

Les Faux-monnayeurs

A. Gide

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As a child I made a distinction between childrens books and adults. Towards the latter I was suspicious, they were no doubt quite boring. As I grew older, the idea of a boring book took on some intriguing aspects. Maybe a good and serious book had to be boring? I had also at the time started to tire of the simple-minded books which were the lot for children and started to appreciate narrations with far more detail. My parents had a library and I used to browse through it. One book greatly surprised me, it was vividly illustrated by what could only be addressed to children. Why had my parents made a secret of this book? One reason was of course that it was in English, in fact Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland' a book which I never came across in childhood, I probably would have appreciated it a lot. But there were books in Swedish as well, and one of them was a Swedish translation of Gide's 'Les Faux-monnayeurs'. I think I read a few chapters, and I have a vague recollection of someone being on a boat. I guess this was as far as I made it. It was hence readable but I did not pursue it. However, Gide must have been a well-known name to me as when he was brought up in literature classes in high-school our teacher referred, somewhat giggling, to the home-erotic over-tunes in his auto-biography, and I thought that this I did not know about him.

In the early fall of 1973, when I had moved in with my then girl-friend to an apartment on 24 Ware Street, not that far from Harvard Yard, I started to read an English translation, and it made a very deep impression on me. In fact so deep that I got inspired to write my own novel. So why did this book make such an impression on me? Clearly due to its meta-fictional quality, which was further emphasized by having a translation of the concomitant journal of Gide included. It gave me, or at least I thought so, an insight into the process of writing that intrigued me a lot. This was on many levels. First there was a straight-forward narrative with an almighty narrator who knows everything in principle. Interspersed with it were excerpts from the journal by one of the characters who were in the process of writing a book with the same title as the book itself. Did we witness here the meta-level embedded in what it was describing? Was that character, incidentally Edouard by name, actually writing the very book I was reading! Such stratagems are now looked down upon as being cheap. but at the time Gide wrote the novel in the 20's it was avantgarde on level with the works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

I reread the book over thirty years later using the Swedish edition picked out of my parents library. I was severely disappointed, all the magic was gone. I have no recollection of the reading as to particulars, and when I retrieved the essay I wrote on it, I learn that to my surprise I had remembered next to nothing about its plot, as far as one can talk about a plot at all. This experience I had again when now reading it in French (then checking with the Swedish translation lest I would have missed something). In many ways it was like reading it for the first time as I had no clue how it would proceed. In fact I seemed to remember nothing of the refreshments I no doubt must have had back in 2006,

and what I remember I remembered already back then. There were a few things which stood out from my previous readings. The friendship between Bernard and Olivier, the benign uncle Edouard, and maybe vaguely the character of Passavant, the rival of Edouard (both being pederasts at heart?) and then lady Griffith, although her character is rather marginal and dwelled on only initially. Now as I was back then I was surprised that I had completely forgotten about Laura and the pregnancy, as well as her siblings. And the concluding suicide by Boris, which is really pathetic and the most painfully moving in the whole novel, providing a fitting end, seems to have been completely suppressed. But one thing I have never forgotten from the book was the following remark¹

On ne découvre pas de terre nouvelle sans consentir à perdre de vue, d'abord et longtemps tout rivage. Mais nos écrivains craignent le large; ce ne sont que de côtoyeurs.

The book has no plot, so the different chapters are not really attached to each other, but somehow can almost be read as independent components complete in themselves. As such many of the vignettes are as small mini-novels or rather short short-stories by themselves. This was also something that appealed to me as a would-be novelist. I fantasized to present myself small fragments of a bigger story, as if snippets from a huge novel, without having to write it yourself, only to show your mastery and indicating that this was only the tip of an ice-berg. Do not snippets stimulate the imagination deeper than having everything spelled out? Gide himself toyed with the idea as a young man to write a journal of the writing of an imaginary novel arguing that this would be more interesting than the novel itself, something which is clearly reflected in the present novel. A novel may be pure fiction, but to make it fiction by itself, is clearly to bring the game to a higher level.

Now in retrospect I must admit that some of those snippets of Gide are masterly done. I am thinking in particular of the depiction of a marriage of two old people who have grown old not so much together as separately and find themselves at loggerheads with each other. When I was young such a presentation would have had almost no interest to me, now I can understand it much better. There are also scenes which are very funny, as when Edouard expounding on novel writing up in the Swiss retreat. Regretting that authors did not keep journals of their works as they composed them. Such works would be even more interesting than the books themselves (maybe being the perfect substitute and saving the authors from the onerous work of writing them out themselves?). This clearly alludes to Gide's youthful fantasies as noted above. The general structure of the book is to give vignettes in which the author presents two people having an exalted conversation mixed with everyday trivia. Did I not take this rather *ad notam* when I wrote my own novel? There are also some imaginative digressions. In one Bernard is made to follow an angel, as in a dream (but not a dream?), in which he ends up wrestles with the angel, as in

¹ *On ne peut découvrir de nouvelles terres sans consentir à perdre la rive de vue pendant longtemps.* In fact this was the quote I found on internet, the actual quote in the book is hence different. The English translation of which I copied out back then on a piece of paper attaching to a poster I had bought a few years previously in a store in Chester, Wales, showing a depiction of a man attached to an air-balloon coasting over an empty expanse of water. I took such a proposition very seriously.

the well-known Biblical story. Or more interesting still, at least from my point of view, the omniscient narrator taking a pause and pondering the evolution of his characters. Some he are fond of, and others he has lost interest in, such as lady Griffith. And the characters are they predictable or not? He wonders. Does he know what to do with them, or what they will do to him? This must have delighted me at the time, but it seemed to have made no impression on my second reading.

As noted my third reading was a definite improvement on my second, maybe the fact that it was read in French contributed to this rejuvenation of the experience. It certainly made possible at least a partial revival of the magic of my first reading.

So should this be thought merely as a literary experiment or does it speak to graver concerns of Gide, who had a Protestant education, relatively rare in France, and whose works often are devoted to moral and religious questions, which may make you think of Dostoevsky. In fact the Russian writer certainly has left his mark on his writing, not only in explicit references but also in the kind of discussions relating to morality and the possible existence of God (and the Devil). There certainly is a Dostoevskian touch to many of the interchanges between characters, and also to the style of presentation, where plot is secondary, and meeting of souls paramount. This is also something that struck me during my second reading, wondering whether Gide was aware of the existence of Dostoevsky's notebooks. In the notebooks of the *Idiot*, which I read with deep fascination in my twenties, characters undergo drastic metamorphisms changing from good to evil and back as well as switching from one gender to another, thus appearing even more fluid than in dreams. This was of course a consequence of the author trying out his characters from ever new angles. Thus the finished product becomes just a 2-dimensional slice of the 3-dimensional imaginative cloud of the writers imagination, Some of those metaphysical exchanges are more pronounced Dostoevskian than others, particular the outpourings at the very end of the book by the grandfather of the unfortunate Boris who had been tricked to commit suicide in public by a most depraved character (Gh ridanisol), created to display absolute evil. The distraught grandfather, identical with the unhappy husband, speaks about God and the Devil, and how God is mute while the Devil is talking all the time, maybe they are even the same.

Other moral issues is that of Vincent, the older brother of Olivier, who during a visit to a sanatorium in the Pyrenees, has made a newly married woman pregnant. The woman is Laura, whose predicament I had totally forgotten, who turns out to be a friend of Edouard and capturing the romantic imagination of Bernard, who later on engages in a brief sensual interaction with a younger sister (*la soeur cadette de Laura*). Laura has married a kind and honorable but unremarkable man, a literary academics working in Cambridge. He is ready to forgive her everything, bringing up her child as were it his own. This of course brings to mind the very first chapter in the novel, when Bernard finds out by accident that his putative father is not his biological, but who had nevertheless bonded with him after an affair of his wife. The epistolary revelation of which leads Bernard to leave home, ostensible grateful that he has no real claim to his ridiculous last name. But such self-sacrifice and magnanimity on the part of Laura's hapless husband only inspires the contempt of the characters of the novel, in particular that of Edouard. Clearly Douvires (the name of the unfortunate cuckolded husband) is no real man, not motivated by real

passions, at most by a vain obligation to act as if he had felt them. Now clearly Laura was left unsatisfied by the marriage, and thus when in a situation where both she and her distracted seducer believed that their lives were about to end and thus that nothing they did would have any consequences beyond that of the moment, they became quite susceptible to sexual exploration. This one thing having occurred, 'shit happens' as they say, the real challenge is to deal with it later. He, Vincent, initially shows good character and honorable intentions, ready to use the savings his parents have made to launch him in a medical career to aid her. Feeling that the sum is inadequate he decides to gamble abetted so by his so-called friend Passavant, and predictably loses it all, only (unpredictably?) to get a second chance and winning it back and much more to boot. But this triumph courtesy of fate makes him proud and depraved and allows him to throw his initial moral compunctions and obligations to the wind and make him realize, with no regrets, that he has no desire to attach her to himself. Instead he is allured by lady Griffith, who appears so much more intriguing than the rather young and inexperienced woman with whom he provisionally dawdled. Vincent takes off for exotic lands with the alluring lady, and we as readers lose sight of them. That we would not do in a more conventional novel. There are indeed many loose threads in the narrative inviting the curiosities of readers to uncoil.

Edouard is the good literary character, while Passavant is his opposite, a rather unsavory character out to dazzle and impress, and as such far more successful in his literary pursuit than the more doggedly working Edouard. Is it not indicative of their different status, that when Edouard arrives in the station in Paris, the bookstores display prominently the latest book by his rival, but of his own not a trace. He comforts himself with the thought that such attention can simply be bought, but that he finds himself above such tricks. For every successful man in the public eyes there are at least ten who deserve such attention better but who are nevertheless ignored.

So what to make of it all? Will I ever reread the book again (when my command of French is stronger?), and if so will it be solely out of sentimental reasons?

April 24-25, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se