ANDRE GIDE'S WRITINGS ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The social writings of André Gide may not be considered as being separate from or unrelated to the rest of the author's work. They constitute a development of that problem which Gide examines in all his work, namely the search for a code of ethics for individual life in society, and in particular the assertion of the extent to which man may be hindered by other people as well as by certain social attitudes and institutions in the fulfilment of his desires and in the satisfaction of his requirements.

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DEDICATION

To Emmanuelle - without whom I might have submitted a better thesis.

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION

In several major studies of Gide's writings, critics have tended to regard that body of his work in which he examines specific social questions as trivial, amateurish, and quite distinct from his fictional writings. Germaine Brée, for instance, comments on the author's attitude to social problems in this way: "Rien de tellement profond en Gide ne semble s'émouvoir devant ces questions qui restent extérieures à ses préoccupations d'écrivain . . . il y a chez Gide une irresponsabilité sociale profonde."[1] This same critic, claiming that "l'activité sociale de Gide . . . n'a jamais été que contingente",[2] seeks to present Gide to her readers as some pure aesthete whose momentary social interest is of little relevance to the main body of his work:

> Tous les aspects tumultueux de la vie moderne et sa violence sont absents de son oeuvre, tant dans leurs retentissements intérieurs qu'extérieurs. La guerre, les révolutions, la croissance des grandes villes, la mécanisation grandissante de la vie, les rythmes et les contraintes qu'elle impose aux hommes, sont exclus du monde gidien.[3]

Her conclusion, that "L'oeuvre de Gide n'a donc qu'indirectement et par défaut un contenu social,"[4] clearly constitutes a rejection

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[1] G. Brée, André Gide, l'insaisissable protée (Paris: les Belles-Lettres, 1953), p. 17.

[2] Ibid., p. 18.

[3] Ibid., pp. 18-19.

[4] Ibid., p. 19.

of Gide's social writings as having very little in common with his fictional writing, and an attempt to establish them as an extremely minor aspect of the author's work.

Another, more recent critic, G. W. Ireland, neglects to examine Gide's "reportages", claiming that they have little in common with the author's main body of work.[5] Klaus Mann briefly examines Gide's social writings, but fails to see them in their correct perspective: if André Gide, "became a supporter of outcasts, prompted by his unyielding truthfulness, his chivalrous generosity",[6] this was also a consequence, Mann claims, of "his passionate concern in everything unusual, dangerous, and devious".[7]

In adopting such an attitude, these critics fail to perceive that Gide's interests in "la question sociale" is directly related to his fictional writing and stems from the major preoccupation of his life and work: the examination and defence of the concept of individualism. In an extremely revealing letter Gide indicated that his consideration of the "moral question" in literature marked a definite break with the past, and had considerable bearing on the problems of society:

Les questions morales, lors de ma jeunesse et au sortir

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[5]See G. W. Ireland, André Gide, a Study of his Creative Writings, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. viii.

[6]K. Mann, André Gide and the Crisis of Modern Thought, (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1943), p.213.

[7]Ibid.

> de ma formation puritaine, m'ont beaucoup inquiété. Elles me paraissaient de toute importance, vitales, si je puis dire. "En tant que littérateur", je me délivrai de leur angoisse en précipitant dans ma cornue problèmes moraux, angoisses et tout ce qui s'ensuit. Il me paraissait que la doctrine de "l'art pour l'art" ne devait sa faillite qu'à son refus d'englober les questions morales. Il ne tenait à l'artiste, me semblait-il, d'étendre sur elles également son empire. Et sinon, quel manque à gagner!
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> Je ne m'avisais pas alors d'un grand danger: un artiste (un romancier) qui touche aux questions morales, ce n'est plus en artiste qu'on le juge; c'est en moraliste. Rien à faire à cela.
>
> De la qualité littéraire de mes écrits, il ne fut plus question; mais bien de leur valeur morale et de leur possible influence. De cela j'ai cessé depuis longtemps à m'étonner; d'autant que, pris au jeu moi-même, c'est de moins en moins en artiste pur que je me plaçais. Mais au temps de mes Nourritures, de mon Immoraliste et de ma Porte Etroite, je m'inquiétais presque uniquement de faire le tour d'une donnée éthique . . .[8]

The life and work of André Gide are marked by the consistent defence of individualism. In his fictional writing the author reflects the necessity which he strongly felt to "oser être soi", [9] a preoccupation which he considered to be "moral", that is, relating to the self, to "Man", to "Life". But, clearly, man does not function in a void; in Les Nourritures terrestres Gide is led to dismiss the family as a hindrance to the individual

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[8] Quoted in Y. Davet, Autour des Nourritures terrestres, (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 89-90.

[9] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1941), p.20.

in the search for his particular "vérité". The church is also rejected as an obstacle to the development of individualism. In 1893, four years before the publication of Les Nourritures terrestres, Gide could claim: "Tous mes efforts ont été portés cette année sur cette tâche difficile: me débarasser enfin de tout ce qu'une religion transmise avait mis autour de moi d'inutile, de trop étroit et qui limitait trop ma nature".[10]

At the same time as Gide was writing such early works as Les Nourritures terrestres he was increasingly participating in political life and reflecting upon "social questions", that is to say those problems relating to man's active life in society.[11] After his marriage to Madeleine, André Gide's fictional writings reflect an increased awareness of the problem posed by "the other" with regard to sincere self-achievement by the individual. This problem has two facets; not only does Marceline present the greatest obstacle to Michel's pagan or Nietzschean individualism, and Alissa's religious fanaticism thwart Jérôme, but both Michel and Alissa are clearly criticized at the end of L'Immoraliste and La Porte étroite for having taken their concept of individualism beyond reasonable limits and so for having neglected their duty towards another individual. In the case of L'Immoraliste this is made quite

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[10] Ibid., p. 41.

[11] He was elected mayor of La Roque in 1896 and fulfilled his new functions dutifully. He also discussed the Dreyfus Affair and other contemporary political topics with his friends.

explicit: not only does Marceline, initially, hinder Michel's self-achievement, but the latter, who is responsible for his wife's death, clearly constitutes the greatest obstacle to the satisfaction of Marceline's most elementary requirements. In La Porte étroite the rejection by Alissa of life, love and Jérôme (all of which are equated) for religious fervour and death does not constitute a victory ; not only is Alissa left derelict by her religious sacrifice, Jérôme also suffers as a result of her renunciation.

There exists no dichotomy between Gide's reflections upon the individual and his reflections upon social questions. In most of his fictional works the author examines the individual's attempt to find an ethical code for life in society: in this way he is led to denounce social obstacles to the development of individualism, to manifest his awareness of the problem posed by "the other", and to admit the complexity of the concept of nature upon which he seeks to base his individualism.[12] It is these same fundamental problems which are examined in his social writings.

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[12] Michel in L'Immoraliste and Alissa in La Porte étroite present two conflicting examples of self-fulfilment. In Les Caves du Vatican Gide explores the concept of the gratuitous action which he conceives as the most natural and sincere expression of personality. Such an act, the author claims, must not be produced by circumstance; its motivation must be "interior". Gide fails, I think, to make Lafcadio a psychologically satisfactory character, and all that he can point to as composing personality is unpredictability. The answer to this predicament may lie in the fact that there is no such thing as the pure self, but while he indicates (in the diary of Edouard in Les Faux-Monnayeurs) the complexity of the self, the extent to which it is dependant on other people and the impossibility of finitely perceiving it, Gide maintains his belief in some central and inherent "être vrai" or "substrat".

For André Gide, the all-important "point de départ" is the individual. His fictional works constitute a defence of individualism, and demonstrate an increasing awareness not only of the extent to which society acts as an obstacle to individualism, but also of the ethical problems which must be faced in the quest for self-fulfilment.

In order to defend the positions which he adopted in his life and work, Gide was led to question very closely the accepted notions of human nature and of the self. If he continued to believe in the existence of some central and inherent "nature", he was obliged to demonstrate the impossibility of defining human "substrat" and to indicate his amazement at the complexity of human psychology. Gide's attack on contemporary notions of human nature, and his concept of individualism were immediately seen by the defenders of existing morality, and certain catholic critics in particular, to have direct consequences for society. Henri Massis, for example, sees this quite clearly:

> . . . On comprend peut-être maintenant pourquoi et au nom de quoi nous avons attaqué André Gide. Il s'agit de défendre ce qu'il menace de détruire: la notion de l'homme sur quoi se fonde la civilisation.[13]

It is the rich spectrum of achievements of which the individual is capable that André Gide illustrates in his fictional

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[13]Quoted in A. Gide, Littérature engagée, ed Y. Davet (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 65.

writings; but in his social writings he considers more explicitly and in specific contexts the way in which society and its institutions infringe upon the individual in his quest for self-fulfilment. In this thesis I propose to study the author's defence of the individual in an oppressive society through an examination of Gide's 'reportages' and a selection of his other social writings, which I shall consider in chronological order of composition rather than of publication. At the same time I shall investigate the author's inquiry into the nature and concept of individualism, for this not only provides the basis for his art, but also has direct consequences for society and is ultimately responsible for the commitment of André Gide.

CHAPTER I

THE DEFENCE OF HOMOSEXUALITY

While it cannot be claimed that Gide's homosexuality is the all-determining influence in his life,[1] there can be little doubt that the antagonism which it brought him proved to be a decisive factor in convincing the author that conventional notions of morality and social prejudice hindered the sincere expression of what he regarded as the natural self and its imperatives.

Gide indicates in Si le grain ne meurt that it was his rising sexuality which, having been condemned by his parents and peers, made his adolescence so painful: "A cet âge innocent où l'on voudrait que toute l'âme ne soit que transparence, tendresse et pureté, je ne revois en moi qu'ombre, laideur, et sournoiserie".[2] In the same work he asks, "Au nom de quel Dieu, de quel idéal me défendez-vous de vivre selon ma nature?"[3]

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[1] G. I. Brachfeld in André Gide and the Communist Temptation (Paris and Geneva: Minard and Droz, 1959), argues that Gide's artistic creation is a compensation for the moral dilemma provoked by his homosexuality; consequently, he suggests, as the author's virility declined, so did his artistic output, and Gide could turn to social matters.

[2] A. Gide, Si le grain ne meurt (Paris: Folio, Gallimard, 1972), p. 10.

[3] Ibid., p. 284.

The conflict between what he felt within himself and the outraged attitude of society made Gide a prey to feelings of guilt and morbid anxiety, while at the same time he refused to totally repress his sexuality. "C'était l'époque où je me retenais de toucher ce dont j'avais le plus envie",[4] he wrote in 1930. His entries in the Journal for 1893 begin with: ". . . qui donnèrent à mes tristes joies, à chacune, toute l'amertume du péché . . . et mes plus grandes joies ont été solitaires et soucieuses. J'ai vécu jusqu'à vingt-trois ans complètement vierge et dépravé".[5]

Although Gide was able to overcome his inhibitions and gain greater confidence after his visits to North Africa in 1893 and 1895, an indication of which may be found in the Nourritures terrestres, which proclaims an ardent acceptance of nature and human experience, his desire to vindicate his homosexuality carried him into the field of social criticism and reform. For this mission which the author set himself he was admirably placed:

> Il est naturel que toute grande réforme morale . . . soit due à un déséquilibre physiologique . . . A l'origine d'une réforme il y a toujours un malaise; le malaise dont souffre le réformateur est celui d'un déséquilibre intérieur. La densité, les positions, les valeurs morales lui sont proposées différentes, et le réformateur travaille à les réaccorder; il aspire à un nouvel équilibre.[6]

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[4] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1941), p. 994.

[5] Quoted in G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, p. 12.

[6] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p.665.

Gide has experienced considerable difficulty in overcoming the prejudices of a society which condemned pederasty as contrary to nature and harmful to society. In order to justify his desire, he was to reject the limiting definition of "nature" and so undertake the defence of a large group of individuals. Corydon marks the first explicit attempt by Gide at social reform.

The publication of this work was an act of considerable courage, for Gide risked not only his reputation among the public at large - on which he claimed not to place much importance - but particularly among his close group of friends and relatives. In his "Préface" to the first edition of Corydon he wrote: "Je ne tiens qu'à l'estime de quelques rares esprits . . . Je n'ai jamais cherché de plaire au public".[7] He realized, in fact, that most members of this small circle would withdraw their friendship. A part of this work had been printed privately, in 1911, in an edition of only twelve copies, all of which the author kept in a drawer. A second, complete, edition of twenty-one copies was published in 1920, and the commercial publication of 1924 was carried out in complete defiance of Gide's friends and relatives, upon whose opinion he placed great store and to whose pressure the author had yielded until then. Martin-Chauffier suggests that the writing of Isabelle was due to the effect of Gide's reading to a few friends the first part of Corydon. In order to dissuade him from publishing Corydon, Francis Jammes suggested to Gide the subject matter of Isabelle and encouraged him in its composition.

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[7] A. Gide, Corydon (Paris: Gallimard, 1925), p. 7.

In Les Caves du Vatican, Gide's study of human behaviour, of the individual's motivation, as well as of the difficulty of being sincere in life, lead him to declare: "Nous vivons contrefaits". This "contrefaction" is not only due to society at large, he claimed, but also to parents and relatives:

> Et quand il n'y aurait pas la société pour nous contraindre, ce groupe y suffirait de parents et d'amis auxquels nous ne savons pas consentir à déplaire. Ils opposent à notre sincérité incivile une image de nous . . .[8]

With the enlarged commercial edition of Corydon, Gide decided that sincerity to himself was more important than the friendship and esteem of those close to him, and this is made explicit in the quotation from Ibsen in the preface to the second edition:

> Les amis, dit Ibsen, sont dangereux non point tant par ce qu'ils vous font faire, que par ce qu'ils vous empêchent de faire.[9]

The "besoin de sympathie", the admiration and friendship Gide felt for a small number of people (and without which, as G. W. Ireland notes, "it is improbable that any rapprochement between Gide's beliefs and the faith of the Roman Catholic Church should have ever been attempted")[10] were abandoned in favour of the author's compulsion to refuse to conceal his sincere self.

The publication of this work was particularly courageous

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[8] A. Gide, Les Caves du Vatican, p. 229.

[9] A. Gide, Corydon, p.11.

[10] G. W. Ireland, André Gide, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 276.

because not only is it a defence of homosexuality but, as the public realized from the simultaneous publication of Si le grain ne meurt, it is also a public admission of Gide's own sexual mores. There are few stronger prejudices than those relating to sexuality. Christian dogma has consistently condemned homosexuality as a sin, the scholastic definition of strict human nature allowing only for human love as a reproductive impulse. Public opinion in Gide's time regarded homosexuality primarily as a sin, and was beginning to conceive of it as an illness, a pathological complaint. André Gide claimed that it was neither.

The author proceeds to his aim - to help other homosexuals and to open the eyes of heterosexuals, most of whom he regarded as being either ignorant or prejudiced - in two main stages. Firstly, he answers the charge that homosexuality is contrary to nature, and to this end Gide employs considerable scientific and biological knowledge. He points to the common occurrence of homosexuality among animals, particularly among domestic animals; the period of fertility in female animals represents a danger to the survival of the species, and to offset this handicap the males, which generally exist in greater numbers, have a virtual permanence of desire and potency. Moreover, the superabundance of males and male desire (a desire which is not a reproductive urge but simply a desire for pleasure) often finds its gratification with other members of the same sex. Homosexuality can therefore not be described as being contrary to nature; it is widespread in the animal world.

More important to Gide's thesis, however, for to point out that homosexuality is natural in animals is not to prove that it is natural to man, is his attack upon the limited and limiting concept of human nature to which many of his contemporaries seemed determined to restrict themselves. To this end Gide quotes passages from Pascal and Montaigne which suggest that what is commonly attributed to human nature in fact stems from custom (the scholastic argument that custom is but the first manifestation of human nature being neatly reversed). From Pascal, he quotes the lines:

> J'ai grand peur que cette nature ne soit elle-même qu'une première coutume, comme la nature est une seconde nature.[11]

Montaigne's words are more categorical: "les lois de la conscience, que nous disons naître de nature, naissent de la coutume."[12] With the help of further quotations from Pascal, Gide demonstrates that when we judge on the grounds of nature, it is in fact custom we are invoking: "là où vous dites 'contre nature', le mot'contre coutume' suffirait."[13] Homosexuality, in short, is excluded from our society by custom and not by nature. Contemporary society fosters heterosexuality as the natural, the normal and healthy way of things:

> dans notre société, dans nos moeurs, tout prédestine un sexe à l'autre; tout enseigne l'hétérosexualité, tout y provoque . . . Si l'on ne devient pas amoureux avec tout ça, c'est qu'on a été mal élevé, s'écrie

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[11] A. Gide, Corydon, p. 38.

[12] Ibid., p. 39.

[13] Ibid., p. 40.

> plaisamment Dumas fils . . . Mais si, malgré conseils, invitations, provocations de toutes sortes, c'est un penchant homosexuel qu'il se manifeste, aussitôt vous incriminez telle lecture, telle influence; (et vous raisonnez de même pour un pays entier, pour un peuple); c'est un goût acquis, affirmez-vous; on le lui a appris . . .

Here we touch upon the roots of Gide's individualism. The homosexual is not conditioned by a particular "milieu" - indeed, how sincere to his nature he must be, the author claims, to resist the pressures of society - he is merely obeying something which he feels to be within him; he is merely manifesting one aspect of the rich variety of impulses which nature has to offer. Gide's fundamental approach to reality is through the individual: man is primarily an "individual being", and only secondly a "social being". The phrase: "il est des instincts sociaux et des instincts antisociaux "[15] suggests that the "complete" man is not suited to life in society. Not only does society thwart some of the individual's inner imperatives, but it must be in conflict with some, the nature of which goes essentially against the interests of society at large. Gide seems to indicate the impossibility of obtaining complete harmony between the individual and society.

The author then turns to his second task: that of refuting the charge that homosexuality is harmful to society. There exist "des instincts antisociaux", but homosexuality is not among them. To answer this charge, Gide points to Ancient

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[14] Ibid., p. 41.

[15] Ibid., p. 43.

Greece where "la pédérastie était non seulement admise, mais même . . . approuvée"[16], and where it was not equated with femininity or weakness, as is testified by the existence of the Thebans' "lovers' battalion". What is of greater importance in Gide's eyes is the fact that during the periods of history which were the greatest periods in terms of artistic creation, homosexuality was practised more openly: for example, in Classical Greece, where beauty was represented primarily by "le corps du jeune homme" [17] and secondly by "la femme voilée"[18], and in Renaissance Italy and France. Much of the "evidence" presented by Gide is by no means categorical: the claim, for instance, that the male is more beautiful than the female, supported by quotations from Goethe, and by references to Plato, may certainly not be considered as proven. The author merely points to the "great homosexual epochs" where society, and particularly art, flourished.

Until this stage Gide has demonstrated the weakness of the concept of nature which is the basis of judgment of homosexuality. Moreover, in certain periods of history when homosexuality was practised openly, we can find no indication of social decadence - and Gide, strangely enough, is at pains to show that homosexuals make excellent husbands and fathers. Society acts most unjustly

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., p. 99.

[18] Ibid.

in its condemnation as criminals of individuals who practise homosexuality. The author mentions the Affaire Renard (1909), in which judge and jury at several levels of the judicial system condemn the accused for murder, in full knowledge of his innocence, because he was a homosexual:

> Parce qu'il a été prouvé que Renard, même en admettant qu'il n'eut pas tiré, était un monstre odieux et répugnant.[19]

If Gide condemns contemporary society for its treatment of the homosexual, he is more concerned to demonstrate that homosexuality presents no threat to that society. The author claims not only that homosexuals make excellent husbands and fathers, but also that homosexuality is a less reprehensible outlet for extra-marital sexual desires than are prostitution or adultery:

> je soutiens que la paix du ménage, l'honneur de la femme, la respectabilité du foyer, la santé des époux étaient plus sûrement preservés avec les moeurs grecques qu'avec les nôtres.[20]

How strange that in his defence of homosexuality Gide should support the institution of the family, the "respectabilité du foyer", which he had so often denounced as a restraint on the individual in his self-achievement. In Les Nourritures terrestres he had exclaimed: "Familles, je vous hais; foyers clos; portes refermées." He had claimed, furthermore, in his Journal that "l'esprit de famille s'oppose . . . à l'individu"[21].

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[19] Quoted from le Matin in Corydon, p. 132.

[20] Ibid., p. 134.

[21] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1237.

Gide's suggestion that for young men homosexuality is more ethical than heterosexual love, and its consequence that women should remain in the gynaceum with their maternal cares must surely prove distasteful to both women and men, and also to the author of Geneviève. In his wish to vindicate the homosexual, Gide overstepped himself and accepted the limiting concept of the family, an institution which he had often denounced in the past and which he was later to attack in his trilogy l'Ecole des femmes - Robert - Geneviève.

Corydon, therefore, constitutes by no means a rejection of society by the homosexual individual who finds himself unjustly condemned by it, but a plea for a reform of social attitudes and those institutions which reflect prejudice. The author attempts to reconcile society with all the forms of sexuality which have their source in nature. Critics such as Painter are misinformed when they claim that Corydon is a demand that only homosexuality be permitted, that " a society founded on Corydon would substitute proscription of heterosexuals for the equally deplorable present proscription of homosexuals".[22] Corydon is a plea for social justice for the homosexual, who must be permitted to live according to his desires, as well as an indication that when the individual is most free to express his sexual instincts, a rich variety of which are furnished by nature, that society of which he is a member

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[22]G. Painter, André Gide, a Critical Biography, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p. 87.

will benefit.

This, however, is not the full importance of Corydon. In the explicit "rapport" which he sees between "les périodes uraniennes" (Classical Greece, Augustus' Rome, Shakespeare's England, Renaissance Italy and France) and "les périodes de grande efflorescence artistique",[23] Gide develops a theory concerning the relationship between sexuality and art. Nature has furnished male and female sexuality with different characteristics which the author describes by employing two terms from Bergson: "catagenèse" and "anagenèse". The anagenetic role of the female, Gide argues, consists in the purely necessary function of the perpetuation of the species, while the abundance of the male element, catagenetic in character, prevents him from being confined to a purely biological function. The latter is: "un être de façade, de chant, d'art, de sport, ou d'intelligence - de jeu",[24] and the very nature of the male element lies in its gratuitousness:

> la castration, en faisant triompher chez le mâle une force anagénétique sans emploi, montre combien la dépense gratuite est naturelle.[25]
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> Les brillants atouts, ces prestigieux moyens de séduction ne sont, en somme, qu'un vain étalage de parties mortes, le signe d'une dépense inconsidérée.[26]

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[23] A. Gide, Corydon, p. 129

[24] Ibid., p. 56

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p. 58

The gratuitous exuberance of the male is like art, for:

> la florescence de la sculpture et de la peinture, de l'art enfin, se développe sur ces parties des temples grecs et des cathédrales qui précisément avaient cessé d'être utiles . . .[27]

Gide states his thesis categorically: "Ne peut être asservi à la finalité esthétique que ce qui échappe à l'asservissement utilitaire."[28]

The importance of this line of thought is enormous. One may quite correctly object that while Gide claims to find the excess of sexual function in higher mammals, all the examples supporting his correlation come from the insect and bird species - the scales of the butterfly, the feathers of the peacock and the song of the nightingale. The "brillants atouts" he refers to are rare among the higher mammals. Moreover the theory of a "natural" difference among males and females has reprehensible implications stretching far beyond the sexual role, concerning what is fitting for women. Gide does not take this point of view to its limits: he admits that, after all, nature gives the same directives to male and female alike: "Elle dit, à l'un comme à l'autre sexe 'Jouis' simplement."[29] Nor does Gide present the view that only males can create artistic beauty: he merely claims that homosexuality is like beauty, in nature and in art, in its gratuitousness.

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., p. 59.

Nevertheless his claim that males and females are different by nature, together with his attitude to the role of women, in the family and elsewhere, betrays a prejudiced point of view.[30]

Corydon, therefore, is of importance in several respects. In the first place it is a defence of the homosexual against the way he is treated by society. The attack Gide directs against the narrowness of the concept of human nature on which the society he knew sought to base its moral judgments is of particular importance. It indicates the immediate bearing of Gide's interest in "la question morale", in human nature, upon society. It is a courageous attack on the injustice with which the homosexual was condemned. Unfortunately, in the defence undertaken by the author of a certain group of individuals, he reflects a prejudice towards an even greater section of mankind, to women, and in his eagerness to show that homosexuality is not

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[30] "Voici qui va, je le crains, apporter de l'eau à ton moulin" one of Gide's friends said to him on the publication of a work by Freud on sexual development (Journal 1889-1939, p. 730). When Gide started to write Corydon, several years were to elapse before the work of Freud was translated into French. Nevertheless it is of interest to note that Freud's conclusions on the vagueness of the sexual instinct, and the divorce of sexuality and reproduction support Gide's thesis. Freud is also blamed today by the Women's Liberation Movement for suggesting that a woman's role is in her house. The psychologist is often criticized for his suggestion that the working woman is probably attenuating some sexually-motivated psychological insatisfaction.

harmful to society he brings himself to defend the family, an institution whose noxious characteristics he had so often denounced.

The interest of Corydon is not limited to these aspects. By the correlation Gide draws between homosexuality and art, he indicates that the very definition of the latter consists in its gratuitousness. The artist must express himself free from all social pressures and utilitarian ends, just as the beauties of nature are also an extravagance. Art, like homosexuality, is an exuberance. This thesis presented in Corydon throws more light on Gide's repeated claim that art must be free from any attempt to prove.

And yet how fitting it is that Corydon, "un tract" as Porché described it[31], should at the same time be "le plus important de mes livres";[32] how fitting that while explaining Gide's fundamental attitude to art, it is at the same time the first work in which he explicitly criticizes the way society treats a certain group of individuals. This plea for social reform, combined with an exposition of Gide's ideas on art, demonstrates that the writer can not fail to present a moral point of view which has a direct bearing on his society. Central to Gide's thought was a conviction of the duty of the individual to

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[31] In "Appendice" of Corydon, p. 153.

[32] A. Gide, Journal 1939-1949, p. 142

express the richness of a self given to him by nature. Such, Gide courageously claimed, is the right of the homosexual, even though society condemns him for it. Let us now examine the "reportages" in which Gide, pursuing his defence of the individual's right to full self-development, and completing his study of the concept of the "acte gratuit", studies the working of the legal system.

CHAPTER II

GIDE AND JUSTICE: NE JUGEZ PAS

André Gide had observed the workings of the legal and political institutions of the country from an early period in life. In 1896 he was elected mayor of the commune of La Roque. Moreover, if his election was principally due to the ardour of his steward,[1] if the author did not at first regard the honour highly, qualifying it as "un sale coup", "une catastrophe" in his correspondence with Valéry,[2] and if he took some comfort from the fact that he would not have too much to do in connection with this appointment,[3] he nevertheless undertook his functions and their duties seriously.[4] In the particular interest which he demonstrated in the case of a labourer whom he suspected of having been unjustly condemned by society,[5] Gide indicated the

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[1] See G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, p. 83.

[2] A. Gide, P. Valéry, Correspondance, ed. R. Mallet, (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 264.

[3] G. Painter, André Gide, p. 29, quotes Gide: "Thank heaven France had reserved for her youngest mayor one of her most minute communes".

[4] Later he could declare: "ceux qui me prétendent insoucieux de la chose publique imaginent mal, assurément, le zèle civile que j'apportai dans l'exercice de mon très absorbant pouvoir" (Quoted in G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation , p.83).

[5] See G. Painter, André Gide, p.29.

the lines on which his later participation in the judicial system were to lie: namely the defence of the individual against the oppressive structures of society.

In May 1912 Gide, who had requested for several years to be considered as a prospective juror, was called to participate in that capacity at the Cour d'Assises in Rouen. His notes on the cases brought before him and his fellow jurors, published in 1914 as Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, reveal his discovery that "C'est une tout autre chose d'écouter rendre la justice ou l'aider à la rendre soi-même . . . A quel point la justice humaine est chose douteuse et précaire".[6] This study of the "machine-à-rendre la-justice"[7] indicates not only that that machine functioned most imperfectly and that certain reforms were of the utmost importance, but, more importantly, it also suggests that human justice may only be applied with extreme difficulty because of the practical impossibility of attributing a clear pattern of motivation to criminal actions. Since the first of these observations is considered in detail only in the Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, I shall examine Gide's criticism of the working of the judicial system before turning to his reflections on motivation, which, expressed in this work and developed more fully later in the author's two crime dossiers, strike at the very roots of the judicial system.

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[6] A. Gide, Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, (19th ed., Paris: Gallimard, 1950), pp.7-8.

[7] Ibid., p. 7.

The other jurors, the author claimed, attempted like himself to fulfil their functions to the best of their ability. Nevertheless, the machine of justice undeniably manifested considerable shortcomings in its treatment of many of the individuals whose actions it judged. Where did the causes lie?

From the first pages of Gide's account one can discern that the idea, the very presentation of the court, touched upon one of the writer's main preoccupations: that of the individual seeking to assert himself against a repressive society. The jurors represent "la _société_ et sont bien décidés de la défendre",[8] and from the very commencement of the proceedings it is as a potential - or existing - threat to society that they regard the accused. The practice of justice is determined by the existing customs of society, and these alone. To give an example, the several charges of "atteinte aux moeurs" are dealt with leniently, as Gide unexpectedly notes; on some occasions the accused are acquitted even though they are guilty, because in the eyes of the jury such events are everyday aspects of contemporary society; they are but: "de[s]vétilles come il s'en commet . . . chaque jour de tous les côtés".[9] The members of the jury also make a distinction between two categories of criminal (categories quite

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[8] _Ibid._, p. 12.

[9] _Ibid._, p. 13.

unknown to the criminal code): the "aigrefins" and the "bandits". The former are treated more leniently because, unlike the latter, they do not seek to destroy society: "ils profitaient de la société, mais n'étaient pas insurgés contre elle".[10] The immediate assertion of the attitudes of contemporary society as the ultimate standard of justice proves to be particularly retrogressive when public opinion and newspaper articles influence the jurors in their duty and prejudice the outcome of their deliberation: "les exploits des bandits tragiques, Bonnot, etc. . . . , viennent d'occuper l'opinion: 'Surtout pas d'indulgence', c'est le mot d'ordre, soufflé par les journaux."[11] In one particular case Gide traces a travesty of justice directly to a newspaper article, published two days previously, which urged members of the jury not to acquit any of the accused. Most members of the jury, undecided in this case, yielded to the opinion expressed in the article which acted as an agent of "intimidation".[12] When the harsh judgment is pronounced, "De hideux applaudissements éclatent dans la salle; on crie: 'bravo! bravo!'"[13] Society has revenged itself on the individual who threatened it.

Gide is aware of the extent to which the accused finds

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[10] Ibid., p. 24.

[11] Ibid., p. 12.

[12] Ibid., p. 119.

[13] Ibid., p. 115.

himself in an unfortunate position from the moment he is brought into court. The general impression of the proceedings prompts the following note by the author:

> le côté chien du commissariat de police . . . son ton rogue. Et l'air gibier que prend aussitôt le prévenu. L'art de lui donner l'air coupable.[14]

What is more, in many instances the judge's preconceived attitude directs the trial towards a certain end. This person also has a habit of phrasing his questions during the interrogation in such a way that the accused or witness understands very little, is made to feel inferior and frightened, and is thus incapable of influencing the jury. Not only is the accused a victim of the abuse of power by the judge, however; the jury also is a victim: "il serait à peine exagéré de dire qu'un juge habile peut faire du Jury ce qu'il veut."[15] The members of the jury, for their part, have little to recommend them. Reflecting the view of a society which places more importance on appearance than on reality, they continually demonstrate prejudice in the assessment of the accused by his dress, as well as by his physical features: the latter is often condemned on account of his "sale tête" or his "air sournois". The past record of the accused is often enough to condemn him on a

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[14] Ibid., p. 83.

[15] Ibid., p. 179.

new charge, and Gide points to the "ombre que cette première condamnation porte",[16] which leads so many members of the jury to conclude that "un criminel c'est un criminel".[17] Because he claims that the self is not always continuous, and that if one commits a crime on one occasion that does not mean that one will always be a criminal, Gide is greatly distressed by the discovery that the majority of decisions rest not on the evidence concerning the charge in question, but on the general impression presented by the accused:

> l'opinion du jury est que, après tout, s'il n'est pas bien certain qu'ils aient commis ces vols-ci, ils ont dû en commettre d'autres; ou qu'ils en commettront; que, donc, ils sont bons à coffrer.[18]

In the eyes of the author, the criminal is being condemned not for a specific act but for what he is. One of the accused "sentant les mailles du filet, autour de lui, qui se resserrent",[19] could claim that it is the coalition of the forces of society which are plotting to condemn him.

Apart from these prejudices which Gide observes in the members of the jury, the author also accuses them of demonstrating a "lamentable incompétence",[20] which manifests itself primarily

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[16] Ibid., pp.140-141.

[17] Ibid., p. 168.

[18] Ibid., p. 18.

[19] Ibid., p. 73.

[20] Ibid., p. 114.

in their failure to grasp the evidence. When the rare intelligent juror - André Gide - asks a question, its relevance meets with obvious total incomprehension on the part of both judge and jury. The jury seeks a clear, simple account of the events leading up to and, or, constituting the crime. As Gide remarks:

> La version la plus simple est celle qui toujours a le plus de chance de prévaloir; c'est aussi celle qui a le moins de chance d'être exacte.[21]

Gide's proposals for reform, presented in the "Appendice", concern primarily the type of jurors who must be chosen. They should not be elected, he claims, to represent all sections of society (and so include a preponderance of "les plus désoeuvrés et les plus insignifiants"),[22] but should consist of "les plus aptes". He also suggests that a plan of the area where the crime is said to have been committed would be of considerable help to the jurors. Gide's final proposal - and one to which he alludes frequently- consists in a plea for the reorganisation of the list of questions concerning the circumstances of the crime and a rephrasing of these questions to which the jurors have to give specific answers in the affirmative or negative. It is here that Gide's fundamental criticisms of the machinery of justice lies.

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[21] Ibid., p. 84

[22] Ibid., p. 183.

Before attempting to gauge Gide's approach to the problem of motivation and the responsibility of the individual, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the development of penal law in nineteenth-century France. The penal code of 1791 had predetermined a specific sentence for each crime. The code of 1806 indicated only maximum and minimum sentences, but apart from mental illness and clearly-defined pathological cases, the penal code of 1810 allowed no limitation regarding personal responsibility; it did not permit the consideration of extenuating circumstances. When juries were called to judge an accused, however, they often realised the relevance of "toutes les circonstances de sa vie, tous les entraînements qu'il avait subis, tous les affolements qui avaient pu l'aveugler".[23] Since the law did not permit them to attribute proportionate blame, the jurors often felt that an acquittal was fairer than a condemnation since the severity of the automatic sentence was quite out of proportion with the degree of responsibility of the accused. Consequent legislation established extenuating circumstances - and it was in order to assess these that members of the jury were forced to answer a long list of specific questions. Unfortunately, however, the questions were phrased in such a way that jurors were often led

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[23] A. Gide, "l'Affaire Redureau", in Ne jugez pas, (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 131.

to determine aggravating circumstances against their will, so as not to deny the facts presented in the case and on which the condemnation rested. As Gide remarks, on several cases:

> Il faut dire surtout que les questions auxquelles le juré doit répondre sont posées de telle sorte qu' elles prennent souvent l'aspect d'un traquenard, et forcent le malheureux juré de voter contre la vérité pour obtenir ce qu'il estime la justice.[24]

The problem presented by the medical definition of responsibility is an equally complex one. Although by 1912 considerable progress had been made from the original approach of complete responsibility or total irresponsibility (a ministerial decree of 1905 had established that the court must ask the physician to determine whether the limitation of responsibility was "légère, large, ou très large"),[25] the establishment of responsibility - in terms of intention - was not always an easy one. If Gide was to admit that "l'acte gratuit, c'est-à-dire un acte qui ne serait motivé par rien" is "essentiellement inadmissible",[26] it serves as a useful label, as "une étiquette provisoire qui m'a paru commode pour désigner les actes qui échappent aux explications psychologiques ordinaires, les gestesque ne détermine pas le simple intérêt personnel . . . ".[27]

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[24] A. Gide, Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, p. 184.

[25] Quoted in L. Pierre-Quint, André Gide, (Paris: Stock, 1952), p. 193.

[26] A. Gide, Ne jugez pas, p. 143.

[27] Ibid.

All our acts, Gide states, are motivated, but several are determined "par motivation intérieure",[28] and in these cases the individual concerned cannot point to a precise motive. The "force motrice" is hidden within him and psychology has not yet explained them to us. To such acts, the author claims, although the term motivation (unknown) may be applied, responsible intention may not be attributed. Where such acts result in a crime, judge and jury react with complete incomprehension and conclude that the motive is "sentiment de méchanceté", "l'étiquette logique".[29]

In the Souvenirs de la cour d'assises Gide describes such an act.[30] Bernard, an arsonist, had set fire to several buildings merely from a need to do so - a need which he himself refused to attribute to revenge, or to a state of drunkenness, as the judge would have liked him to admit. He consistently denied the accusation, repeating "J'avais pas de motif".[31]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., p. 142.

[30] This case Gide explicitly mentions later in connection with the concept of the "acte gratuit", and so we must refute G. Painter's assertion (André Gide, p. 107) that: "It is hardly correct to relate this experience. . . to his interest at that time in the gratuitous act." Moreover this biographer's reference to the "dignity of gratuity" leads one to wonder what G. Painter has in mind.

[31] A. Gide, Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, p. 51.

Gide, taking note of the doctor's report which mentioned "l'étrange soulagement, la détente . . . après avoid bouté le feu",[32] astutely wondered if there might be any connection between the arsonist's satisfaction and "la jouissance sexuelle".[33]

This interest in acts of which the motivation was not apparent prompted Gide in 1930 to launch two volumes in a series under the title Ne jugez pas. In L'Affaire Redureau and La Séquestrée de Poitiers Gide aimed at presenting a documentary study of these "affairs" which elude traditional psychology and consequently prove disturbing for society's concept and application of justice.

The acts of Marcel Redureau constituted one such case. One evening this young agricultural worker suddenly, brutally, and apparently without a reason, killed his employer, the latter's wife, four of their children and the family maid. Neither theft from his employer, love for the maid, nor jealousy or revenge, all of which were denied by the adolescent, could provide an acceptable motive for the crime. The "médecins-légistes", after examining Marcel (who had admitted almost immediately to having committed the crime) could find no evidence whatsoever to suggest that he might have lost some of his faculties, that he might have been ill. In other words they came to the conclusion that Marcel Redureau was entirely responsible for his actions. Gide does not

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[32] Ibid., p. 54

[33] Ibid.

dwell on the fact that the young man had recently been made to work fourteen to fifteen hours a day - although the working day for a youth of his age was not to exceed ten hours.[34]

The report of the doctors - reproduced at length by Gide - may strike the reader as somewhat unsatisfactory; in particular the equation of physical deformities with mental deficiency (or the absence of one indicating the absence of the other), as well as their assumption that evil is natural to some people. The influences of heredity and milieu are not to be disregarded, but the reader may find it difficult to accept the statement, apparently accepted by the author, that there exist "ces tares régressives si fréquentes chez les jeunes criminels, la malfaisance instinctive . . . de sens moral".[35] It is, however, on the conclusion of these doctors - that Marcel was a perfectly normal adolescent - that Gide insists:

> En définitive, ce n'est pas dans la psychopathologie mais bien dans la psychologie normale de l'adolescent qu'il faut chercher le véritable déterminisme des actes commis par l'inculpé.[36]

Gide does not point to the shortcomings of the medical report. He merely uses it to demonstrate the existence - in "normal" people - of actions which cannot yet be explained by psychology. Consequently, he claims, it is wrong for society to condemn, in the name of a justice based on limited psychological concepts, that which it does not understand. Furthermore such acts are incomprehensible to their

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[34]This legislation only covered industrial workers. See Ne jugez pas, p. 125.

[35]Ibid., p. 111. (my italics).

[36]Ibid., p. 126.

perpetrator - for although he admits to committing the acts, Redureau had acted without any previous intent. Such acts, the doctors demonstrate, are in harmony with "la psychologie normale de l'adolescent".[37] Is Gide claiming that such acts are "normal" in the sense of being naturally inherent? I think not. He is, rather, claiming that there exist among human actions a certain number which, although as yet unexplained, are motivated in the same way as jealousy, for example. Only in such cases where the motivation is obscure and where the individual had no intention to commit that act may he not be condemned. The term "acte gratuit" is consequently seen to be a label which represents actions of this kind. It embraces, in the mind of the author, a wide range of acts of which the individual is capable. Nevertheless, if previous to such an action no intention manifests itself, it is none the less motivated; the weakness of Lafcadio's "acte gratuit" in Les Caves du Vatican lies in the fact that the author suggests no satisfactory possibility of that act having a psychological explanation. On the other hand, in L'Affaire Redureau, Gide suggests that the source of such apparently inexplicable acts may lie in some deep-seated motivation of the adolescent.[38]

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., p. 108.

Gide introduces his documentary study of La Séquestrée de Poitiers with a quotation from Les Faux-Monnayeurs:

> Il suffit, bien, souvent, de l'addition d'une quantité de petits faits très simples et très naturels, chacun pris à part, pour obtenir un total monstrueux.[39]

In 1901, on receiving an anonymous letter, the police of Poitiers investigated the claim that Mélanie Bastion had been incarcerated for twenty-five years in a dark and filthy room. Now an emaciated half-wit of fifty-one years, Mélanie had been locked up since 1875, following the birth of an illegitimate child, by her authoritarian mother and weak, consenting brother; on her release she seemed to regret her "chère petite grotte", "mon cher grand fond Malampia".[40] Madame Bastion died in prison before the trial, and her son, after being condemned, was acquitted on appeal. In Gide's words:

> Comment cette affaire, en apparence si monstrueuse, où la culpabilité de Madame Bastion et de son fils semblait d'abord si évidente put-elle aboutir à un acquittement des inculpés?[41]

Evidence determined that it was the mother who was to be considered entirely responsible. Pierre Bastion, the brother, had been completely dominated by her; he was at first, considered guilty as a tacit accomplice, but Gide claims that such a point of view was erroneous, pointing to the brother's love of solitude and

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[39] Ibid., p. 200.

[40] Ibid., p. 227.

[41] Ibid., p. 204. These words are not strictly exact since Madame Bastion was never acquitted.

a marked attraction to unpleasant odours and excrement. In his presentation of the material relating to this case Gide attempts to demonstrate that the acquittal was perfectly in keeping with the very limited responsibility of the accused who consistently maintained that he was unaware that his sister's living conditions might be regarded as disagreeable. Indeed the very frequency of his visits to the room where Mélanie lived in her filth suggests that, far from finding it distasteful, he was attracted to it. It seems surprising, however, that Gide did not consider that Mélanie Bastion's willingness to return to her "grotte" (a willingness which is not conclusively proven) might have been the result of her incarceration rather than of her sharing her brother's unsavoury pleasures. Perhaps, Gide, in his defence of the criminal, neglected to explore all the possibilities. In this study, as in the one which preceded it, Gide came to the conclusion that the lack of knowledge we have concerning certain human actions - indeed the inconsequential nature which these actions assume in the eyes of their perpetrator at the time - do not warrant condemnation as crimes.

The three "reportages" which I have briefly examined demonstrate the extent to which Gide's interest in the working of "la-machine-à-rendre-la-justice" stems from his primary interest in the individual. To a certain extent the Poitiers incarceration must have attracted his attention for several other reasons. The indictment, for instance, of the horror and filth at the core of an extremely well-established and respected bourgeois family

and the hatred which existed between mother and children caused a journalist of the time to comment:

> C'est un drame effroyable, un drame de préjugés, de respectabilité, de vertu exaspérée - une vertu basée sur la convention hideuse.[42]

Gide was, however, more concerned with exploring the psychology of the individual - in this case the hidden cause of the monstrous situation probably lay in some sort of Freudian anal complex. What interested Gide was the psychological reation, the apparent satisfaction which Mélanie Bastion claimed to have found in her "grotte", and the variety of complexes which existed in the family. Both L'Affaire Redureau and La Séquestrée de Poitiers are a plea that the criminal be not judged by a society which has no right to condemn individuals whose actions it cannot comprehend, and who themselves appear at the time to be incapable of doing otherwise.

In the introduction to his Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, Gide claims that: "Assis sur le banc des jurés on se redit la parole du Christ: Ne jugez point."[43] This assertion that the individual must be his own judge does not amount to a philosophy of irresponsibility, however, for: "je ne me persuade point qu'une société puisse se passer de tribunaux et de juges."[44] The three works examined in this Chapter, if they demonstrate the difficulty of practising justice, do not deny the need for the existence of some application of justice. What Gide is saying in effect is that, necessary as justice is, society is too eager to condemn the

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[42] Ibid., p. 203.

[43] A. Gide, Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, p. 7.

[44] Ibid., p. 7.

individual whose actions are out of the ordinary, and we must be extremely careful in our condemnation of "criminals" because of the complexity of factors which may act on an individual to cause a "crime". The author writes about one youth who is accused at Rouen of theft: "Avec le peu qu'il gagne, comment pouvait-il s'en tirer, sans voler?"[45] He mentions that the accused accepts his act "comme s'il ne pouvait pas ne pas le faire".[46] This idea of the inevitability of many crimes is one which the reader often comes across in Gide's defence of the criminal. Our acts are influenced by many factors, most of which we can gauge, but some which we cannot, and so the author exposes his concept of the "acte gratuit" to be what it is, namely a label for those actions the motivation of which we have not yet learnt to perceive. Gide suggests that Marcel Redureau may have been motivated by some irrational fear; Pierre Bastion by some as yet unexplained anal attraction - or at least one to foul odours, darkness and solitude. The "acte gratuit", it seems, may therefore not be considered as a manifestation of individualism, but, like our other actions, its motivation lies within the individual's reaction to external influences.

In this defence of the individual Gide points to some of the causes of the crimes he studied: poor wages, for example.

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[45] Ibid., p. 42.

[46] Ibid., p. 44.

By condemning the actor of a youthful prank, society may create one of its criminals. Many crimes seem to be carried out with malevolent intent, but if one examines them carefully, one will discern in some cases the helplessness of the individual with regard to his act. The line which distinguishes "criminals" from the most established members of society is a very fine one. The extremely harsh condemnation of Yves Cordier reminds Gide of the account of the sinking of the ship "Bourgogne", during which the sailors had to condemn some people to die in order that others might be saved. The reminder of this episode provokes the remark: " 'oui!' le mieux c'est de ne pas tomber à l'eau . . . Ce soir je prends en honte la barque, et de m'y sentir à l'abri."[47] That evening the author wanders about the slums around the harbour, contemplating the horror and barrenness of the existence of the people who live there, "noirs de charbon . . . ivres sans joie, hideux"; their children will never eat properly, nor will they ever be loved.[48] The young offender, Cordier, however, comes from a good family, "une honnête famille"[49], and he can perhaps be saved. Gide's request for leniency merely results in a reduction of the sentence, and he wonders: "Mais hélas! après la prison ce sera le bataillon d'Afrique. Et au sortir de ces six ans, qui sera-t-il?"

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[47] Ibid., p. 142.

[48] Ibid., p. 143.

[49] Ibid.

. . . que sera-t-il?"[50]

Although Gide's conscience is stirred by the appalling conditions many people are made to live in, he does not consider this problem in depth. Nor does his interest rest mainly on those reforms which he considers necessary for a change in judicial procedure. In his defence of the criminal against society Gide examines a few cases which question "certaines notions trop facilement acceptées",[51] on which society bases its condemnation of certain individuals. He denies the validity of the statement that "un criminel c'est un criminel", and demonstrates the wide spectrum of possible ways in which an individual can, without his being aware of it, find himself condemned as a criminal.

By his awareness of the strict relationship between certain social and economic factors and the necessity of crime which these entail, and by his enquiry into the complexity of tracing individual responsibility, André Gide raises the fundamental questions concerning the justice he witnessed. While seeking to retain, in its broad outline, the function of the legal system, Gide considers the complexity of psychology and defends the individual whose acts a society which seeks to categorize, to simplify, to justify, is only too eager to condemn as a criminal.

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[50] Ibid., pp. 150-151.

[51] A. Gide, Ne jugez pas, p. 146.

CHAPTER III

COLONIALISM: UNE IMMENSE PLAINTE M'HABITE

By the time he had completed Les Faux-Monnayeurs, Gide felt that the time had come for a break with the past and the present. With the recent publication of Corydon he was being continually condemned and harassed by critics and in addition, by quite a few friends. His search for personal emancipation had also led to his abandoning his wife Madeleine for Marc Allégret. An indication of his state of mind at this time may be found in a thought - attributed to a certain "x" - in his Journal:

> Que des milliers d'êtres aient peiné pour lui assurer le bien-être, voici ce qu'il a besoin d'ignorer pour pouvoir continuer d'être heureux.[1]

Selling his collection of presentation copies of the works of his friends, he sailed for the Congo with Marc in July 1925.

From his first visit to North Africa, in 1893, Gide had emerged a more confident person as well as one in better health. He had overcome his sexual inhibitions and, eager to enjoy life, indicated in Les Nourritures Terrestres and l'Immoraliste the duty of the individual to be guided by his nature towards fulfilment. It was this "renaissance", this rekindling of the joys of life which the author hoped to find in this second longer journey of

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[1] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 811.

exploration in the Congo. On the ship taking him to Equatorial Africa, Gide was asked by a fellow traveller: "Qu'est-ce que vous allez chercher là-bas?" "J'attends d'être là-bas pour le savoir" was his answer.[2] On arrival Gide immediately noted the "joie de se trouver parmi les nègres",[3] and his eagerness to leave the ugliness and vulgarity of the white settlers. As he advanced into the jungle, this journey seemed to promise everything which he had lacked in France: "Tout ici semble promettre le bonheur, la volupté, l'oubli."[4] It was not to be more than a few days, however, before he became aware of "l'extraordinaire complication, l'enche-vêtrement de tous les problèmes coloniaux".[5] Gide was soon to realise that "ces questions sociales angoissantes . . . de nos rapports avec les indigènes" were to become "le principal intérêt de mon voyage",[6]

Nothing had been further from his mind. He had gone to the Congo to satisfy "un projet de jeunesse",[7] hoping to find some

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[2] A. Gide, Voyage au Congo, (85th ed., Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p.10.

[3] Ibid., p. 11.

[4] Ibid., p. 13.

[5] Ibid., p. 24.

[6] Ibid., p. 25, Note 1.

[7] Ibid., p. 10.

place away from the increasing pressures and attacks to which he was subject in France. He had hoped to satisfy his curiosity, and his only precise plan had been to study the fauna and flora in which he was so interested. When he realised that he could not escape "tous les problèmes coloniaux", his first reaction was one of disappointment:

> Heureux . . . le naturaliste qui choisit de ne s'occuper que des insectes ou que des plantes . . . Vivrais-je une seconde vie j'accepterais, pour mon bonheur, de n'étudier que les termites.[8]

His honesty and sincerity, however, was such that the first few glimpses of the way in which white people treated the natives - the sending of spoiled tins of food from France to alleviate the famine at Libreville, the complete lack of medical facilities, the crimes committed by a young French administrator, the sordid cheating of the natives by the merchants - convinced him that he had to speak out:

> Désormais, une immense plainte m'habite; je sais des choses dont je ne puis pas prendre mon parti. Quel démon m'a poussé en Afrique? Qu'allai-je donc chercher dans ce pays? . . . A présent je dois parler.[9]

The great sympathy which Gide held for the colonized people of Africa, though first expressed in the Voyage au Congo, had been felt a long time before 1926. In his Journal he reveals that, had he kept a diary during his first journey to North Africa, this sympathy would have been apparent at an earlier date:

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[8] Ibid., p. 25.

[9] Ibid., pp. 96-97.

> . . . Sans doute eussé-je parlé de l'affaire des phosphates de Gafsa que je pouvais alors suivre de près, du retrait progressif des Pères Blancs après la mort du Cardinal Lavigerie, et surtout de l'arrivée des tonneaux d'absinthe pour la réduction des indigènes, et de l'expropriation des Arabes par le procédé de la banque Cazenave selon une méthode monstrueuse que j'aurais sans doute exposée . . .[10]

Are we to accept Gide's earlier reluctance to denounce these atrocities as merely stemming from his failure to keep a diary? The real answer, I think, lies in the fact that since his North African journey Gide had come to realize that he must speak out on social matters, as an author who placed considerable importance on the moral question as well as an individual living in society.[11] At first hesitantly (ce que . . . je sentais alors, c'était surtout mon incompétence),[12] he gradually gained confidence and, as he witnessed the atrocious treatment of the natives inflicted by the white men, he gained a sense of purpose:

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[10] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1155.

[11] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, pp.1155-1156: "Le sentiment de mon incompétence m'a longtemps retenu de parler de ce qui n'était pas ma partie. Il a fallu la guerre pour m'amener à douter de la valeur des "compétences", pour me persuader qu'un spécialiste peut se blouser comme un autre homme, et que j'avais autant qu'un autre le droit et même le devoir, de parler." Gide had considerably matured in his attitude to politics and social questions from the "confiance naïve" (ibid., p. 674) of his earlier years. The First World War had proved decisive in drawing Gide closely into political life and in convincing him of the need to participate, to work to improve society. His work in the Foyer Franco-Belge had left him "devoured by sympathy" (G. Painter, Andre Gide, p. 70), and the social and political problems of the time had convinced him that "a writer's duty during a war i s to abstain from writing" (Quoted by G. Painter, Andre Gide, p. 70). For further indications of his awareness of the need for cooperation and social service see Journal 1889-1939, p. 673

[12] A. Gide, Voyage au Congo, p. 25.

> En acceptant la mission qui me fut confiée, je ne savais trop tout d'abord à quoi je m'engageais, quel pourrait être mon rôle, en quoi je serais utile . . . A présent je le sais, et je commence à croire que je ne serai pas venu en vain.[13]

Gide rose to defend the natives. In the letters he wrote during his journey, in his diaries published as Voyage au Congo and le Retour du Tchad, as well as in later articles, he actively denounced the injustices to which the Congolese people were subjected. From the first disquieting facts which drew his attention he carefully noted and examined the many abuses of power which he witnessed. Let us first outline the nature of these grievances, summarised for the most part in a letter he wrote from Nola to the Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, in which he detailed the state of affairs in this region.

The bulk of Gide's accusations were levelled at the Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui, which had obtained a charter making it the only "Concessionnaire" for the region in question. The monopoly held by the company amounted, Gide claimed, to nothing less than slavery: the men were forced to go far into the forest to collect rubber, while some women were obliged to maintain a road travelled over only once a month by a company agent, and other women undertook the extremely harsh work of portage. The result of this policy was that the Africans had no time to cultivate their fields, could not plant and develop rubber plantations of their own (the

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[13] Ibid., p. 95.

company owning rights merely over the wild rubber crop and not cultivated rubber plantations), and, receiving a pittance completely out of proportion with even their most elementary needs, tended to flee the country. A district which once had been rich and densely populated was now reduced to "un vrai désert", and the company, furious at being unable to find enough natives to force to work for it, obtained revenge on the remaining few by exacting the same total production from the decimated number of remaining Africans. An indication of the misery to which the Mandja race, for instance, was subjected may be gleaned from the fact that, according to an official report, the members of this race preferred to remain hidden:

> caché, comme un solitaire traqué, dans un coin de brousse, ou se réfugie dans les cavernes de quelque "Kafa" inaccessible, devenu troglodyte, vivant miserablement jusqu'à ce qu'il meure de faim plutôt que de venir prendre ses charges.[14]

As if the agreement drawn up between the French administration and the Grandes Compagnies concerning the concessions was not bad enough, more recent agreements, Gide noted, were even less favourable for the natives. Moreover, the company officials lost not the slightest opportunity to cheat the Africans (who were ignorant of the weight measures and the price specified for their rubber) out of a good portion of that which the convention stipulated to be their due. Gide's list of complaints concerning the abominable situation of the African natives is by no means a short one. In the prison of Boda, where workers considered not productive enough were incarcerated, more than half of the prisoners died as a result of

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[14] Ibid., p. 75

brutality and insufficient food. There was a total lack of medical facilities, the author observed, the Compagnie Forestière refusing to comply with even the minimum of "sages réglements médicaux, éludant les visites sanitaires et se moquant des certificats pour tous les indigènes",[15] and so permitting sleeping sickness to ravage among the natives.

Gide's attack on the Grandes Compagnies had not been initially provoked by observation of the treatment the companies gave to their natives. This he discovered and denounced later. What had first led him to cry out "Désormais une immense plainte m'habite", was the revelation of atrocities meted out to uncooperative natives which the French administration overlooked: the "bal" at Boda[16] for example, and in particular the complicity between the terrible Pacha and the agents of the Compagnie Forestière in that district - a complicity which, on one occasion, had resulted in thirty-three deaths.

The list of grievances which the author presented on behalf of the Africans were not directed merely at the Grandes Compagnies. Even in the "free zones", white merchants who had come to make their fortune ruthlessly exploited the natives by rigging the auctions between them. If Gide also directed some of the blame for the devastation of the land and the subjugation

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[15] Ibid., p. 115.

[16] See Voyage au Congo, p. 92.

of the natives towards the French administration, he considered that the latter's portion of the blame was a much smaller one than that of the Grandes Compagnies. Indeed, the author suggests that when the colonial administration sins it does so by default, by accident almost. In this way Gide accepts the occasions on which French officials worked closely in collaboration with the Compagnie Forestière to conceal particularly atrocious incidents as merely regrettable accidents - even if these accidents have to be investigated and their perpetrators punished. But for the most part Gide claims that the administrators are carrying out a difficult task to the best of their ability. If only more money, medical facilities and officials were sent by France, then he would not object to the role of the French government in colonized Africa. If the officials were to be paid higher wages, Gide claimed, such positions would attract better administrators and they would not abuse their power to compensate for low salaries. On several occasions Gide emphasises the considerable benefits for colonized Africa "que pourrait obtenir une administration intelligente et suivie".[17]

The great hardships enforced upon the native people of the Congo, in building the roads network, for example, Gide claims to be perfectly acceptable, because:

Ce regime affreux, mais provisoire, était consenti

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[17] Ibid., p. 51.

> en vue d'un plus grand bien, tout comme les souffrances et la mortalité qu'entraîne nécessairement l'établissement d'une voie férrée. Le pays entier, les indigenès mêmes, en fin de compte ont un dernier ressort, en profitent.[18]

On the other hand, the same may not be said on behalf of the slavery imposed by the Grandes Compagnies, for the latter are motivated only by profit for their shareholders. These companies have done nothing whatsoever in return for the benefit of the country. They have not even paid their taxes, and any hope that they might have fulfilled the obligation they undertook to "develop" the area in which they hold their monopolies had proved to be illusory. It may seem rather surprising that Gide limited his attack to the Compagnies Concessionnaires and did not consider the very real role of the French government in instituting the "régime abominable des Grandes Concessions". His position may be summarized by the following extract which he gives from a study undertaken at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales:

> Qu'ont fait les colons en Afrique Equatoriale Française? Assez peu de choses et ce n'est pas à eux qu'il faut s'en prendre, mais au régime détestable qui a été imposé à l'Afrique Equatoriale, le régime des Grandes Concessions.[19]

One is temped to ask, however, who "imposed" this "régime détestable des Grandes Concessions", if not the French government? One must not forget that the principal reason for the French presence in the

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[18] Ibid., p. 78.

[19] Ibid., p. 78, Note 2.

Congo - as is the case for all colonization - was the economic profit which the colonial power was able to secure for itself. The French colonized the Congo for the main reason of obtaining its rubber, and the system of Grandes Compagnies was the most efficient way of exploiting the country, of providing the investment which was needed. So efficient was it that the country was drained, "saigné, pressuré comme une orange dont on va bientôt rejeter la peau vide."[20] Despite his knowledge of this result as well as the fact that the companies required the authority of the colonial administration to enforce their "rights", Gide did not condemn colonialism itself. As he stated in a letter dated March 1, 1935: "Je n'étais nullement anti-colonialiste en partant, et ce n'est pas en anti-colonialiste que je denonçai les abus dont je fus temoin."[21] L'Humanité blamed him for not attacking the colonial system itself, but Gide continually maintained that a form of colonialism according to which both the colonized country and the colonizing power would benefit was perfectly possible. Indeed, such, the author claimed, had been the intention of the French government and now that the Grandes Compagnies presented a vast obstacle to this achievement their concessions must be stopped immediately. Gide maintained that free trade,[22] with healthy competition, should be practised -

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[20] Ibid., p. 78

[21] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 81.

[22] A. Gide, Voyage au Congo, p. 211.

but was not the very principle of colonialism to secure for oneself the monopoly over the totality of the resources of the colonized country? The author even accepted the idea that the natives, as well as losing their wealth to the colonizing power, should in addition pay taxes for this privilege.[23]

In the eyes of Gide it was not, therefore, the principle of colonialism but the way in which this was practised in the Congo which must be denounced. Colonization in the French Congo signified giving a free hand to the Grandes Compagnies; it meant in effect giving them not only "la propriété exclusive de tous les produits naturels d'immenses regions",[24] but also the natives themselves, "car, en fait, ils furent concédés eux-mêmes avec le terrain".[25] That this constitutes nothing less than theft and slavery Gide concedes, but he would be willing to accept it if the natives in exchange received schools, medical facilities - if, in general, they were provided with "modernisation". In this way the tremendous hardships borne by the natives while building a communications network are accepted because they achieved some "plus grand bien-être futur".[26] Indeed:

> Aucun progrès, dans certains domaines, ne saurait être réalisé sans sacrifice de vies humaines. Sacrifice imposé ou généreusement consenti.[27]

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[23] Ibid., p. 212

[24] Ibid., p. 227.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p.224. Was this, however, the only way to achieve this end?

[27] Ibid., p. 224.

For all the courage which the author demonstrated in denouncing the atrocities he witnessed in the French Congo, he merely regarded them as abuses and shortcomings of a fundamentally praiseworthy policy. Moreover, if we look closely at the nature of the progress which, in his mind, the good colonist should help the African natives to achieve, we see that Gide was not totally free from the prejudices of his French milieu. He was only too aware that many of the traits of character which the whites attributed to the natives were a result of the way in which the latter were treated. His own servants, he claimed, were more honest than their French counterparts:

> L'on peint le peuple noir comme indolent, paresseux, sans besoins, sans désirs. Mais je crois volontiers que l'état d'asservissement et la profonde misère dans laquelle ces gens restent prolongés, expliquent trop souvent leur apathie.[28]

At the same time, however, Gide is capable of categorizing the Africans as having a precise set of (unfavourable) characteristics. He falls into his own trap when he makes such generalisations as

> De quelle sottise, le plus souvent, le blanc fait preuve, quand il s'indigne de la stupidité des noirs. Je ne les crois pourtant capables que d'un très petit développement, le cerveau gourd et stagnant.[29]

In the same way, on observing that the natives seem incapable of understanding the term "pourquoi", he draws the conclusion that "les cerveaux de ces gens sont incapables d'établir un rapport de

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[28] Ibid., p. 65, Note 1.

[29] Ibid., pp. 124-125. My italics.

cause à effet".[30] An indication of the conclusions Gide drew concerning the limited capabilities of the "primitive mind" may be seen in that he claimed to find a confirmation of them in Levy-Bruhl's book La Mentalité primitive, to which he refers in the footnotes which were added to the diary after the journey and prior to publication. More recently Claude Levi-Strauss has demonstrated the shortcomings of the erroneous interpretation presented in such works.[31]

In the same way it may seem peculiar that Gide, who had so much affection and esteem for the numerous natives who worked for him, and indeed to whom so many of the Africans looked with love and admiration, should critize these people and their country for being so uniform. He notes at the beginning of Chapter VI of the Voyage au Congo this overwhelming impression which met his gaze:

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[30] Ibid., p. 106

[31] Levy-Bruhl claims that affection is the source of all the natives' actions which manifest themselves primarily in a "révulsion sentimentale" and a total acceptance of "des puissances invisibles". He also claims, paradoxically perhaps, that the laws of causality do not exist for them.

C. Levi-Strauss, in The Savage Mind (5th ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), referring explicitly to Levy-Bruhl's belief that the savage is incapable of "complex understanding", of "analysis and demonstration" (The Savage Mind, p. 251.), argues that the native's thought "proceeds through understanding, not affectivity, with the aid of distinctions and oppositions, not by confusion and participation" (The Savage Mind, p. 268.). The "antimony between logical and prelogical mentality" is a "false" one: "The savage mind is logical in the same sense and the same fashion as ours".

> L'absence d'individualité, d'individualisation, l'impossibilité d'arriver à une differentiation . . . devant le peuple d'enfants tous pareils, indifféremment agréables, etc . . . et dans les premiers villages, devant ces cases toutes pareilles, contenant un bétail uniforme d'aspect, de goûts, de moeurs, de possibilités, etc . . . Tout est uniforme.[32]

How severe a condemnation this is in the eyes of an author who belived in the supreme value of the individual, and who was so delighted when he discovered something out of the ordinary - in this case the "air pur" and a particularly enchanting light - that he immediately noted: "Cette notion de la différenciation, que j'acquiers ici . . . est si important qu'elle me paraît le principal enseignement à rapporter de ce pays."[33] Despite the prejudice and ignorance which had led Gide to claim that everything was "uniformé", his day by day account of his travels and the affection he demonstrated for his "boys" contradicts to some extent the statement above. Moreover, the trust and affection the natives manifested towards the traveller (while at the same time expressing attitudes of quite a different nature towards the officials of the Compagnie Forestière, for example) demonstrates that they did not categorize people in the same way as that in which the author classified "le peuple noir" as being inferior on many counts. This impression reflected by Gide may be partially attributed to the denigrating social and economic conditions to which the natives were reduced.

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[32] A. Gide, Voyage au Congo, p. 169.

[33] Ibid., p. 170. Gide is referring here to Bosoum.

As the author admits, the regulations of the Grandes Compagnies may serve as an "explication" of this "impression de la non-différentiation de l'individu, du troupeau."[34] In the mind of the author, however, these regulations serve also as a "confirmation" of the uniformity of the African natives. This attitude of Gide's must be considered as stemming from prejudice, as well as from a certain blindness, a failure on behalf of the tourist to discern much beyond general impressions. The vehemence with which Gide denounced the absence of individuality of the black Africans demonstrates the ease with which this great individualist - like other individualists, perhaps - could be marked by prejudice concerning other people and classify them in uniformly characterised social, even racial, groupings.[35]

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[34] Ibid., p. 191.

[35] It is also of interest to note that Gide displayed "deeply ingrained class prejudices" (G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, p. 85) in his relations with the Jews. His attitudes towards the Jews indicate a failure to keep an open mind. In spite of his conviction of the uniqueness of the individual, he tended to apply preconceived notions about the Jewish race, and attribute particularized characteristics to the members of this race. The Jews, Gide claimed, had their particular qualities and faults, "leurs laideurs" and "leurs beautés"; in his Journal he relates his argument with Rathenau who attempted to demonstrate the dangers of attributing to all Jews a certain simplied "esprit de race juive" (A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 713).

Nevertheless the author's observations on the way the African people were treated by the French colonials in the Congo - the "Cendrillon" of French colonies (a term which excuses the colony on the grounds that it is unique, while implying that it will "blossom"[36]) - had a certain positive effect. If Gide accepted colonialism, if he carried with him some of the prejudice of his French milieu, he had the courage to denounce those atrocities which were inacceptable even within this biased framework. His "reportages" were used as the basis of two articles by Léon Blum in Le Populaire. When the Directeur of the Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui denied Gide's accusations, the author, replying in the Revue de Paris, pointed to the lies and distortions of fact contained in the latter's denial. The matter was raised in the Chamber of Deputies and although no concrete results were achieved, Gide obtained a meeting with the minister responsible for the colonies and cam away assured that he had obtained more than mere promises. A Commission of Inquirywas sent to the Congo. Nevertheless, in the "Appendice" to his Retour du Tchad the author admitted that much more needed to be done. Courageous as was the public denunciation of the atrocities in the French Congo, it did not achieve anything of importance in terms of immediate change of policy.

Gide's proclamation of these abuses had carried him into the field of journalism. In the Voyage au Congo he had wondered:

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[36] A. Gide, Retour du Tchad, (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) p. 223.

> Comment se faire écouter? Jusqu'à présent, j'ai toujours parlé sans aucun souci qu'on m'entende; toujours écrit pour ceux de demain . . . J'envie ces journalistes dont la voix porte aussitôt . . . [37]

Realising the need to speak for the present - a necessity which he had proclaimed during the First World War - Gide felt himself uncomfortable in his new role. Still tainted by the fear of not writing works of art which, he felt, must remain free from any specifically social interest, he claimed that he was not participating in a political battle. What he had to say, he wrote, had nothing to do with the political policy of colonialism:

> Loin de moi la pensée d'élever la voix sur ces points qui échappent à ma compétence et nécessitent une étude suivie. Mais il s'agit ici de certains faits précis, complètement indépendants des difficultés d'ordre général.[38]

Refusing to question this basic policy, Gide supported it, restraining his criticisms to what he considered to be prejudicial to a beneficial and established policy:

> C'est pourquoi l'on ne saurait trop redire que l'effort colonisateur et l'existence d'un commerce actif dans nos colonies ne sont aucunement liés à un régime abusif qui tout au contraire les compromet.[39]

He stated categorically that:

> cette question échappe à la politique et mérite de rallier les consciences droites de tous les partis.[40]

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[37] A. Gide, Voyage au Congo, p. 97.

[38] Ibid., p. 200. See also Voyage au Congo, pp. 95-96.

[39] A. Gide, Retour du Tchad, p. 234.

[40] Ibid., p. 235.

Nevertheless he was now actively interested in social problems and, whether he accepted it or not, in politics. He now proposed specific social reforms. Although his attitude reflects considerable racial prejudice (he does not question, for example, the claim that the African native "croupit depuis des millénaires dans l'inertie et la famine",[41] that the main reason for these natives' troubles consist in "l'incapacité du noir à s'élever lui-même et à se défendre contre la nature"),[42] and although his view of the progress which he claims the white man must bring to the African native is based on a belief in the superiority of Western civilization (the white man must assert his authority in the colonies or these will revert to anarchy), he manifested considerable courage in pointing to the failure of the colonizing power to meet its obligations: "Nous avons assumé des responsabilités envers eux auxquelles nous n'avons pas le droit de nous soustraire."[43]

Gide went to French Equatorial Africa, preoccupied with his own individualism, to satisfy his curiosity. Once there, he was compelled by his sincerity - as well as by his recent discovery of the need to speak of the present and of social questions - to denounce the colonial abuses which he witnessed. In so doing, however, and despite his unwillingness to challenge the broad policy of colonialism

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[41] Ibid., p. 209.

[42] Ibid.

[43] A. Gide, Journal 1939-1949, p. 745.

(an unwillingness which he explained not so much by a dislike but by a feeling of incompetence regarding politics), and despite the prejudice within him, he gained a sense of purpose; he became committed: "Je suis venu dans ce pays pour défendre les intérêts des indigènes."[44] His reactions were more than those of mere bourgeois conscience (though this manifests itself in his thoughts on the child who was dying of leprosy and hunger, and on the numerous occasions in which he hesitates to be carried by the porters because he feels "l'effort des porteurs"),[45] for many of his accusations point to the inhuman atrocities and injustices of colonialism. As L. Pierre-Quint writes:

> Si les abus ont pu devenir un état de choses toléré, presque général et normal, c'est que la violence est à la base même de toute entreprise coloniale.[46]

Gide's attempt to place himself outside politics was in vain, for the "régime détestable des Grandes Compagnies" not only had been instituted by the political authority, but was enforced by it. The failure of any significant change further stresses this. Capitalism is inherent in colonialism. Without wishing to accept that

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[44] See A. Gide, Voyage au Congo, pp. 95-97.

[45] Ibid., p. 122.

[46] L. Pierre-Quint, André Gide (Paris: Librarie Stock, 1952), p. 203.

"derrière la colonisation il a découvert le capitalisme"[47] - for Gide, despite his realisation that "c'est à Paris d'abord qu'est le mal",[48] refused to judge colonialism, - the author's denunciation of specific abuses led him into the field of politics, and constitutes an important step towards his eventual questioning of the capitalist regime itself as a structure of society which denied the individual the fundamental rights of existence and self-achievement.

Gide had emerged from his first journey to North Africa as a more confident person and with a commitment to the principle of self-fulfilment. His later journey to the Congo, likewise at a crucial time in his life, dictated to him a sense of duty, an "engagement" to actively undertake the defence of certain sections of society and raise disturbing questions concerning the structure of society.

On the final page of the diary of his voyage into Central Africa, written on his return to white society, the author observes two children and notes:

> Qu'il est difficile à cet âge, pour un blanc du moins, d'être naturel. On ne songe qu'à épater autrui, qu'à paraître.[49]

Before examining the author's eventual commitment to Communism,

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[47] Ibid., p. 207.

[48] Ibid.

[49] A. Gide, Retour du Tchad, p. 194.

we shall consider the three short works in which the obstacles to individual self-achievement are examined, both in terms of literature and in terms of active social commitment: L'Ecole des femmes, Robert, and Geneviève.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AND THE NEED FOR SOCIAL REFORM

Gide's attitude towards women is a complex one, reflecting as it does the influences of his upbringing, his marriage to Madeleine and his views on the family. He had been raised, let us remember, by two women, and his authoritarian, repressive and devout mother had so marked him that he did not take long to realize what his quest for self-fulfilment must lead him to combat. "Familles, je vous hais; foyers clos; portes refermées"[1] he wrote, and in most of his works there is a strong vein of animosity towards this institution. But the family is by no means constituted merely by women, and if, in his criticism of the family in his novels, the women are brought under attack, the men are equally victims of this attack. In Les Faux-Monnayeurs it is not only Le Pérouse but also Madame Profitendieu and Madame Molinier who suffer as a result of their marriage. Gide's attitude towards women reflects his feelings towards all people who seek to conceal themselves behind a façade and hinder the self-achievement of others. It must also be stated, however, that Gide had experienced in his own marriage - and notably in Madeleine's attitude towards his attempts to realize self-achievement -

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[1] A. Gide, Les Nourritures terrestres, in Roman , Récits et Soties (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), p. 186.

a particularly restraining force. His whole work, he claimed, constitutes an attempt to convince her of his need to live sincerely. Some of the pressures he felt from within his own marriage seem to have left their mark in a few of his works: in l'Immoraliste, for example, where Marceline presents the greatest obstacle to Michel's self-realization (and he to hers). In Corydon he attributes to women a different "nature" from that of men, claiming that virtues of the former are essentially conservative, important but of no great interest. He then speaks enthusiastically of the role of women in Classical Greece: they were confined to the gynaceum while their husbands were free to devote themselves to important matters. In a note in his Journal of 1927, provoked by Madeleine's attitude when he left her for Marc Allégret, Gide evokes what he considers to be the restraining influence of women:

> Qui se dirige vers l'inconnu, doit consentir à s'aventurer seul. Créuse, Eurydice, Ariane, toujours une femme s'attarde, s'inquiète, craint de lâcher prise et de voir se rompre le fil qui la rattache à son passé. Elle tire en arrière Thésé, et fait se retourner Orphée. Elle a peur.[2]

As early as 1914 Gide had elaborated a "beau sujet de roman",[3] which may have served as a point of departure for

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[2] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 840.

[3] See G. Painter, André Gide, p. 102.

l'Ecole des femmes (1929); the development which this work underwent, however, and in particular the publication of Robert (1930) and Geneviève (1936) was to take the author far beyond his original subject. In this "triptyque",[4] developing his inquiry into the individual's quest for self-achievement, Gide was to wonder: "Qu'est-ce que, de nos jours, une femme est en mesure et en droit d'accepter?"[5] Written over a period of ten years, the three "volets" do not form a cohesive unit, but rather constitute a development of the problem with which Gide had continually concerned himself - that of sincerity to one's self - from the more general point of view to its specifically social aspect. They may thus be considered as a demonstration of the direct social consequences which stem from Gide's fundamental concern - as an artist - with "la question morale" and in particular with the individual's right to self-achievement. These three works of fiction, and particularly the last volume, where a specifically socially-orientated point of view is raised, may serve the reader as an indication of Gide's success or failure as an "écrivain engagé ". Needless to say, when we come in the following Chapter to assess the author as a committed writer, we shall take into account both his fictional and his non-fictional works; Geneviève

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[4] A. Gide, l'Ecole des femmes, Robert, Geneviève, (Paris: Livre de Poche, Gallimard, 1971) p. 155.

[5] Ibid., p. 158.

however, may help us to gauge Gide's attitude towards specifically socially-orientated art.

L'Ecole des femmes and Robert recount the history of the marriage between Robert and Eveline, first from the point of view of the wife and then from that of the husband. The story of Eveline is presented in the form of a diary sent to Gide by a certain Geneviève, her daughter. From the very beginning this diary is presented as being of specific use to its readers, as "pas sans profit pour quelques jeunes femmes".[6] The practically-orientated testimony of her daughter will be even more directed towards this objective.

Eveline's recording of her life with Robert falls into two parts. In the first, describing the short period before their marriage, most of the content is devoted to her fiancé. The naive and trusting young lady in this period accepts Robert's facade and pretence of self-righteousness, probity and wisdom at face value, failing completely to discern that beneath his generosity lies selfishness, and that his willingness to serve conceals an elated pride and egoism. The characterization - and thus the plot - is so simple that the revelation of the truth to Eveline after twenty years of marriage, which constitutes the second section of l'Ecole des femmes, fails to arouse much enthusiasm on the part

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[6] Ibid., p. 9.

of the reader. The importance of this work lies not so much in the way Gide's ideas are presented, nor in the presentation of new ideas by the author, but resides in the restatement of all that which Gide found distasteful in the people around him.

Robert signifies all that which Gide abhorred because of the extent to which he is preoccupied with appearances. Avoiding the use of the most current cliches, this husband has developed his own set phrases which, while preserving his dignified appearance, free him from the necessity to face reality and achieve anything worthwhile. "Je tiens à faire réussir les idées que je représente" [7] he claims, but there is not one of his acts which is not motivated by profit. While using people to suit his ends, he manages to convey to them the impression of providing invaluable help. In this way he pretends to act out of charity by buying the paintings of an artist, but subsequently promotes the artist's work merely to increase handsomely the value of his collection. Having suffered a minor accident, he speaks with great spiritual elevation, as someone who has seen Death. Without risking his life he manages to obtain full military honours.

Eveline's awakening manifests itself in two ways. In the first place we have the revelation of the truth - disclosed by twenty years of marriage - which consists in living a life of pretence: "il faut se satisfaire de l'apparence "; [8] elsewhere Gide speaks

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[7] Ibid., p. 13.

[8] Ibid., p. 70

of: "cette préoccupation constante de paraître".[9] As she attempts to establish herself in the face of her husband's sham, the once naive woman finds herself condemned to serve the husband she now hates, and she seriously considers leaving him. Although before her marriage she had accepted that "ma vie entière doit désormais être consacrée à lui permettre d'accomplir sa glorieuse destinée",[10] she finds that Robert, who had been capable of considering his wife's wedding ring as an investment, who had assumed that she would marry him if he obtained her parents' consent, does not consider her as having any right to an existence of her own:

> . . . il ne soupçonne pas que je puisse avoir, en dehors de lui, de vie propre. Il ne me considère plus que comme une dépendance de lui. Je fais partie de son confort. Je suis sa femme.[11]

Unable to accept this existence, Eveline turns in vain to her "confesseur", the Abbé Bredel, whom she continues to trust despite the fact that Robert's show of piety and hollow comments on the sublime have kindled an increasing anti-clerical spirit in her and convinced her that the Church, like her husband, "ne se soucie que des dehors".[12] She refuses to accept the renunciation of the self which is the solution the Abbé offers:

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[9] Ibid., p. 46.

[10] Ibid., p. 13.

[11] Ibid., p. 59.

[12] Ibid., p. 69.

> . . . se mettre au service d'un être pour qui je n'ai plus d'amour, plus d'estime; d'un être qui ne me saura aucun gré d'un sacrifice qu'il est incapable de comprendre . . . d'un pantin dont je suis la femme. C'est là mon lot, ma raison d'être, mon but.[13]

The humility which Bredel seeks to instill in her, she points out, is based on pride. For the Abbé and Robert "le geste leur suffit",[14] and they both deny her the right to act sincerely and independently: "L'Abbé s'accommode bien plus volontiers d'un simulacre qui le sert que de ma sincerité qui le gêne et le désoblige".[15] An epilogue informs the reader that this wife and mother, unable to continue living with her husband, and yet unable to bring herself to assert her independence, has left for the front as a nurse to treat contagious diseases - and so to seek escape in death.

If Robert represents much of what Gide detested, Eveline is by no means free of fault for her failure to act sincerely. Before her marriage she had declared: "C'était si merveilleux de se perdre et de s'oublier",[16] and had neglected her duty to herself. The tone of the second part of l'Ecole des femmes reflects a change not in her husband but in herself: "Ce n'est pas lui qui a changé, c'est moi".[17] Although she realizes how

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[13] Ibid., p. 68.

[14] Ibid., p. 69.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 23.

[17] Ibid., p. 57.

blind she was at first, she nevertheless refuses to condemn Robert. He cannot, she maintains, be otherwise. Whereas at first she had seen in him some "bonté naturelle",[18] she now attributes to him a new, yet nonetheless permanent, set of characteristics which she considers to be the manifest expression of some central essence of his being. In this way, it is not his action which she criticizes; on the contrary, she observes: "je ne peux lui reprocher que son être".[19] It seems, therefore, that Eveline represents two ideas which are to be found not only in Gide's earlier, fictional, works but also in his social writings: namely the quest for sincere self-achievement hindered by social pretence and institutions, as well as the assertion of some constant determinate core of an individual's being. L'Ecole des femmes also includes a restatement of two further obstacles to sincerity: in the first place, love, which had led Eveline to seek to negate herself and model her actions on those of Robert;[20] secondly, the Christian religion which, by

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[18] Ibid., p. 21.

[19] Ibid., p. 83.

[20] In Les Faux-Monnayeurs Edouard had experienced the effacement of the self for the image one thinks the person one loves has of one: "Quiconque aime vraiment renonce à la sincerité A. Gide, Les Faux-Monnayeurs, (Paris: Livre de Poche, Gallimard, 1967) p. 88.

by its preoccupation with "le geste", by its rejection of independent thought for a limited and limiting set of dogma providing a model for everyone ("L'important selon l'abbé, n'est pas tant de dire ce que l'on pense . . . que ce que l'on devrait penser"),[21] as well as by its encouragement of concealment (the "devoir d'épouse chrétienne et de mère " consists in "couvrir", "cacher et pallier"[22]), actively promotes the renunciation of the self.

Robert - ostensibly the reply by an angry husband - often confirms much of what the reader has understood from l'Ecole des femmes. But it does more than that. If the husband further demonstrates the extent to which his wife was to blame for initially devoting herself to him, at the same time he reinforces his views on the importance of authority in questions of faith and morals, and to this end he proposes suppression of curiosity and the negation of individualism. This is manifested primarily in his attitude to women: if "l'insoumission est toujours blâmable . . . je la tiens pour particulièrement blâmable chez la femme";[23] the role of women in his eyes is particularly limited, "éminemment conservateur,[24] and one which must be subordinated to the mission

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[21] A. Gide, L'Ecole des femmes, pp. 66-67.

[22] Ibid., p. 67.

[23] Ibid., p. 119.

[24] Ibid., p. 121.

of the male:

> Oui . . . je le répète, j'estime que le rôle de la femme, dans la famille et dans la civilisation tout entière, est et doit être conservateur. Et c'est seulement lorsque la femme prend pleine conscience de ce rôle que la pensée de l'homme, libéré, peut se permettre d'aller de l'avant. Que de fois j'ai senti que la position prise par Eveline retenait le vrai progrès de ma pensée . . .[25]

Are we to see here merely a reflection of Gide's experience in his own marriage, to which we have previously referred? To place this point of view in its correct perspective I think that it is more fruitful to regard Robert and Geneviève as presenting tentative answers to the exposition - in l'Ecole des femmes - of the most fundamental problem which Gide set out to investigate: that of the individual's quest for self-achievement. This becomes more evident when, in a deliberate attempt to broaden the scope of his answer, to deal with "un problème d'intérêt très général et très grave",[26] Robert not only praises "cette soumission intellectuelle qui doit être celle de tout bon catholique",[27] but attacks Eveline's right to lead her life according to her own principles. In his rejection of her claim to having "suffisamment de jugement personnel pour pouvoir se guider elle-même",[28] Robert, who sought

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[25] Ibid., p. 122.

[26] Ibid., p. 112.

[27] Ibid., p. 123.

[28] Ibid.

to answer his children's questions by the words "Parce que je te le dis",[29] raises objections which Gide himself had seriously considered concerning the concept of sincerity. These objections the husband bases on the attitudes and actions of his wife and of the two other individuals outside the family who figure in any prominence. In this way, while Robert acknowledged the artist's right "à cette recherche assidue de la plus sincère expression",[30] he refuses to admit that it has any revelance in the field of "la morale":

> l'on eût dit bientot qu'il suffisait qu'un sentiment fût sincère, pour mériter d'être approuvé; comme si l'être naturel . . . n'était pas précisément celui même que nous devons combattre et supplanter.[31]

In the place of sincerity, Robert proposes "le sentiment du devoir", which alone will bring the dignity which he claims to be essential. He objects to the argument of Marchant who asserts that illness in abstract terms does not exist:

> les maladies n'existent point à l'état abstrait, en dehors de l'homme, et . . . chaque homme en qui et par qui la maladie se fait connaître, modifie cette maladie et la réfracte . . . selon ses dispositions particulières.[32]

Moreover, the atheist doctor's ideas, concisely presented by Eveline as "plus de Vérité en dehors de l'homme",[33] demonstrate,

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[29] Ibid., p. 134. This reminds the reader of Si le grain ne meurt of the author's mother.

[30] Ibid., p. 136.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., p. 138

[33] Ibid.

in the eyes of Robert, "le danger de l'instruction chez les femmes".[34]

The argument presented by Robert in his denial of sincerity is one which, at least at first sight, needs no reply from the author who through his life and work had rejected such an attitude. The presentation of this argument in the series we are now examining is such as to suggest a most unfavourable judgment of it. The fact that Gide wrote Robert in the short space of a week also suggests that he was presenting a summary of ideas on which his views were already well defined. There seems to remain, however, a disturbing impression that Robert, in his conception of sincerity, is more than merely a spokesman for something which Gide had irrevocably rejected. Robert, after all, is not a hypocrite and Eveline defends him from this charge:

> Robert n'est pas un hypocrite. Les sentiments qu'il exprime, il s'imagine réellement les avoir. Et même je crois qu'en fin de compte il les éprouve . . .[35]

Robert himself makes this the basis of his plea: all he had done was to present a particularly attractive image which he strove to realize - and this, as the following passage from the Journal indicates, is a course which Gide himself had contemplated:

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., p. 58.

> Ne pas poser devant soi-même. Id est: ne pas affecter les qualités et les vertus que l'on souhaiterait d'avoir et que l'on n'a pas. Mais l'être humain est si extraordinairement perfectible . . . que souvent l'on devient ce que l'on souhaite d'être, et l'on finit par éprouver vraiment le sentiment que d'abord l'on feint d'éprouver, si toutefois, l'on ne joue pas cette comédie pour les autres. Et combien de gens, pour s'être crus dévots ou amoureux, sont devenus bientôt des dévots ou des amoureux sincères . . . Je ne suis jamais; je deviens. Je deviens celui que je crois (ou que vous croyez) que je suis . . . (Il est plus facile de penser ceci à 58 ans qu'à 20 ans.)[36]

Only a few years earlier, in Les Faux-Monnayeurs, Edouard had written in his diary "je ne suis jamais ce que je crois que je suis", and:

> L'analyse psychologique a perdu pour moi tout intérêt le jour où je me suis avisé que l'homme éprouve ce qu'il s'imagine éprouver. De là à penser qu'il s'imagine éprouver ce qu'il éprouve . . .[37]

If Gide did not doubt the duty of the individual to pursue self-achievement, on several occasions he had expressed the difficulty he encountered in his attempt to define the concept of the individual's true nature. The road to self-achievement is indeed a complex one, as Gide suggests by his presentation of Robert. If the hero's self-illusion and repressive action, which hinders other individuals in their quest for personal

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[36] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, pp. 851-852.

[37] A. Gide, Les Faux-Monnayeurs, p. 89.

development, are definitely rejected by the author, this first answer to l'Ecole des femmes again raises the problem of the impossibility of defining what constitutes individual nature.

Although the answer proposed by Robert is rejected, one may discern a doubt on the part of the author concerning his right to act on the basis of sincerity. Gide now turns to a different solution, that presented by the daughter Geneviève. As was the case with the second "shutter" of this "tryptique", Geneviève may be interpreted as presenting a different point of view, another element of the debate which sprang from the author's concern for sincerity.

Whereas Eveline had sought to free herself from the repressive atmosphere surrounding her, she had not succeeded in bringing herself to rebel completely against it. All that she had achieved was an escape in the form of death. When she had first realized that many women, through marriage, find their lives systematically subjected "au plus au moins bon vouloir d'un Monsieur",[38] she had undertaken not to introduce her daughter to any of the pastimes to which women are supposed to devote their free time, but instead to provide Geneviève with a serious education which would enable her to assert herself. Nevertheless this mother had not concluded that it was wrong for a woman to renounce her

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[38] A. Gide, l'Ecole des femmes, Robert, Geneviève, p. 48.

independence; her objections were limited to stating: "chaque femme devrait pour le moins être libre de choisir la servitude qui lui convient."[39]

If Eveline had lacked the strength to assert fully her rights as an individual, if her refusal to accept the status enforced upon her was expressed in her diary rather than in her actions,[40] her daughter has none of her mother's hesitations. This young girl, who had frightened Eveline by voicing the contempt they had both felt for Robert, draws the logical conclusions from the repressive form of marriage and family life which she had experienced; she envisages taking practical steps to prevent herself from entering the same stifling relationship. She represents the shift of interest away from the abstract study of the "moral" dilemma of sincerity - or at least a study which is manifested in writing, and concerning an isolated personal situation - and towards the denunciation of the evil of a society in which the unhappiness she had witnessed in her mother threatened every woman. This represents a shift of interest which we have already observed on the part of the author, and it is made explicit with the reproach Geneviève ostensibly makes to Gide in the letter

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[39] Ibid., p. 48.

[40] Her diary is explicitly compared to an "ouvrage de broderie", one of those pastimes which women are encouraged to undertake in order to divert themselves from serious reflection and, more importantly, from daring to manifest in their actions some disturbing independence. See l'Ecole des femmes, p. 52.

accompanying her testimony:[41]

> La question n'est point pour moi, comme pour les héros que vous peignez et pour vous-même, d'une façon vague et générale, que peut l'homme? mais bien, d'une manière toute matérielle et précise: Qu'est-ce que, de nos jours, une femme est en mesure et en droit d'espérer?[42]

In Geneviève, Gide had proposed to "prêter la parole à la génération nouvelle",[43] and the development which the work presents - by contrasting the daughter with her mother - indicates the new conclusions drawn by the author. Geneviève not only reflects the new emphasis of interest which preoccupies the author, it also indicates the reasons which had influenced Gide in his decision. The attitude of Eveline belongs to the nineteenth century, it is suggested, (and this is supported by Gide's pointing out how daring it is for a young lady to dine in a public restaurant for example). Geneviève indicates her mother's failure to liberate herself, and in so doing states that this must be a thing of the past:

> Le livre de ma mère s'adresse à une génération passée. Du temps de la jeunesse de ma mère, une femme pouvait souhaiter sa liberté; à present il ne s'agit plus de la souhaiter, mais de la prendre.[44]

It is the war, she claims, which has proved of ultimate importance

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[41] Only 10 years previously, however, Gide had rejected social "engagement" as but an escape for the individual who loses faith in himself. Commitment is equivalent to "échapper à la question" and is placed in direct opposition to the goal of the "développement de soi". See Les Faux-Monnayeurs, pp. 435-436, 441-442.

[42] Ibid., pp. 157-158.

[43] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1160

[44] A. Gide, l'Ecole des femmes, Robert, Geneviève, p. 175.

in demonstrating the capabilities of women and so the need to recognize their rights. The reader will observe in this not only a statement of fact but also the reflection of an event which had proved so important in forming the author's ideas on the necessity of direct social action.

Geneviève's main concern is to be useful, to change existing social attitudes and structures. With her categorical statement that: "L'examen attentif de ce qui est doit précéder tout l'acheminement vers ce qui pourrait être , vers toutes réformes et améliorations tant sociales qu'individuelles,"[45] she indicates a trend which we have attempted to follow in the life and work of Gide. First she reiterates the claim - previously encountered on several occasions - that "rien ne peut fausser d'avantage le caractère d'un enfant que de lui imposer un respect de commande pour ses parents".[46] Then, directing the attack towards her own parents, she points to their preoccupation with concealing their true feelings - anti-semitism, for example - behind the customary facade of pretence. Her mother lacked the strength to carry her convictions into action; her father beat her for noticing his "inconséquence";[47] her brother, finally, a perfect copy of his father, shelters behind "comme dit papa". Geneviève declares to her mother that she refuses to accept a marriage in which the husband has his particular and exclusive

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[45] Ibid., p. 174.

[46] Ibid., p. 174.

[47] Ibid., p. 194.

prerogatives and, after forming with two friends a "ligue pour l'indépendance des femmes", resolutely defends her claim to live "une vie personnelle et de ne point lier son sort à quelqu'un qui peut-être ne le vaudrait point".[48] Repeating the claim which we have come across in one form or another on so many occasions in the works of Gide, "IL NE TIENT QU'A TOI",[49] and invoking the occasion on which Christ instructed a paralysed woman to pick up her bed and walk, she asserts that women must realize their independence and act upon it. Her practical proposals are few, however, for it is not an organized movement of female emancipationists which she envisages, but individual action. The emphasis rests squarely on the individual. To a certain extent Geneviève represents much of what the author had been - and was - considering. Had Gide himself not felt the restraining influence of his partner in marriage? Had he not also written: "il faut n'aimer point pour disposer de soi librement"?[50] Was he himself not considering the need for direct social action which stemmed from an examination of man's right - and duty - to sincere self-achievement? G. W. Ireland mentions another parallel between Gide's

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[48] Ibid., p. 79.

[49] Ibid., p. 233.

[50] Quoted in P. Archambault, Humanité d'A. Gide, (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1950), p. 239.

life and an episode in Geneviève.[51] Like the author, the individualist Geneviève is led to make considerable generalizations about large sections of society (I am thinking here of her belief in "les qualités féminines" which, "sans être inférieures" are "différentes de celles des hommes").[52]

From this summary examination of l'Ecole des femmes, Robert and Geneviève emerges the conclusion that in extending his defence of the individual to woman, whose path to self-achievement is made particularly difficult by social prejudice and her role in marriage, Gide is more concerned with the defence of individualism per se than with any particular social group. This "tryptique" is remarkable not so much for its defence of feminism but for the intention it demonstrates of dealing with practical social reforms which stem from Gide's observations concerning the difficulty faced by the individual in his - or her - attempt to achieve sincerity. At the same time it must be recognized the work points to a paradox: social reform, the author claims, must be achieved not only for the individual but also by the individual.

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[51] G. W. Ireland, André Gide, p. 387: "Gide had in sum accepted an offer very similar to the one which Marchant declines. Like Marchant, Gide was married and childless . . . considerably older than the young woman in question, . . . known as a friend of her parents . . . Like Geneviève, the young woman was not yielding to a momentary impulse but making a considered decision."

[52] A. Gide, l'Ecole des femmes, Robert, Geneviève, p. 232.

I have indicated that it is the form of the presentation of the ideas - as well as the ideas themselves - in these works which supports the thesis that they reflect not only questions with which Gide had always concerned himself, but also a progression in the author's attitude to "la question sociale". The particular importance of l'Ecole des femmes, Robert, and Geneviève lies in their illustration of the fundamental problem which preoccupied Gide - that of sincerity to the self - and in their indication of a shift of emphasis towards the investigation of specific social problems and the consequent need for social reform. To dismiss these works as G. Brachfeld does, by the observation that "After having voiced feministic convictions at a time when they no longer shocked anyone, Gide never showed great concern for the rights of women again.,"[53] is to fail to see them in their correct perspective. In the same way G. Painter's concluding note that they represent "the most impersonal of Gide's fictions",[54] is not only misleading but incorrect. Gide himself, in a Journal note of 1933, confirmed the extent to which he felt Geneviève to be close to him; he also raises therein the problem he experienced in writing committed literature:

> Si j'avais pu mener aussitôt à bien cette Geneviève, . . où je me proposais de prêter la parole à la génération

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[53] G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, p. 78.

[54] G. Painter, André Gide, p. 107.

> nouvelle, j'y aurais sans doute épuisé . . . quantité de ratiocinations . . . que je me suis trouvé comme contraint d'assumer. Je n'ai pu les faire endosser par un "héros", ainsi que précédemment j'avais fait des nietzschéennes avec mon Immoraliste, des chrétiennes avec ma Porte Etroite . . . Les assumant, je ne pouvais plus les pousser à bout, à l'absurde, ainsi que j'avais su faire dans un roman qui, tout à la fois les eût exposées, en eût fait le tour et la critique, et qui m'en eût enfin delivré. Le piège . . . s'est soudain refermé sur moi.[55]

Let us now examine this problem of the artist's commitment in our study of Gide's attitude towards Communism.

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[55] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1160

CHAPTER V

THE COMMUNIST IDEAL

> Je voudrais crier très haut ma sympathie pour la Russie; et que mon cri soit entendu, ait de l'importance. Je voudrais vivre assez longtemps pour voir la réussite de cet énorme effort; son succès que je souhaite de toute mon âme, auquel je voudrais travailler. Voir ce que peut donner un état sans religion, une société sans famille. La religion et la famille sont les deux pires ennemis du progrès.[1]

This, one of the first proclamations of his support for communism, introduces us to the two principal aspects of Gide's espousal of the communist cause; firstly, the problem of how the committed author is to make himself heard, and secondly, the affirmation of the author's long-held belief in progress - in terms of the individual - which he felt contemporary society to be hindering. Before turning to the question of committed literature, I propose to examine those factors which convinced Gide, for a period of some four years, of the importance of what was occurring in Russia.

Although he never joined the Communist Party, Gide's declaration of support was nonetheless expressed in his Journal, in his correspondence, and in a number of public declarations of solidarity. Whereas during the First World War Gide had reacted to the "effondrement" of society by joining - for a short time - the Action Française, which was the only organisation which seemed

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[1] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1066.

to him to "lutter contre une dissolution",[2] his reaction to the disintegration of society during the turbulent years preceding the Second World War was of a quite different nature:

> Mais surtout j'aimerais vivre assez pour voir le plan de la Russie réussir . . . Comment une réorganisation si nouvelle eût-elle pu être obtenue sans, d'abord, une période de désorganisation profonde?[3]

His stand reflects the logical outcome of an evolution that had manifested itself in his life and work. The author, through his art, reflected his fundamental dictate of the duty of the individual to achieve what I have termed sincere self-expression, and consequently manifested his condemnation of those attitudes in society which hinder the development of the individual. We have also seen, in the more socially-orientated writings, Gide's attack spread to other institutions and social attitudes. Only in his defence of the natives of colonial Africa had he come close to questioning the regime, however, and even on that occasion, somewhat blinded by prejudice, he had deliberately avoided questioning general policy. It is this same exaltation of the individual which led Gide to affirm his support for the U.S.S.R..

Gide repeatedly rejected the term "conversion" as a suitable description of his solidarity with "cette gigantesque et tout humaine entreprise".[4] He added: "Mais communiste, de coeur aussi bien que d'esprit, je l'ai toujours été."[5] His adhesion to

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[2] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 66.

[3] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1044.

[4] Ibid., p. 1044.

[5] Ibid., p. 1132.

communism represents the outcome of an evolution which may be traced in his life:

> Ne parlez pas de "conversion"; je n'ai pas changé de direction; . . . la grande différence c'est que, pendant longtemps, je ne voyais rien devant moi, que de l'espace et que la projection de ma propre ferveur; à présent, j'avance en m'orientant vers quelque chose; je sais que quelque part mes voeux imprécis s'organisent et que mon rêve est en passe de devenir réalité.[6]

This adhesion does, however, mark a certain change: the author is still moving in the same direction but he has found a new and clear sense of purpose. Nevertheless, the stages of this evolution have been traced in the rest of his work: his assertion of the individual's imperative to fulfil his personality; the rejection of family, of the Christian Church, as well as other social institutions and attitudes which obstruct the development of the individual; his discovery of a sense of mission in the Congo, and the aim - expressed in Geneviève - of the need to serve society, to be useful. In a Journal note which dates from his first declaration of support for the U.S.S.R., Gide explains the change which has occurred in his attitude to social questions: if for a long period of time he has held that the "moral" question should precede the "social" question, he no longer holds this to be true. His interest still lies in the individual rather than with the "masses", "mais d'abord important les favorables conditions de la masse pour permettre à l'individu sain de se produire".[7] The moral question is seen to be dependent on the social question, and so we must concentrate for a while on

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[6] Ibid..

[7] Ibid., p. 1135.

the latter in order to achieve the regeneration of mankind:

> Ce qu'il faut d'abord à Descartes pour bien penser c'est son poêle. Sans poêle pas de cogito . . . Il m'apparaît aujourd'hui que la question sociale doit prendre le pas, et qu'elle doit d'abord être résolue pour permettre à l'homme de donner ce qu'il mérite de donner.[8]

Gide's rallying to communism, therefore, may not be seen as a sudden conversion and the acceptance of a dogmatic body of ideas. The author on many occasions defends himself from this charge, explaining that the roots of his recent adhesion lie in his past life and work: "Il faut bien que je le dise, ce qui m'amène au communisme, ce n'est pas Marx, c'est l'Evangile."[9] Had not Lenin himself spoken of "l'esprit démocratique révolutionnaire . . . du christianisme primitif"?[10] The very idea of having to defend Christ against his comrades appears to Gide as perfectly absurd, for in his eyes the example of Christ points to the same goal as does communism, when "bien compris". It is organized religion, with its body of dogma, with its rejection of individualism and its alliance with capitalism which has completely distorted the message of Christ.[11] Had not Christ preached and practised poverty and compassion, had he not defended the victims of

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[8] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 76.

[9] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1176

[10] Ibid., p. 1228.

[11] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 25: "Les chrétiens d'aujourd'hui qui, honteusement et en trahison du Christ . . . se rallient aujourd'hui à la cause du capitalisme."

injustice and fed the hungry? In the Gospel Gide claimed to have found a confirmation of his contempt for material possessions. During the debate with a group of his friends and enemies, the author indicates that one considerable motivation for his rallying to communism was the long-held awareness of his "situation de favorisé,"[12] which created feelings of guilt in him. We have seen that on previous occasions he had felt uneasy about his privileged position in society (in his Souvenirs de la cour d'assises, for example), a position which he represented by the image of the small number of survivors from the sinking ship "Bourgogne". He now states unequivocably the guilt of the privileged few who live at the expense of others: "je ne puis admettre une barque où quelques-uns seulement trouvent abri."[13] To the defenders of contemporary French society who object that communism represents not only a preoccupation with material questions but also a crippling orthodoxy and a debasing uniformisation, Gide points out that all his work has demonstrated the existence of these evils in France. His support for Russia stems from his belief that the aim of communism lies beyond this. Material questions are not precisely the most important but they must be solved first; society must free man from misery, in order that he may become "l'homme nouveau".[14] This must be the aim

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[12] Ibid., p. 73.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 93.

of all society:

> qu'il importe d'abord de le secourir, il va sans dire, comme une plante qu'il s'agit d'abord d'arroser, mais c'est pour obtenir sa fleur, et c'est de celle-ci que je m'occupe.[15]

It is this "efflorescence", which in the author's eyes is "la raison d'être de l'humanité",[16] which determines Gide's support for the U.S.S.R. in its effort to free all men from servitude and poverty, for "la réforme spirituelle dépend de la réforme matérielle".[17] Indeed, just as it is a misunderstanding to accuse the U.S.S.R. of according primacy - as opposed to priority - to material questions, so it is equally false to see in the communist effort a sacrifice of individualism, for the ultimate aim of the U.S.S.R., the author claims, lies in the promotion of "un individualisme communiste". In Gide's interpretation of communism such objections remain "théorique et factice",[18] for the author expects equality of opportunity to provide a starting point which will enable the diversity and richness of "l'homme nouveau" to manifesr themselves.

Gide had always argued that it was by being as "particular"

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[15] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1233. See also p. 1142 where the author compares the "souci potager" with "les fleurs".

[16] Ibid., p. 1139.

[17] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 76.

[18] Ibid., p. 72.

as possible that man best served the general interest. The Soviet Union of the early 1930's represented for him "une patrie idéale",[19] in which each individual could attain his full development. The author points to the Soviet rejection of religion - or at least of mythology - in favour of an ideal to be realized on this earth.[20] This idealism, together with the aims of the negation of the family, of freer expression of love in all its forms, is seen by the author as conducive to a higher degree of morality for the individual than is possible in the society in which he was living. Because of the pretence, orthodoxy and uniformity he had witnessed in French society, where only a small number of individuals were free of worry from material questions, Gide turned to the U.S.S.R. as a "patrie idéale" which would achieve "le plus grand épanouissement de chaque homme, la venue au jour et la mise en valeur de toutes les possibilités".[21] It is therefore as a champion of specific individual value and against collective value that Gide undertook to support communism.

It was not to be long before the divergence between the idea

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[19] Ibid., p. 98.

[20] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, pp. 1181-1182: "c'est en tant que religion que la doctrine communiste exalte et alimente les ferveurs des jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui. Leur action implique une croyance; et s'ils transfèrent leur idéal du ciel sur la terre, ainsi que je fais avec eux, ce n'en est pas moins au nom d'un idéal qu'ils luttent."

[21] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 95

Gide himself had formulated about what was happening in the U.S.S.R. and the aims of the Soviet leaders were to come to light. The frequency with which the author refers to the development of individual talent in Russia may suggest a slight need to reassure himself on this question. At any rate, his recurring protestations against the misunderstandings prevalent in contemporary criticism of the U.S.S.R. are of vital importance. The reader of the Journal for this period has the impression that the author is defending his idea of communism not only from the enemies of the Soviet Union but also from certain sections of society in Russia itself:

> . . . un communisme bien compris a besoin de favoriser les individus de valeur, de tirer parti de toutes les valeurs de l'individu, d'obtenir le meilleur rendement de chacun.[22]

Relating the case of Dmitriev, a particularly brilliant child who had astounded the mathematics faculty at Moscow, the author jubilantly points to the fact that this person received special, even privileged, treatment: "Et le régime n'en sera pas moins communiste pour cela."[23] Perhaps an indication of his later surprise may be gleaned from the report of another visitor to Russia who complained that the individualism of some Russians was presenting problems for the Soviet authorities.[24] In order to

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[22] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, pp. 1116-1117.

[23] Ibid., p. 1190

[24] See Journal 1889-1939, p. 1219

defend the complete harmony between individualism and communism Gide was led to expand his definition of "un individualisme bien compris".[25] This is not to be considered as some "âpreté anti-solidaire",[26] nor merely as a manifestation of all that is inherent in one's nature, for, Gide continues; "je crois . . . que la personnalité ne s'affirme jamais plus qu'en se renonçant".[27] The highest manifestation, therefore, consists in voluntary renunciation (not to be confused with the enforced negation of the self which the author had repeatedly criticized in his earlier works), and it is this revelation which permits us to examine in its proper perspective Gide's attitude to art during his period of active support for communism.

As far as Gide was concerned, his art was his primary preoccupation, and this the author maintaïned even at the height of his involvement with communism: "La chose à laquelle je tiens le plus, c'est mon art."[28] There can be little doubt that as the author became more preoccupied with "la question sociale", he experienced considerable difficulty in achieving any fictional

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[25] Ibid., p. 1179.

[26] Ibid., p. 1219.

[27] Ibid., p. 1180.

[28] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 64.

writing. This impotence the artist ascribed to his age - in the year of publication of the Retour du Tchad he was almost sixty years of age - and to the fact that he was beginning to wonder if he had not already expressed the essential of what he had to say:

> je ne suis plus tourmenté par un impérieux désir d'écrire . . . je me persuade que je n'ai peut-être plus grand'chose à ajouter à ce qu'un lecteur perspicace peut entrevoir dans mes écrits.[29]

Repeated entries in the Journal for this period admit the difficulty which he experiences in completing the literary work on which he was engaged and his failure to be satisfied with what he did succeed in writing. This is particularly true of Geneviève, and the notes regarding it are most revealing: "Je fais effort pour pousser plus avant ce roman (Geneviève), sans gôut, sans conviction que pour les idées que j'y voudrais mettre en valeur. Détestable méthode."[30] Later he goes on:

> Je fais de grande efforts pour me remettre à mon livre, et tirer de léthargie ma Geneviève . . . N'ai-je en moi plus aucune puissance créatrice? Ou plutôt ne puis-je plus m'éprendre de la fiction? Elle ne m'intéresse plus; mon esprit la quitte sans cesse. Les romans des autres ne me retiennent pas d'avantage . . . Comment peut-on encore écrire des romans? quand se désagrège autour de nous notre vieux monde.[31]

During this period of intense commitment Gide came to the conclusion that his ends could best be served outside fictional

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[29] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1014.

[30] Ibid., p. 1046.

[31] Ibid., pp. 1128-1129.

writing. The reason for this conclusion did not lie in the urgency of the problems which he wished to tackle, but stemmed rather from a refusal - and failure - to combine art with specific social preoccupations. The author's commitment to communism in the early 1930's did persuade him for a while that he ought to incorporate more direct social criticism in his work, but he came to the conclusion that commitment of this kind was incompatible with his art. If Gide's principal interest in writing Geneviève had been in the ideas presented therein, the fictional framework had not particularly enhanced them, and the main interest of this work, as I have indicated, seems to lie not in the author's ideas concerning the liberation of women from the restrictions of society, but in the more general debate concerning sincerity and the question of whether the artist should commit himself to seeking practical and immediate social reform.

His attempt, with Robert ou l'intérêt général, to write "une pièce d'allure nettement tendancieuse",[32] during his "lune de miel avec le parti communiste"[33] proved a total failure, as the author was to admit: "Le vrai, c'est qu'elle ne valait pas grand'chose et je le reconnus vite."[34] This original version

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[32] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 221.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

was never published, though it was translated into Russian by Elsa Triolet with a view to being published in the Soviet Union,[35] and what the student of Gide has at his disposal today is an adaptation of the original work transforming the earlier "conflit social" into a "comédie des caractères",[36] which most of Gide's critics have followed the author and his friends in condemning as his worst work.

This play is a disorganized restatement of the obstacles to individualism and of all the social hypocrisy and repression which may be observed elsewhere in the author's work. The characters include Robert, who, claiming to be concerned only the highest principle, "l'intérêt général", barely conceals a life of purely selfishly motivated actions; a repressed and inhibited wife, under the influence of a priest, who exclaims that "le jour où je n'aurais plus de domestiques, je ne pourrais plus tricoter pour les pauvres";[37] a son who has become a perfect duplicate of his father. The outraged comment from a person established in society that "un crime c'est un crime", later becomes "il y a, n'est-ce pas, crime et crime?"[38] as Robert turns the situation to

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[35] It was, for reasons which we shall later examine, never produced.

[36] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 221.

[37] Ibid., p. 281

[38] Ibid., p.320.

his advantage. This compilation of attacks on insincerity, on a Church which maintains that there must always be poor people, in order that the spirit of charity on the part of the rich may be satisfied, assumes even greater banality by its presentation as drama.[39] What remains of the original plot - the story of a strike - is completely lost in the presentation of Michel, the "patron" 's son, who is drawn to the side of the strikers by the love for a working-class girl, and of Ivan, the union spokesman, who, it is suggested, is merely seeking revenge for the way his father was treated by Robert. Robert ou l'intérêt général does contain the theme of social revolution, but the heterogeneous and confused presentation of this theme - treated without any depth - is such as to warrant the author's later rejection of the work.

In addition to this play, Gide published a few other works motivated by a desire to serve the communist cause. The relevance of the "willingness to serve" in Oedipe has been examined by G. I. Brachfeld; this play, however, does not contain an explicit communistic mission. The verse Gide wrote for a choral ballet, Perséphone, staged in 1934, has been described as "the historically submerged world of the Proletariat . . . for whose sake the goddess sacrifices herself voluntarily".[40] The author, however, was

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[39] Is the point made more explicit by such repetition as: "Il ment. Oh! je le comprends bien maintenant, lui aussi. Il ment. Il ment sans cesse . . ." (Littérature engagée, p. 312.)

[40] Quoted in G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, p. 126.

not very pleased by its presentation,[41] and it seems doubtful that the pathetic plea for the "hungry people . . . in pain"[42] may be considered as propaganda. As with his treatment of Greek mythology, it is perhaps the distancing from reality (in subject and musical presentation) and the refusal to develop the theme of any particular social injustice which saved this work from being condemned as severely by the author and his friends as Robert ou l'intérêt général.

Les Nouvelles Nourritures, published in 1935, reaffirm the need for the individual to free himself from the social restraints in the pursuit of self-fulfilment, but the most strikingly new element in this work is the change of Nathanaël into a "comrade" who decides that he does not want a happiness which springs from the misery of others, and who finds satisfaction in serving others. Gide considered this work as perhaps the worst he had ever written: in his Journal he later condemned it as "de tous mes livres, le plus inégal, le moins bon", as lacking in "cet accent de sincérité qui sans doute fait la valeur la plus sure de mes meilleurs écrits".[43]

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[41] See A. Gide, Journal 1939-1949, pp. 1166-1167.

[42] G. Painter, André Gide, p. 111.

[43] A. Gide, Journal 1939-1949, p. 220.

Those attempts which Gide did make to produce literature of a more directly committed kind convinced him of the fundamental incompatibility between art and social criticism. During his period of active support for communism, the author came to the conclusion that a revolution in the structure of society was an essential precondition for the creation of "l'homme nouveau", and that the temporary sacrifice of his art was not too great if it would help achieve this end. Just as he refused to join the Communist Party, or any association of revolutionary writers, on the grounds that his political commitment could only be of value "si je l'apporte librement et si l'on me sait non enrolé",[44] so he refused to produce any fiction which would be "compromised" by a necessity to remain within strict ideological limitations:

> J'ai déclaré mon adhésion à la cause du communisme, mais refusé de m'inscrire au parti; refusé également d m'inscrire à l'A.E.A.R.[45] parce que je ne suis nullement convaincu que mes écrits, si j'écris encore, soient de nature à satisfaire à ses exigences; je préfère me taire plutôt que de parler sous une dictée.[46]

His art, Gide decided, must suffer "une éclipse prolongée".[47] The author refers on numerous occasions to this decision as a

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[44] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 18.

[45] l'Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires.

[46] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 50

[47] Ibid.

sacrifice on his part occasioned by the need to deal effectively - for the time being - with social questions. The aim of improving the material conditions of mankind can best be achieved outside literature, for "une littérature asservie est une littérature avilie".[48] Turning to politics signifies abandoning literature; if Marxism has its orthodoxy, which is essential to achieve "le nouvel état social", it is preferable to consent to the sacrifice of a few works of art, for "l'oeuvre d'art ne peut répondre à un mot d'ordre".[49]

On one occasion Gide does suggest that a fusion of art and communism may be possible: "Que l'entente de l'art et de la doctrine communiste soit possible, je veux le croire."[50] Such a fusion, however, consistently eluded him, and having been unable to find it he has preferred to sacrifice his art. This suggestion of the feasibility of uniting the dictates of art and communism may have been prompted merely by the esteem and affection Gide felt for fellow communists; he was never able to harmonize the two:

> Que l'art et la littérature n'aient que faire des questions sociales, et ne puissent, s'ils s'y aventurent, que se fourvoyer, j'en demeure à peu près convaincu. Et c'est bien aussi pourquoi je me tais depuis que ces questions ont pris le pas dans mon esprit . . . Je préfère ne plus rien écrire, plutôt que de plier mon art à des fins utilitaires. Me

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[48] Ibid., p. 58.

[49] Ibid., p. 74.

[50] Ibid., p. 64.

> persuader que celles-ci doivent aujourd'hui prendre le pas, c'est du même coup me condamner au silence.[51]

Art for Gide is more than a reflection of contemporary society. Art is itself an agent of reform, for if it helps man to free himself from constraints, its particular role is to aid man "à se former et à se dessiner lui-même".[52] Literature is more than a mirror: "elle informe; elle propose; elle crée".[53] If the "point d'entente" lies in the fact that literature serves truth, its aim is superior to immediate social preoccupations; while the latter must be considered a suitable starting point for the flourishment of "l'homme natural, l'homme vrai",[54] it is literature alone which can raise the problems beyond the social domain and which can celebrate such manifestation of the freedom of the individual:

> Que la littérature, que l'art puissent servir la révolution, it va sans dire; mais il n'a pas à se préoccuper de la servir. Il ne la sert jamais si bien que quand il se préoccupe uniquement du vrai . . . Il ne la suit pas; il ne s'y soumet pas; il ne la reflète pas. Il l'éclaire.[55]

Gide's exclusive concern for social questions, it must be

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[51] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1149.

[52] A. Gide, Littérature engagée, p. 92.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., p. 57.

[55] Ibid., p. 58.

remembered, was a temporary one. His aim lay beyond liberating man from material obstacles, and he supported communism because in his mind it provided the most hope for resolving "la question sociale", which hindered the individual's development of the richness that was his by nature. The flowering of mankind, however, will only be achieved after the resolution of social conflict, when works of art will celebrate this triumph.[56]

During his period of active support for communism, Gide's failure to write any work of committed literature which he considered satisfactory further convinced him of the incompatibility of art and specific social preoccupations. This is not to suggest, however, that he scorned either social questions or his art, for if he considered that all of man's efforts should for the moment be directed towards creating favourable conditions for individual fulfilment, he never abandoned his belief that art alone could celebrate and in its own way indicate or create "an assocation in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all", as envisaged by Marx. Above all, Gide was convinced that the work of art must not be preoccupied with social reform; that work which concerns itself primarily with immediate concerns risks becoming quite insignificant in the future. The moment was such as to warrant a temporary sacrifice of the novelist in him, but only art in works completely free from all restrictions

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[56] See A. Gide, Littérature engagée, pp. 50-51.

in time and place can proclaim the eventual flourishing of "la nature humaine".

Gide had remarked that the artist in contemporary society swam against the tide of public opinion: "l'écrivain de valeur a presque toujours été . . . un révolutionnaire, un combattant."[57] For the first time, however, the Soviet Union provided an exceptional situation in which the writer, without renouncing his revolutionary message, would not be regarded as an opponent of the regime. Or so Gide thought before visiting the U.S.S.R..

After his visit to the Soviet Union in 1936, Gide had to admit that all his hopes had been but illusions on his part:[58] "C'est la hauteur de votre bluff qui fit si profonde et si douloureuse la chute de ma confiance, de mon admiration, de ma joie."[59] At the risk of appearing inconsistent with himself, while manifesting more courage than had initially been required to declare his support for the U.S.S.R., Gide bitterly denounced the reality which he had witnessed. His first impression of participating in the joy of the people of Russia had profoundly moved the author: "Dans cette foule, je me plonge; je prends un bain d'humanite."[60]

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[57] Ibid., p. 134.

[58] See Littérature engagée, p. 134 Note 1.

[59] A. Gide, Retour de l'U.R.S.S., Retouches à mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S., (18th ed.; Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 131.

[60] Ibid., p. 34.

Nevertheless the overwhelming evidence presented in the Retour de l'U.R.S.S. and the Retouches a mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S. amounts to a frank admission of the erroneous ideas the author had formed concerning Russian Communism, and a severe indictment of what he witnessed being done in the name of humanity. The most important charge made by the author concerned the almost total uniformity and conformity which was manifest in all aspects of Soviet life. Together with his five travelling companions - three of whom could speak Russian - Gide strayed off the official paths, away from the model factories, hotels, kolkhoses and children's playgrounds, in search of the truth, for it was not technical achievements in which he was interested, but individuals. He claimed that his approach to social questions was that of the psychologist; it was the type of individual produced by the new society which interested him:

> . . . les questions psychologiques seules sont de mon ressort; c'est d'elles, surtout, et presque uniquement que je veux ici m'occuper. Si j'aborde de biais les questions sociales, c'est encore au point de vue psychologique que je me placerai.[61]

His disappointment was immense, however, for Russian communism, instead of preparing an elevation of the individual, had instituted a "nivellement social", "une extraordinare uniformité"[62] which manifested itself not only in the daily actions of the Russian people, but "également dans les esprits".[63]

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[61] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

[62] Ibid., p. 33.

[63] Ibid.

The reader of Gide's "reportages" may pass over the aesthete's concern for the Russian lack of taste, which stemmed from the absence of choice and the poor quality of consumer goods which were available; now that the state was at the same time producer, buyer and seller of all products, "l'exquis cède à l'ordinaire".[64] Were there not more important goals to be achieved, and were starvation and poverty not on the point of being eliminated? The author, witnessing the existence of poor people, of abandoned children, and the failure to erase illiteracy, denied that this was the case. Although the first aspects of Soviet life which, according to Gide, indicated a degrading uniformity - the ugly standardised furniture of the workers' quarters, the absence of "le moindre souvenir personnel"[65] - demonstrate in reality Gide's aesthetic preoccupations, his most important criticism lies in his account of the mental conformity which the Soviet leaders fostered among the Russian people, and which resulted in their complete depersonalisation. Everywhere he travelled, Gide testified to the apparent happiness and enthusiasm of the populace, but, he objected, their happiness derived from conformity, ignorance, a complete lack of independent critical action, and a total subjection of the individual to mere materialiest aims: "Le bonheur do tous ne s'obtient qu'en

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[64] Ibid., p. 37.

[65] Ibid., pp. 42-43

désindividualisant chacun, le bonheur de tous ne s'obtient qu'aux dépens de chacun. Pour être heureux, soyez conformes."[66]

The process of conforming is amply described by the author: it resides in indoctrination from an early age to convince the people of the U.S.S.R. that they are better off than anywhere else. Because of this indoctrination the Russians are in total ignorance of what is occurring beyond their boundaries; there is extraordinary effort in the field of education, but education is geared exclusively towards praising Russia and eradicating any critical approach towards the Soviet Union. "Auto-critique" consists merely in asking whether a certain idea or act is faithfully reflecting the "party line", and not in discussing the line itself. Even culture is threatened, as well as any higher aim of progress which Gide had for humanity. Soviet education fosters a certain superiority complex in the mind of the Russians,[67] as well as the establishment of a new "aristocracie . . . du bien penser, du conformisme"[68] which is on the threshold of constituting a materialist class, "une nouvelle sorte de bourgeoisie ouvrière satisfaite (et partant, conservateur, parbleu!) trop comparable à la petite bourgeoisie de chez nous".[69] The failure

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[66] Ibid., p. 43.

[67] Ibid., p. 47

[68] Ibid., pp. 57-58.

[69] Ibid., p. 56.

of the Soviet leaders to infuse in their people a sense of idealism had resulted, Gide claimed, in a widespread inertia and materialism; the only solution had been to reestablish inequality of salary on which the new satisfied worker class was based, and with whose approval

> la restauration de la famille (en tant que cellule sociale), de l'héritage et du legs, le goût du lucre, de la possession particulière, reprennent le pas sur le besoin de camaraderie, de partage et de vie commune.[70]

The recent law against abortion - promulgated despite almost general public opposition - which, Gide claimed, could only increase the misery of the poorest workers, and the condemnation of homosexuals who were likened to "counter-revolutionaires", reminded the author of the ills of the bourgeois society he had previously denounced on many occasions in France.

It was precisely the revolutionary spirit of love for humanity, for justice and the hope of progressing towards the "floraison" of the individual and mankind which Gide now found condemned in Russia. All the efforts of the communist regime were directed at stifling this spirit which was now regarded as "counter-revolutionary". In the description of this "volte-face" Gide raises two points which we have often observed in his work: the assertion that the flowering of humanity is manifested through individual self-achievement, and the idea that an artist is

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[70] Ibid., p. 57.

essentially moved by a spirit of opposition. When the author writes: "Alors ne vaudrait-il pas mieux . . . reconnaître que l'esprit révolutionnaire (et même simplement: l'esprit critique) n'est plus de mise . . . ? Ce que l'on demande à présent c'est l'acceptation, le conformisme,"[71] he is expressing his fundamental condemnation of Russian communism.

Gide also awoke from his dream of uniting Christ and communism. In their anti-religious campaign, he considered, the Soviet leaders should have emphasized the example of Christ and demonstrated the treachery of the established Church. Gide was shocked to find, beneath the picture of Christ, the simple message "personnage légendaire qui n'a jamais existé";[72] he himself never ceased to believe in the value of the Christian doctrine, "cette doctrine emancipatrice"[73]. Had they pursued the ideal which Gide had previously convinced himself was their aim, the Russian people would have realized the meaning of Christ's example. The Revolution, however, had been betrayed. Instead of the "dictature . . . des prolétaires unis" the U.S.S.R. was the "dictature d'un homme".[74] Just as Western civilization had treachorously betrayed

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[71] Ibid., p. 60.

[72] Ibid., p. 89. Gide also wrote that the Soviet leaders had "thrown the baby out with the bath water" (p. 90).

[73] Ibid., p. 89.

[74] Ibid., p. 69

Christ, so Stalin had completely distorted and discredited the message of Marx and Engels, whose work is a testimony to "une extraordinaire générosité . . . un impérieux besoin de justice".[75]

In the "Avant-Propos" to his Retour de l'U.R.S.S. Gide had explicitly stated the criteria upon which he was to judge the Soviet Union: "Il y a des choses plus importantes à mes yeux . . . que l'U.R.S.S.: c'est l'humanité, c'est son destin, c'est sa culture".[76] If he had previously thought that the future of culture was in some way dependent on the future of Russia,[77] as he looked more closely at Stalinist Russia Gide realized that what he sincerely believed to be the aim of humanity was not being served in the Soviet Union. Everything was geared towards materialism and conformity, even art, or rather the travesty of art.

One of the questions Gide had hoped to be in a position to answer after his journey to the Soviet Union had stemmed from his belief that the value of a writer is linked to his "force d'opposition".[78] What, he had wondered, would happen when society successfully eradicated any need for such opposition:

qu'adviendra-t-il si l'état social transformé enlève

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[75] Ibid., p. 138, Note 1.

[76] Ibid., p. 15.

[77] Ibid., p. 14.

[78] Ibid., p. 71.

> à l'artiste tout motif de protestation? Que fera l'artiste s'il n'a plus à s'élever contre, plus qu'à se laisser porter?[79]

He was, however, never to find an answer; not only was society in communist Russia as far removed from perfection as in contemporary France, but moreover the very idea of art and the purpose to which it was put in the Soviet Union was quite different from the author's conception of it. Art, the communist leaders insisted, must be immediately acceptable by the bulk of the population; it must also reflect the party line, or it will be condemned as "formalist".[80] Those artists who agreed to conform received abundant rewards; several artists and writers ranked among the highest salaried group of citizens. The sumptuous banquets which were held in honour of the six travellers, the luxurious hotels at which they stayed, the privileged carriage put at their disposal for travelling - all these were offered at the expense of the Society of Soviet Authors.

That art which existed - indeed which was actively promoted - emphasized conformity and materialism. A few days after his arrival in Russia, Gide had been asked to present a short lecture to a group of students and writers in Leningrad.

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[79] Ibid., p. 72.

[80] This term is applied in particular to visual art, but its general precept, "l'oeuvre d'art sera jugée formaliste dès que pas inclinée du tout" (p. 75), illustrates the ease with which it may be applied to all realms of art.

The lecture was never delivered, the author having been made to understand that his proposed text was "fort mal séante".[81] In this lecture, Gide warned of the dangers presented to literature by conformity and orthodoxy -be it Marxist or otherwise - for the function of art is to raise new questions and answers and not to be limited to a purely social orientation. However important it might be to achieve social reform, the fundamental aim of Gide's conception of progress was "cette efflorescence qui m'apparait parfois comme la raison d'être de l'humanité".[82] Consequently the author viewed any refusal to see beyond the purely material, as well as any establishment of social and critical conformity, as obstacles which must be condemned because they hinder the achievement of that goal. Just as uniformity restrains individualism, so orthodoxy acts as an obstacle to art - a point which the author would have liked to explain in the Leningrad lecture which remained undelivered:

> L'art qui se soumet à une orthodoxie . . . est perdu. Il sombre dans le conformisme. Ce que la révolution triomphante peut et doit offrir à l'artiste, c'est avant tout la liberté. Sans elle, l'art perd signification et valeur.[83]

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[81] Ibid., p. 78.

[82] A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 1139.

[83] A. Gide, Retour de l'U.R.S.S., p. 80.

If Gide's return from Russia marked the author's awakening from a great illusion, it also affirmed his fidelity to those principles which we have observed in his work from its very beginning: the superiority of the goal of humanity over social reform; the criticism of a conformist and authoritarian society which actively discouraged individual development; and finally, the certainty that while one of the essential motivations of the writer lies in his spirit of opposition, the value of art can only deteriorate from the restrictions which follow from the embodiment of a purely social platform. The goal of humanity lies beyond the material liberation of man; only art can raise new problems and testify to the superior achievement, the "floraison" of mankind to which Gide believed all our efforts should be directed.

To those who argued that what the author had witnessed represented merely a stage in a period of transition, Gide never provided a really satisfactory answer, because after his journey to Russia the specifically social question ceased to hold the interest that it once had for the now ageing writer. Although he had discovered that Stalinist Russia was not the "patrie idéale" he had imagined it to be, Gide still claimed to be anti-capitalist as well as a convinced critic of the Soviet Union. There was still very much to be achieved in terms of necessary social reform. The Retour de l'U.R.S.S., however, is marked by increasing doubts concerning the feasibility of social reform. "Le passage de la 'mystique' à la 'politique' entraîne-t-elle fatalement une dégradation?"[84] Gide asks. His distrust of the mass of people

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[84] Ibid., p. 67.

reasserts itself on several occasions: "Je ne crois pas du tout à la plus grande sagesse du plus grand nombre."[85] The failure of the Russian experience raised considerable doubt in Gide's mind concerning the achievement of the blossoming of humanity. On several occasions we have noted an apparent dichotomy in the work of the author; on the one hand he has suggested that individual action is a consequence of contact with other people, of customs, of various social pressures, and on the other he has asserted that it is a manifestation of the individuality of human nature. In the final pages of Retouches à mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S. Gide indicates that the disappointment which stems from the failure of Russia to achieve - or at least to point to - that ideal "efflorescence de l'humanité" has caused him to wonder whether the key to progress does not like in human nature rather than in social reform. The immensity of the author's disillusionment with communist Russia suggested to him that attempts at social reform alone would achieve very little:

> Tant que l'homme est comprimé, tant que la contrainte des iniquités sociales le maintient prostré, l'on est en droit d'espérer beaucoup de l'inéclos qu'il porte en lui. Tout comme l'on attend souvent des merveilles d'enfants qui, par la suite, deviendront des adultes très ordinaires. L'on a souvent cette illusion que le peuple est composé d'hommes meilleurs que le reste de l'humanite décevante. Je crois simplement qu'il est moins gâté; mais que l'argent le pourrirait comme les autres. Et voyez ce qui se passe en U.R.S.S.: cette nouvelle bourgeoisie qui se forme a tous les défauts de la nôtre.[86]

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[85] Ibid., p. 156, Note 1.

[86] Ibid., p. 167.

Earlier in this same work he had written:"Aussi bien, je crois que c'est une erreur d'attendre et d'espérer des seules circonstances sociales différentes un changement profond de la nature humaine".[87]

Gide's return from the U.S.S.R., the death of Madeleine in 1938 and the Second World War, all seem to have convinced him of the bitter and chaotic state of modern society:

> Nous étouffons (le monde modern) et demain ce sera pire, dans une épaisse forêt de problèmes insolubles, où, je le crains, la force seule, et la plus volontairement aveugle, la plus monstrueuse et absurde, la plus brutale, sera invitée . . . à triompher.[88]

Despondent about the state of affairs in the world, about his failure to realise any considerable amelioration in those institutions and attitudes in society which throughout his work he had courageously denounced, Gide in his final years turned away from the world about him, and back to Classical Greece, for a final statement of his ideal society: he looked to Theseus, the builder of Athens, who organized the functions of all people and constructed a benevolently governed city. Moreover, Classical Greece alone had produced an art which was not motivated by a spirit of opposition; it had manifested that efflorescence of humanity which was the ideal towards which Gide always strove.

In the face of the failure - in his lifetime - of social

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[87] Ibid., p. 166.

[88] A. Gide, Journal 1939-1949, p. 321.

change to achieve meaningful progress, Gide's view of human nature and human society towards the end of his life is pessimistic, contrasting with the fervent hope and idealism he expressed in the 1930's. Nevertheless, in his final comment on man and society he stated: "Je crois à la vertu du petit nombre . . . le monde sera sauvé par quelques-uns."[89] This great individualist thus reasserted his faith in progress - for and by the individual - which had led him through his art to express his opposition to a materialist and hypocritical society.

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[89]Quoted in G. I. Brachfeld, André Gide and the Communist Temptation, p. 141.

CONCLUSION

Gide's individualism provides the basis of all his work. His fictional writing is characterized by two principal preoccupations: the assertion of the obligation of the individual to achieve complete self-development, and an inquiry into the nature of the self upon which the author sought to organize the blossoming of humanity which he consistently declared to be the aim of progress. Both of these ideas prove to have direct social implications, for Gide himself had experienced the obstacles presented to the individual by the structure of a society which considered existing attitudes and institutions as an essential manifestation of some strict human nature. The fictional works provide the foundation for the author's explicitly social writings, for Gide realized that "la question morale", that essential element of literature, implied, indeed expressed, criticism of the existing structure of society. Just as existing patterns of society are based on "moral" judgments (concerning God, the aims of man on earth, the properties of strict human nature) so Gide's "moral" concern with the right of the individual to sincerely express his nature pointed explicitly to existing social conditions, to "la question sociale". Such works as Les Caves du Vatican and Les Faux-Monnayeurs indicate the increasing bitterness the author

experienced in a society where sincerity was considered as something to be concealed.

In the social writings examined in this thesis he demonstrates his fundamental preoccupation with the defence of the individual in an oppressive society. Gide's espousal of the communist cause was based upon the mistaken belief that Stalinist Russia was working to achieve that ideal state in which the individual would be fully free. By its imposed orthodoxy and its reduction of all preoccupations to the purely materialistic, it proved to be the very opposite of this ideal.

If Gide could not find an answer in his search for the elements of "personnalité", he took it upon himself to denounce those elements of society which acted as a hindrance to the individual. In his fictional works he had experimented with the complexity of the self, of the individual, in an attempt to achieve his authentic and unique personality. His life and work signify that the author sought to confer existence on himself: it is the nature of this work which determines his personality, and not vice versa. His Journal represents "a mirror in which Gide will look for his own reality. It confers existence."[1] Through his defence of homosexuals in a prejudiced society, of women in a man's world, of native Africans in a world partitioned between colonizing

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[1] G. W. Ireland, Gide, p. 91.

powers, and of criminals in a society where justice, based on primitive psychology, is a tool of the established section of that society, Gide sought to become himself, to achieve his own being.

With great honesty and sincerity, often at the expense of demonstrating his prejudice, Gide in his life and work continually examined those problems which he considered essential, and it is as a result of this sincere attempt that he appears to be a person of many contradictions: preoccupied with the individual and at the same time with the goal of the "floraison de l'humanité"; desiring to liberate certain groups from prejudice, and yet tending to standardize and categorize "the masses"; claiming in his fiction that society acts as an obstacle to self-development and at the same time refusing to deal with specific social causes; wondering whether to devote himself to art or whether to sacrifice the latter for active social work; refusing to abandon the example of Christ despite the admission that Christianity has irrevocably failed to achieve any progress; finally, considering actions as manifesting the self, and also recognizing that one perhaps becomes what one wishes, that our acts confer existence on ourselves. This sincere and courageous examination of the individualism upon which society is based testifies to Gide's very real preoccupation with social matters.

"Je ne suis jamais; je deviens",[2] the author wrote in his

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[2]A. Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 852.

Journal. André Gide is his work. That this work constitutes a sincere attempt to consider the fundamental problems of individual life in society is what I have attempted to indicate in this thesis.

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