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Conversation with André Gide.

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Conversation with André Gide
A YOUNG MAN OF ALMOST EIGHTY;
ANDRÉ GIDE

FRANZ J. HORCH
AUTHORS' REPRESENTATIVE
325 EAST 57th ST., NEW YORK 22, N.Y.

By K l a u s M a n n

It was good to see him again -- and to find him unchanged. He certainly does not look his seventy-eight years; there is nothing senile about his appearance or mentality. His speech, his gait, his gestures, his expression have maintained the youthfulness which is part and parcel of his very nature and genius. As I shook hands with this alert young man of almost eighty, the time that had elapsed since our last meeting seemed to become unreal, to lose its weight and its significance.

How curious! how touching! -- to walk once more along the sleepy street where his home is situated: the placid Rue Vaneau on the left bank of the Seine river, not far from the Boulevard St. Germain. And there is the familiar building, Numéro 1 bis -- rather a colorless, prosaic apartment house. Everything is just as it used to be -- the old concierge smiling at me from behind her window ("Oui, Monsieur Gide est chez lui -- sixième étage à gauche..."); the rickety, slow-moving elevator where one feels ^{suspended in space in the} ~~like in an~~ alarmingly fragile cage ~~hovering~~ between heaven and earth; the dark corridor leading to his apartment; the picturesque mess in his studio -- those inevitable, ever-lasting masses of books, papers and magazines piling up on shelves, chairs and tables.

When was it that I last talked to him, in this very studio? I was leaving then for the United States and called on Gide to say "au revoir." Was that yesterday? No, it must have been in 1938, just a few days before the "Munich" crisis -- more than nine years ago...

And what years! Years of tragedy and struggle -- for France, for Europe, for the world; bitter, eventful years for this great citizen

of the world, this good European and good Frenchman, André Gide.

"It was pretty bad, at times," he told me -- not complainingly but in a dry, matter-of-fact tone. "Particularly the first six or seven months following the ^{collapse of France} ~~debacle~~. From June, 1940, up to March, 1941 -- that's when my morale was at its lowest, when I really felt discouraged and despondent, almost without hope..."

His confession was hardly apt to surprise me. Not only did I recall the letters he had written to me, at that time, from the South of France -- short, cautiously worded messages expressing the sender's feelings in veiled, yet unmistakable terms --; but I had also read the printed version of his ~~diary~~, his Journal, 1939-1942 (published by Gallimard in 1946). As he was now mentioning his past dejection, the moral low he had passed through in those gloomy days, I could not help remembering certain ^{painful} passages from that continuous monologue and lifelong self-analysis which is the Diary of André Gide.

It would have been easy for him to omit those embarrassing phrases, to conceal them from a public which -- as he must have foreseen -- would certainly gloat over them; but ^{this} ~~such a posterior~~ correction would have been incompatible with his sense of pride and probity. Yes, it was just like Gide to startle and antagonize his critics in 1944 (when his Journal was first published in New York, Algiers and Switzerland) by presenting an unabridged, unchanged version of what he had thought and written down in 1940 and 1941.

During a certain period -- it did not last very long -- he had lost confidence in France, in Allied victory, maybe in the future of Man and civilization altogether. ~~was that defeatism? We may call it so. But why should a man be ashamed of a momentary discouragement? The deeper the depression through which he passed, the more impressive his moral victory in overcoming it.~~

Yes, there may have been moments when the lonely wanderer -- "si vieux déjà et si près de quitter la vie," as he put it, in the melancholy vein characteristic of that period -- could not help asking himself whether it was really worthwhile to go on struggling, fighting, resisting. *The mood - downward. His last book poor.* Would it not be wiser to accept the inevitable? "Je sens en moi d'illimitées possibilités d'acceptation," he observed in his diary (September 5, 1940). *it is a state of joy ...* But a few months later, in the spring of 1941, his mood has already changed: he is his old self again -- courageous, militant, uncompromising. *Had changed. He appeared. "Madame Thérèse" (1941)*

The "Imaginary Interviews" -- first published in Le Figaro, then still a comparatively independent paper in the Unoccupied Zone -- clearly indicate the reawakening of his fighting spirit. Of course, he had to be careful and cunning; *it would have been suicidal, under the circumstances, to venture on an open attack against occupied Paris and collaborationist Vichy. But what an American observer, at the time, described as Gide's "subtle rear-guard action" -- that is, the series of articles published under the title of Interviews Imaginaires -- will be remembered as an outstanding sample of both intellectual prowess and polemic skill. Considering the strictness and vigilance of censorship in Vichy France, it is indeed amazing how much this fearless old rebel and nonconformist actually risked to say, with what elegant casualness he put across his subversive ideas.*

A few months after the publication of his "Imaginary Interviews," in May 1942, Gide left France for Tunis -- just in time to avoid being caught by the Germans who were about to take over the hitherto unoccupied zone. *(in America.)* In the summer of the same year, I began working on a critical biography, André Gide: And the Crisis of Modern Thought, (Creative Age Press).

While working on my book, I did not have any direct contact with

the man whose work and character I was trying to analyze; there was no way for me to consult the subject of my thoughts and studies, to profit by his advice or criticism. It was the time of the Allied landing in Morocco; the Germans occupied Tunis. Gide, who had escaped from Wehrmacht-infested France, found himself trapped in North Africa -- cut off from freedom and civilization, a helpless prisoner behind the Brown Curtain.

With Tunis controlled by the enemy, the author of Interviews Imaginaires and other objectionable writings had to go underground -- leading the furtive, shady life of those social outcasts whose drama he had often described with so much insight and sympathy.

"It's a funny sensation, you know," he said to me, remembering those trying days, " -- to hide, to feel like a criminal... Imagine! I let my beard grow to make myself unrecognizable. Must have looked pretty awful..." He chuckled, then added -- serious again, "How we were waiting for you Americans! How impatient we were!" --

When my book on André Gide appeared, ^{spring} ~~February~~ 1945, I was busy with close-order drill, hikes, K.P. and ^(similar diversions) ~~other~~ entertainments in a training camp near Little Rock, Arkansas. At that point, Tunis was already liberated; Gide -- nicely shaved: looking like Gide again -- had been among the first to hail the Anglo-American colors as they replaced the swastika on the public buildings of the North-African capital.

Of course, anxiety and suspense continued: France was still occupied, the war was still going on, every day brought destruction of human lives and cultural monuments. But unmistakably, there was a change for the better: Tunis and Stalingrad marked the turning point.

As for Gide's personal life, it resumed gradually its normal rhythm and color. He was free to move again -- if only within the

comparatively narrow area of French North Africa: from Tunis to Algiers, from there to Morocco, back to Tunisia, and so forth. Finally he settled down in Algiers, in the home of friends. He had started working again.

Algiers, during that phase of the war, was not only the center of Free French political life but also the capital of French literature in exile. The most active elements of the intellectual vanguard gathered around Fontaine Magazine -- "la première revue de la France libérée," as the editors proudly called it. For some time Gide contributed to Fontaine. Also, it was the publishing house connected with that review -- Editions E. Charlot -- which brought out the first book by Gide to appear abroad. A collection of essays presented under the title of Attendu que..., the volume contains the Imaginary Interviews, an introduction to Goethe's dramatic work, a paper addressed to a young actress who has to impersonate one of Racine's heroines, and -- as its last but maybe most significant part -- some religious notes of extraordinary inspiration and profundity.

Early in 1944, another literary periodical, L'Arche, began to appear in Algiers, "sous le patronage de André Gide." Like Fontaine, the new magazine tried to mirror and articulate the manifold aspects of the French genius -- temporarily violated and polluted by barbaric invaders. Following the example of its longer established rival, L'Arche made it its policy to combine the fervent patriotism characteristic of political exiles with the cosmopolitan broad-mindedness typical of André Gide's tradition. Even though the name of France was constantly invoked with almost religious veneration and ecstatic affection -- in the columns of L'Arche as in all the other Algerian publications --, the opening manifesto of the magazine stated expressly that a moral renaissance would have no chance to be vital or permanent,

unless it was conceived on a super-national scale: "Une révolution nationale", une révolution en vase close... est un véritable nonsens. La Révolution doit prendre comme aire d'action le monde entier."

The first issue of L'Arche reached me in Italy, somewhere in the Cassino area, where I was then assigned to the "Combat Team" of the Fifth Army's Psychological Warfare Branch. About the same time I received a long letter from André Gide -- dealing with my book, André Gide, which he had read in the meantime. He liked my book. His approval, his cordial and candid comment made me very proud, very happy. "Your essay," he told me in his movingly generous message, "means to me the most gratifying compensation for all my efforts." -- I felt the same way about his letter -- the finest reward for my work I could have possibly hoped for.

"I don't know if you quite realize what enormous pleasure your letter gave me," I was now saying to him. "I'll never forget the moment I read it -- down there, in Italy; standing in line for 'chow', ankle-deep in the mud, cold and hungry and tired... The whole dreary place -- Regimental Headquarters, or whatever it was -- seemed to be brightened up when I had finished reading."

He was kind enough to tell me some more friendly things about the book. -- "But it's not quite up-to-date any more," I interrupted him. "You haven't been idle, after all; at least three or four new volumes by you must have come out since 1943. Let's see, now..."

We discussed some of his recent writings -- particularly Robert, ou l'Intérêt général, a play in five acts (published in L'Arche, 1945) and Thésée (Gallimard, 1946), a novelette presented as the autobiography of Theseus, the Attic hero, son of Aegeus, king of Athens.

"Robert is my problem child," Gide observed, with a sigh and a wry smile. "I suppose those five acts have given me more trouble than

any other job I ever did in my life. For six years I went on laboring on that play -- revising the dialogue, omitting whole scenes and characters, adding ever new touches. What an headache it was! And to no avail... The other day, I read the whole thing to my friend Jouvet. Do you know what he had to say? 'Oui, mon cher ami, il faut se méfier du théâtre!' That was about the only comment he made after the reading. Beware of the theater!"

Yet, just a few days before I went to see him, Gide had been cheered by one of Europe's most exacting, most sophisticated first-night audiences: his dramatization of Franz Kafka's novel, The Trial, with Jean-Louis Barrault in the leading role, was the most widely discussed theatrical event of the season (just as his "Hamlet" translation, presented by the same actor, had been the year before).

"I enjoyed doing The Trial," Gide told me. "I enjoyed it enormously. It's wonderful to work with Barrault, ~~and with Kafka!~~ The more intimately I become acquainted with his genius, the more I admire him. There is something quite uncanny, something positively compelling about the elaborate accuracy, the inexorable realism with which he presents his nightmares... In a sense, it would have been easier for me to adapt Kafka's novel if I loved and respected him a little less. My profound admiration for him proved in fact quite an handicap. I was working under the constant fear to change his style, to misrepresent his ideas, to distort his vision. That's why I tried so hard to follow the original as closely as possible... No, The Trial is not my play: it's Kafka's. Robert is mine, I'm sorry to say."

I felt I had to defend his "problem child." It is true, Robert may be somewhat disappointing from a purely artistic point of view. Rather conventional in its structure and deliberately dry in its diction, the tragicomedy seems to be conceived in as sober a mood as

were, years before, the realistic novelettes, L'Ecole des femmes and Geneviève. But if the five neatly built acts are rather lacking in elan and inspiration, they are all the richer in intellectual suggestions, ~~and surprises~~. For all the brittleness and transparency of its texture, ROBERT is not without weight and persuasion -- a dialectic fugue and comedy of ideas, akin (if only in a minor way) to the classic novel of ideas, The Counterfeiters.

Clearly, it was Gide's ambition to dramatize and thus clarify the predominant social and political philosophies of our time; each character in his play represents a different school of political thought, another attitude towards society. Robert, owner of an industrial plant, is a potential Fascist. When he invokes, suavely and unctuously, the "interest of the nation" -- l'intérêt général --, it's his own interest he actually has in mind. His patriotic virtue is a transparent façade to cover up his lust for power and wealth.

Not much more sympathetic than this cynical hypocrite and exploiter is his main antagonist, Ivan Orlov, a rigid Marxist and dogmatic revolutionary. A militant leader of considerable shrewdness and determination, Ivan is at times impressive but never likeable. Does he care for anything except the party line? Is he a human being or just an automaton serving an abstract cause?

His father, the scholarly Boris Orlov, has more warmth and generosity; but how naive he is! And how hopelessly obsolete are his views and ideals! The nice old gentleman -- a disinterested scientist and upright liberal of the nineteenth-century tradition -- seems to live in a dream world, in an ivory tower, disconnected from reality.

What about the priest who makes his appearance towards the end of the play? May we accept him as a moral leader? To be sure, he is less brutal, less revoltingly insincere than Monsieur Robert; but he,

too -- the representative of the ecclesiastical hierarchy -- is morally weak, cowardly, complacent. Always willing to play along with the powers that be, he tolerates Robert's crimes and defends social inequality, not only as "inevitable" but also as desirable, from the Christian point of view. For if there were no misery in the world -- the abbé argues, sophistically --, how would we be able to practice one of the cardinal Christian virtues, charity?

Is there no hope, then? No light?

Yes: there is Michel. He is Robert's son -- and Robert's most implacable, most spirited enemy. The Prodigal Son -- a mythical archetype for which Gide has an old penchant -- has turned class-conscious: it is against his own class -- the greedy, hypocritical bourgeoisie -- that he directs the heavy fire of his emotional pathos. In contrast to Ivan's cold fanaticism, Michel's revolutionary faith comes from the heart. The young rebel is more sincerely interested in the welfare of the masses, in social progress, than is the calculating, ruthless agitator; he takes Christian ethics more seriously, believes more profoundly in their basic principles, than does the diplomatic clergyman.

A strike takes place in Robert's factory. Michel, the employer's son, sides openly with the strikers. He will be defeated, killed by his father's henchmen. But his sacrifice -- seemingly as futile and absurd as the exploits of Don Quixote -- cannot be wholly lost. By echoing the young man's pure and generous enthusiasm, the author reaffirms his own faith in the sublime potentialities of Man -- malgré tout, after all...

It is the same faith, the same fundamental optimism and unshakeable confidence -- in spite of all dark insights and experiences -- which manifests itself, much more powerfully and enchantingly, in Gide's

Theseus story. Of course, the Hellenic hero is infinitely stronger, more self-assured, more dynamic, than Michel, the spirited ^{but} delicate scion of a decadent bourgeoisie. Theseus, the gallant conqueror of dragons and superstitions, is neither a dreamer nor a diplomat but a man of action. Prometheus-like, he challenges the gods -- without bitterness or jealousy, rather in a playfully competitive fashion. He will not perish, will not lose his way -- not even in the Cretan labyrinth --; for he is fond of life -- its joys, its dangers, its vast promises. He believes in Progress. "Ma grande force," he will tell us as an aging man, "était de croire au progrès."

"It's the finest book you've written since... oh, I don't know: since The Counterfeiters," I said to Gide. "~~It's a fine book.~~"

He nodded, smiled: "Yes, I suppose he's all right, my Thésée... Anyway, it was fun writing the book. None of the worries and pains I experienced in the case of Robert! Thésée was written in a state of joy, almost of exaltation."

The novel testifies to the authenticity, the vitality of that creative joy. Thésée -- "ce dernier récit," as Gide calls it, somewhat ambiguously, in his dedication -- exhales indeed an extraordinary sense of freshness and serenity. It's a remarkably graceful -- an unusually pleasant little masterpiece, rich in both charm and wisdom. Clearly, the renewed contact with antiquity, the reunion with the heroes of his youth, had a tonic, rejuvenating effect on this old lover of Hellenic beauty.

"How good it was to get away, for a little while, from those so-called 'timely problems'!" he said to me. "What relief to forget all about the bitter political questions I tried to deal with, dutifully, in Robert! -- But, of course," he added, as an afterthought, "such forgetfulness must not last. There we are -- confronted by those very

real, very vital conflicts and dilemmas. We have to face them -- there's no other choice."

We talked about some of those disturbing and crucial issues. While inexorably opposed to Communism in its present form, Gide does not follow the example of other ~~and~~ ex-radicals who have turned into professional Red-baiters. To him, bigotry and brutality, narrow-mindedness and selfishness are revolting, inexcusable -- no matter in what disguise they may appear.

In contrast to his friend André Malraux -- one of De Gaulle's most active champions and most influential advisors -- , Gide does not seem to regard "le Général" as the God-sent savior of France. However noble and sensible the general's intentions may be, the regime of a "strong man" can always degenerate into a dictatorship -- especially if that strong man happens to be an ardent militarist...

"Not that I know the solution for our national emergency or the international crisis," Gide said to me, shrugging his shoulders in resignation and bewilderment. "Believe me, I always am at a loss -- in fact, I feel quite embarrassed when young people come to me for advice or comfort. Frankly, I don't know what to tell them..."

He quoted some of those unanswerable questions he had been asked by confused and despondent boys -- for instance, in Germany where he had recently attended a youth meeting. "Now, how can you preach democracy or Christian ethics to young men who have first been indoctrinated with Nazi slogans -- and then left to a bleak, empty life in ruined cities? The more intelligent and sensitive they are, the more desperate they become!"

It was by no means only in Germany that Gide found young people in such an alarming state -- disconcerted, lacking in faith and purpose, deeply afraid of the future. "It's the same thing everywhere," he

sighed. "Take this letter from a student in Beyrouth -- a highly gifted young Arab. The first message I had from him sounded like an SOS signal, a heart-breaking cry for help. In my answer, I tried to warn him against despair and nihilism; I admonished him not to lose hope. But that was not at all what he wanted to hear, as he pointed out in his second letter..."

"You, André Gide," the young Arab wrote, "have given us through your work the example of a certain constant and enlivening disquietude. Cette inquiétude est notre seule noblesse.... It's not hope you should preach us now; it's not hope we should accept. In these days of darkness and anxiety which have only just begun, hope would be an illusion. If we can contribute anything to the solution of the present crisis, it's certainly not by contenting ourselves with hope but by remaining disquieted, dissatisfied, restless, vigilant, alive. The very disquietude which you, André Gide, have taught us -- that's our hope: the only hope, the last chance of a lost, sacrificed generation."

There was a silence. I looked at Gide who kept pacing the studio, lost in thought. There he was, that extraordinary young man of almost eighty -- as alert, as keen and resilient as ever; always provocative, always striving and struggling -- never satisfied with what he had already accomplished; an indefatigable seeker of truth, a great artist, a real personality.

"Well, I suppose you have given him some kind of hope, after all," I said finally. "Thanks to you, he'll find life a little less unbearable -- that friend of yours in Beyrouth."

THE END

CONVERSATION WITH ANDRÉ GIDE

By K l a u s M a n n

It was good to see him again -- and to find him unchanged. He certainly does not look his seventy-eight years; there is nothing senile about his appearance or mentality. His speech, his gait, his gestures, his expression have maintained the youthfulness which is part and parcel of his very nature and genius. As I shook hands with this alert young man of almost eighty, the time that had elapsed since our last meeting seemed to become unreal, to lose its weight and its significance.

How curious! how moving! -- to walk once more along the sleepy street where his home is situated: the placid Rue Vaneau on the left bank of the Seine river, not far from the Boulevard St. Germain. And there is the familiar building, Numéro 1 bis -- rather a colorless, prosaic apartment house. Everything is just as it used to be -- the old concierge smiling at me from behind her window ("Oui, Monsieur Gide est chez lui -- sixième étage à gauche..."); the rickety, slow-moving elevator where one feels suspended in space in the alarmingly fragile cage; the dark corridor leading to his apartment; the picturesque mess in his studio -- those inevitable, ever-lasting masses of books, papers and magazines piling up on shelves, chairs and tables.

When was it that I last talked to him, in this very studio? I was leaving then for the United States and called on Gide to say "au revoir." Was it yesterday? No, it must have been in 1938, just a few days before the "Munich" crisis -- more than nine years ago...

And what years! Years of tragedy and struggle -- for France, for Europe, for the world; bitter, eventful years for this great citizen

of the world, this good European and good Frenchman, André Gide.

"It was pretty bad, at times," he told me -- not complainingly but in a dry, matter-of-fact tone. "Particularly the first six or seven months following the collapse of France. From June, 1940, up to March, 1941 -- that's when my morale was at its lowest, when I really felt discouraged and despondent, almost without hope..."

His confession was hardly apt to surprise me. Not only did I recall the letters he had written to me, at that time, from the South of France -- short, cautiously worded messages expressing the sender's feelings in veiled, yet unmistakable terms --; but I had also read the printed version of his Journal, 1939-1942 (published by Gallimard in 1946). As he was now mentioning his past dejection, the moral low he had passed through in those gloomy days, I could not help remembering certain painful passages from that continuous monologue and lifelong self-analysis which is the Diary of André Gide.

Yes, there may have been moments when the lonely wanderer -- "si vieux déjà et si près de quitter la vie," as he put it, in the melancholy vein characteristic of that period -- was on the point of losing confidence in France, in Allied victory, in the future of Man and civilization altogether. Was that defeatism? We may call it so. But why should a man be ashamed of a momentary discouragement? The deeper the depression he passed through, the more impressive his moral victory in overcoming it.

Clearly, the Gide of 1947 had regained his old resilience and vitality; he was his true self again -- courageous, militant, uncompromising; not without humorous, indeed, impish features, in spite of all his tragic insights and experiences. The Gide who received me in his Paris home no longer was the downcast, lonely man who had confided to his diary the grievances and misgivings of a bewildered heart, in those dark

days of disgrace and debacle; he was the serene, spirited master who had just completed one of his most delightful works -- Theseus, the story of the Hellenic hero, son of Aegaeus, lover of Ariadne, husband of Phaedra, conqueror of dragons and superstitions.

"It's the finest book you've written since... oh, I don't know: since The Counterfeiters," I said to Gide.

He nodded, smiled: "Yes, I suppose he's all right, my Thésée... Anyway, it was fun writing that little novel. None of the qualms and worries I experienced in other cases! The Theseus story was conceived and accomplished in a state of joy, almost of exaltation... But you must be starving: it's high time for luncheon. ~~Let's have a bite to eat!~~"

As it was Sunday -- a day on which many of the left-bank restaurants are closed -- Gide entertained me in his apartment. He apologized for the frugality of the meal. -- "My cook is Turkish, you know," he said, in a confidentially lowered voice, as though divulging a somewhat risqué little secret. "She doesn't know much about French cuisine... But I'm glad to have her, all the same -- especially as long as la petite Madame is away."

"La petite Madame" is Mme Théo Van Rysselberg with whom Gide shares his flat. A gentle and efficient old lady, "Mme Théo" -- to use the name familiar to all readers of Gide's Journal -- has been close to the great writer for many years. After the death of Mme Emmanuèle Gide, in 1938, it was Mme Van Rysselberg, the widow of a Flemish painter, who looked after the widower. Recently one of the Paris tabloids carried a front-page picture of Gide attending an opening night in the company of "Mme Théo, qui" -- according to the ~~fully~~ printed legend -- "est un peu sa gouvernante, et un peu sa belle-mère..."

The expression "belle-mère" (mother-in-law) was to allude, somewhat indiscreetly, to the fact that Mrs. Van Rysselberg is the mother of the

young woman who gave birth to André Gide's illegitimate, but now officially recognized, daughter, Cathérine. As for Gide's former mistress, she is now happily married to one of his best friends -- it's rather an involved set-up, reminiscent of certain complicated relationships Gide likes to describe in his books. (Any writer who is more than just an entertainer, has to live his own stories -- either before he writes them, or afterwards...)

"Cathérine just had her first baby," my host told me, beaming with pride. (André Gide as a grandfather! What a baroque idea!) "Her first marriage wasn't such a success, you know. But now she's very happy; her new husband is a fine fellow; very talented, too -- especially as a translator. He has translated some of Hermann Hesse's recent books, and now he wants to venture on your father's play, Fiorenza, which has never been published in France. It's a Savonarola play, isn't it? I must admit I haven't read the German original; but my son-in-law will certainly make me read his French version."

For a little while, he went on discussing my father's writings -- dwelling in particular on Lotte in Weimar ("The Beloved Returns") which he said to be "even more significant than the Joseph tetralogy;" then the conversation returned to Hesse.

"The more intimately I come to know his work," he said, "the more admirable it seems to me. He commands all the qualities I value most highly in art -- that rare and precious combination of elegance and profundity, of artistic discipline and emotional strength. And he has a good sense of humor, too -- which is most exceptional in a German writer. Most of them are inclined to take themselves too seriously; but not Hermann Hesse! He is capable of laughing at himself -- without bitterness or cynicism, but with serene detachment and self-irony. Yes, he certainly deserved the Nobel Prize ~~for his literary work~~..."

Which reminded me of certain rumors circulating, just then, in "usually

well-informed" literary circles and publications. -- "Do you think they'll really 'ennobel' you?" I asked Gide.

He shrugged his shoulders, grinning. -- "You never can tell," he said. "There seems to be a certain tendency, these days, to forgive me for my past vagaries and accept me as a 'grand old man' of French letters." -- There was a curious twinkle in his eye as he added: "But if people think I'm too old to write anything naughty or scandalous, they're quite mistaken. The more 'respectable' I become, the more I feel tempted to surprise the reading public with a really provocative, really risqué book." --

We had our meal -- which, incidentally, turned out to be much better than Gide had made me expect -- in a room usually occupied by Mrs. Van Rysselberg. It was a typically French salon, not without a certain dusty elegance and quaint coziness, the walls plastered with photographs of Madame's friends, relatives and favorite poets. -- "Quite an amusing collection," Gide observed, pointing out to me some of the likenesses: Verhaeren -- for years one of "Mme Théo's" intimates --, Charles Baudelaire ("Look at him!" Gide said. "Doesn't he have the dangerous charm of Mephistopheles?"); young Arthur Rimbaud, a gamin with dishevelled hair and defiant, inspired eyes; Paul Valéry, whose noble and delicate brow seems to be burdened with the whole weight of Europe's cultural legacy.

Gide spoke of Valéry whose friendship he had enjoyed since those faraway days when the two young poets -- neither known to the w literary public as yet -- frequented and worshipped together their mutual master, Stéphane Mallarmé, the high priest of Symbolism.

"Paul was the most delightful person I've ever known," Gide told me, contemplating the portrait with an affectionate look. "He had everything -- warmth, wisdom, wit, grace, sagacity. However admirable his poems

and essays may have been -- his conversation was even more superb!"

He remembered his last encounter with "cette personnalité incomparable," in the spring of 1942, when Gide was just about to leave the unoccupied zone of (Vichy) France for North Africa. -- "He seemed in excellent shape -- more stimulating, more dynamic than ever! No, he certainly did not look like a doomed man -- a man ready to die. Little did I know, when bidding farewell to him, that I was not to see him again..."

There was a silence; then he continued in a lighter tone: "Another memorable meeting, just a day or two before my departure, was the one with Jean-Louis Barrault. Marc" (the motion-picture director Marc Allegret, Gide's friend and quasi-adopted son) "introduced me to him in Marseille. It was then that Barrault persuaded me to complete the Hamlet translation I had started twenty years before; and on the same occasion -- we had lunch together in one of those picturesque little restaurants near the Old Harbour -- he told me about his plan to adapt Kafka's novel, The Trial, for the French theater. I must admit the idea first struck me as rather fantastic. When Barrault asked me to collaborate with him on that dramatization, I was ^{rather reluctant.} ~~at once pleased and surprised~~. Could it be done? Would it be possible to produce an adequate stage version of Kafka's epic nightmare? And should I venture on such a hazardous experiment?... It was more than three years later that I actually made up my mind. Upon my return to France, in 1945, Barrault showed me his outline of the Trial drama -- a remarkably well-constructed, elaborate skeleton which I was expected to cover with flesh, to animate, to bring alive... Well, I've done my best."

"You've certainly done all right," I said. "Tout Paris seems to be crazy about ^{your} ~~the~~ stage version of The Trial: the Théâtre Marigny is always packed. It was only thanks to your personal intervention

that I got a seat, the other night."

"I suppose it's the first theatrical success I've ever had in my long career," Gide observed with a somewhat melancholy smile. "I'm afraid, though, it's Barrault's triumph, and Kafka's, rather than mine. As for my own play, Robert, that didn't go so well; in fact, it hasn't been produced at all, except once, in Tunis."

The drama he was referring to, Robert, ou l'Intérêt général, had been published in Gide's own literary magazine, L'Arche, in 1945. -- "It's my problem child," the author sighed, with a wry grimace. "Those five acts have given me more trouble than any of my major works. For six years I went on laboring on Robert -- revising the dialogue, omitting whole scenes and characters, adding ever new touches. What an headache it was! And to no avail... Some time ago, I read the play to my friend Jouvet. Do you know what he had to say? 'Oui, mon cher ami, il faut se méfier du théâtre!' That was about the only comment he made after the reading. Beware of the theater!"

I felt I had to defend his "problem child." It is true, Robert is rather disappointing from a purely artistic point of view. But if the five neatly built acts are somewhat lacking in elan and inspiration, they are all the richer in stimulating sidelights and suggestions concerning the crucial political and social issues of our time. For all the brittleness and transparency of its texture, Robert is not without weight and significance -- a dialectic fugue and comedy of ideas, akin (if only in a minor way) to the classic novel of ideas, The Counterfeiters.

"Don't underrate your Robert!" I ventured to say; but Gide interrupted me: "Let's have another cup of coffee and try these biscuits -- they don't look too bad..."

Suddenly he got up and tiptoed through the room towards the door, whispering: "I hear voices from the kitchen -- don't you? Yes, I'm quite

sure, there are people, strangers! Il y a du monde dans la cuisine! Our Turkish maid is entertaining friends -- other Turks maybe? Why, that's interesting! That's exciting! Excuse me just a moment. I have to have a look..."

He sneaked out of the room and, a minute later, returned, grinning all over the face. -- "Just as I thought," he announced with a chuckle. "The place is full of Turks. A big man with a red fez and a black mustache is telling a story -- in pure Turkish, naturally! It's a pity that I don't understand their language. I'd love to know what he's talking about!"

How much like him that was -- that ardent interest in other people's affairs and conversations, that at once passionate and playful curiosity! One does not grow old as long as one remains so keenly openminded, so eager to learn, to widen one's horizon. A man who has maintained the freshness and alertness of his mind is young, even at almost eighty!

Our own conversation -- carried on, not in Turkish, but in a colorful mixture of French, English and German -- jumped from one subject to another. Gide, in his inquisitive fashion, asked me various questions about literary events and tendencies in the United States. -- "What has John Steinbeck been doing, of late?" he wanted to know. "I admired some of his early books -- especially In Dubious Battle which my friend André Malraux made me read, several years ago. But Steinbeck's recent works, I'm told, fall somewhat short of his first things. Is that correct? There seems to be a certain tendency in American writers to peter out, to decline, after the most promising, most brilliant beginnings. That's what happened in the cases of Caldwell and Dos Passos -- yes, I'm afraid even in the case of Faulkner whose Sanctuary I still consider one of the most remarkable novels of our time.... But if the established and successful American authors may be inclined to turn stale, there are always

new talents, new promises... I suppose your country can afford to waste genius as it can afford to waste material goods. There's always more of it where it comes from!"

I mentioned some names of young American writers whose books, I felt, might appeal to him. He wrote down the titles: Jean Stafford's Boston Adventure, Calder Willingham's End As A Man, and so forth. -- "I'll certainly read these novels," he promised. "Any new voice is fascinating to me!"

As for contemporary French letters, Gide appeared much more fastidious, almost overly critical. One of the most widely discussed and most generally admired recent novels -- La Peste by Albert Camus -- he shrugged off with a casual, "Non, ce n'est pas ça..." -- Jean-Paul Sartre? "A talented writer, no doubt; but not the intellectual leader as which he is regarded by his followers. That so-called 'Existentialism' is quite a messy affair; no philosophical doctrine, no program, no solution.

"Not that I know the way out of our present social and moral crisis," he said to me, shrugging his shoulders ⁱⁿ resignation and bewilderment. "Believe me, I always am at a loss -- in fact, I feel quite embarrassed when young people come to me for comfort or advice. Frankly, I don't know what to tell them..."

He quoted some of the unanswerable questions he had been asked by confused and despondent y boys -- for instance, in Germany where he had recently attended a youth meeting. "Now, how can you preach democracy and Christian ethics to young men who have first been indoctrinated with Nazi slogans and then left to a bleak, empty life in ruined cities? The more intelligent and sensitive they are, the more desperate they become!"

It was by no means only in Germany that Gide found young people in such an alarming state -- disconcerted, cynical, lacking in faith and purpose, deeply afraid of the future. "It's the same thing everywhere,"

he sighed. "Take this letter from a student in Beyrouth -- a highly gifted young Arab. The first message I had from him sounded like an SOS signal, a heart-breaking cry for help. In my answer, I tried to warn him against despair and nihilism; I ~~admonished~~ admonished him not to lose hope. But that was not at all what he wanted to hear, as he pointed out in his second letter..."

"You, André Gide," the young Arab wrote, "have given us through your work the example of a certain constant and enlivening disquietude. Cette inquiétude est notre seule noblesse.... It's not hope you should preach us now; it's not hope we should accept. In these days of darkness and anxiety which have only just begun, hope would be a cowardly illusion. If we can contribute anything to the solution of the present crisis, it's certainly not by contenting ourselves with hope but by remaining disquieted, dissatisfied, restless, vigilant, alive. The very disquietude which you, André Gide, have taught us -- that's our hope; the only hope, the last chance of a lost, sacrificed generation."

There was a silence. I looked at Gide who kept pacing the room, lost in thought. There he was, that extraordinary young man of almost eighty -- as alert and resilient as ever; always provocative, always striving and struggling, never satisfied with what he had already accomplished; an indefatigable seeker of truth, a great artist, a real personality.

"Well, I suppose you've given him some kind of hope, after all," I said finally. "Thanks to you, he'll find life a little less unbearable -- that worried friend of yours in Beyrouth."



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