

# A French Odyssey

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"To disturb, that is my rôle," André Gide is quoted as having said,<sup>1</sup> and his American biographer, Klaus Mann, brother of Thomas, says of him, "He echoes our uncertainties, he articulates our dilemmas."<sup>2</sup> Of the essayist Montaigne, Gide wrote, "I consider it a mark of great strength in Montaigne that he succeeded in accepting his own inconsistencies and contradictions. . . . There is nothing that Montaigne dislikes more than a personality—or rather an impersonality—obtained artificially, laboriously, contentiously, in accordance with morals, propriety, custom, and what he likens to prejudices. 'There is no course of life so weak and sottish as that which is managed by Order, Method, and Discipline'."<sup>3</sup>

The contradictory tendencies of the human race fascinated Gide. The German Nietzsche and the Russian Dostoevsky are his two great masters of thought. He credits the "great specialists of the human heart, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Racine," with acknowledging these inconsistencies and, taking comfort from this authoritarian excuse for short-comings, Gide sets up his doctrine of salvation through surrendering to one's instincts.<sup>4</sup> Through the hypocrisy of conventionality one strangles himself, he preaches. "I was persuaded that each human being . . . had a rôle to play on this earth, his only, that resembled none other. . . ; so that any attempt to surrender oneself to a common rule seemed to my eyes as treason . . . to be likened to the great sin

against the Holy Ghost for which there is no forgiveness."<sup>5</sup> In this blasphemous remark can be seen an attempt to justify his presumption through the Scriptures. Before going further let me point out that this thesis was not that of some obscure would-be philosopher, but of one of the greatest writers of France in the modern age.<sup>6</sup> Arnold Bennett in his Introductory Note to Gide's *Dostoevsky* has this to say of him:

Since then (the publication of Gide's *L'Immoraliste* in 1902), in some twenty years of productivity, he has gradually consolidated his position until at the present day his admirers are entitled to say that no other living French author stands so firm and so passionately acknowledged as an influence."<sup>7</sup>

André Gide was carefully brought up in a wealthy Huguenot home and was well acquainted with the Bible; in fact, he never lost his fondness for it and carried it with him, even in the days of wildest license. He literally searched the Scriptures, and based his immoral philosophy on wrested interpretations of it, for he must needs justify himself in his own eyes. One verse of Scripture on which he seized was: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it." He interprets it as a command to renounce not only evil but good, because virtue and self-respect are forms of pride, and the only approach to God is through humility which is learned by sinning. "Without the motes that it lights up, the ray of sunlight would not be visible."<sup>8</sup> We should court temptation, then, and unreign our worst instincts.<sup>9</sup> To live dangerously was his coun-

<sup>1</sup>Jean Séguey and Charles J. Rolo, "André Gide," *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1947.

<sup>2</sup>Klaus Mann, *André Gide and the Crisis of Modern Thought* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1943), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>André Gide, "Montaigne," *Yale Review*, March 1939.

<sup>4</sup>Régis Michaud, *Modern Thought and Literature in France* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1934), p. 84.

<sup>5</sup>"Gide Fad," *Time*, March 6, 1944.

<sup>6</sup>Séguey and Rolo, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>Arnold Bennett, Introductory Note to 1925 edition of Gide, *Dostoevsky* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).

<sup>8</sup>*The Journals of André Gide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), II, 385.

<sup>9</sup>Michaud, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

sel to young people. Throw away books and the experience of others and live your own life as dictated by your instincts. Forethought is begotten of pride and is therefore a sin against God. Spontaneity is better than ethics. Unfettered impulses, even though defeated, are better than stagnation. "Defeat is not tragedy but drama."<sup>10</sup>

Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters* is a tirade against moral hypocrisy which coerces man into being what he is not and should not pretend to be. It has been called "a cruel revenge on his Puritan boyhood, his parents and educators... an excruciating study of delinquent youth... What a Mephistophelian epic, what an assault on conformity, what a lie given to the traditionalists, and what a dissection of the human heart! . . . . The devil roams at large in its pages."<sup>11</sup>

But try as he may, Gide has never been able to free himself of the influence of the Scriptures on his early life. He was famous for it among his unbelieving acquaintances. In 1927 he entered in his *Journal*: "Long conversation with Roger Martin du Gard (another great modern writer of France) - esconced in his Materialism like a wild boar in its wallow . . . ; in every objection I make to him he insists on seeing a manifestation of my Christian heredity."<sup>12</sup> In November of the same year he wrote, "I am an unbeliever. I shall never be an ungodly man."<sup>13</sup> In spite of him the power of the Gospel haunts him and even though, in speaking of a sunken submarine whose crew finally all perished in spite of the efforts of the nation to save them, and of prayers offered in their behalf, he rationalizes, "I should like the soul to be raised in such a way that it did not feel pushed to despair on learning suddenly that God has failed it. It is better to be sure of this in advance; and the best means of keeping Him from failing us is to learn to get along without Him,"<sup>14</sup> yet he had already written earlier in the year, "... how complicated

everything is becoming! Lines in all directions and no guidance. No way of knowing what to believe, what to think! . . ."<sup>15</sup> In 1925 he had admitted that he had not yet eased his mind: "My entire effort, since I escaped from my first Christian wrapping, has been to prove to myself that I should get along without it."<sup>16</sup> At the age of fifty-seven, however, he could not feel too confident that this potential refuge was undesirable. Writing of the old woman of eighty-six who could find no happiness and wanted to die, he comments:

It is for such creatures, to help them endure their suffering, to put up with life, that rosaries exist, and prayers, and belief in a better life, in the reward for one's labors. Skepticism, incredulity, are all right for the rich, the happy, the favored, those who don't need hope and for whom the present is enough. And that is just the saddest part of it: poor Grandma does not believe in God, or that anything beyond death will make up for her sorry life.<sup>17</sup>

Mann describes Gide as "one day given to a paroxysm of religious feeling; the next, to veritable ecstasies of carnal lust."<sup>18</sup> This duality of personality was the basis of his morbid brooding over himself; hence his satisfaction in finding celebrities such as Nietzsche, Corneille, Dostoievsky, Flaubert and Stevenson who recognized this double-mindedness. He might also have counted into his catalogue St. James and St. Paul, but to St. Paul he objects: "It is never of Christ but of St. Paul that I run afoul—and it is in him, never in the Gospels, that I find again everything that had driven me away . . . . I believe in miracles more easily than I follow this reasoning: 'But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen'. Here it is he who denies the miracle exactly as if he said: 'If water does not become wine naturally, Christ did not perform the miracle of the wedding feast at Cana.'"<sup>19</sup>

Paul, however, had the edge on Gide for he "certified" that "the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I nei-

<sup>10</sup>Séguéy and Rolo, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup>Michaud, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup>*Journals*, II, 394 for March 1, 1927.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 421, November 6, 1927.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, December 23, 1927.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>18</sup>Mann, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup>*Journals*, II, 180.

ther received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Gide's ascendancy began slowly in 1909 with the founding of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and reached its peak during the 1920's. The intellectual restlessness of French youth at the close of the First World War together with their disillusion at the treaties of 1919, made them fallow soil for any daring new doctrine and it was André Gide who proposed it. His meeting with Oscar Wilde in Algeria in 1893 had cemented his own position by precipitating his final divorce from all the restraints of his childhood. Without his early grounding in the Gospel Gide would undoubtedly have been spoiled through the vain philosophy of Wilde even worse than he was. "The Gospel disturbed and tormented the pagan Wilde. He did not forgive its miracles. The pagan miracle is the work of art: Christianity was encroaching . . . His most ingenious apologues, his most disturbing ironies were designed to bring the two ethics face to face with one another, I mean pagan naturalism and Christian idealism, and to put the latter out of countenance."<sup>20</sup> Wilde was a "heady, high-minded" conversationalist who liked to create witty anecdotes about God's being put to silence by the cleverness of some sinner. Wilde was a successful writer, rich, handsome, popular, compared to Apollo and to Bacchus; yet Gide saw his popularity turn to scorn and his happiness to bitter humiliation. He who had been called the "King of Life" because, as he said, "The gods had given me almost everything,"<sup>21</sup> protested,

"I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure."<sup>22</sup> But he did confess that, "Life cheats us with shadows. We ask for pleasure. It gives it to us, with bitterness and disappointment in its train,"<sup>23</sup> which reminds us that "The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it." Gide had found out by 1941 that, "The soul with no other end than pleasure, grows weary."<sup>24</sup> By his complete renunciation of morals the latter had thought to find freedom, but from what? For "While they promise liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage."

For three decades, then, André Gide has enjoyed the fame of leadership with its doubtful privileges and certain responsibilities and has prayed at last: "I return to thee, Lord Jesus, as to God of whom thou art the living image. I am weary of lying to my heart. It is Thee that I meet again everywhere, now that I had thought to flee from Thee, divine friend of my childhood."<sup>25</sup>

Unbeliever though this octogenarian remains, he acknowledges the practical value of the Gospels through love and reason, but he refuses to bow his head to faith; so he, through his lack of faith, makes "the word of God of none effect," but . . . "What if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?" It remains still "the power of God unto salvation to all who believe."

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>24</sup>André Gide, *Pages de Journal* (New York: Parthenon Books, Inc., 1944), p. 135.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>20</sup>André Gide, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Philosophical Society, 1949), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.