André Gide and the Homosexual Debate

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My starting point is a query put to me by an editor:

André Gide ... seems from here [in America], rather small and beside the point. Is that how it looks from where you are? ... Odd, with homosexuality now something like a small political movement, one would have thought much more would have been made of Gide, who very early un closeted himself.

Gide does seem by now, some forty years after his death, a relatively forgotten figure, although there is still, of course, a Gidian academic industry. During the second half of his long career, he was the best known of all contemporary French writers. As the house genius of La Nouvelle Revue Française, he was at the center of French literary life, and he was also widely known throughout Europe, as was confirmed by his being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1947. Although he always claimed to be primarily an artist, he had a flair for stirring up controversy on the three main subjects of general human interest outside sports— religion, sex, and politics. Gide had grown up as a fervent Protestant, and it took him a long time, and much heart searching, to work his way through to agnosticism. He was a married man who eventually felt an obligation to proclaim his homosexuality. After being largely indifferent to politics in his earlier years, he became a prominent anti-colonialist, as a consequence of a trip to the Congo. When the Nazi threat loomed, he threw in his lot with the Commu-

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subverting, not to mention his quixotic charm as a rentier prepared to saw off the branch he was sitting on. I respected his attempt at honesty; I thought his influence to be all for the good, provided some of his suggestions were not taken too literally, but my northern working-class cynicism made me doubt whether he could have been so lyrically "free," and so willing to trust nature rather than culture, had he not been permanently cushioned by a private income, which is a cultural not a natural circumstance. To do Gide justice, he eventually realized this himself, as can be seen from some late diary entries, but by then his philosophy, such as it is, had been fully elaborated, and it was left to non-rentiers to figure out for themselves how far they could live by it in the workaday world.

Not only was Gide thought of primarily as a general liberator, none of his enthusiastic readers, so far as I know, ever espoused his homosexual cause. In any case, he launched it rather late in life; he was already fifty-three when he took the bold step of publishing Corydon, his theoretical defense of homosexuality, and fifty-six when he admitted his own involvement in his autobiography, Si le grain ne meurt. The opposition, understandably, was fierce; he was at once condemned by orthodox Catholics, and cold-shouldered by other contemporaries. There is a famous anecdote about Paul Claudel, who had hoped to convert him from Protestantism to Catholicism, pointing one mealtime to a pan in which something was being flambéed, and proclaiming: "That is how Gide will sizzle in Hell!" Gide's homosexual friends showed no eagerness to risk public obloquy, while the heterosexual ones tended to turn a blind eye to his deviance, although some of them deplored it in private. One friend whom I met after the war had been careful to keep his son out of reach of Gide's attentions. Another told me it was rather a strain accompanying the great man to the cinema, because he would keep changing his seat to sitle up to some promising youth glimpsed in the shadows. This was said with a rueful smile, as if Gide's elderly promiscuity were an embarrassing, but forgivable, weakness.

No doubt, Gide's frankness encouraged a later generation of French writers—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Michel Tournier, Mathieu Galley, and others—to accept their homosexuality more willingly than they might otherwise have done, but either through discretion or a lack of conviction, none of them has written as explicitly in his own defense as Gide did. Nor has any of them discussed Gide's apologia at any length. All in all, Gide, in spite of his liberating influence, has not been the homosexual beacon one might have expected.

The first and most obvious reason for this is that what he practiced and advocated was pederasty. This is different in kind from the equal partnership between consenting adults, which I take to be the dominant, militant form of male homosexuality at the present time. There is no suggestion anywhere in Gide's writings that he ever had a sexual relationship with a person of his own age, apart from some hanky-panky under the dining room table with the concierge's son, when they were both toddlers. His first experiences were with Arab adolescents or pre-adolescents in North Africa, as he explains in his autobiography. He was in his early twenties at the time, and in a state of heightened sensibility because of incipient tuberculosis. With his friend, Paul Laurens, he was sharing the favors of a female prostitute, when he discovered that he derived more sensual and lyrical satisfaction from consorting with an Arab boy, who offered his services. What these services were exactly is not explained. Gide mentions incidentally that he had a horror of sodomy, and he frequently states that he is not an "invert," but without defining the term. Since he also says that he could prolong the ecstasy on his own, after his Arab partner had left him, one must suppose that his idea of sexual bliss was some form of mutual or simultaneous masturbation.

Although he had favorites among the Arab boys, their identities were not important, since they were interchangeable; this fits in with his repeated assertion that he felt love for his wife, but only desire for boys. His diary shows that he later went on to find sexual satisfaction in many other places besides Africa: Italy, Corsica, Paris, Marseille, and so forth. He admits somewhere that one of the reasons why he could never settle for any length of time at Cuverville, the country house in Normandy where his wife lived, was the difficulty of finding opportunities for sex in an area where he was well known. Indeed,
a constant theme in his diary is the need to get away from Cuverville; he must have been one of the most peripatetic of all modern authors, and certainly the one who lived least often in his own home. His comments on his roving sex life vary, and are not always as lyrical as the account of his first experiences, given in the autobiography. Sometimes his chief feeling is one of relief at being purged of desire, so that he can turn his mind to other things. Occasionally, he expresses revulsion at the indignity of looking for satisfaction in the back streets of big cities, and wishes that he had not got used to the nomadic life, which is difficult to reconcile with steady concentration on literary work.

But one important moral point that he never mentions anywhere, so far as I can discover, is that most, if not all, of these casual encounters must have been based on payment. His sex life presumably depended for a large part on prostitution, and on what would legally count, at least in Europe, as corruption of minors, even if the minors in question were willing to oblige. Perhaps Gide just took it for granted that such prostitution was innocent, if it suited both parties, or perhaps he was concentrating so single-mindedly on his own pleasure that he remained oblivious of the moral issue as it concerned the boy prostitutes. Apparently, his behavior never got him into trouble in France, where in any case la police des mœurs is chary of pursuing eminent literary figures, but the fact remains that the morality of adolescent prostitution is an issue that the advocates of this kind of homosexuality should logically consider. Also, while Gide’s pederasty may never have crossed the border into pedophilia, the dividing line between the two practices is probably uncertain, and therefore needs to be discussed. Whether Gide’s conscience was absolutely clear on this point remains an open question; the diary contains many curious references to his being egged on by the Devil, but whether these are genuine twinges of remorse or just ironical asides to himself, it is impossible to say; they may not even be connected with the sexual issue.

When he published Corydon in 1924, after years of cogitation and—he says—against the advice of his friends, it found no ardent supporters, and it has never been one of his widely discussed texts. The explanation may be that it was immediately overshadowed by Si le grain ne meurt, which tells his personal story in the most limpid, classical way, without any intrusion of theoretical considerations. Although he always claimed that the value of Corydon would eventually be recognized, it still strikes me today as a muddled, unevenly argued little book.

Since as a homosexual he had not yet “come out,” it is not a direct statement; it takes the form of a dialogue, in which a snippy, carping narrator is asking a self-confessed pederast, Corydon, to justify his proclivities. From the start, Corydon is naïvely presented as a distinguished figure, greatly superior to his interlocutor in manner, intelligence, and knowledge. His first response is to describe how he discovered his homosexuality. He was engaged to be married to a girl whom he loved so deeply that she inspired him with no thoughts of carnality (a reference to Gide’s own frequently expressed spiritual attachment to Madeleine Rondeau, the cousin who became his wife). In spite of some disturbing intimations, Corydon assumed that his indifference to other women was a sign of his chaste devotion to his fiancée. Then, during his courtship, he noticed that his betrothed’s young brother, Alexis, was becoming increasingly attached to him. Eventually, Alexis made open advances; Corydon spurned them indignantly as being effeminate, and urged Alexis to seek salvation in the love of a good woman. But Alexis, after giving final expression to his feelings in a letter, committed suicide, thus revealing to Corydon both the authenticity of homoerotic emotion and his own latent tendencies. Corydon broke off his engagement and decided to devote himself to proving to other homosexuals, like Alexis had done, that what they may feel ashamed of as an anomaly is, in fact, an innocent, natural appetite that has always existed. (We are not told how the lady concerned reacted to these events and views; only that she later died, while still young.)

This little fiction seems to be a romantic transposition of Gide’s first encounter with the Arab boy. It is a fact, attested by various sources, that in all sexual relationships an adult may be enticed into involvement by a precocious child or adolescent. But it still remains to be shown in what sense homosexuality is “natural.”

The simple answer that Corydon gives in
the first place is, as might be expected, that no human tendency can be outside Nature; Nature, taken in the widest sense, is just that which is. Corydon adds, oddly enough, that the only unnatural thing he recognizes is the work of art. This seems illogical because, if it is in man's nature to produce art, then art itself is only an extension of human nature, and its supposed artificiality is just Nature at one remove. However, be that as it may, I am not sure that Corydon, or Gide, ever sees clearly that Nature is useless as a moral criterion, for a homicidal maniac could equally well invoke it to justify his undoubtedly inherent impulses. In the eighteenth century, when the idea of Nature was at its most fashionable, the Marquis de Sade did precisely this; he stood the Rousseauistic concept of "good" Nature on its head, and argued with mad conviction that strong individuals have a right, or even a duty, to work out their aggressive natures to the full, particularly as regards sex. Gide is not one of the hysterical modern admirers of Sade, but, as I shall argue later, he has some neo-Sadian or neo-Nietzschean features that complicate his attempt to extend the range of "virtuous" Nature, without going so far as to abolish morality altogether.

Next, Corydon proceeds to emphasize the complexities of sexuality in the vegetable and animal kingdoms. This is a vast and complicated subject that he summarizes very rapidly with the obvious intention of destroying the illusion that there is any neat arrangement in Nature for the sure conjunction of man and woman. The division into sexes is not universal, and where it exists it takes innumerable forms. Basically, however, the female is the essential partner, who ensures the continuity of the race; the male, who evolved to supply genetic variety, is an addition, a sport, even a luxury. (One might have thought that Gide/ Corydon, who was so well versed in the Bible, would have pointed out that this is a striking reversal of the Adam's rib story, which derives the female from the male, but he doesn't do so.)

Secondly, Corydon says, the sexual instinct is not focused primarily on reproduction. The initial prompting is towards pleasure, and procreation is a by-product. Because the sexual process is such a hit-or-miss affair, Nature over-insures by supplying more eggs and far more male seed than is technically necessary. The notion that there is any simple balance between male and female, either in the animal species or in the human race, has, according to Corydon, to be abandoned. In addition to the supposedly "normal" couple, all sorts of intermediary states or expedients can be found. Homosexuality is one of them; it has always existed, not only among humans but also among some animals, even when the opportunity for heterosexual behavior is present. (Incidentally, if there is no reliable balance in Nature, this means that Papageno's charming aria in The Magic Flute, "Ein Mann, ein Weib, ein Weib, ein Mann" is not expressing a simple, natural truth, as one might suppose, but a secondary, socially conditioned aspiration or idealization.)

This first zoological part of the thesis boils down to saying that homosexuality is a recurrent phenomenon in the jumbled, wasteful processes of Nature, and just has to be accepted in the first place as one of the given mysteries. This is no doubt very true, but, as I have already suggested, the same can be said initially about all human tendencies of whatever kind, including those of "inverts," a term that Corydon/Gide always uses disparagingly. Morality only begins at the point when a particular society chooses between the various promptings of Nature, favoring some and suppressing others, in the supposed interest of the general good.

As it happens, Gide formulates Corydon's naturalistic claim more bluntly in a short diary entry: "In the name of what God or what ideal do you forbid me to live according to my nature?" If the Marquis de Sade had put this question, the humanistic answer would have been: "God doesn't come into it. It is antisocial to torture prostitutes, even if your nature urges you to do so." Homosexuality is not so clear a case, since it does not necessarily involve physical persecution of the other partner. But if Nature is as indefinite as Gide says, pederasty may be infectious or habit-forming, with debatable consequences for the good of society or the happiness of the individual. Contemporary European society has, on the whole, moved to the position of recognizing homosexual relations between consenting adults as an innocent fulfillment of their nature, but there is still a question mark against pederasty, as against pedophilia. How is Corydon going to deal with this?

He prefaches his consideration of the social aspect of the problem by repeating the point
about desire not being primarily geared to reproduction. He presents sexual arousal, in the first place, as a sort of extension of universal narcissism: “I believe, excuse my boldness, that in both sexes homosexuality is more spontaneous, more naive than heterosexuality.” Heterosexual activity, he says, has almost to be learned; witness the legend of Daphnis and Chloe, in which the young man cannot perform properly until he has been initiated by an older woman. No wonder, then, that in certain periods of civilization, and particularly in ancient Greece, pederasty was considered at least as normal an outlet for the superfluity of male desire as heterosexuality, and was regulated accordingly. Also, given that the male principle represents sport and luxury in Nature, it is not surprising that homosexuality should have been especially present in times of great artistic production, such as the Renaissance in Florence or the Shakespearian age in England. Corydon does not ask himself whether Florentine or Shakespearian homosexuality was of the adult kind or not. He just assumes that pederasty is the dominant form of the deviance and, warming to his theme, argues that a bisexual society, on the model of ancient Greece, is preferable to the officially heterosexual society of Western Europe, where young men are exposed to the dangers of female prostitution, of vulgar company, and disease:

I think that a friend, even in the most Greek sense of the word, is more advisable for an adolescent than a female lover. . . . I maintain that peace in the home, family respectability and the health of husband and wife were more securely preserved by Greek sexual mores than they are by ours. [He was writing, of course, at a time when syphilis was still the sexual plague, not AIDS.]

Under the Greek system, Corydon explains, young men were subject to the civilizing influence of an older male lover roughly from the ages of thirteen to twenty-three, and then graduated to marriage and procreation. He doesn’t explain what happened after that: were most grown men permanently converted to heterosexuality or, while founding a family, did they repeat the cycle by taking a young lover on the side? Nor does Corydon tell us what the women thought of this, particularly the young girls, deprived of their male contemporaries between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three. It makes one reflect that Socrates’ Xanthippe may have had a good feminist reason for being a shrew. And, while Corydon accords the female the honor of being the guarantor of the species, this does not prevent him from expressing himself as an unconscious male chauvinist, and he makes some strange remarks about both women and young men:

If the adolescent falls into the hands of a woman, this may spell disaster for him: alas! There are only too many examples of this. But since, at such a tender age, an adolescent can only be a fairly mediocre lover, it is fortunately unnatural that a woman should fall in love with him.

First, this statement is at variance with the helpful role played by the mature lady in the Daphnis and Chloe legend. Second, it is an odd opinion to have been penned by Gide, a great admirer of Racine, whose Phèdre is all about the fierce, naturally “unnatural,” passion of an older woman for an adolescent (unless, of course, Racine was a closet queen, and Phaedra a male lover in disguise; but neither Gide, nor anyone else, so far as I know, has ever suggested this). Third, if an adolescent is a mediocre lover with a woman, in what sense can he be a satisfactory one with a man, unless the younger partner is expected to play no more than a totally passive role?

This second part of Corydon is so open to criticism that one can easily understand why the book has had little influence. There may well be a valid case for pederasty, or at least for extending freedom of sexual choice to all individuals from puberty onwards, but Gide doesn’t make it adequately. Corydon’s idealized picture of Greek sexuality is not altogether borne out by such specialist studies as those of J. K. Dover, and in any case it disregards the historical change in the status of women. It goes far beyond the usual claim of modern homosexuals that they are a minority, entitled to the same rights as the heterosexual majority. And even if we accept that Gide may have been reacting to the defects and hypocrisies of late-nineteenth-century society, it seems incredible that he should advocate the segregation of boys and girls at a time when their sexual drive is at its strongest, and a fair proportion of them mate for life. Perhaps he was tempted to be provocative and paradoxical since he was hiding behind the persona of
Corydon. Even so, the book remains very unsatisfactory—surprisingly so, given André Gide’s general ability.

In his direct confessional writings, such as *Si le grain ne meurt* and the diary, Gide is predominantly descriptive, not propagandist, and the picture he gives of his sex life puts him into a very special, and probably numerically limited, category of pederasts. His main peculiarity was not, as it happened, his interest in boys, but the fact that he combined this interest with the platonic adoration of his cousin, Madeleine, whom he had known since childhood and had always assumed he would marry. The chaste, semi-religious fixation on an idealized female figure—it might be called “the Beatrice Complex”—is a variety of neo-courtly love that occurs in the makeup of a number of other late-nineteenth-century French authors, notably Paul Claudel and Alain-Fournier, neither of whom, however, was homosexual. In Gide’s case, it was particularly strong and coincided with his early religious fervor. One may wonder to what extent, if any, he saw the young Madeleine as a real woman of flesh and blood; he writes about her as if she were part religious icon, and part non-sexual mother substitute.

After his first homosexual experiences, he consulted a doctor, who assured him that marriage would cure him of such tendencies. He had to press Madeleine to accept him (why she hesitated is not made clear), but she eventually did so shortly after his mother’s death. Sexually, the marriage was a failure from the start. He doesn’t say whether he actually tried to consummate it, but in the extraordinary confession he wrote after Madeleine’s death, *Et nunc manet in te*, he reveals that he regularly consorted with boys during their Mediterranean honeymoon, leaving her to amuse herself as she thought fit. It may be that she was frigid, having been affected in adolescence by her mother’s infidelity to her father. Gide gives two brilliantly written accounts of this family crisis, one in his autobiography and the other in the novel *La Porte étroite*, but he was obviously unable to help Madeleine to get over its effects, if effects there were. In *La Porte étroite*, he piously deplores the cruel blow inflicted on the heroine by her mother’s behavior, but he doesn’t seem to have reflected at that stage that his own infidelities must be causing Madeleine still more pain.

Late in life, Gide confided in Albert Camus that he had been ignorant that women have sexual urges and needs. This is hard to credit, since female sexual desire is a common enough theme in French literature, and in French schoolboy conversation. Perhaps he meant that he had put Madeleine on such a pedestal that he couldn’t imagine her to have ordinary appetites. He certainly keeps repeating that his deep love for her was in no way diminished by his pagan lust for boys, as if there were no common denominator between the two feelings. However, it is not easy to understand what he meant by love, since he also says that he and she never once discussed the sexual question. What confidence can there have been between them, and in what sense was he a loving husband, if he could proclaim his homosexuality, and put her into an acutely embarrassing position as his wife, without first asking her permission to do so? In *Et nunc manet in te* he expresses retrospective amazement at his own cruelty and insensitivity, and well he might. Whatever his courage in “coming out,” he must have known that he was pursuing his chosen course with Sadian or Nietzschean ruthlessness as far as she was concerned—indeed, he transparently admits as much both by the contents and the title of the novel *L’Immoraliste*—and this cannot enhance his acceptability as a model in the cause of homosexuality.

There are two further complications in Gide’s peculiar sexuality. About the time of the 1914–18 war, he broke his own rule about only desiring boys by actually falling in love with one, at least for a time. This was Marc Allégret, who figures in the diary, and more prominently in *Les Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, the Boswell-like account of Gide kept by his lifelong friend, Mme Théod van Rysselbergh. The relationship with Marc Allégret was probably the nearest Gide ever came to the Greek ideal of mature mentor and lover/pupil, as described in *Corydon*, which he must have been writing about that time. The association seems to have been the last straw for Madeleine, and when, against her wishes, Gide accompanied Marc on a visit to England, she took her revenge by burning all the letters he had ever written to her. He presents this as a terrible tragedy, because he claimed to have put the best of himself into the correspondence (but how could he, if he had never been frank with her?), and adds: “It was as if she
had killed our child," a strange phrase that implies that he saw his writing as the fruit of his womb that she had served to fertilize, through a curious inversion of roles. One cannot help suspecting that, consciously or unconsciously, he got his own back later—in fact, soon afterwards—by having a real child with Mme Théo’s unmarried daughter, Elizabeth. This act of procreation by a famous homosexual remains completely mysterious; the great confessionalist himself is mute on the subject, and those of his friends whom I heard discussing the matter claimed not to understand. There is no indication that he was in love with Elizabeth, and even if he were politely acceding to her request to have a child, he must have known that Madeleine would be bitterly hurt, so once again his morality appears very uncertain.

It is almost as if, at times, he were conscientiously trying to be wicked, in order to prove to himself that he was free “beyond good and evil.” As Mme Théo records in her deadpan way, even at the height of his involvement with Marc, and during the fateful stay in Granchester, he seduced another boy at the school that Marc was attending; the boy told his parents and there was a slight scandal, which had to be hushed up. When Marc reproachfully asked, “Why did you do it, Uncle Gide?” he received the significant reply, “Par acquis de conscience” (to soothe, or clear, my conscience). In other words, Gide was so intent on experiencing life to the full that he felt it his duty to give in to every passing whim, without allowing moral considerations to intervene. This corresponds to a principle enunciated in Les Nourritures terrestres: act before considering whether your action is good or bad. The recommendation is only valid as a reaction against too oppressively moralistic a society; it is what the French call a boutade, a deliberately paradoxical half-truth, but it degenerates into nonsense outside a context of rigid conventionalism.

This Gidian itch to flout morality irresponsibly is given its strongest expression in the comic novel, Les Caves du Vatican (1914), where the dashing young hero, Lafcadio (a recognizable descendant of Stendhal’s Julien Sorel and Dostoyevsky’s Baskolnikov) lays a wager with himself that he will have the nerve to throw an unsuspecting elderly stranger out of a train window. He wins his bet, thus demonstrating the so-called acte gratuit, or pure expression of individual freedom. This famous episode anticipated by several years the no less famous sentence in Le Manifeste Surréaliste about the essential Surrealist act being to empty a revolver at random into a crowd. The philosophical point is the same in both cases: the “arbitrary act” is in reality an emotional response to the strain of living in the Absurd world, where there are no given rules of behavior, but only the endless, exasperating search for “moral” compromises. Being emotional, the act is, in fact, neither arbitrary nor gratuitous; it is a willfully irrational, explosive consequence of a passionate, egotistical relationship with the self. From the point of view of traditional humanism, it could be called sophisticated, imaginative hooliganism, harmless enough as long as it remains on the fictional level, and even useful as marking the absolute zero of morality. Gide, the celebrated reforming humanist, may have been incomprehensibly cruel to his wife, but he cannot actually have been in favor of throwing people out of train windows; writing before 1914, in the relative security of la belle époque, he no doubt saw himself as moving back the frontiers of complacent humanism by means of an amusing and stimulating fiction, and he deserves a measure of credit for doing so. However, writing some thirty years later, during the horrors of the Second World War, Simone Weil, who had no sense of humor, was perfectly justified in pointing out that the acte gratuit is a pseudo-philosophical alibi for every kind of viciousness, great and small.

Generally speaking, then, we can say that Gide had the courage to raise moral issues rather than the ability to suggest useful answers. Certainly, in the sexual area, neither his theories nor his personal conduct were coherently exemplary, and this no doubt helps to explain why he has not become an international hero of homosexuality. Not that he ever really aspired to this role, in spite of his intermittent proselytizing. He could collapse, on occasion, into complete skepticism about his moral convictions, as is shown by the disarming diary entry:

Je ne suis qu’un petit garçon qui s’amuse, double d’un pasteur protestant qui l’ennuie.*

*(I am just a little boy having fun, with a Protestant minister nagging away inside him.)
A final reason for Gide’s ambiguous position on the homosexual scene is that none of his literary works is openly homosexual, apart from the late novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, and even that is only very discreetly so. *Les Nourritures terrestres*, his little pagan bible, is full of diffuse eroticaism, which remains unspecific. At the height of his fame in the twenties and thirties, his reputation as a serious novelist rested on three récits, or novelas, *L’Immoraliste*, *La Porte étroite*, and *La Symphonie Pastorale*, which are all written ostensibly from the heterosexual angle. With hindsight, all three can now be read as transpositions of his personal sexual problem, although this could not be known to his readers at the time of publication. In each book, the narrator is a version of Gide himself, and Madeleine appears in a different guise in each. All three stories end tragically, and in the first two, the Madeleine figure dies. I sometimes wonder if Gide ever noticed that, in his collected works, he killed off his wife symbolically three, if not four, times long before she actually died.

*L’Immoraliste* (1901) follows the events of Gide’s early life quite closely. The narrator, Michel, is a studious young man, just beginning on a successful career as a scholar, and recently married to a girl he has known since childhood. During their honeymoon in Tunisia, he discovers he has tuberculosis, and is immobilized in a village hotel, where he nearly dies. When he is at a low ebb, his wife, Marceline, happens to bring an Arab boy into his room to distract his attention from his illness. The sight of the healthy young body inspires him with a desire to recover, and there follows a long, ecstatic period of convalescence, during which Michel awakens to the life of the senses, so different from his bookish past. Marceline looks after him tenderly, but he derives his main stimulus from affectionate, but apparently platonic, dalliance with Arab boys. His conversion to the physical life is so complete that, upon returning to his country estate in France, he cannot play the part of the respectable landowner, but hobnobs with the lusty peasant lads who poach his own game. Meanwhile, he has made Marceline pregnant, but she loses the child through a miscarriage, which undermines her health. Michel becomes impatient with the restraints of French polite society, and longs again for the desert. This time, as they move south, it is Marceline who becomes tubercular. He is so obsessed with getting away from civilization that he presses on regardless, and she, unable to bear the strain, dies. Michel summons three of his old schoolfriends to the Arab village, where he has temporarily settled; he tells them his story, and asks them if he has behaved badly; they, surprisingly, leave the question open.

It must be obvious to any reader that Michel is a monster of selfishness, or in the grip of an ungovernable urge. In any case, the Nietzschean title, *L’Immoraliste*, implies the transcending of morality. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the book is almost comically sanctimonious in its attempt to half-exonerate the hero. Given the dishonesty of the work about the sexual motive, it should be a failure, but—apart from a few, over-precious sentences—it is so beautifully written, and gives such a subtle and rounded picture of the spoiled, introspective bourgeois discovering the “natural” life and being naively transported by it, that it has a kind of classic quality. Gide achieves such marvelously precise expression not only of the hero’s sensual awakening, but also of his selfishness and self-deception, that one can both despise Michel and admire him for delineating himself so completely. One may wish that Gide had gone still further and told the whole truth, but the book, as it stands, is a compromise that works effectively on a certain level, although, of course, it makes no contribution to the homosexual cause.

*La Porte étroite* (1909) forms a pair with *L’Immoraliste* in the sense that, while the earlier book reflects Gide’s quest for self-fulfillment whatever the consequences, the later appears at first sight to be an extreme elaboration on the theme of Madeleine’s recessiveness. The work is still further removed from overt discussion of the sexual question, although the title can be given a Freudian interpretation, that Gide may, or may not, have intended. He probably knew nothing about Freud when he wrote the book, but he later remarked in his diary that “the imbecile of genius” had discovered the obvious that he himself had always been aware of. In the story, the gate is both a garden gate, where the hero and heroine have more than one significant meeting, and the “strait gate” of Luke 13.24, leading to the virtuous life. Since the theme is the hero’s inability to persuade the heroine to renounce her virginity and marry.
him, there is an implied third narrow gate, which is particularly difficult of access.

The story is another version of the Gide/Madeleine relationship. Jérôme is in love with Alissa, whom he has known since childhood, whose mother has been unfaithful. This time, the heroine is two years older than the hero, as was the case in real life. At first, they commune in their Christian piety and in their shared enthusiasm for literature and music. When, stimulated by the example of a more worldly fellow student, Jérôme begins to think of marriage and wants to become engaged, Alissa puts him off, saying at first that she is too old for him and cannot be sure that his love will last. She also argues that they are already so intimately bound together by their common love of God that there is no urgency for marriage. From the first, it is clear that her attachment to Jérôme is in conflict with saintly aspirations.

Her next excuse is that she doesn’t want to get married before her younger sister, Juliette. She has, in fact, discovered that Juliette is in love with Jérôme, and her motive this time is noble self-sacrifice. When Juliette realizes this, she resolves the situation by opting for a mariage de convenance with another suitor, and the marriage turns out to be happy. But still Alissa keeps putting Jérôme off, and, with time, she gradually turns herself into a sort of lay nun, devoted to stultifying good works. In the end, she wastes away, leaving behind a diary that reveals that she has never resolved the tension between human and divine love.

The major weakness of the book, which Gide later recognized in a diary entry but without tracing it back to his own sexuality, is the passive role played by Jérôme. If he had any physical passion for Alissa, he would try to overcome her resistance, instead of meekly obeying her every whim and allowing her to destroy herself. He is not a man, but a sexless blank. Alissa I take to be an extreme development of the negative element that was probably present in Madeleine, and at the same time a reflection of Gide’s own early mystical fervor and its subsequent withering. However, the work is such a suave outpouring of Puritan piety that it is still apparently read in some quarters as a genuinely religious book. I find it too self-consciously sublime, as well as distasteful in its bland avoidance of the sexual roots of the case, but it has a certain interest as a study of generalized anorexia nervosa, at the opposite pole from the eager appetite for life in L’Immoraliste.

If L’Immoraliste was the thesis and La Porte étroite the antithesis, La Symphonie Pastorale (1919) can be seen as the synthesis. At first, it may appear quite unconnected with the Gide/Madeleine issue, but this is only because the symbolism is indirect. The narrator is a Swiss pastor in a remote mountain district, and he is full of pious expressions of goodwill as he copes with his parish, his five children, and his rather crotchety wife, Amélie. His parsonal tone is not unlike that of the Vicar of Wakefield, and we know from Gide’s diary that he had read Goldsmith’s novel. One day, when the pastor is called to the deathbed of an old peasant woman, he discovers in her cottage a blind, apparently imbicilic girl, her niece, who is left alone in the world. With Christian charity, he brings the girl home, much to the displeasure of Amélie, who however accepts the situation. They call the girl Gertrude. When the pastor realizes that she is not subnormal but only undeveloped, because her deaf old aunt has never been able to communicate with her, he embarks with enthusiasm on her education.

She blossoms into a pretty, sensitive creature, whom he instructs in the beauty of life with a passion he has never lavished on his own children. In particular, he is careful to shield her from all intimations of evil; hence, I suppose, the relevance of the Beethoven symphony that he takes Gertrude to hear in Neuchâtel; in this middle-period Beethoven work, evil, as represented by the thunderstorm, is set between movements celebrating the goodness of God and the beneficence of Nature. Evil breaks into the story, however; the pastor discovers that his grown-up son, Jacques, is in love with Gertrude and wants to marry her. He is amazed at his own jealousy, and equally taken aback when Gertrude tells him that she has refused Jacques, because she is in love with him, the pastor, and he with her. They seal their love with a kiss, and perhaps more.

Meanwhile, a doctor-friend has suggested that Gertrude’s blindness might be cured by an operation. The restoration of her sight brings disaster. She realizes the sorrow she has brought to Amélie, and that Jacques, not the pastor, is the love-object she saw in her mind’s eye. Overwhelmed by the revelation
of evil, she throws herself into a river and, although rescued, dies of pneumonia, after a last explanation. Jacques, disgusted with his father's sentimental laxity, enters into holy orders and becomes a Catholic priest. The pastor and Amélie are left sorrowfully reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

This novella, which can be read at a sitting, is one of Gide's most remarkable achievements, a piece of verbal music composed in the most mellifluous and exquisitely modulated French, and ironically contradicting the optimism of Beethoven's symphony by the placing of evil at the end, instead of in the middle, of the pastoral structure. The pastor is clearly a parody of Gide himself, with his semi-pious, semi-pagan enthusiasms, his roving spirit and his didactic urge. Amélie is the long-suffering Madeleine, an almost silent witness to the vagaries of her husband's temperament. Gertrude can stand for any of the boys with whom Gide became infatuated to his wife's sorrow, and whom he helped or harmed by his attentions. If this reading is plausible, and I think it is, it shows that Gide cannot, in the last resort, be accused of insensitivity, or of having only the simplistic attitude to pederasty he sometimes expresses. All the delicate satire of the tale is directed by the Gide-figure against himself, the self-deceiving pastor, blinder than the blind girl, and who, while constantly quoting the New Testament, paves the way to Hell with good intentions. In other words, the pastor is, after Michel and Jérôme, a third embodiment of the author's problem, and this time he comes to realize that he is in a web of human relationships that has been wrecked by the unconscious egotism with which he has pursued a natural impulse.

In addition to being lyrical and humorous, the book is genuinely tragic, in a way L'Immoraliste and La Porte étroite are not. It is a nonpartisan work of art, which holds the moral issue in balance without resolving it, and although homosexuality was no doubt the key issue behind its composition, it can be appreciated without any reference to that subject. Here Gide has completely succeeded in transposing the particular into the general, which, as he, I think, rightly says, is the function of art.

With the writing of La Symphonie Pastorale, Gide appears to have finally exorcized his problem as a married homosexual, unable to separate from his wife or to discuss the matter openly with her. In real life, the problem did not go away, but he had sloughed off his worry about it, and it ceased to be a source of literary inspiration. If, at an early stage, he had behaved like another nineteenth-century homosexual—the English art historian John Addington Symonds, who, after fathering a number of children, decided that heterosexuality was not for him and came to an amicable arrangement with his wife—French literature would probably have been the poorer by at least three books. Such are the quirks of creativity.

But the slackening of the guilty tension did not lead to Gide's emergence as a specifically homosexual novelist. In his last major work of fiction, Les Faux-Monnayeurs (1926), sexual deviance is openly present, but, surprisingly enough, in the muted form of a minor tendency, half-virtuous and half-wicked, in a predominantly heterosexual society. The book is a summation, encompassing all of Gide's different styles: the lyrical, the Absurdist-humorous, and the analytical, and touching on all of his previous themes: the nature/culture dichotomy, religion as a source of good and as a hypocritical alibi, the question of realism in art, and, above all, as the title indicates, the problem of authentic living. I am not sure that it is a total success, but it is his most ambitious creation and a book with great qualities. It consists of a complex interweaving of various different stories involving a score or more of characters, and cannot be summarized in a few words. Suffice it to say that it again contains a Gide-figure, the novelist and compulsive diarist, Edouard.

It is never openly stated that Edouard is a pederast; although unmarried, he may have had physical relations with women; but, as the story begins, he is interested in an adolescent, Olivier, whom he has just got to know, and who is the son of his half-sister, Pauline. (This may reflect the fact that Marc Allégret was related to Gide; perhaps incest is relatively unimportant within homosexuality, since it can have no genetic consequences). Olivier, in return, is tremulously enthusiastic about Edouard but, misinterpreting the latter's behavior, in a fit of pique becomes involved with Comte de Passavant, a fashionable, superficial man of letters with a homosexual reputation, and who is presented in fact as a "bad" homosexual. (According to
gossip, the model here was Cocteau, who had shown an interest in Marc, but the character seems very different from Cocteau.) Passavant wants to found a new, deliberately scandalous, literary paper, of which Olivier is to be editor, although he is just out of school. It is implied that Olivier’s appointment, like the new wardrobe Passavant has supplied, is a reward for services rendered.

In the end, nothing comes of the project. Olivier gets drunk at the launching party, becomes involved in a brawl, sees through Passavant’s phoniness, and appeals for help to Edouard, who happens to be present. Edouard carries him off, presumably to bed. During the night, unhinged by drink and the bliss he has experienced with Edouard, Olivier tries to gas himself in the bathroom. He is found in time by Edouard and nursed back to health. Rather reluctantly, Pauline accepts the situation, because she thinks that Edouard will have a better influence on her son than Passavant. We are not told about the reaction of Olivier’s father, a prominent magistrate, nor do we see any subsequent development of the Edouard/Olivier liaison.

Although the pederastic idyll is handled with delicate, springlike lyricism, it is only a very small element in the book, and we are even left in doubt about how far it is physical. Besides, Olivier is a rather dim figure, with no particular quality apart from his beauty, which is frequently mentioned, and he is outshone by his heterosexual schoolfriend Bernard, with whom Edouard has some interesting intellectual discussions, and who is an altogether more rounded personality. There is also a hint that Olivier may be only a very temporary sex object, soon to be replaced by a younger boy, in whom Edouard suddenly expresses an interest in the very last sentence of the book. If this is so, Gide is suggesting that the pederastic relationship can never be taken very far by the adult, since it depends less on the personal identity of the loved one than on his attraction as a provisional embodiment of youthful charm; in short, a pederast is probably more in love with youth and beauty than with any particular individual, and this is hardly an attitude that lends itself to a crusading development. At no point, indeed, does Edouard speak out in favor of homosexuality, although he argues about many other subjects.

Perhaps Gide, as he is sometimes inclined to do, is deliberately teasing the reader who, at this point, might have expected a triumphant hymn to homosexuality from so scandalous an author. Or perhaps he had reached a stage when he accepted his deviance with relative serenity as being appropriate for himself, but no longer had any strong conviction about it being as morally pure, or as universally valid, as he once thought. In either case, if there is a homosexual lobby, it must find Les Faux-Monnayeurs, whatever the book’s other virtues, of little representational value to the cause.