Gardens and Labyrinths as Metaphors for the Dionysian World in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and André Gide's *The Immoralist*

In her article "André Gide et *The Picture of Dorian Gray* d' Oscar Wilde" Hillary Hutchinson writes that however undeniable the personal influence of Wilde on Gide may have been, the literary influence has not been studied very thoroughly; she maintains *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had both a great moral and aesthetic influence on the literary works of André Gide (161-169). This paper will speak to those influences. In a close study of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891), Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902), and his more mature work *Theseus* (1946), we are struck by images of labyrinths and gardens; the metaphorical level of this imagery strengthens the ties these two authors have to one another. Through these metaphors Gide's récit *Theseus* completes *The Immoralist* and illuminates not only his earlier work but one which preceded it and influenced him—Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Self-discovery for each of the heroes of these works takes place in a garden. In Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Dorian's initial moment of awakening occurs while Basil Hallward is painting his portrait. Lord Henry articulates Dorian's discovery when he observes Dorian "Burying his face in the great cool lilac blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine" (Wilde 187). He tells him "…that this is one of the great secrets of life – to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul" (Wilde 187). The garden clearly represents the place where the senses can be fulfilled. The narrator tells us then of the look of fear in Dorian's eyes "such as people have when they are suddenly awakened" (Wilde 187).

In the introductory scenes in the garden, however, Lord Henry explicitly makes Dorian more aware of his extraordinary beauty and of his own place in the sensual,

sensuous garden: “You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray… And Beauty is a form of Genius – is higher, indeed than genius… It has its divine right of sovereignty” (Wilde 31). Dorian is himself both a part of nature and a work of art. Basil’s portrait of Dorian’s ideal beauty completes Dorian’s awakening consciousness to the transformative power of his own beauty. Indeed Basil admits that Dorian has transformed his art, that his beauty has inspired his greatest masterpiece. Both men thus contribute to Dorian’s belief in the supremacy of his perfect beauty that places him outside and above society’s laws and conventions. One of Lord Henry’s first gifts to Dorian will be a mirror surrounded by cupids. In other words, both Lord Henry and Basil contribute, one of them quite guilefully, to the development of Dorian’s narcissism, and to the destruction unleashed narcissism inevitably engenders.

After a life-threatening illness, Gide’s Michel, not unlike Dorian, discovers what seems to be a cure by the senses of both his body and soul. In the gardens of North Africa, he walks “in a sort of ecstasy, of silent joy, of elation of the senses and the flesh” (Gide, *The Immoralist* 48). He tells us that “…from the depths of [his] past childhood, there now awoke in [him] the glimmerings of a thousand lost sensations” (Gide, *The Immoralist* 45) —sensations of light, touch, fragrance, and sound. Gide, early in the narrative, subtly links the imagery of the garden to the metaphysical labyrinth in which Michel will eventually become lost. In the midst of Michel’s awakening to the sensuous, sensual existence, to the Dionysian world in nature and himself, he observes:

> [Marceline] led the way along a path so odd that I have never in any country seen its like. It meanders indolently between two fairly high mud walls; the shape of the gardens they enclose directs it leisurely course; sometimes it winds; sometimes it is broken; a sudden turning as you enter it and you lose your bearings; you cease to know where you came from or where you are going (47-48).

As usual, almost every detail of Gidean description points us metaphorically to the hero's quest, to his ascent as well as to his downfall.

Later at his farms in Normandy, awaiting the fruition of rich crops, Michel observes the harmony that results from the "teeming fecundity of nature and the wise effort of man to regulate it…" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 88). He wonders:

> "What would man's effort be worth… without the savagery of the power it controls? What would the wild rush of these upswelling forces become without the intelligent effort that banks it, curbs it, leads it by pleasant ways to its outcome of luxury?" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 88)

He admires the "ordered abundance" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 88) brought about by balancing the Apollonian and Dionysian elements and envisions a code of ethics for humanity that emulates such balance. It is not long, however, before the upwelling forces in his life overwhelm and destroy the controlling Apollonian influences. It is nevertheless, in the gardens of North Africa, and on the Norman farms, that fuller discovery of his authentic nature begins and develops: his awakening to the Dionysian forces in the garden is an awakening to life itself, both within and outside himself. His voyage into nature provides him with a recovery not only from tuberculosis but also from his Puritan upbringing, from a lifestyle hostile to the development of the Dionysian side of his nature.

Such is not the case for Gide's hero Theseus who grew up in the natural world and experienced himself in harmony with it:

> I grew with the plant; I flew with the bird. My self knew no boundaries; every contact with an outer world did not so much teach me my own limits as awaken within me some new power of enjoyment. Fruit I caressed and the bark of young trees… Toward all the charming things that Pan, Zeus or Thetis could offer, I rose. (Gide, *Theseus* 61-62)

As a young man, however, he encounters both his temptress and saviour Ariadne in the gardens:

> She led me down a few steps toward a more leafy part of the gardens, where huge trees obscured the moon…. She had changed her clothes, and now wore…a sort of loose dress, beneath which she was palpably naked. (Gide, *Theseus* 79-80)

As she offers him her body, she concomitantly offers to save him from Daedalus's labyrinth: "Only thanks to me, by me, and in me will you be able to recapture yourself…." So begin by taking me." (Gide, *Theseus* 80) Shortly thereafter, during Theseus's meeting with Daedalus, the designer of the labyrinth actually refers to his own construction as a "set of communicating gardens." (Gide, *Theseus* 85) Not only then is the garden a place of self-discovery and pantheistic pleasure; like Eden, it is for Wilde and Gide's heroes the place of temptation and risk.

Just as in the original garden, where a forbidden consciousness of Dionysian pleasure leads to loss and destruction, the discovery of the Dionysian world and the constructing of a new ethic lead both Michel and Dorian to a life of decadence and destruction. In order for the Dionysian self to flourish, the preset patterns of conformity to the Judeo-Christian ethic may no longer control them. To emerge from their unconscious, semi-moribund state in which conventional society entraps them, Wilde's Sybil and Gide's Marceline, both beautiful fragile creations reflecting the Judeo-Christian ideals, must be sacrificed. If their paintings of these women are so exquisite, the artists, while they show us the destructions of these female characters, show us as well their consciousness of the beauty of the old ideal. Immediately before Dorian's total rejection of her, the consummate actress Sybil rejects what she sees to be the decadence and falsity of the artistic world in favour of the Judeo-Christian convention immediately before Dorian's total rejection of

her. Similarly, when Michel is leading Marceline on the voyage that liberates him but kills her, she sadly informs him, "…I quite understand your doctrine—for now it has become a doctrine. A fine one, perhaps, …but it does away with the weak." (Gide, *Immoralist* 181) Michel exclaims cruelly, "And so it should." (Gide, *Immoralist* 181) On her deathbed, Marceline deliberately drops her rosary beads on the floor three times–the final symbolic gesture of the denial of the Christian ethic. Her own death, indeed, becomes the symbol of the death of the old feminine principles of sacrifice and self-abnegation, of the defeat of the Christian, Apollonian control over the Dionysian. Thus, another fundamental parallel becomes apparent between Gide's *The Immoralist* and Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. In her criticism of *Dorian Gray*, Camille Paglia observes, "The novel's major premise is Dorian's repudiation of the Christian inner world for the pagan outer world. By ritual of riddance, he detaches himself from his post-classical soul and projects it onto his portrait." (Paglia 514) Similarly, Michel detaches himself from his "post-classical" soul by playing the role of his former, conformist self for society while masking his newly discovered, authentic self to allow its unhindered development. However much importance these authors attach to the new ethic themselves, neither Gide nor Wilde vaunt their heroes' actions as a model for humankind. Gide writes in his preface to *The Immoralist*: "But I intended to make this book as little an indictment as an apology and took care to pass no judgement." (Gide, *Immoralist* vii)

In *Theseus*, Gide's Daedalus warns the hero of the pitfalls of the labyrinth—those same dangers to which Dorian and Michel had earlier succumbed. Daedalus notes that the first danger that Theseus will encounter will be the semi-narcotic vapors. These vapors will "induce a delicious intoxication, rich in flattering delusions, and provoke the mind, filled as this is with voluptuous mirages, to a certain pointless activity." (Gide, *Theseus* 85) The visitor's will power will become a victim of the overwhelming sensual pleasures of the

Dionysian world, causing him to become just as stupid as the beast, the Minotaur, being held captive within the labyrinth.

Dorian, unlike Theseus, quickly falls prey to the pitfalls of the labyrinth. He heeds Henry's advice by trying to cure his soul, his guilt-ridden conscience, by means of the senses. In desperate search for the opium den where he will find his decadent, sensual cure he finds that, like the labyrinth, "the way seemed interminable, and the streets like the black web of some sprawling spider." (Wilde 141) Dorian's desire for opium "gnaw[s] at him." (Wilde 141) He longs to reach the opium den in which he will find his drug and the "very vileness of thief and outcast" (Wilde 141) that will surround him; he longs to be intoxicated by the opium that will make him forget the horrifying sins of the past.

Like Daedalus's cautions against the semi-narcotic vapors of the labyrinth, there is in Gide's *The Immoralist* an inherent warning in Ménalque's discussion of intoxication. Ménalque offers both wine and cigarettes to Michel, which he himself will reject. Ménalque does not drink because "…I consider sobriety a more powerful intoxication—in which I keep my lucidity" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 82). He does not smoke because "Smoking is an impersonal, negative, too easily achieved kind of drunkeness; what I want from drunkenness is enhancement, not a diminution of life." (Gide, *The Immoralist* 82) Unlike Theseus, Michel does not heed the warning given to him. Like Dorian he becomes enslaved to the sensual, sensuous pleasures of the Dionysian world. As Michel's life becomes more exclusively focused on sensuous existence, he notes that "The only attention I found possible was that of my five senses." (Gide, *The Immoralist* 113) He wishes only to venture into the woods of his property at night, "his head reeling with darkness, lawlessness, anarchy…" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 113) His pleasure derives from helping his lawless farmhands despoil his own lands!

Just as Dorian "[loses his] way in the sanguine labyrinth of passion through which he is wandering" (Wilde 81). Michel finds himself walking aimlessly through the streets of Syracuse, Italy, finding that "the society of the lowest dregs of humanity were delectable company…", that "their company whetted [his] growing luxury, of comfort, of all things [he] was wrapped round with…" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 188) He is so fascinated and captivated by the idea that they "live their art" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 191) that he sleeps beside them on the street, only to return home to Marceline "covered with vermin." (Gide, *The Immoralist* 191)

Similarly, the "new Hedonism" that Henry so persuasively awakens in Dorian ultimately manifests itself in the hero's desire to consort with "thieves and coiners and the mysteries of their trade." Wilde 112 It results in Basil asking why Dorian's friendship is so fatal to young men, why all who associate with him are covered with shame and sorrow. (Wilde 118) It results in his "creeping at dawn out of dreadful houses and slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London." (Wilde 118), that is to say, it results in total debauchery.

Michel's life of decadence and Dionysian existence has sufficiently caused him to lose all desire for the past. To Michel "Memory is an accursed invention" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 137), while Dorian notes that "the one charm of the past is the past." (Wilde 85) As Walter Pater writes in his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end." (Pater 252) The fulfilment of the present moment in time becomes the focal part of the heroic quest. The problem, of course, is that it ceases to be a heroic quest once, in their drunken pleasure, they have lost all control of it. Dorian's and Michel's role models, Ménalque and Lord Henry, respectively, had presented the past as a hindrance to self-development. Ménalque explains:

> … I should be afraid of preventing the future and of allowing the past to encroach on me. It is out of the utter forgetfulness of yesterday that I create every new hour's freshness. It is never enough for me to have been happy. I do not believe in dead things and cannot distinguish between being no more and never having been. (Gide, *The Immoralist* 95)

As Dorian and Michel completely break their links to the past and to the moral conscience provided by the past—Dorian to Sybil and ultimately to his portrait, Michel to his properties, his scholarly work, and to Marceline—both protagonists fall into the gravest danger of all, for they will become dominated exclusively by the moment they sought to capture.

When Dorian if finally horrified by his own behaviour and by his total enslavement to the Dionysian world, he expresses his desire for escape to Henry:

> I wish I could love… But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden I want to escape. (Wilde 158)

He later expresses his moral resolution to be good: "A new life. That was what he wanted. That was what he was waiting for. Surely he had begun it already… He would never again tempt innocence. He would be good. (Wilde 165) His hope for escape from the Dionysian labyrinth is dashed immediately when he rushes to see if his portrait reflects the amending of his life.

> A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite… The thing was still loathsome, if possible, than before. (Wilde 166)

Dorian is hopelessly trapped and lost within the Dionysian world. He will be its victim. Similarly, Michel, though he insists that he does not regret his voyage into the Dionysian

world, finds himself in the same state of inertia, "…Take me away…" Michel implores his friends, "I cannot move of myself. Something in my will is broken… Sometimes I am afraid that what I have suppressed will take vengeance on me…" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 146) As Michel looks out over his lush garden in North Africa, he tells them, "Enjoyment follows so closely upon desire that effort is impossible." (Gide, *The Immoralist* 146) The persistent azure of the North African climate immobilizes him. He has begun to love the desert. Michel's journey has taken him from the original garden where self-discovery became possible, towards the hostile land of the desert where action become impossible, where arid, sterile land is hostile to life. Michel's immobility at the conclusion of *The Immoralist* reminds us of the foreshadowing Gide gives us in Part I when Michel gazes upon the "terrifying fixity of the nocturnal shadows" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 42) in the courtyard in Biskra, which he refers to as the "immobility of death." (Gide, *The Immoralist* 42)

It may be said then that the most extreme form of individualism leads not to self-realization and creation or progress, for the individual *or* humanity, but rather to an almost pathological narcissism, the inevitable end being the destruction of others as well as themselves. This point seems clear enough in both novels. Yet Gide remains convinced of the value of the heroic voyage into the Dionysian world of the labyrinth and in his most mature work refuses to allow his hero to regret the so-called sins of the past. If Dorian Gray ends in death and the triumph of art over the individual, and *The Immoralist* ends in the question of how and even if Michel can escape from his aimless loss in the Dionysian world, Gide's work Theseus, while not embracing the Christian ideal, reconciles the ethic with both the past and the future. *Theseus*, while a work of its time, becomes not so much an answer to the problems posed in Wilde's earlier work and in Gide's own *The Immoralist*, it can be seen as a wise epilogue illuminating both.

> Before entering into the labyrinth, Theseus is saved from the same fate as Dorian and Michel by Daedalus's warnings. It is he who describes the most essential risk of an adventure into the Dionysian world as he describes his plan for constructing the labyrinth:
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> I thought that the best way of containing the prisoner in the labyrinth was to make it such a kind, not that he couldn't get out…, but that he wouldn't want to get out… Another and indeed the prime necessity was to fine down the visitor's will-power to the point of extinction… I had noticed that certain plants, when thrown into the fire, gave off, as the burned, semi-narcotic vapors… The heavy gases thus distributed not only act upon the will and put it to sleep; they induce a delicious intoxication, rich in flattering delusions, and provoke the mind, filled as this is with voluptuous mirages, to a certain pointless activity; … The effect of these gasses is not the same for all of those who breathe them; each is led on by the complexities implicit in his own mind to lose himself, if I may so put it, in a labyrinth of his own devising. … But the most surprising thing about these perfumes is that when one has inhaled them for a certain time, they are already indispensable; body and mind have formed a taste for this malicious insobriety; outside of it reality seems charmless and one no longer has any wish to return to it. And – that above all-is what keeps one inside the labyrinth. (Gide, *Theseus* 76-77)

Whereas Ménalque discounts the past entirely and emphasizes the primacy of one's immersion in the present, "Regrets, remorse, repentance, … Oh, Michel! Every joy is always awaiting u, but it must always be the only one; it insists on finding the bed empty and demands from us a widower's welcome" (Gide, *The Immoralist* 96), Daedalus warns Theseus that the only way he will be able to escape the labyrinth is by linking himself to Ariadne by a thread. That thread he calls a "tangible symbol of duty" and a "link to the past." (Gide, *Theseus* 77) Not only does Daedalus urge Theseus to remain staunchly in control of his will, regardless of the "charms of the labyrinth" and the "seduction of the unknown" (Gide, *Theseus* 77), but contrary to Ménalque's advice to Michel, he also tells him to return to the past by means of the thread: "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." (Gide, *Theseus* 77) Notice that Daedalus does not discourage the descent into the labyrinth, nor does he encourage total

immersion in that sensual world or the past. What reveals distinctly the evolution of the Gidean hero is merely a thread, not a rope or a chain, that links him to the past. Dorian destroys himself when he slashes the portrait, for the portrait is his conscience and his link to the past; to slay one's conscience and one's past is to slay one's self. Both Dorian and Michel have fallen victim to the intoxicating vapors of the sensual, sensuous world. However, in spite of all Daedalus's warnings and Theseus's firm resolution to resist the vapors and to keep "[his] will taut," (Gide, *Theseus* 86) once he traverses the fourth room of the labyrinth, he emerges from darkness into light where he finds himself in a garden. There before him "stretched at length upon a flowery bed of buttercups, pansies, jonquils, tulips, and carnations, lay the Minotaur." (Gide, *Theseus* 86) At first Theseus finds the Minotaur so beautiful that he is unable to kill him. When, however, he perceives in the eye of the Minotaur that the beast is stupid, he finds the courage and energy and courage required to slay him. That beast which represents the overwhelming, intoxicating world of sensual pleasure could have kept the hero in his lair. However, there are three things that will allow the hero to emerge from the labyrinth: the realization that the beast is witless, great vigilance to keep his will strong, and that unbroken thread to his past by which he will find his way out of the Dionysian world. Indeed, it is only after Theseus's many adventures in the Dionysian world that he is able to make use of the freedom he has conquered. Dorian's freedom has led only to enslavement in the labyrinth and Michel's friends question whether he will be able to make use of his freedom:

> …will it be possible to invent some way of employing all this intelligence and strength. Or must they be all together outlawed?... In what way can Michel serve society? …Make haste. Michel is still capable of devotion. Yes, he is so, still. But it will soon be only to himself. (Gide, *The Immoralist* 3)

The Minotaur conquered, Theseus is now ready to create. He returns to Athens and founds the ideal city – the democratic society of Athens. His legacy to humanity is to bequeath to them nothing less than the foundation of democracy. Like Dorian and Michel, Theseus is an immoralist. But he is an immoralist who maintains a hold to that precious link to the past – Ariadne's thread. The garden, that place of discovery and temptation, has given birth to a city. It has been a prerequisite to the city, to progress for humanity, to creation.

We are astonished by the vision of these two writers when we realize how predictive they have been of our own twentieth century dilemmas. They forsee the overthrow of the Christian, patriarchal society, and the perilous journey through decadence that threatens to destroy the progress mankind seeks to make by establishing a new order. The same liberations that give birth to a new order is one that threatens to imprison the will. Gide in particular sees the need to hang on to Ariadne's thread, that fragile, precious link to the past, so that creation and progress are possible, so that we do not live what T.S. Eliot has called an "age which advances progressively backwards." (Eliot 108)

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