André Gide’s “New Self”

THOM NICKELS

ANDRÉ GIDE lived for his art. Born to a wealthy family, as a young writer he had no financial worries and he could afford to be experimental in his writing. For a brief time he associated himself with poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the Symbolist School. Later, his affiliation with the Communist party and his brief attraction to Christianity were both heightened and terminated by his aesthetic sensibility. Throughout his life, however, Gide stopped short of any ideological commitment, but he remained a firm believer in the life of the senses.

One of Gide’s biggest mistakes was his rejection of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* for his magazine, *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Later, Gide would regret the decision and invited Proust to resubmit. Many critics view Gide as the greatest journalist of the 20th century; Gide himself believed that he was preparing for a “much greater work” (as a child he wondered if adults could see this “future great work” in his eyes). For most of his life, he owned two manor houses and an apartment in Paris. It is said his house in Normandy contained staircases that glowed like polished amber.

“Polished amber” best describes Benjamin Ivry’s first-ever English translation of *Judge Not*, a little-known Gide work, which adds significantly to the Gide corpus. Ivry, the author of biographies of Francis Poulenc, Arthur Rimbaud, and Maurice Ravel, has translated and written a lengthy introduction to a small book that’s a testament to Gide’s fascination and even obsession with crime and punishment. In novels such as *Lafcadio’s Adventures* (1928), Gide often explored the criminal mentality as well as the criminal’s place in society. In *Judge Not*, Gide recorded his impressions and analyses of judicial cases while serving as a juror. He wrote about the cases in depth, examining both the facts of the case and the background of the accused in a way that dovetailed with his lifelong rejection of traditional morality. Many of the cases involved murder, with adolescents as the accused, and one can imagine Gide using them as the raw material for his fiction. Although Gide declared that his writings on judicial cases were not “literature,” they are nevertheless artful journalism in which Gide often saw facts that judges and jurors overlooked. As Ivry explains, some critics have deemed *Judge Not* as too graphic in its descriptions of violence, but such charges appear illogical given the book’s subject matter.

Gide used criminals in his fiction in order to explore human psychology. He himself was often considered an outcast or criminal because of his open defense of homosexuality in his writings—Jean Genet once referred to him as “the master”—and because of his brief alliance with the Communist Party. (Gide mourned what happened to Marxism twenty years after the Russian Revolution and documented these changes in *Return from the USSR*.) Despite his lifelong love of the Bible, he had a persistent wish to escape conventional morality and explore the sensual life. Writing about his youth in his journal in March 1893, he wrote: “I have lived until the age of 23 completely virgin and utterly deprived; crazed to such a point that eventually I came to look everywhere for some bit of flesh on which to press my lips.” Although he married in 1895, the marriage ended once he announced his homosexuality. No longer content to live life according to values that were not his own, Gide advocated in *Fruits of the Earth* (1897) that one partake of life’s sensual pleasures rather than think of everything in terms of “sin.”

The newly liberated Gide was proud of his emerging “new self.” His reinvention of himself laid the groundwork for the private publication of *Corydon* in 1911. This was his masterful defense of homosexuality as expressed in the “homosexual models” of ancient Greece. The first edition was a mere twelve copies; later it would go to 66 editions, representing 33,000 copies. Wrote Gide in *Corydon*:

You must also recognize the fact that homosexual periods, if I dare use the expression, are in no way periods of decadence. On the contrary, I do not think it would be inaccurate to say that the great periods when art flourished—the Greeks at the time of Pericles, the Romans in the century of Augustus, the English at the time of Shakespeare, the Italians at the time of the Renaissance, the French during the Renaissance and again under Louis XIII, the Persians at the time of Hafiz, etc., were the very times when homosexuality experienced itself most openly, and I would even say, officially. I would almost go so far to say that periods and countries without homosexuality are periods and countries without art.

Gide considered *Corydon* his most important work. He remarked that he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1947 despite this book.

In 1924 he published another controversial work that dealt explicitly with his homosexuality, the memoir *If It Die*, where he described his first homosexual experiences, his first attempt at authorship, and his family relationships. It was the openly homosexual content of this work that turned Gide into an international target of derision by some critics. (The American author


Dashiell Hammett, on hearing that Gide admired his detective stories, said, "I wish that fag would take me out of his mouth!")

Even as early as 1912 Gide was aggressively supporting the idea of homosexual rights, if only in his private writings. In a journal entry, Gide wrote:

At Calvi (near Corsica), the entire male population, young and older, prostitutes itself. Yet that's not quite the word, for it seems to be not so much a matter of money as of pleasure. Women are closely guarded, unapproachable; a girl is compromised if a young man speaks to her. ... In the dance halls men only dance with each other—and in a very sensual way. The little boys, from the age of eight, witness the sexual activities of their older brothers with the strangers they take down to the beach.

This paper, which contains information about ivy, is not suitable for human consumption. It is intended for educational purposes only. The content includes extracts from an essay by Gide about his experiences in Corsica, where he observed the behavior of young men at dance halls. The essay reflects on the nature of male prostitution and the impact of such activities on the lives of young boys. Gide's observations are insightful and provide a glimpse into the social dynamics of the time.

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is to rise up and speak in front of the court. If I ever had to ‘testify,’ I would surely lose my composure, and what would I feel in the defendant’s box?” But that does not seem to have been the case, as recorded in Judge Not. Gide was often appointed foreman because of his professional literary stature and patrician manner, and when he spoke to the court he did so eloquently and without much fanfare.

“Does an innocent man sound more eloquent and less disturbed than a guilty one? Nonsense!” Gide wrote. “As soon as he feels that he isn’t believed, he might be even more disturbed since he is less guilty. He’ll overdo his statements, his protests will seem more and more disagreeable, and he will be out of his depth.” Gide was definitely in his depth as he took notes on case after case. What upset him most, he confessed, is an attitude among juries during serious cases when it was clear that the defendant was not guilty. Many jurors would opt to punish the defendant anyway. “To these jurors, some punishment is necessary,” wrote Gide, “so just in case, let’s punish the man, since he’s the one offered to us as a victim. But since we’re not sure, let’s at any rate not punish him too much.”

Gide’s attention to detail allowed him to see pertinent facts to which other jurors were blind. Consider the case of Charles, a 34-year-old coachman, who allegedly stabbed his mistress Juliette to death. As witnessed by Juliette’s landlady, the killing would appear to be a simple case of murder. This was what the jury saw despite the defense attorney’s claim that Charles’s act “was done without the idea of killing being quite specified in his mind.” Gide considered the attorney’s claim that the proof of this lay in the distribution of stab wounds and then posited: “Why didn’t the defense attorney go further and say that not only had Charles not wanted to kill but that he dimly tried, while mutilating his victim, not to kill her and that, doubtless so as not to kill her, he had grabbed the knife just next to the blade, which is the only way that the stabbing could have been so intense yet cause such shallow wounds?” Fed up with the “appalling incompetence of jurors,” Gide recorded how the jurors later changed their minds after a sentence of life imprisonment at hard labor was handed down. Stunned by the severity of the sentence, the jury chose to take another look at the case and obtained a reprieve.

Then there was the case of a teenager named Cordier, who got involved with two other young men in the killing of a sailor after a foiled robbery attempt. Here the jury saw only one thing, Cordier’s prior offenses. “No sooner were we in the jury room than a tall, thin, white-haired ‘foreman’ pulled from his pocket a paper on which he had written all the charges against Cordier and, most important, his previous convictions. In truth these would dominate and determine this latest verdict. That’s how difficult it is for a juror not to consider a previous conviction as an indictment and to judge a defendant outside the shadows that a previous conviction cast on him,” Gide wrote.

Gide took his job as juror very seriously. In some cases he took notes during trials; at other times he took it upon himself to visit the families of convicted felons. In the Redureau case, a teenage servant, Marcel Redureau, hacked to death the family of his employer. It seems Marcel was set off by the father calling him a “lazbones” and telling the boy that he hadn’t been at all happy with the boy’s work for some time. “At this remark,” Gide wrote, the irked Redureau stepped down from the winepress, armed himself with a wooden hammer, a kind of fifty-centimeter-long bludgeon that was within his reach, and struck several blows at the head of his master, who sank down groaning, letting go of the bar. Then, seeing that he was still alive, Redureau grabbed a huge chopper that the country folk call a grape bullock, which is used not on vines but rather to separate bunches of grapes that are pulled in the winepress. ... Redureau opened the throat of his master, who was in his final agony and soon gave his last gasp.

Redureau then butchered the three children, the grandmother, the mother, and the housemaid. Commented Gide: “In no way do I presume to lessen the atrocity of Redureau’s crime, but when a case is this serious, we have the right to expect that even the prosecution will be resolved to present for justice’s sake all ap...