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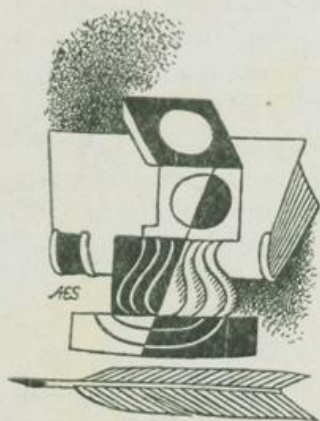
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Conversation with Gide

KLAUS MANN

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 that 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, *Numero 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, everlasting 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 hardly surprised 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 has passed through, the more impressive his moral victory in overcoming it.

Clearly, the Gide of 1947 had regained his old resiliency 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—*Thésée*, the story of the Athenian hero Theseus, son of Aegeus, 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."

Inasmuch 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. Emmanuele 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 caption—"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, Catherine. As for Gide's former mistress, she is now happily married to one of his best friends—it's rather an in-

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 *afterward*. . . .)

"Catherine 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 Savanarola 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 finds "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. . . ."

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 Mme. 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 disheveled 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 unknown young poets frequented and worshiped 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 France (Vichy) 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 Harbor—he told me about his plan to adapt Kafka's novel, *The Trial*, for the French theatre. 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. 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 that 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. "All Paris seems to be crazy about your stage version of *The Trial*: the Théâtre Marigny is always packed. It was only thanks to you 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 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 a headache it was! And to no avail. . . . Some time ago, I read the play to my friend Jovet. 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 theatre!'"

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 *élan* 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 toward the door, whispering: "I hear voices from the kitch-

en—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 for just a moment. I have to have a look. . . ."

He sneaked out of the room and, a minute later, returned, grinning. "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 open-minded, 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. 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 just 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 those 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 he is regarded as 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 am always 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 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 heartbreaking 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 inquietude 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 friend of yours in Beyrouth.”

ROBERT RESOR

DAWN

The wind is white
And stars sing, shrill.

The raging night
Descends the hill.

A razor moon
Precisely slices.

The jiggling tune
Of nightlong vices.

Thrums guitar
In dying discord.

Then our loud
And single star
Strikes downward
With his bloody sword.