CHAPTER 13

Theseus Revisited: Commitment through Myth

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Gide’s relationship to the extraordinarily rich world of Greek mythology is a complex and ambivalent subject, and many modern critical studies have explored various aspects of this relationship, from its presence as a constant aesthetic referent to its potential as a unique discursive framework. Indeed, Gide’s interest in myth, as with his attraction to Christian motifs, represents a consistent force throughout his life and a fundamental referential thread throughout his textual corpus, from the 1891 Traité du Narcisse through the 1946 Thésée. Gide employed a mythic backdrop to explore a variety of generic forms, composing mythologically based texts within such forms as the récit, the dramatic text, the sotie, the treatise, the essay, and the Socratic dialogue. References to Greco-Roman myth abound as well in his correspondence and his personal papers, in his conversations and his lectures. Clearly Gide felt a deep attachment to the dynamic system of the ancient modes of thought and art; he obviously discovered in the myths of antiquity something more powerful than merely an evocative historical framework or a provocative narrative structure.

In one sense, one can argue that Gide’s primary interest in myth is of a personal nature, for it is evident that in many ways, Gide retells the stories of the heroes of myth in order to recount his own adventure, to communicate a personal narrative within a mythic framework. This act of self-expression exists for Gide as a gesture of exploration and inquiry, as a significant move in the enterprise to work towards a more authentic understanding of himself. In the mirror of ancient myth, Gide recognizes a shadowy figure, a double of himself both desired and feared, not unlike the painfully beautiful and inaccessible image that flashes up to Narcissus seated at the water’s edge. Thus, myth for Gide fulfills the fundamental purpose of serving as a vehicle for the expression of subjectivity, as a structure within which the author can dramatize conflicts drawn from his own internal stage.

Moreover, Gide’s understanding of myth is clearly modern, in the sense that what interests and attracts him in the tales of antiquity is not so much an eternal, T. Conner (ed.), André Gide’s Politics: Rebellion and Ambivalence © Tom Conner 2000
unchanging truth that would convey to the moderns, as we often assume was the case for the ancients, an immutable fragment of divine wisdom or a cleverly worded solution to a basic human dilemma. Rather, Gide’s interest in myth is as a partner, indeed as a double to complement himself, and for him the story of a myth becomes truly powerful and significant only when it joins together with a unique creative mind, as it takes on new meaning and potential through an individual reading of its most basic elements. Thus Gide enters the aesthetic tradition of the *mythe littéraire*, an artistic form embodying the response of a single writer to the encounter of an ancient narrative. Literary myth implies evolution, subversion, and surprise, as an author approaches the antique myth from a unique, reinvigorated standpoint, manipulating the referent to reveal its hidden, neglected, or censored implications. As the progeny of the union of an author and a legendary narrative of a prior age, literary myth ensures the continuation of the mythic in the modern world. For without literature, myth would be lost to human sensibility; without the conscious act of a writer to reactivate the material of ancient myths, the anonymous oral message, structure, and contexts of the powerful stories of antiquity would no longer hold meaning today. In the words of Albert Camus, “Myths . . . await our incarnation. If even one man responds to their call, they offer up their strength intact.” Gide himself is not unaware of the active, polyvalent nature of ancient myth; he argues: “The Greek fable, after Troy, loses its symbolic meaning but takes on a psychological and poetic value, to the great advantage of dramatists. There is no longer any reason to seek the hidden meaning of those stories; they have ceased to have anything mythical about them; their admirable pathos must suffice for the ingenious poet” (Journals 4: 253).

Interestingly, Gide does not consider the construction of his own *mythe littéraire* as a gesture of rebellion or competition when confronted with a previous author perceived as an aesthetic rival or a traditional model to be overturned. Rather, for Gide, his own response to a mythic tale, or to any specific later textual version of that tale, is always already unique, necessarily unlike that which came before. Regarding the myth of Oedipus, for example, Gide underscores the fact that he is in no way interested in an attempt to outdo other authors, or to redo what they have accomplished, but to construct a new and unsuspected perspective, to uncover an element inherent in the narrative until then undetected. He writes: “You have Sophocles’ play and I am not posing as a rival; I am leaving him the pathos; but here is what Sophocles could not have seen and understood, though it lay in his subject, and what I understand—not because I am more intelligent but because I belong to another epoch. . . . I intend not to make you shudder and weep, but to make you reflect” (Journals 3: 254). As is clear in this passage, Gide does not perceive the individual subject in an isolated, solitary state, but rather, he contextualizes the standpoint from which the modern author contemplates the mythic referent. In Gide’s view, the reason for the unique nature of his own interpretation of the myth appears grounded primarily in the era to which the writer belongs. The challenge in the enterprise to construct a truly powerful contemporary literary myth focuses then on the problem of unifying the ancient figures with the modern atmosphere, and the