

## Encounters with André Gide, Albert Camus

### Encounters with André Gide

I was sixteen when I first met André Gide. An uncle, who had taken part of my education in hand, sometimes gave me books. A butcher by trade, with a fairly wealthy clientele, his only real passion was for reading and ideas.

He devoted his mornings to the meat business, and the rest of the day to his library, newspapers, and interminable discussions in the local cafés. One day, he held out to me a small book with a parchmentlike cover, assuring me that I would find it interesting.

I read everything, indiscriminately, in those days; I probably opened *Les Nourritures Terrestres* after having finished *Lettres de Femme* or a volume of the *Pardaillan* series. I found the invocations rather obscure.

I shied away from this hymn to the bounties of nature. In Algiers, at sixteen, I was saturated with these riches; no doubt I longed for others, and then [the evocations of] "Blida, little rose ..."

I knew Blida, unfortunately. I gave the book back to my uncle, telling him that it had indeed been interesting. Then I went back to the beach, to my listless studies and idle reading, and also to the difficult life I led. The encounter had not been a success.

The next year, I met Jean Grenier. He also, among other things, offered me a book. It was a novel by André de Richaud called *La Douleur*. I don't know André de Richaud. But I have never forgotten his admirable book, the first to speak to me of what I knew: a mother, poverty, fine evening skies. It loosened a tangle of obscure bonds within me, freed me from fetters whose hindrance I felt without being able to give them a name.

I read it in one night, in the best tradition, and the next morning, armed with a strange new liberty, went hesitatingly forward into unknown territory. I had just learned that books dispensed things other than forgetfulness and entertainment.

My obstinate silences, this vague but all-persuasive suffering, the strange world that surrounded me, the nobility of my family, their poverty, my secrets, all this, I realized, could be expressed! There was a deliverance, an order of truth, in which poverty, for example, suddenly took on its true face, the one I had suspected it possessed, that I somehow revered. *La Douleur* gave me a glimpse of the world of creation, into which Gide was to be my guide.

This is how my second encounter with him took place. I began to read properly. A fortunate illness had taken me away from my beaches and my pleasures. My readings were still disorderly, but there was a new appetite in them. I was looking for something, I wanted to rediscover the world I had glimpsed that seemed to me to be my own. From books to daydreams, alone or because of friends, little by little I was discovering new dimensions in life.

After so many years, I still remember the amazement of this apprenticeship. One morning, I stumbled on Gide's *Traité*s. Two days later, I knew by heart whole passages of *La Tentative amoureuse*. As to the *Retour de l'enfant prodigue*, it had become the book of which I never spoke: perfection seals our lips. I only made a dramatic adaptation of it, which I later put on the stage with a few friends. Meanwhile, I read all Gide's work, responding in my turn to *Les Nourritures Terrestres* with the personal upheaval so often described by others.

Mine came the second time round, perhaps because of the first reading I was a young, unenlightened barbarian, but also because for me there was nothing

revolutionary in the senses. The shock was decisive in quite a different way. Long before Gide himself had confirmed this interpretation, I learned to read *Les Nourritures Terrestres* as the gospel of a self-deprivation I needed.

From that point on, Gide held sway over my youth, and it is impossible not to be always grateful to those we have at least once admired for having hoisted us to the highest point our soul can reach. In spite of all this, however, I never saw Gide as my master either as a writer or a thinker. I had given myself others. Rather, Gide seemed to me, because of what I have just said, the model of the artist, the guardian, the king's son, who kept watch over the gates of the garden where I wanted to live.

There is almost nothing in what he has written about art, for example, that I don't entirely approve of, although our century has moved away from his conception. The reproach made of Gide's work is that it neglects the anguish of our time. We choose to believe that a writer must be revolutionary to be great. If this is so, history proves that it is true only up to the revolution, and no further. Moreover, it is by no means certain that Gide did move away from his time.

What is more certain is that his time wanted to move away from what he represented. The question is whether it will ever succeed, or will do so only by committing suicide. Gide also suffers from that other prejudice of our day, which insists that we parade our despair to be counted as intelligent. On this point, discussion is easier: the pretext is a poor one.

Yet I had to forget Gide's example, of necessity, and turn away very early from this world of innocent creation, leaving at the same time the land where I was born. History imposed itself on my generation. I had to take my place in the waiting line on the threshold of the black years. We fell into step, and have not yet reached our goal. How could I not have changed since then? At least I have not forgotten the plenitude and light in which my life began, and I have put nothing above them. I have not denied Gide.

In fact, I encountered him again at the end of our darkest years. I was in Paris then, living in part of his flat. It was a studio with a balcony, and its greatest peculiarity consisted of a trapeze that hung in the middle of the room. I had it taken down, I think; I got tired of seeing the intellectuals who came to see me hanging from it. I had been settled in the studio for some months when Gide, in his turn, came back from North Africa.

I had never met him before; yet it was as if we had always known each other. Not that Gide ever received me very intimately. He had a horror, as I already knew, of that noisy promiscuity which takes the place of friendship in our world. But the smile with which he greeted me was simple and joyful and, when he was with me, I never saw him on his guard.

Otherwise, forty years difference in age stood between us, together with our mutual horror of embarrassing each other. This is why I spent long weeks next door to Gide, almost without seeing him. Occasionally, he would knock at the double door that separated the studio from his library. At arm's length, he would be carrying Sarah, his cat, who had slipped into his room via the roof. Sometimes, the piano attracted him.

On another occasion, he listened by my side to the announcement of the armistice on the radio. I realized that the war, which brings most people an end to their loneliness, was for him, as it was for me, the only true loneliness. Sitting around the radio, for the first time we shared the solidarity of the times. On other days, all I knew of his presence on the other side of the door were footsteps, rustlings, the gentle disturbance of his meditations and musings.

What did it matter! I knew that he was there, next door to me, guarding with his unrivaled dignity that secret realm I had dreamed of entering, and toward which I have always turned, in the midst of our struggles and our shouts.

Today, now that he is no longer among us, who can replace my old friend at the gates of this kingdom? Who will look after the garden until we can get back to it? He, at least, kept watch until his death; so it is right for him to continue to receive the quiet gratitude we owe to our true masters. The unpleasant noises made at his departure will in no way alter this. Of course, those who know how to hate are still furious over this death.

He, whose privileges have been so bitterly envied, as if justice did not consist of sharing these privileges rather than mingling everything in a general servitude, is argued over even at the end: people are indignant about such serenity. Not a day goes by without his once again receiving the homage of hatred, envy, or that poor insolence which thinks it descends from Cardinal de Retz, although actually it originates in the scullery.

Yet what unanimity ought to have been performed around this little iron bed. To die is such appalling torture for some men that it seems to me as if a happy death redeems a small patch of creation. If I were a believer, Gide's death would be a consolation.

But if those believers I see do believe, what is the object of their faith? Those deprived of grace simply have to practice generosity among themselves. As far as the believers are concerned, they lack nothing, they are provided for; or at least they act as if that were the case.

We, on the other hand, lack everything but the fraternal hand. Surely this is why Sartre was able to pay Gide, over and above their differences, an exemplary act of homage. Certain men thus find, in their reflections, the secret of a serenity neither miserly nor facile. Gide's secret is that he never, in the midst of his doubts, lost the pride of being a man.

Dying was also part of this condition, which he wanted to assume to the very end. What would have been said of him, if after having lived surrounded by privilege, he had gone trembling to his death? This would have shown that his moments of happiness were stolen ones. But no, he smiled at the mystery, and turned toward the abyss the same face he had presented to life. Without even knowing it, we were waiting for that one last moment. And, for one last time, he kept the rendezvous.

"Homage to André Gide," from the Nouvelle nouvelle revue française, November 1951

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