The Figure of the Labyrinth in “Le Renégat” and “La Pierre qui pousse”

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[...] l’être dans le labyrinthe est à la fois sujet et objet congloméré en être perdu.1

The labyrinth is a useful figure for the interpretation of certain types of literary texts and it seems particularly well-suited for the interpretation of Camus’s fictional work which, with his essays, make frequent reference to Greek and Roman mythology. Indeed, L’Exil et le Royaume was intended to be part of a new series of works, the Nemesis cycle, referring to the Greek goddess of measure (oc iv, 1343). As for the labyrinth, of course, there is the famous 1939 essay, “Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran” (oc III, 567–585), in which Camus offers a sardonic portrait of the Algerian city of Oran, which he compares to a labyrinth. The labyrinth here is a metaphor for futility and boredom, an enclosed space where people go around in circles, and where all beauty, natural or man-made, has been progressively and intentionally eliminated—a place, he says, “sans âme et sans recours” (oc III, 568). The Minotaur in this labyrinth is boredom, a Baudelairean existential ennui:

Oran est un grand mur circulaire et jaune, recouvert d’un ciel dur. Au début, on erre dans le labyrinthe, on cherche la mer comme le signe d’Ariane. Mais on tourne en rond dans des rues fauves et oppressantes, et, à la fin, le Minotaure dévore les Oranais: c’est l’ennui.

oc III, 573

In the last section of Camus’s essay titled “La Pierre d’Ariane”, Oran is the “capitale de l’ennui” (oc III, 583) and its inhabitants give in to the shadows of Eurydice and the slumber of Isis. The inhabitants seek oblivion—“n’être rien” (oc III, 584)—and seem to wish to become stone themselves, but the essayist rejects false dichotomies—“Le néant ne s’atteint pas plus que l’absolu » (oc III, 584)—and concludes by asserting that the fil d’Ariane is finding a balance between

human suffering and the pleasures that nature can give us. To be spared a life of futility, Camus writes, “Il faut dire ‘oui’ au Minotaure” (OC III, 584).2

Wendy Faris, in her study Labyrinths of Language, draws attention to the paradoxical nature of stone in Camus's essay. The stone imprisons the inhabitants of Oran and, by extension, the poet/essayist, but it is also the means of liberation from the labyrinth, as becomes evident in the final paragraph when light transforms the stone into ships bound for adventure. Faris writes: “The reward of liberation from Oran is the stone he picks up, but this token of freedom is made of the same material as the prison, as if to suggest that spiritual deliverance grows out of close confrontation with the given environment.”3

Camus's 1939 essay uses the labyrinth as a metaphor for the human condition, and although his primary focus is on the Minotaur and on Ariadne's thread, he also alludes to Christian texts (the Mount of Olives, the sleeping Apostles), ancient Egyptian mythology (Isis) and other Greek and Roman myths (Eurydice). Camus would not make direct reference to the labyrinth again in his fiction but I contend in this article that the labyrinth is an important trope in his later work. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, the labyrinth presents clear topographical features that support and reinforce both theme and structure. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to examine the labyrinthine aspects of two very different short stories from L'Exil et le Royaume: “Le Renégat, ou un esprit confus” and “La Pierre qui pousse”. I will demonstrate that the labyrinth is embedded in these stories not only in the setting but also in the narrative structure. Finally, I will suggest that the figure of the labyrinth is a hermeneutic matrix that helps us better understand the stories.4

Labyrinths have a long history, both real and symbolic, and consequently occupy a rich and complex semantic field. They are historical and mythological,