

## Amyntas

A.Gide

July 3-4, 2006

*Today I reread my travel notes. Publish them - for whom? They will be like those resinous secretions which yield their perfume only when warmed by the hand that holds them.*

Yes indeed why? This is an English translation of a series of notes from Gide's travel in North Africa during a rough ten year period from 1896 to 1904. They do not constitute a continuous narrative, but are in the nature of snapshots suspended halfway between poetry and prose. Their purpose is to evoke, not to explain. Hence there is much about the color of the sky, the heat of the blazing sun, the soft mud after a continuous drizzle, the aromatic astringence of a pomegranate. Gide is travelling, sometimes alone, sometimes with his wife, but if so she is no presence, only the occasional use of a 'us' rather than an 'me' reveals a plurality. But what is his wife doing there? Notoriously Gide is out for homosexual experience. There are many young Arab boys referred to, just as in the travel documentaries of a Thesiger, or in the reports by a Isherwood, in the that case young Arab replaced by young German<sup>1</sup>. Gide spends a lot of time in cafés, where no tourist dare to tread. He smokes kef and inhales the stark Arabian night. 'Nothing compares to the first contact' he laments, echoing sentiments already expressed

*No; a futile thing. One can see the same place twenty times over - never again anew. You look back, you look more, you see less. Perhaps you understand better...but the enchanting astonishment is no longer there.*

and furthermore 'But the clients, alas! have changed; now everything seems stale to me; I am no longer young'. Gide is thirty-one.

A collection like this, not unlike that of poetry, depends on the arresting images. As a salute to a passing train, the small shepherd divests himself of his gandoura, standing exposed, one goat among the other goats. Or upon the poignancy of a philosophical reflection. Death is necessary for Art. The Greeks shrunk from it and defied it all the way to the brink of the grave and produced wonderful Art as a consequence. The Arab on the other hand does not fear death, as a result there is no want of artists, only of Art itself. Had Christianity really succeeded in making the promise of eternal life seem a certainty, likewise there would have been no Cathedrals, no *cantico del sole*. Francesco de Assisi may have thought them, but would hardly have bothered writing them down, why give the mere mortal a permanent record?

One hundred years ago there were tourists. Too many tourists of course, but Gide had at the time no inkling of the real pest of mass-tourism to come half a century later. The crowd bends towards Mecca three times over, as if bowed under the wind of prayer, their foreheads touching the ground. They are being photographed by giggling tourists, among them some nuns, parodying the voice of the holy man orchestrating the event. They

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<sup>1</sup> As an innocent reader of 'Goodbye to the Berlin' I used to be puzzled by all the references to boys on camping-trips

worship another God, Gide remarks, and as a consequence feel very superior.

Gide travels in Tunisia and Algiers. He walks the cities, he goes off into the desert, and he visits the oases. There is appalling poverty, hunger, destitution. The Arab boys are very handsome, but sometimes it is the women who are beautiful and the men ugly. Once he witnesses a strange ritual, women dipping their hair in a vat of water, then dancing in abandonment to divest themselves of bad spirits. An older woman presides, and among the lustful dancers is also a Jewish woman. At another time he is instructed in the travails of the well-digger, letting themselves descend some sixty meters, their lives dangling from thin ropes, in constant danger of catastrophic asphyxiation.

Gide is the privileged visitor. Free to foray and then to leave. Just as the reader.

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