the date of Socrates' death? To give some credit to Phaedo, he does introduce his story of the ship with the words "as the Athenians say."

Had I looked into the whole of *Plutarch's Lives*, had I not read just the one or two excerpts assigned in Roman History a few days previously, I would have learned that Theseus was also one of Plutarch's heroes and that, furthermore, he too was skeptical about that Athenian ship. He attempts an explanation, and here it is:

The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.<sup>3</sup>

A literate explanation, but as suspect as the Athenian ship.

It was not until a doctorate later that another piece of the Theseus story chanced my way. I was, then, myself teaching in a humanities program in which Greek literature, history, art history, and philosophy were taught in conjunction one with the other. It was my first year of college teaching, and I was busily doing some background reading in Greek history. In the process I came to Pisistratus, that great tyrant of sixth-century Athens (ca. 560-527 BC). An interesting figure, but what stunned me was the statement that Pisistratus had deliberately exploited the Athenian belief in myth and had raised Theseus from a minor local hero to a national symbol, that it had probably been Pisistratus who set up the whole pageantry of Theseus' ship and created the mission to Delos. Now, that was disillusioning—as so often truth at first discovery is. So, Henry VII in setting up King Arthur as his ancestor and Hitler in manipulating the Siegfried myth had a precedent in old Pisistratus.

But what was Pisistratus' point? Why Theseus if he were, indeed, only a local hero? Why not Achilles or Ajax? The answer was there in the history books. It was just because Theseus was a local hero that he suited Pisistratus' purpose. The Athenians remembered him as an early king who had saved the seven youths and seven maidens from King Minos and who had brought fame and prosperity to Athens. It was this core that Pisistratus and his sons exploited for propaganda reasons. The Theseus we meet in Thucydides, the great Athenian historian of the Peloponnesian wars, is a Theseus who has been through the propaganda machine of Pisistratus. Theseus no longer sounds mythical or even legendary; he seems a fully fledged historical character:

In Theseus, however, they had a king of equal intelligence and power; and one of the chief features in his organization of the country was to

abolish the council-chambers and magistrates of the petty cities, and to merge them in the single council-chamber and town-hall of the present capital. Individuals might still enjoy their private property just as before, but they were henceforth compelled to have only one political centre, viz. Athens; which thus counted all the inhabitants of Attica among her citizens, so that when Theseus died he left a great state behind him.<sup>4</sup>

Pisistratus saw the need for a unified Athens; he established a policy to encourage that unity. Clearly, he saw Theseus as lending romance to that policy—thus, the propaganda. Perhaps, too, he had an eye on Athens' great rival, Sparta, who had long boasted of their great hero, Hercules. Certain it is that not until the late sixth century is there evidence of a flourishing Theseus cult; nor is it until the late sixth century that the Theseus story, now much elaborated, appears everywhere in Greek painting, sculpture, and drama.

In that first year of teaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, I looked for references to Theseus, but found few. Homer mentions him not more than three or four times. I then discovered that many scholars were suspicious of just those passages and suspected that they had been interpolated by Pisistratus to cover up Homer's neglect. Yet, there was one passage that was not suspect; and, although it was not a direct reference to Theseus, it did refer to Daedalus and Ariadne and Knossos—all elements in the earliest segment of the Theseus story. In describing Achilles' shield, Homer says,

And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it a dancing floor, like that which once in the wide spaces of Knosos Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses.<sup>5</sup>

A beautiful but puzzling passage. I pondered the problem of Theseus, Ariadne, the labyrinth, and the minotaur. I tried to conjure up the dancing floor. Was there a connection between the dancing floor and the labyrinth? Could the dancing floor have been the origin of the labyrinth? From that time on, my interest in Theseus subsided, and I turned my attention to labyrinths.

I learned from the art historians that one of the earliest depictions of Theseus occurs on the François vase, which was fashioned in the sixth century, a century later than Homer, a little earlier than Pisistratus. It shows, amongst much else, Theseus, Ariadne, and a dance procession. I found that interesting. I went to Plutarch, for I now knew that his was one of the fullest accounts of the Theseus story; it is, in fact, the first of the *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch parallels Theseus with Romulus. "It seemed to me," he writes, "that I must make the founder of lovely and famous Athens

the counterpart and parallel to the father of invincible and glorious Rome."<sup>6</sup> He gives a detailed account of Theseus; he has sifted, as a good historian should, through all the earlier accounts. Oddly enough, he gives short shrift to Theseus and the minotaur; probably, he took it for granted that the story was too well known to be repeated in detail. But here is what he writes about Theseus' return home from Crete:

On his voyage from Crete, Theseus put in at Delos, and having sacrificed to the god and dedicated in his temple the image of Aphrodite which he had received from Ariadne, he danced with his youths a dance which they say is still performed by the Delians, being an imitation of the circling passages in the Labyrinth, and consisting of certain rhythmic involutions and evolutions. This kind of dance, as Dicaearchus tells us, is called by the Delians The Crane, and Theseus danced it round the altar called Keraton. . . . (I: 45)

There once again was the dance. According to Plutarch, the labyrinth came before the dance; but might it not have been the other way around? Might not the dance have given rise to the labyrinth? Homer implies that everyone knows about the dance floor which Daedalus made in Knossos for Ariadne of the lovely tresses. But, what kind of dance? And what was the occasion for the dance?

I began this essay to make a point about learning, not so much to talk of Theseus and the labyrinth. The point is that we learn much in piecemeal fashion. While the mind is busy studying in a systematic fashion as students do, or should do, in school, the mind is inadvertently picking up stray bits of information. Starting out, we have no notion which bit of information will link to another bit nine months or ten years or thirty years down the road. Each student must start from wherever he or she is, from whatever little or much there is now in the storehouse of the mind. Otherwise, no bit of information is likely to link with another to form that Ariadne's thread that will lead to the mystery at the center or to the city of Jerusalem. There will be no unexpected adventures of the mind. In fact, Ariadne's thread did lead me to the city of Jerusalem.

Bit by bit the labyrinth had begun to fascinate; it began to draw me into its center. Through the years I had been not so much gathering information as storing whichever piece of the Theseus story came my way. Each portion of the story joined with what had gone before; only gradually had I begun to sense a mystery. The mind, of course, likes mystery, but at the same time it craves consistency. It wants each particle of data to fit neatly into a chain of thought that leads somewhere. It is just when things do not connect, when there seems to be a link missing, that the mind grows most active. It insists on knowing.

Clearly, there was, in my mind, a link missing between the dancing floor at Knossos and the labyrinth. Was the dancing floor which Daedalus built for Ariadne one thing and the labyrinth that Ariadne knew another? Homer lived some six hundred years after Minos. He expects everyone to know about the famous dancing floor; he says nothing about the labyrinth. I was no longer willing to wait until some new piece of information floated my way. Some active investigation was called for. I turned to the historians, archaeologists, and comparative mythologists. As Ezra Pound says, "You can't expect to be carried up Mt. Helicon in an easy chair."

Here is the gist of what I found. First, some hard information about mazes and labyrinths. Irrespective of what you might find in the dictionary, a maze is one thing and a labyrinth another. They are not the same. A maze or, as the Germans say, an *irrgarten* or "error garden" is a building or garden which offers many entrances to the seeker, but which leads one into blind alleys and into error, into losing one's way. It is a negative figure. In contrast, a labyrinth provides only one entrance. There are no choices; the path is convoluted but leads inevitably to the center. The principle of the labyrinth is to get as much linear movement as possible within the circle, square, or octagon. And, to return out of the labyrinth, one must turn oneself around 180 degrees and go out the same way one went in. It is a positive figure. It is a figure in which one finds one's way.<sup>7</sup>

The maze as a place probably goes back to ancient Egypt where it developed out of the desire to hide the mummy of the Pharaoh and its possessions from robbers and intruders. Pliny, in his *Natural History*, claims that Daedalus adapted his design for the labyrinth from the famous Egyptian labyrinth of King Petesuchis or King Tithoes. Commenting on Daedalus' adaptation of this labyrinth, Pliny writes:

. . . he reproduced only a hundredth part of it containing passages that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner. It is not just a narrow strip of ground comprising many miles of 'walks' or 'rides,' such as we see exemplified in our tessellated floors or in the ceremonial game played by our boys in the Campus Martius, but doors are let into the walls at frequent intervals to suggest deceptively the way ahead and to force the visitor to go back upon the very same tracks that he has already followed in his wanderings.<sup>8</sup>

Note, that Pliny is, in fact, distinguishing the maze as found in Egypt from the figure patterned on the tessellated Roman floors and in the ceremonial game played by the Roman boys in the Campus Martius. Note, too, that he takes it for granted that Daedalus' creation was a maze. There Pliny is certainly wrong, as was the tradition which he was following, as is the tradition which has been handed down to us in the so-called myth of

Theseus and the minotaur.

True, our present association of the word *labyrinth* with maze undoubtedly stems from the story of Theseus and the minotaur. Theseus needed the thread of Ariadne to find his way into the center and out again. Quite surely, in the story as we have it, Theseus did enter a maze of some variety. So Plutarch understood the story, and so he recorded it for posterity. Already in Plato's day, the word *labyrinth* was used as a literary metaphor to describe a situation which is difficult, obscure, tortuous, entangled. In Plato's dialogue, *Euthydemus*, Socrates speaking to Crito says: "At last we came to the kingly art [the art of politics], and enquired whether that gave and caused happiness, and then we got into a labyrinth, and when we thought we were at the end, came out again at the beginning, having still to seek as much as ever."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Plato in identifying labyrinth with maze is in error. According to those whose business it is to know about such things, the identification of labyrinth as maze derives from innumerable misunderstandings.

First, the word *labyrinth* is generally thought to come from the Lydian word *labrys* meaning double axe. Now, the double axe appears often in Knossos as a cult symbol: it was the symbolic weapon of Minoan divinity. The palace was called the house of the labrys or house of the double axe. The palace became known as *labyrinthos*.<sup>10</sup> It was both the dwelling of the king and the dwelling of the priestess-goddess. It was a sacred place—a sanctuary—as well as the center of the kingdom's business.

Before we go further, it should be said that scholars are still in dispute over the chronology of the Minos/Theseus story. Did Theseus fight the Cretan bull before or after the 1480/70 eruption of Santorini, when the waves from the great back-wash devastated Crete and its many cities? That is the question. But, whether one opts for the *before* or the *after*, there still remain incongruous elements, historical inaccuracies.<sup>11</sup> It is well to remember that we are dealing with legend, with a few facts that have been transmuted through centuries of imaginative storytelling. And, even if we accept the suggestion that King Minos of the legend was the Mycenaean ruler of Knossos following the eruption of Santorini, that still leaves some five hundred to six hundred years of storytelling between Theseus and the first references to him in literature and art. In short, we are not on the solidest historical grounds in whatever we might say of him.

However, archeologists have over the last one hundred years been hard at work. Sir Arthur Evans in the early nineteen hundreds excavated the Palace of Minos and endeavored to reconstruct it. He quite disproved the old notion that the Palace which occupies the traditional seat of Minos was itself labyrinthine in nature.<sup>12</sup> He did, however, himself entertain the idea that any mainland Greek coming to Crete and first beholding the Palace of Minos would have, like any country cousin, been literally amazed at what



he saw. The vast complex of room after room, corridors, terraces, stairways, cellars, courtyards might well have seemed a maze. Hence, perhaps, the association of maze with King Minos's Palace, the *labyrinthos*.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars, however, consider it more likely that the idea of maze appeared only after Knossos had been finally destroyed, somewhere around 1350.<sup>14</sup> Nothing would have remained of the vast complex that had been the Palace except the stone foundation with its half-walls and rubble, the whole appearing not unlike a maze. The latest scholar, Hermann Kern, says bluntly that the labyrinth as building existed no more than did the minotaur.<sup>15</sup> But that is to jump ahead of my story.

Now, to return to King Minos and the Greek connection. It is likely that King Minos, a powerful sea king, did exact tribute of young men and women of Athens. And, if King Minos was, as recent investigation seems to show, not a Cretan but a Mycenaean or Achaean, then there is more than one Greek connection.<sup>16</sup> Remember that Homer's Agamemnon comes from Mycenae, that Homer never speaks of Greeks, but of Hellenes or Achaeans. Beneath modern Athens are the remains of an ancient Mycenaean or Achaean fortress. It is not improbable that Theseus, a minor Achaean prince, did accompany hostages to Crete and somehow saved them through the help of the priestess whose name was Ariadne or Ariadne-Aphrodite or Ariadne-Demeter. The historical kernel of the story was undoubtedly embellished by later travelers to Crete who saw in the west entrance hall frescoes representing bull rodeos, processions of youths and maidens, and in the north portico a fresco which depicts two young men and a woman leaping over the back of a bull. The bulls, the youths and maidens, the maze-like ruins of the palace, with perhaps some memory of the bull cult as central to Minoan worship, would have been sufficient to generate the story of Theseus and the minotaur. Too, the palace was perhaps still known as the *labyrinthos* though its original meaning would have been long forgotten.

It is a curious fact that in the fourth century BC, Knossos, fallen on less heroic times, looked back to its legendary past and issued a series of coins bearing on one side a circular figure and on the other side the minotaur. The circular figure on the coin is not a maze but a true labyrinth.<sup>17</sup> This Cretan labyrinth, whatever its source, became the model for the Roman mosaic labyrinths. The entrance path proceeds inward a short space, then turns right and goes almost full circle; then back in the opposite direction and so through a series of full circuits to the center.<sup>18</sup> There are seven circuits—some say to commemorate the seven youths and the seven maidens.

Was there then once a true labyrinth in ancient Knossos, quite apart from the fabled maze? And, if so, what exactly was its purpose? Yes, says Károly Kerényi, there was in Knossos a true labyrinth. Kerényi is a Greek

scholar much interested in myth; in 1942 he suggested that the Cretan labyrinth began as a ground plan for the chain dance.<sup>19</sup> The chain dance was apparently a part of the ceremonial rites at Knossos and is to this very day the favorite folk dance of the Cretans. Kerényi, like myself, had been intrigued by Homer's description of the dance depicted on Achilles' shield and especially by the mention of Daedalus having built a dance floor for Ariadne. He supposed that the dance floor had been more than a clearing in the earth and more than a winnowing floor which was the ordinary location for ancient dances. He believed that quite likely it had been an inlaid floor so laid that the circular and pendulum motion of the dance was made a part of the floor. Hence, the labyrinth was built into the pavement. The chain dance, he believed, was an essential part of the initiation rites into the ceremonial worship of Ariadne, the priestess-goddess.<sup>20</sup>

So, the legendary Theseus, Prince of Athens, who accompanied the hostages to Crete, probably became involved in the chain dance in the great Palace of Knossos, and probably through the help of Ariadne, the priestess, he and the seven youths and seven maidens were saved. He may well have instituted a thanksgiving service at Delos, just as Plutarch says he did, where a legend was preserved that Ariadne—representing Aphrodite—gave Theseus a statue of the goddess and that, while the statue was being set up, the figure of the labyrinth was danced by the rescued youths and maidens.

And the chain of dancers probably gave rise to the thread of Ariadne. The thread is common to many fairy tales, and when long after the event the labyrinth was transformed into the maze, the thread substituted for the dancers.

Only gradually had it dawned on me that the Theseus story had been woven together over a vast period of time and that it was, in fact, not a true myth at all, but rather a legend or heroic saga—a saga to be sure with mythic elements. A true myth stems from the people or from a race of people; its authors and origins are deep in the past and quite unknown. We can guess, but not know, that true myths sprang out of the psychic energies produced by ancient fears and anxieties, out of religious awe and wonder, that the psychic energies were somehow spent or ordered in the transmutation into story, into symbols and images. Simple as myths appear, they tend to embody or to illuminate expandable truths of human nature or of human history. The majority of the participants of a true myth are supernatural. A true myth explains how and why things came into being; it tells of events that took place in primordial time—when things got started. Now the Pluto/Proserpine story fits the definition and pattern of a true myth. The Theseus story does not. It is a legend insofar as Theseus, King Minos, the labyrinth, the dance, even the bull, have some footing in history, in actual events. It is heroic saga insofar as one hero gives unity to a series of extraordinary happenings. True, the story takes shape around common

themes and at points parallels one or another of the ancient myths: it is a quest story, a trial story; it involves a descent into the underworld. And, at points the supernatural enters in. But, while not a true myth, the Theseus story has a mythic center; and the mythic center is the labyrinth itself.

The labyrinth is a very ancient figure and by no means confined to Crete. The oldest graphic of the labyrinth is that scratched into a rock of a subterranean grave in Luzzanas, Sardinia, and can be dated on good grounds as three thousand years before Christ.<sup>21</sup> The labyrinth in origin seems to have been connected with life and death. The entrance into life is the entrance into death; the turning about at the center signifies rebirth, the finding or entering into new life. Perhaps, at the very start, the labyrinth represented the journey into the underworld, and imitating the journey's path ensured the candidate a safe journey there and back again. Later, the labyrinth rituals were the base of initiation rites and ceremonies which were intended to teach the neophyte during his sojourn on earth how to enter the domains of death without getting lost. Mircea Eliade writes:

In a sense, the trials of Theseus in the labyrinth of Crete were of equal significance with the expedition to get the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides, or to get the golden fleece of Colchis. Each of these trials is basically a victorious entry into a place hard of access, and well defended, where there is to be found a more or less obvious symbol of power, sacredness and immortality.<sup>22</sup>

So much for labyrinths. I had found out more than I could assimilate. My curiosity was assuaged. Years went by—twenty to be exact.

I was enjoying a well-earned sabbatical in Europe. The year was 1982. I entered the cathedral of Chartres. Now, one goes to Chartres to see the glorious windows and the hauntingly beautiful sculptured figures on the exterior. Gothic architects built to lift the heart and mind to God. And also the eyes. One instinctively looks up. That is why, I suppose, that although I had been in Chartres several times previously I had never looked at the floor. This time I looked at the floor or, more accurately, the floor presented itself to my vision. I saw quite unmistakably a great labyrinth inlaid into the stone pavement of the great nave. I questioned why the medieval stonemasons had set into the floor of a Christian church a pagan symbol. The thread of Ariadne was at the stretching point. I was still within the labyrinth.

This labyrinth at Chartres was no small figure. Upon inquiry I found that its diameter, some thirteen meters, is almost equal to the diameter of the great rose window which glows just above it. The path of stone, the labyrinthine path, moves first in one quarter of the great circle, then in another, and so gives the effect of a cross overlaying the whole. Further,

there are eleven circuits rather than seven. Hence, although the Chartres labyrinth is a true labyrinth, it does not follow the Cretan pattern. Originally, a brass plate covered the central stone, but unfortunately it was used towards the war effort in the French revolution.<sup>23</sup> A description of the brass, however, remains: in the center had been engraved the figures of Theseus and the minotaur. The labyrinth was known to the people as “le dédale,” “la lieue,” and “le chemin de Jérusalem.” “Le dédale” refers, of course, to the legendary builder of the labyrinth at Knossos. “La lieue” is not so easy to explain. *Lieue* means league; a league equals four kilometers which is considerably longer than the actual labyrinthine path which is exactly 261.50 meters or 857 feet in length. The usual explanation is that the medieval Christians traveled the path on their knees—and that took them an hour’s time, the same amount of time that it takes to cover a league on foot. The title “la lieue” implies, then, that the labyrinth provided a penitential path. The designation “le chemin de Jérusalem” would seem to imply that for the medieval Christian the linear road of the labyrinth symbolized the road to Jerusalem. Perhaps those poor who could not afford the time or money to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem traveled in substitution the road to the center of the labyrinth and out again. Hence, it was equivalent to a trip to the Holy Land, and considerably cheaper. Scholars think, however, that the more probable explanation is that rather than representing a pilgrimage to the earthly city of Jerusalem, it more likely led to the Heavenly Jerusalem, Jérusalem Céleste.<sup>24</sup> If so, this would mean that the Christian, too, saw the labyrinth as a symbol for life, death, and rebirth. Death was the entrance to paradise. What, then, of Theseus, the minotaur, and Ariadne’s thread? Theseus was seen either as Everyman or as Christ. The minotaur stood for Self or Devil. Ariadne’s thread became God’s providence or Christ as the way, the truth, and the light, or the Church itself.

Actually, the above are all educated guesses. Unfortunately, only guessing remains to us, for the significance of the Christian labyrinth, as such labyrinths are now called, was lost in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and, perhaps, was already lost in the fifteenth century when the maze first began to be used graphically.<sup>25</sup> There had, also, been great labyrinths inlaid into the pavements of the cathedrals of Amiens and of Reims; those labyrinths had been destroyed by their abbots in the eighteenth century because children came into the church, played games on the labyrinthine paths, and disturbed the people at their prayers. The games were apparently similar to our hop-scotch, for the journey had to be made without stepping on any line. But, the children were noisy at their play; the abbots received complaints, and the labyrinths were removed. Fortunately, other Christian labyrinths remain.

After leaving Chartres, I did not go looking for labyrinths, but I kept

finding them in the most unexpected places. Of course, one tends to see what one has on the mind. Still, I had other things on the mind besides labyrinths. A major intent of the sabbatical was to put together a slide presentation for my Dante class. So, I went to Italy. I sought out the cathedral of Lucca; I wanted to take a picture of *Il Volto Santo*, the Holy Face, mentioned by Dante in Canto XXI of the *Inferno*. There set into the wall of the cathedral at Lucca was a mosaic labyrinth. I thought I could make out Theseus and the minotaur at the center, but perhaps not. At the "entrance" to the labyrinth, however, there is the following inscription. I translate from the Latin: "This is the labyrinth which Daedalus the Cretan built, from which nobody escaped who had gone inside, nor did Theseus without the help of Ariadne." The mosaic dates from the twelfth century and may have been part of a floor of an earlier church. In Pavia where I went to pay my respects to Boethius and St. Augustine, both buried, as Dante tells us, in the church of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro, I saw in the neighboring basilica of San Michele the remnants of another wall labyrinth not unlike that in Lucca and likewise dating from the twelfth century. There was yet another in San Vitale in Ravenna, another in Santa Maria Trastevere in Rome. Surely, these Christian labyrinths derived from the Cretan labyrinth. Surely, here was another instance of the adaptable Christians taking a pagan symbol and adjusting it to their own purposes as they had, for example, with the signs of the zodiac. Or, was the labyrinth itself a kind of Jungian archetype imprinted somehow in the psyche of the human race? So many questions. And, the answers were not far off.

I was in Munich; it was the day before Christmas, and I was reading, or attempting to read, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a German newspaper not unlike the *London Times* or Paris's *Le Monde*—both newspapers that contain lovely literary and philosophical essays, critical book reviews, together with the news. Turning from section to section, I saw suddenly emblazoned in large black letters on the masthead of page 80 the word **LABYRINTHE** under which was the following verse in italics:

*Im Labyrinth verliert man sich nicht  
 Im Labyrinth findet man sich  
 Im Labyrinth begegnet man nicht dem Minotauros  
 Im Labyrinth begegnet man sich selbst*

which is to say:

*In the labyrinth one does not lose oneself  
 In the labyrinth one finds oneself  
 In the labyrinth one meets not the Minotaur  
 In the labyrinth one meets oneself.<sup>26</sup>*

The entire page was devoted to an account of a just published book by Hermann Kern entitled *Labyrinthe*, and the account was by Hermann Kern himself. Not only had he written the definitive book on labyrinths, but also, as Director of the Hauses der Kunst in Munich, he was preparing in Munich for the spring of 1985 a great exhibition and display of labyrinths of every variety.

The spring of 1985 came, and I was not in Munich for the great exhibition. I have, however, spent a good deal of time reading and examining Kern's magnificent book with its splendid illustrations of labyrinths from all over the world and from every century. I now know that my knowledge of labyrinths is but a mere scratch on the surface. If I would know more I must "study, concentrate, keep the mind on the page." Yet, as marvelous and learned as is Kern's great *Labyrinthe* book, I am glad that it was not published until 1982. I am content with my own adventure of the mind and happy that I followed Ariadne's thread into the labyrinth and out. But, just now as I write, it occurs to me that Ariadne's thread is, perhaps, not the best image of the adventure. It might better be described as Ariadne's chain dance—a dance of the intellect among fact and fables and, what appear to have been, mere chance observations.

And, did I, in pursuing Theseus back down the labyrinthine corridors of western culture and of my own past, discover my true Self? Perhaps, there through the half dark I saw, or seemed to see, sitting at the center—Self, curious and fastidious still.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1946) 59-60. The passage quoted is from John Russell's translation (London, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, being *The Euthyphron, Apology, Crito*, and *Phaedo* of Plato, trans. F. J. Church (London: Macmillan, 1920) 105-06.

<sup>3</sup> Trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 11 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1914) I: 49.

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Writings of Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*, the unabridged Crawley translation with an introduction by John H. Finley, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1951) 93. For Pisistratus' influence on the Theseus story see W. R. Connor, "Theseus in Classical Athens," in *The Quest for Theseus*, ed. Anne G. Ward (New York: Praeger, 1970) 143-174.

<sup>5</sup> *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951) Bk. 18, lines 590-92.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, I: 5.

<sup>7</sup> I give current sources for this information because much of what I know of labyrinths came gradually out of what sources I know not. Hermann Kern, *Labyrinthe* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1982) 13-14. Dorothy Norman, *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol* (New York: World, 1960) 106-11.

<sup>8</sup> Trans. D. E. Eichholz, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962) X: 67-69. Pliny's two kings have not been identified according to Eichholz.

<sup>9</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937) I: 153.

<sup>10</sup> Anne G. Ward, "The World of Theseus: Bronze Age Crete," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 59-62. Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, 4 vols. (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964) I: 6; III: 283. Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, trans. F. J. Fielden, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1949) 12-16. But see also Kern 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> Anne G. Ward, "In the Footsteps of a Hero," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 99-101.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, III: 282-84.

<sup>13</sup> Anne G. Ward, "The Cretan Adventure," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 114-17. Martin P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (New York: Norton, 1963) 176-77.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, "The Cretan Adventure," 117. Jacquetta Hawkes, *Dawn of the Gods* (New York: Random House, 1968) 131.

<sup>15</sup> Kern, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958) 18-23. See also Ward, "In the Footsteps of a Hero," 89-101.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Tidworth, "The Roman and Medieval Theseus," in *The Quest for Theseus*, 184-85. See also Kern, 62-67.

<sup>18</sup> Tidworth, 184.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Kerényi, *Vom Labyrinthos zum Syrtos*, 283 ff. Cited by Kern, 19, 50-61. See also Károly Kerényi, *Dionysos, Archetypal Image of the Indestructible Life*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 97-101.

<sup>20</sup> Kern, 19, 50-61.

<sup>21</sup> Kern, 22, 87-89.

<sup>22</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958; rpt. New Amer. Library, 1974) 381.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Villette, "L'énigme du Labyrinthe," *Notre-Dame de Chartres* (Mars, 1984) No. 58, 4-13.

<sup>24</sup> The above information comes from Villette, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Kern, "Labyrinthe," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* No. 296, Weihnachten, 24/25/26 (Dec., 1982), 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 80.



## Study-Guide Questions

1. What has this essay to do with your study of the Humanities?
2. In how many different ways is the phrase “the thread of Ariadne” used within the essay?
3. What is the meaning of the word *myth*? What is a myth? How does a myth differ from a legend?
4. Is the story of Theseus a true myth or is it a legend? Explain. If you do not know the whole story of Theseus, look it up in some dictionary of Greek myths.
5. Do you remember any references to Crete in *The Odyssey*? Of what value was Homer’s *Iliad* in explaining the true nature of the Cretan labyrinth?
6. What is the relationship between Crete, Mycenae, and Athens?
7. Identify the following names and places: Minos, Pisistratus, Plato, Thucydides, Plutarch, Pliny, Knossos, Delos, Helicon, Chartres?
8. What is the difference between a maze and a labyrinth? What seems to have been the most ancient mythic meaning of the labyrinth? Why the confusion between myth and labyrinth?
9. What are some of the explanations of the Christian labyrinth?
10. By what means might the Cretan labyrinth have influenced the Christian labyrinth?
11. Can you think of any modern instances of myth or legend having become incorporated in history?
12. In your own “storehouse of memory” do you perceive the beginning of what might become a “thread of Ariadne”?

