

Strait is the Gate

A Gide

February 19-21, 2014

In my youth I was a fan of Andre Gide. I read an English translation of his 'The Counterfeiters' in the late summer of 1973. The kind of self-referential meta-fiction it represented to my mind greatly excited me as it is wont to do with youth without proper experience save that of thought and thinking. It inspired me to write a novel myself. Subsequently I bought quite a few of his books in English translation but for some reason I never got around to read them. His autobiography of his childhood I plucked out of my shelves as late as a year ago, while the present book I picked almost at random, on the look out for a short work, quickly to be devoured. The book may have been present in my library for almost forty years. Its pages have yellowed and the paper feels old but is thick and sturdy enough not to be brittle and prone to disintegration as old autumnal leaves are.

The story is a melodramatic one. The protagonist has fallen in love with his cousin, a beautiful girl and young woman two years his elder and by name of Alissa. There is also a younger sister Juliet, and a simpleton of a young brother. With the younger sister he plays, with the older he thinks. They are a couple, but should they be engaged? The protagonist professes his love, the cousin holds back, after all she is older and he will tire. He opens his heart to the younger sister and a common friend, who falls in love with the former, only to find out that she really loves the protagonist, who is aghast at her revelation.

Juliet soon thereafter marries an older ugly man who has taken a fancy to her and who in the eyes of her father and her aunt is a good match catch and moves down to his vineyard in the vicinity of Nimes and bears him many children. The protagonist and Alissa carry on an intensive correspondence but their emotions are so high strung by their self-imposed restrictions that when they actually meet in the flesh, they have nothing to say to each other, or at least nothing that would meet with their expectations. Alissa withdraws and refuses to marry him. They see less and less of each other, in spite of the fact that subsequent meetings are more satisfactory if highly tense. Once many years later the protagonist comes by her place and to his great surprise she calls for him. How did she know that he was there? It transpires that she calls for him every night. He is aghast at her pallor and emaciation fearing seriously for her health. He leaves, writes to Juliet, only to find out a month later that Alissa is dead. He receives her journal, which is solely concerned with her love for him. How she only pretended not to love him, and how much she really craved him. The reading of those letter is a bitter and painful experience to him. Should he have been more forthright?

As we all know Gide married his cousin. Whether the marriage was consummated may be source for some speculation as the sexual interest of Gide focused on young boys. It eventually dissolved. How much of the novel is actually autobiographical, and if so how much of Alissa is really Gide himself? The most romantic love is of course the unrequited. In this tale Gide manages to make the love unrequited for both parties. Had

it been consummated at an earlier stage it might have simply faded away as many teenage crushes do. Love is only truly tragic and inaccessible in the imagination of a fervent mind. It soon loses its allure in real life. And conversely an earthy relationship not based on love but convenience may in the end turn out more satisfactory, as the case of Juliet seems to illustrate, although of course such an interpretation would be considered rather controversial. And why does Alissa reject him? Of course out of some higher principle, which at the time, can be no other than a religious one. A rejection of earthy love between two people of the flesh. In fact the title of the novel comes from the Bible (Matthew 7:41) with which Gide must have been very familiar.

The setting is Normandy, yet another autobiographical touch as Gide had relatives there and spent many a summer in its fold. But there is little sense of landscape and setting, save for some references to the rugged coast and the sea.

The English translation by Dorothy Bussy avoids translating the poetry. Maybe out of humbleness or because a reading knowledge of French was assumed of cultivated readers?

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