ANDRE GIDE: THE ETHIC OF THE ARTIST

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WRITING so soon after Gide's death, one would like to remember only his charm, the music of his prose and, above all, the prayers addressed to God in *Numquid et Tu*. Yet the influence of such a writer does not cease with his life; as long as French is read the sinuous harmonies of that prose will ceaselessly convey a definite message.

That 'message' renders neutrality impossible. Gide, by subordinating a moral code to aesthetics, of which he declared it 'a dependency', raised fundamental questions which it would be inexcusable to evade. While he repudiated any wish to make 'converts', books are not published in a vacuum. Moreover the *Journal* reveals that, at times, Gide was fully conscious of the power of corruption which he wielded. In fact, if his basic postulate be accepted—the necessity of the full development of one's individuality, unhampered by ethical considerations—a pagan moral code has been adopted. This invalidates the undoubtedly sincere advice which he gave to his readers to cast aside his book —to free themselves from his influence as well as from that of others.

While this fundamental clash between Gide's ethic and that of the Christian is continually touched on by Mr Thomas in his book published just before the French writer's death,[1] it might be argued that, because of the chronological presentation and a certain, perhaps inevitable, lack of synthesis, the idea will be insufficiently clear to the ordinary reader, less familiar than Mr Thomas with the texts. Mr Thomas's attitude is sometimes difficult to assess, mainly, I think, because of his tendency to synopsise Gide's ideas without fully distinguishing between his author's voice and his own. His task was well-nigh impossible; which does not mean either that he was wrong to attempt it or that his book is a failure. On the contrary, it will be indispensable to any student of Gide. But no work could hope to deal exhaustively with a thought as sinuous, as deliberately shaded as Gide's. This difficulty, of which Mr Thomas is himself fully aware, was

[1] D. L. Thomas, *André Gide: the Ethic of the Artist.* (Secker and Warburg; 15s.)

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foreseen by Gide: 'It will not be easy to trace the trajectory of my mind'.

Gide's underlying ambiguity places the critic in an unenviable position. However, while giving due warning that over-simplification is inevitable when only a few pages are available, I shall attempt to summarise Gide's teaching. He believes in the primacy of emotion and sensation over logic and reason; in the simultaneity of various impulses, limited by no objective criterion; in the necessity of immersion in the present, forgetful of yesterday and of tomorrow—thus the fullest measure of joy will be drawn from life. Especially must one remain *disponible*, available, ready to taste of every fruit, whether good or evil; perpetually must one be prepared to pass beyond not only others but also oneself; since anticipation is often preferable to achievement, it will sometimes be better to postpone the actual satisfaction of desire. Detachment must be practised, not of course with the Christian object, but, as Mr Thomas excellently defines it, in order that we may discard 'all that interferes with the full enjoyment of the moment' (p. 53). The *acte gratuit*, the spontaneous, motiveless action, well exemplified, in *Les Caves du Vatican*, by Lafcadio's murder of a complete stranger, forms an integral part of Gide's doctrine. He admits that, fortunately for himself, 'common-sense' saved him from the aberrations of his creations.

Even from this sketchy outline it will be clear that Gide's ethic was essentially hedonistic and individualistic: man's only duty is to become whatever, for good or evil, he potentially is. Everything in life must be accepted and enjoyed; all desires are natural and consequently good.

Purely objectively, the difficulty lies in universalising a philosophy based on individual emotional idiosyncrasies. It would be superfluous to point out that it is completely anti-social. Like Walter Pater's not altogether dissimilar doctrine, it might conceivably be practical if applied to a small intellectual *élite*. Even however from the individualistic standpoint, it demands unusual ruthlessness and detachment. Gide's Prodigal, albeit reluctantly, returns to his father's house. In fact, in his novels Gide makes his doctrine of self-development at any cost reasonably acceptable only by what might be termed a trick of focus. For instance, in *L'Immoraliste*, Michel's wife, the victim of his egoism, remains an unsubstantial figure—otherwise the theme would be quite

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'VEILED MADONNA' (1943) Private Collection

Oil 48 x 38 inches

[*By courtesy of Ashley Galleries*

[See article 'Roy de Maistre', p.219]

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DEPOSITION (1947)
'British Council Collection'

Oil 60 x 48 inches

[*By courtesy of Ashley Galleries*

[See article 'Roy de Maistre', p.219]

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insufferable; in *La Porte étroite*, Jerome, whose life is ruined by Alissa's peculiar belief that salvation is a solitary achievement, is never more than a rather wooden individual. Do we even get a fair version of the feelings of the Pastor's wife in *La Symphonie pastorale*?

It must naturally be remembered that Gide's code represents a reaction against the excessive rationalism of the preceding age. Logically, his theory of 'outpassing' should have led to infinity and to God. How close he was to this we shall never know. Up to about 1917 the Christian influence is, despite everything, clear in his work. *Numquid et Tu*, written during the 1914-18 war, was probably the high point of his spiritual crisis. But when it was published some years afterwards his choice was already made: he had turned his back on his Christian youth. His later writings lack a resonance which, even in its perversity, was essentially spiritual.

Mr Thomas describes Gide's mother as 'a devout Catholic' (p. 16); it is usually stated that, like his father, she was a Protestant, although of Catholic origin. This seems more likely, as Gide's Christianity, such as it is, is definitely of a Protestant nature. What is certain is that, at times, Gide hungered for God and regretted the mystical ardour of his devout if troubled adolescence. In general, however, his God was a pantheistic manifestation to be sought 'only everywhere': in all joy, in all voluptuousness. As Mr Thomas well remarks, God was no more than 'the projection of his sensual fervour' (p. 83). A little earlier Mr Thomas has stated that Gide was 'deeply imbued with Christian feeling' (p. 78). This seems a little ambiguous, unqualified as it is; it would seem better to say that he was undoubtedly and inevitably marked by the environment of his youth. He consistently refused even to consider the possibility of survival after death. In fact, his quest for God was transposed on to the same plane as his quest for earthly pleasures. This is naturally a very bald statement of what Mr Thomas, not without humour, refers to as 'Gide's complicated traffic with Divinity'.

One of Gide's most disconcerting aspects is his life-long veneration of Christ. It must be understood that his constant effort was to 'dechristianise' Jesus, whom he considered to have been 'annexed' by the clergy. His deformation of Gospel texts, in order to make of Christ a Gidian hero, was, in Mr Thomas's words, 'flagrantly sophistical' (p. 104).

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Yet, despite the nature of Gide's thought, it would be unjust and foolish to deny his qualities: sincerity and courage. That his sincerity was not absolute is, of course, a fact: he was at times capable of a considerable amount of equivocation about the moral content of his books, for example. That he genuinely strove to be sincere both with himself and with others is no less true. Naturally, however, the cult of sincerity, to the exclusion of other virtues, leads, as Mr Thomas remarks to 'an equation of values: evil [acquiring] parity with good' (p. 7). Yet that sincerity it was which, for instance, led Gide first to seek in Communism a substitute for the religion he had abandoned and, then, to publish a fair and balanced account of his disappointment with the system.

I have not attempted to discuss here Gide the artist—possibly the most important subject of all. The characters in his novels are probably too much reflections of his potential 'selves', too steeped in Gidian atmosphere for him ever to rank among the really great novelists. When we consider him as a stylist, however, the position is very different. Fundamentally his ideas, which are new only in so far as they represent the systematic transposition of immoralism into a code, are so dangerous only because of the insidious charm of his writing. Inhuman would be the man who could read *Les Nourritures terrestres* without paying tribute, however reluctantly, to the almost plastic beauty which veils the expression of naked desire. There, and even more disturbingly in the later more classical prose, we find the distilled essence of disquiet. His frequent use of Christian phraseology—and in this he was not unlike Renan—adds a further troubling appeal.

It was this charm of style, together with the glorification of self-development, which so greatly influenced those who grew up in the early twenties. We remember Claudel's severe words to Gide: 'You take upon yourself the responsibility for the souls whose loss you cause'. While we are far from suggesting that Gide has ceased to be a living force, it seems unlikely that the Gidian fervour of those years will ever again be attained. Harder and more tempered generations have since arisen and, while they may follow false gods, it is improbable that they will turn to Ménalque for their creed.

Yet, while excusing and justifying nothing, we cannot forget Gide's kindness to his friends, nor his efforts to improve man's material welfare as instanced by his exposure of colonial exploita-

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tion. Above all, let us remember that, when Henri Ghéon was hovering on the verge of conversion, it was Gide who, by declaring his hesitations at that point inexcusable, encouraged him to take the final step. Mindful of the parable of the Prodigal Son, we may hope, with François Mauriac, that, in his last moments, Gide finally discovered the endless vistas of that infinity which he had sought in vain along earthly paths.

ROY DE MAISTRE

William Gibson

Keeper of the National Gallery

ONE of the ablest critics of contemporary art has distinguished two groups among the more abstract types of painting today. The one, deriving through cubism from Cézanne and Seurat, is characterised by this critic as intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometric, rectilinear and classical. The other, deriving from Gauguin through *fauvisme*, and especially Matisse, he defines as instinctive and emotional, organic or biomorphic, curvilinear and romantic.

The opposition of these two groups is the modern equivalent of the old opposition of the classical and the romantic or, to formulate the distinction in still more general terms, it might be said to represent the eternal distinction between the draughtsman painter and the colourist. It is to the former that the art of Mr de Maistre belongs. He is the leading exponent in this country of the later developments of cubism. His conventions are personal to himself, being dictated by his personal experiences, but his point of view is analogous to that shewn in recent work by the continental artists who created cubism.

Like theirs, Mr de Maistre's pictures retain a relationship to natural appearances absent from the most extreme forms of contemporary abstract art. Mr de Maistre takes for his theme the emotional experience provoked by some event, real or imaginary, which has struck his imagination. The ceremony of the coronation, for example, has inspired a picture which he has named *The Procession.* Form and colour are his means of expression, so that the forms and colours of the scene which has inspired him are of

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