

**Assuming homosexuality :
the correspondence between André Gide and Eugène Rouart**

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When as a Final-Year undergraduate I first approached Claus Mayer with a view to doing research in his department, he looked at the record for my first and second years – and told me I wasn't very good. Mercifully I had had the Year Abroad to change that. But if this helped in one way, it caused problems in another; for Claus's instinct was to direct aspiring postgraduates towards the 16th Century. Unfortunately, by the time I returned from the year abroad I was beyond redemption, for during this period I had read *Les Nourritures terrestres* and *Les Nouvelles Nourritures*, and these books enthused me precisely as they were intended to. 'Ne sacrifie pas aux idoles', I had read. So I found myself potentially embarking on a struggle of wills with Claus. A daunting prospect.... Fortunately (for me), after some reflection he conceded that Gide was probably the last of the great Humanists, and by that token it would not be a betrayal on my part to 'go off' and do research on him. And so it came to pass. I did hear Claus once remark that it 'was a shame'; which I chose to take as a compliment. I did, however, feel myself duty bound to start my research by reading Gide's 'Montaigne' and 'Suivant Montaigne' of 1928-1929. But I was reminded of my status as a *seizièmiste manqué* when in August 1970 I received from Claus a telegram bearing a quotation from Marot's 'Adolescence clémentine':

'Tant que vivrai en âge florissant,
Je servirai Amour, le Dieu puissant'

That gesture meant a lot then, and it still means a lot now, to my wife and myself.

Of course, from my studies of Ronsard under Claus Mayer I had taken away numerous quotations I can still recite, including the following :

'Corydon marche devant
Sache où le bon vin se vend...'

When one begins working on Gide, it isn't long before this Renaissance conceit takes on a rather particular sense. Indeed it's fair to say that in our contemporary culture, if people have heard of *Corydon* at all, the chances are it is as Gide's emblematic figure for the pederast: he for whom pastoral poetry becomes inauthentic once the poet ceases to be in love with the shepherd.

At the time when I had the honour of delivering the C.A. Mayer memorial lecture in 1999 I had just finished tracking down and transcribing some 440 letters Gide had written to his friend Eugène Rouart. Four weeks previously, I had received authorisation from Olivier Rouart, the son of Eugène, and Catherine Gide, the

daughter of André, to consult and transcribe the 400 or so letters from Eugène to André which had lain under lock and key in the Bibliothèque Doucet for over fifty years. In my lecture I was able only to present a one-sided perspective on the subject I had decided to address. At present, having edited the entire Gide-Rouart Correspondance in two volumes published by the Presses universitaires de Lyon in 2006, I can present a fuller picture.

It is in his novel *The Counterfeiters* that Gide evokes the dilemma of the artist who seeks to create a literary *œuvre* by giving free expression to his most intimate inspiration : 'Happy the man who can grasp in the same embrace both the laurel crown and the object of his love,' he has the novelist Edouard note in his diary, referring to the fable of Apollo and Daphne.¹ The publication of this novel in 1925 completed a trio of books in which Gide set out the story of his homosexuality, a story expressed most directly in his autobiography *If it die...* of 1924 and polemically in *Corydon*, also made public in 1924, though written from 1910 onwards. There is not much left to say, in a factual sense, about Gide's sexuality: he was open about it himself in *Corydon* and elsewhere; he confided many details to the trusted Roger Martin du Gard who duly noted them down and arranged for them subsequently to become available in his *Notes on André Gide*.² And since the publication of the correspondence with Henri Ghéon, we know plenty about the form Gide's adventures took and where they occurred. But behind the convinced and determined spokesman and activist for sexual freedom, we had not yet fully understood how Gide first became aware of and came to terms with the particular character of his pederasty. The three volumes of 1924-5 represented the realisation of a project he had actually set himself some 30 years earlier. These later sources, and most other documents available to us, are retrospective recreations of events and emotions, and we lacked evidence to appreciate how in fact he lived the process of discovering and assuming his homosexuality. We can infer a certain amount from the diary, especially in its 1996-7 edition which restores previously suppressed entries. But it is the correspondence between Gide and Eugène Rouart which reveals most immediately Gide's frame of mind when he was actually coming to terms with his sexuality Eugène was the second-eldest son of Henri Rouart the industrialist and part-time painter, a close friend of Degas, who exhibited with the Impressionists. Eugène was slightly younger than the 22-year-old Gide who befriended him at the age of 19 in February 1893. He was to undergo a process of self-discovery broadly parallel to that of his friend, and the two shared confidences of a particularly intimate kind. The similarities and contrasts in their respective stances extend over a considerable period and their epistolary exchanges enable us to trace the evolution that eventually led Gide to insist on asserting his right and duty to speak openly about his nature. These letters thus constitute a unique set of documents which can serve as a basis to clarify several hitherto unknown or misunderstood aspects of Gide's attitude to his homosexuality.

¹ *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, in André Gide, *Romans et récits, œuvres lyriques et dramatiques*, II, ed. Pierre Masson, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2009, p. 240.

² Gallimard, 1951.

When Gide met Rouart, he was planning a trip to Spain with his then best friend the writer Pierre Louÿs. His intention was to ‘open every door to every event’.³ However he did not fully trust Louÿs to adhere to the spirit in which he envisaged this joint adventure: ‘At the first woman you encounter you’ll stop caring about me,’ he wrote to him.⁴ Louÿs ultimately pulled out of the project, which was perhaps for the best. The fact is, however, that Gide lacked an attentive and reliable interlocutor on the subject of his sexual tastes. This explains the importance of Rouart: and the letters the two young men exchanged, particularly at the start of their friendship, constitute a crucial testimony to the manner in which homosexuals could learn to acknowledge, pursue and claim legitimacy for their desires, in a society which was still a long way from being permissive towards them. This is all the more the case in that the circumstances and the nature of the relationship between the two friends prompted particularly significant epistolary exchanges. The slight age difference meant that the one found himself dealing with sensations which the other was slightly better placed to elucidate in the light of his relatively more extensive experience. It is symptomatic that certain passages of Gide’s sensual breviary *The Fruits of the Earth*, notably the famous ‘Letter to Nathanaël’, turn out to have been drafted in letters Gide wrote to Rouart.

From Spain where – in a modification of his initial plans – he finally found himself journeying with his Mother in March 1893, Gide wrote to his new friend :

I’m in Seville where I am blossoming – so happy that I’m not even too sad any more; the beauty of this race drives me wild, together with the perfume of the orange blossom. I have not forgotten you.⁵

Gide’s first biographer Jean Delay quotes this text, stating that it was addressed to ‘a friend’. But in a more significant oversight – if that’s what it was – Delay substitutes the word ‘town’ where Gide had written ‘race’.⁶ This crucial modification gives to the sentence a trivial sense far removed from what Gide is really getting at. Delay’s error turns out to be all the more misleading when we realise that it obscures a key issue.

For seven months later, in the autumn of 1893, having recently arrived in North Africa, on the first stage of a famous series of journeys that would prove the trigger for his true emancipation, Gide writes to Rouart :

The beauty of the races here fills one with an exaltation which is vaguely erotic, but more precisely lyrical; I’m writing poetry every hour of the day. One sees in the streets, on the squares, superb Sudanese men, black as can be; and our thoughts wander to the countries of the interior where little negroes are raised.⁷

³ Jean Delay, *La Jeunesse d’André Gide*, vol. 2., Gallimard, 1957, p. 219.

⁴ Letter dated 4 February 1893, André Gide-Pierre Louÿs-Paul Valéry, *Correspondance à trois voix 1888-1920*, ed. Peter Fawcett and Pascal Mercier, Gallimard, p.661. It was on the same day that Gide met Rouart for the first time.

⁵ Letter dated 30 March 1893, André Gide-Eugène Rouart, *Correspondance I, 1893-1901*, ed. David H. Walker, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2006 (hereafter CI), p. 99.

⁶ Jean Delay, *op.cit.*, p. 222.

⁷ Letter dated 4 November 1893, CI, p. 127.

To which Rouart replies :

What you tell me about the beauty of the races makes me quiver. Setting aside vice the beauty of the arab race is alluring, they say. It's a terrible thing, we didn't talk enough, I don't know why, about such things openly, for me to venture to speak about them in a letter; perhaps we might misunderstand each other, and that would be even worse.⁸

So this is a subject the two friends have not yet discussed between themselves: to this fact we owe written versions of the conversations they had failed to have previously. On 24 November 1893 Gide in turn responds, switching straight away from the 'vous' to the 'tu' form of intimate exchanges :

I knew perfectly well that when I mentioned beautiful races I would prompt some kind of start in you . What fun to have foreseen it so well and to know you more profoundly than you suspect.

We may suppose therefore that the expression 'the beauty of the races', previously used in the letter from Seville, constitutes on Gide's part a kind of coded gambit, intended to sound out his correspondent and provoke precisely the admission we have just seen. Now, Gide continues:

Yes indeed it would have been interesting to talk about this before we separated – all the more so as it will be less interesting to do so afterwards. It would have been extremely interesting, for despite your fears, I am utterly certain that we would have seen eye to eye as well as, if not better than, on anything else. And that being so I could have written to you, having discussed such matters, some things about this journey which I daren't recount just now, however great an urge I have to do so.⁹

As for the 'things about this journey which I daren't recount just now, however great an urge I have to do so', it is virtually certain that Gide is alluding to what he will call in *If it die...* a 'little episode whose effect on me was considerable', the first in a series of life-changing episodes which had occurred a day or two previously on the dunes at Sousse, where the boy Ali, 'naked as a god' offered himself to Gide 'in the splendour of the evening'.¹⁰

On 6 December, Rouart received the 'tu' form with some misgivings. However he declared that he had re-read Gide's *The Lovers' Attempt*, which had recently gone on sale. And as he points out that he now understands better the ambivalence this text manifests in relation to (hetero)sexual desire, he recalls that Gide and he had in fact had, on 5 or 6 October in Paris, just before catching a train together for Montpellier, an

⁸ Letter dated 8 November 1893, CI, p.129.

⁹ Letter dated 24 November 1893, CI, p. 134.

¹⁰ *Si le grain ne meurt*, in *Souvenirs et voyages, op.cit.*, pp. 279-80.

agonisingly inconclusive conversation during which they must have sidestepped the subject.

I re-read it the other evening, and it called to mind again the astonishing evening in Paris, when our indecision brought us together so; and I also found your book to my liking.¹¹

Immediately after these letters, Gide fell ill with a pulmonary infection which interrupted the correspondence for a few weeks. When Gide resumed it, he adopted once again the 'vous' form in deference to Rouart's nervousness ; and yet, looking back at the way in which his convalescence had awakened his senses and opened up his mind to new possibilities in his life, he observed:

You are one of those who would have best understood the thoughts that occurred to me at the time, whether too serious or too shameless; that's why I kept wishing you were with me.¹²

This time Rouart was dismayed at the return to 'vous' in Gide's letter ; and in a manner which would prove to be typical of him, he revealed to Gide the relief he felt at having discovered someone who understood him, in whom he could confide. In May 1894, he went so far as to say:

I think I have already told you (in any case I'm telling you again today) the profound friendship I feel for you, you whom I loved from our first encounter because you were the way-marker that my soul was waiting for – a guiding light come just in time.¹³

No sooner had Gide returned to Europe than he made arrangements to introduce Rouart to the circle of his other friends. To this end he organised a get-together at the Norman manor-house his Mother owned at La Roque-Baignard. So it was that Gide and Rouart were to spend a fortnight together in mid-August 1894. Delay points out that we have no letters indicating what happened there since all of Gide's usual correspondents were with him. However, it takes little effort to imagine that Rouart was at the centre of things. And the fact is that subsequent letters contain passing echoes of this period. For instance Gide wrote to his cousin and future wife Madeleine, on 23 August 1894 : 'With Rouart, at the beginning of his visit, we were still trying to win each other over – now it's done, it's done, with Rouart [...] it's really no longer a question of appealing to each other; now we're well and truly beyond that.'¹⁴ The two friends travelled back together from Normandy to Paris, and the following month Gide wrote to Rouart :

I remember certain conversations, as we passed over the bridge at La Roque, in which we considered more important than all the rest, than all the intimate story

¹¹ Letter dated 6 December 1893, CI, p. 136.

¹² Letter dated 6 January 1894, CI, p. 141.

¹³ Letter dated 24 May 1894, *ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁴ Letter quoted in André Gide, *Correspondance avec sa mère*, ed. Claude Martin, Gallimard, 1988, p. 723.

of the senses, the necessity of living one's entire life in a manner one deems beautiful and becoming. On that day I liked you to the depths of your soul, which it seemed to me I caught a glimpse of.¹⁵

For his part, on 21 August, Rouart had written to Gide thanking him for the stay at La Roque which, he said, had enabled them to get to know each other 'almost entirely'. This same letter continues with some revealing remarks:

Over all that the memory of our talks remains ; so many things learned, sadnesses and joys, even to find you were so much like me ; not sadness at knowing you were like me (I'm worthy of better thoughts), but sadness at knowing you, my friend, were as anxious, as tormented, as irresolute as I am ; -- and a somewhat egotistical joy in seeing that at last I had found someone with whom my friendship had nothing to fear and to whom I could say everything [...] we will have the capacity and the knowledge to support each other in life.

The rest of this letter comprises a long confession of the struggles that Rouart had undergone to face up to his confused desires. 'Anxious' indeed, and 'tormented', too; but above all he shows himself to be 'irresolute', for he is actually wondering just what is his sexual orientation. It would seem that the question is far from being settled, for he knows that when he gets back to town he will find himself once more confronted with dilemmas that he fears:

But I know that I want to continue the struggle until I'm cured or until I abandon myself to another direction [...]

However I would be rather ashamed to take the path that everyone takes, with sidesteps when imperious desire requires it ; -- but I hope to avoid that, it would be the pattern of behaviour I would least forgive in myself.

Behind the euphemisms of another era, Rouart outlines problems which it would take Gide 20 years to prepare to speak openly about. Clearly Rouart is torn between the wish to live 'normally' and the fear that by doing so he would sacrifice his own nature. At the same time he signals his determination not to 'suppress morality; but simply appease excessive disquiet'. It is obvious, nonetheless, that the moral dimension intensifies a physiological distress which torments him.

The main thing is to be able, from a given moment onwards – starting as soon as possible – to live normally. In that case one knows what one has and what one has not ; what one wants and what one doesn't want ; *there must be no room for regret.*¹⁶

Until such time as he can resolve these questions once and for all by force of will, he is wary of the unforeseen, of the chance occurrences in life which can undermine his efforts ; and he is haunted above all by a spectre which one assumes is masturbation, the so-

¹⁵ Letter dated 23 September 1894, CI, p. 200.

¹⁶ Letter dated 21 August 1894, *Ibid.*, pp. 177-9.

called 'bad habits' which had secretly inspired Gide's first novel, *The Notebooks of André Walter*, and which in his autobiography *If it die...* Gide would chronicle less discreetly.

From this moment on, Gide and Rouart resolve to explore the consequences for each of them of the homosexual impulses which they have in common. Their correspondence for Autumn and Winter 1894 is crucial in this respect. Already in the letter cited just now, Rouart shows himself to be apprehensive with regard to a book which he knew Gide had taken away with him to La Brévine where he had decided to pursue his convalescence. He writes: 'I don't think you are strong enough to read it yet, for my part I imagine it would do me great harm and I think the same goes for you.'¹⁷

The book in question was by Albert Moll and had been translated from the German. Entitled *Perversions of the genital instinct. A study on sexual inversion based on official documents*, the French translation had just appeared in 1893, and the publicity leaflet had prompted the 'Society for protection against licentiousness in the streets' to bring a prosecution against it for an offence against public morality.¹⁸ The attitude evinced by Rouart shows how difficult he found it merely to broach the subjects which the book sets out to examine.

By contrast one can assess the moral courage of Gide through the way in which, unlike Rouart, he considers these issues with some equanimity, even at a time when his personal liberation is only in its initial stages. It is worth noting that it would be another nine months before he underwent a decisive initiation in North Africa, urged on by Oscar Wilde. His reply to Rouart's anguished letter of 21 August, dated 5 September from Saint-Moritz, begins with the following comments:

I shan't reply to your last letter. I prefer to talk about these things rather than write about them. Now we know each other deeply; we will always acknowledge what we are. Until such time as we meet again and can talk once more about whatever we like, I'm of the view that we must extricate ourselves on our own from the clutter of moral precepts.

However he invites Rouart to write to him freely on these issues if he wishes to ; he will perhaps be moved to take them up again himself if the occasion arises. But for the time being he is concerned above all to dispel a misunderstanding on the part of his correspondent:

You were slightly mistaken, it seems to me, in your excellent letter [...] as to the anxieties that I might have. I assure you, all that is past and gone – I no longer have any turmoil or disquiet, practically, – and that is why I am so little inclined to stir up once more these questions of transcendent physiology. I really am, it seems to me, as well as it is possible to be while experiencing vehement desires.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ The fourth edition of the work, containing extracts from the court proceedings held between 12 and 19 July, appeared in Paris, published by Georges Carré, in 1893.

As for the ‘secret book’, Rouart is wrong to let himself be frightened by it :

I have leafed through it: it bores me. I could write something infinitely better on the subject – it seems to me – even while keeping to the medical or social point of view.

I was astonished above all to find in it nothing resembling my ‘sickness’ in any of the cases he cites – and he claims to cite them all...¹⁹

This is no doubt the starting-point of *Corydon* which Gide was to take thirty years to publish and whose prolonged gestation Rouart was to follow sometimes with something approaching apprehension.

Nevertheless, in the meantime, Rouart had actually steeled himself to read Moll’s book, as he announces on 4 September:

I bought it and read it avidly. It is excessively interesting and its author, though I occasionally find him disagreeable, strikes me as a man of intelligence. I’ll say no more, we’ll talk about it together.²⁰

However Gide had not had his final say on the subject, for in fact he hadn’t yet read the book in detail. Once he had finished reading it he was prompted to write on 14 September:

It is interesting and has modified, or helped modify, my thinking. I was unjust at the outset, and when I spoke to you about being bored, it was because I had barely leafed through it, rapidly and casually.

The book is very well done, – but it seems to me that it does not differentiate enough between the two categories: the effeminate and the ‘others’: it constantly mixes them up and nothing is more different, more contrary – for the one is the opposite of the other; for, so far as this psychophysiology is concerned, what does not attract repels and the one of these categories inspires horror in the other.

This was to be a key theme in Gide’s theory of homosexuality and would be a significant ingredient in *Corydon*: according to Gide there exist two broad categories of homosexuals – the effeminate and the rest – between which there allegedly reigns a mutual hostility.

In this same letter, Gide draws his friend’s attention to a pitfall that bedevils the friendship of men like them. After having underlined certain categories of homosexual whom Moll omits to mention and which Gide takes pains to distinguish from each other, he goes on to say :

¹⁹ Letter dated 5 September 1894, CI, pp. 182-3.

²⁰ Letter dated 4 September 1894, *Ibid.*, p. 180.

This leads me to an affirmation that I consider necessary. *None of my friendships up to now has involved any seduction or sensual arousal [...]*

And what was true yesterday is still true today; it is important to affirm this so that friendship should not be compromised, and no principle of perdition be sensed in it. I daren't ask you for any admission on this topic, for if your view were not the same as mine I would be infinitely pained and *would begin* to pity you for real. So we ought both to take care.²¹

Now it is clear that Rouart had an ardent and sentimental temperament, but he was also inclined to take umbrage readily: he was not best pleased to be spoken to in this way. Did he take these remarks of Gide's as a kind of rebuff? We can't be sure. Whatever the truth of the case may be, he declares himself to be put out, firstly by the 'egoism' – his word – with which Gide, having attained a certain peace of mind for himself on these questions, reacts evasively when faced with his friend's 'confessions'. It has cost Rouart to re-open old wounds and stir up old passions in the interest of frankness between friends:

You must remember that I'm younger than you and forgive me my lack of reasoning and wisdom, I'm terribly emotional – and of very bad character – and then [...] I'm not a politician – so you must forgive me my clumsiness.

All the same, when I got back from La Roque, I went through a series of frightful days, swinging violently from one extreme to the other.²²

When, into the bargain, Gide now takes it upon himself to warn against the apparent stirrings of a sexual attraction aimed at him that he might have detected in his new friend, Rouart takes great pains to point out that nothing could be further from the truth. Nonetheless it is hard to escape the suspicion that he protests rather too much and strives a little too strenuously to match the composure with which Gide had contemplated his own instinctive impulses:

[your letter] interested me greatly, it called to mind certain things I had previously been thinking about [...] for in my notebook I came across these words written at the start of the month: 'Two states to be defined: psychological love – sexual love'. That is why without any shame or even awkwardness I am pleased to be able to reply to you. [...]

Without realising it perhaps, I have always made a great distinction between an intellectual love and a love of the senses [...] for me the one ceases where the other begins and vice versa.

All this is bound to please Gide. Having got it out of the way, Rouart continues in a firmly virile tone possibly intended to refute the implicit accusation that he might be one of the 'effeminate' type. 'I don't regret your letter, since it gives rise to this explanation which I had initially thought was not necessary but perhaps it's better to have.' There follows a list of his masculine qualities: whereas he has always been candid and sincere with Gide, he has succeeded nevertheless in concealing 'the great violence of [his]

²¹ Letter dated 14 September 1894, *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

²² Letter dated 10 September 1894, *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

character, of [his] thoughts, of [his] acts'. All the same he considers himself 'an upright man, whom all hold in esteem'. He offers proof of his candour : 'In all the milieux I have frequented I have sometimes provoked hatred, for I do not conceal what I think.' And yet this virile man has never been an object of 'scorn': 'I have always been respected even by those who hated or disliked me'.²³

By way of reply, Gide hastened to appease his friend:

It was having read the German book, which made me think there might have been a blunder between us, on the serious subject you are aware of. In fact I didn't recognize myself in the book, or only rarely, and I didn't know if you had failed to find yourself in it too. That's all there was to it, absolutely all, and so everything is for the best.²⁴

This misunderstanding ought not to blind us to the essential contained in the letters exchanged by the two young men during the winter of 1894-95. A friendship which was to endure up to Rouart's death in 1936 was fortified in this period, and the basis of this friendship is contained in a formula that Gide set out in his letter of 14 September 1894. Gide is determined that neither he, nor Rouart, nor their friendship, nor the 'idiosyncrasy' which they share, should be the object of scorn or pity

... the pity they might offer us, I would not accept. I would say : take it back, I am not miserable at all. On the contrary, I feel I am consistently more joyful than other men, and I aspire despite everything to live a life in which, when I look back on it later to see myself, I will judge myself beautiful. [...] I wish that whoever understands me might feel proud of being a friend of mine. *I will not be ashamed*. But I can sense it already, dear friend, we will need good strong shoulders, and *convictions*, for, you know, I want no hypocrisy – it's a form of suicide – and it shows that we do not know our own worth.²⁵

The subsequent history of their friendship was to be dictated in large measure by the way in which Gide went about living up to these splendid precepts. Occasionally Rouart would find it difficult to be the equal of this ideal, but it is to his credit that he helped Gide to formulate it.

²³ Letter dated 19 September 1894, *Ibid.*, pp. 190-3.

²⁴ Letter dated 23 September 1894, *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁵ Letter dated 14 September 1894, *Ibid.*, p. 187.