

Journal des faux-monnayeurs

A.Gide

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When a young man Gide toyed with the idea of writing a novel about writing a fictional novel. Of the novel no trace only the works and comments upon its writing. This is of course a game that appeals to the adolescent mind and has by now lost much of its immediate and fresh appeal. Now the journal of his novel is in many ways a disappointment, it does not have to much to do with the actual novel itself, it exerts none of the surrealistic fascination that the note books of Dostoevsky do, in fact it is mostly a record of half-baked thoughts and ruminations and episodes, which may or may not have any relevance to the novel itself. As an example of the former is his witnessing of a boy trying to steal an Algerian guide book, something which is repeated in the journal of his alter ego – Edouard – in the novel, almost *ad verbatim* to boot. Somehow this episode must have made such an impression on Gide that he insisted including it in the novel, where it appears artificially attached, with the boy in question now being Georges, the younger brother of Olivier. Somehow it seems out of character and is one of those 'darlings' that could have been killed with no regrets, at least as far as readers are concerned. Other episodes painstakingly documented have no relation at all to anything in the novel. Maybe they turned out to be darlings which were killed.

The passage of losing sight of the land, which made such an impression on me back then, can also be seen in the journal in a preliminary form. More precisely

Naviguer durant des jours et des jours sans aucun terre en vie. Il faudra dans le livre même, user de cette image; la plupart des artistes, savants, etc ... sont des côtoyeurs, et qui se croient perdus dès qu'ils perdent la terre de vue. – Vertige de l'espace vide.

More interestingly are his thoughts on presentation, which brings to mind the remarks by the mathematician Hermann Weyl in the preface to the first edition (1938) to 'Classical Groups'.

The stringent precision attainable for mathematical thought has led many authors to a mode of writing which must give the reader an impression of being shut up in a brightly illuminated cell where every detail sticks out with the same dazzling clarity, but without relief. I prefer the open landscape under a clear sky with its depth of perspective, where the wealth of sharply defined nearby details gradually fades away towards the horizon.

Gide writes about his friend and fellow writer

Je reprocherais à Martin du Gard l'allure discursive de son récit; se promenant ainsi tout le long des années, sa lanterne de romancier éclaire toujours de face les événements qu'il considère, chacun de ceux-ci vient à son tour au premier plan; jamais leur lignes ne se mêlent et, pas plus qu'il n'y a d'ombre, il n'y a de

perspective.

He also faults Tolstoy for the same thing, of painting panoramas as if art was a matter of painting a picture. Instead Gide advises

Étudier d'abord le point d'où doit affluer la lumière; toutes les ombres en dépendent. Chaque figure repose et s'appuie sur son ombre.

As to the characters of a novel, Gide remarks

Il y a un genre de personnage qui ne peut parler que comme pour une 'galerie' imaginaire (impossibilité d'être sincère, même dans le monologue) – mais c'est là un cas tout spécial, et qui ne peut prendre tout son relief que si les autres, au contraire, demeurent parfaitement naturels.

As to *esprit faux* Gide refers to those people who always attribute reasons to what they do

[..] c'est celui qui éprouve le besoin de se persuader qu'il a raison de commettre tous les actes qu'il a envie de commettre; celui qui met sa raison au service de ses instincts, de ses intérêts, ce qui est pire, ou de son tempérament.

This makes you think of David Hume's diction that reason is but the slave of the instincts, and quite possibly it is this that Gide has had in mind, although in the case of Hume this is meant as a universal truth, but for Gide a mere anomaly which he connects with hypocrisy *Le véritable hypocrite est celui qui ne se aperçoit plus de mensonge, celui qui ment avec sincérité.* But Gide is *un romancier* not *un philosophe*.

Reality in the novel, or as Gide puts it *[qui] peut sortir le roman de son ornière réaliste.* For that reason Gide admits to be attracted by the epic. He regrets that

Le roman s'est toujours, et dans tous les pays, jusqu'à présent cramponné à la réalité. Notre grande époque littéraire n'a su porter son effort d'idéalisation que dans le drame.

Maybe this is why the novel has remained so popular, one is tempted to add. This ties up with what Gide calls the purity of the novel, or more generally of art. He admits that he has always *..eu horreur de ce que l'on appelé 'la synthèse des arts'* and holds out Wagner as a cautionary case. Instead

Purger le roman de tous les éléments qui n'appartient pas spécifiquement au roman. On n'obtient rien de bon par le mélange.

On a day written in Cuverville on October 11 he remarks

C'est à l'envers que se développe, assez bizarrement, mon roman. C'est-à-dire que je découvre sans cesse que ceci ou cela, qui se passait auparavant, devrait être dit. Les chapitres, ainsi, s'ajoutent, non point les uns après les autres, mais repoussant toujours plus loin celui que je pensais d'abord devoir être le premier.

Hardly surprising one would say, for all what it is worth, when I some years ago again tried my hands at a novel (as a finger exercise I hasten to add) I wrote the different parts in some haphazard order, just as you do when you shoot a film, which is made up by scenes.

From the remark of Gide one surmises that he had as default at least a planning of the novel, but as it evolved and unfolded it surprised him.

He does occasionally discuss the characters of the novel. In particular he writes

Vincent et Olivier ont de très bon et noble instincts et s'élancent dans la vie avec une vision très haute de ce qu'ils doivent faire; – mais ils sont de caractère faible et se lassent entamer. Bernard au contraire. réagit contre chaque influence et se rebiffe.

In the case of Vincent he ends up acting very callously towards the women he has brought into embarrassing troubles, and Olivier is too easily seduced by the flattery and superficial charm of Passavant. Were they meant to be weak characters or did they just turn out that way while he was writing creating circumstances to which they yielded? Does an author invent or does he discover? One can look at it in many ways. Much of the writing of a novel consists in the transformation of reality in particular as it is remembered by the author, and that is something outside him. It is well-known that many characters in novels are actually based on real models. Then how much should you stick to the facts, i.e. your memories, or how much should you invent? The character Le Perousse, the old piano teacher of the novel is based on an actual piano teacher of Gide in his childhood. This man made quite an impression on him. As a consequence in his first drafts he stuck to close to his memories of him and realized that it was not good, that he needed to free himself and invent more. But *Le difficile c'est d'inventer, là ou le souvenir vous retient..* It is hard to invent from scratch, in fact is it even possible? As I often point out, invention cannot take place in a void, it needs to react to something, that something can be a memory to which you then becomes free to distance yourself from, but without its solidity that exerts an opposite force as in Newton, it would be as impossible to kick away as from a cloud. In fact his friend du Gard conveys a quote from Thibaudet

Il est rare qu'un auteur qui s'expose dans un roman, fasse de lui un individu ressemblant, je veux dire vivant... Le romancier authentique crée ses persinnages avec les directiones infinies de sa vie possible; le romancier factice les crée avec la ligne unique de sa vie réelle. Le génie du roman fait vivre le possible; il ne fait pas revivre le réel.

But yet invention is not free as well even when free of (conscious) memory. There is an intrinsic logic to a work of fiction, even when it is not tied to reality through personal memory. Gide writes admonishingly

Le mauvais romancier construit ses personages ; il les dirige et les fait parler. Le vrai romancier les écoute et les regarde agir; il les entend parler dès avant que de les connaître, est c'est d'après ce qu'il leur entend dire qu'il comprend peu à peu qui ils sont.

A case in point is Profitendieu, I assume that he is referring to the father. Gide writes

Profitendieu est à redessiner complètement. Je ne le connaissais pas suffisamment, quand il s'est lancé dans mon livre. Il est beaucoup plus intéressant que je ne le savais.

Returning to Vincent, Gide makes quite a lot out of his descent into immorality, in fact he envisions him as identifying with the devil and hence later on be the spring board for some Dosteevskian rumination on the nature of evil. The first step of this development is his involvement with Lilian, also known as lady Griffith, married out of pure convenience, which in her case means money pure and simple. To the reader (as well as to Vincent of course) she may come across as an intriguing character but not to Gide.

Le caractère de Lady Griffith est et doit rester comme hors du livre. Elle n'a pas d'existence morale, ni même à vrai dire de personnalité; c'est là ce qui va gêner Vincent bientôt. Ces deux amants sont faits pour se haïr

A key note struck by Gide is *Ne jamais profiter de l'elan acquis* by this he means that writing creates its own momentum, but warns to take advantage from it. Each chapter should be started anew, by which I suspect that this is the only way to maintain a struggle, things should not be too easy.

The division of the book into three parts turns out to be an afterthought, initially Gide thought of it in two parts, and feared an imbalance. He remarks

Encore que les fins précipitées me plaisant, et que j'aime à donner a mes livres l'aspect du sonnet qui commence en quatrains et finit en tercets. Il me parait toujours inutile d'expliquer tout au long ce que le lecture attentif a compris; c'est lui faire injure. L'imagination jailit d'autant plus haut que l'extrémité du conduit se fait plus étroit, etc...

The more resistance to the imagination the higher it rises.

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