

Gide's *Immoraliste*: Orientalism Against the Grain

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Over the years, since its publication in 1902, André Gide's novel *L'immoraliste* has elicited a variety of responses. Paul Claudel denounced the book by saying that Gide was personally responsible for leading French youth astray both morally and sexually. Although avoiding Claudel's peremptory denunciation, some readers have emphasized the homosexual component of the novel, whereas others have stressed Michel's quest for liberation from religious and social constraints. Indeed, until discussions of metafiction and self-reflexive art became fashionable, *L'immoraliste* was read as an example of that "monstrous rose" (Gide's own term)—Michel's unbridled licentiousness and self-interest—the diabolic opposite of Alissa's renunciation in *La porte étroite* (1909). It was customary, and Gide himself encouraged the coupling, to read *L'immoraliste* and *La porte étroite* together as typical examples of the Gidean dialog.¹

When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that Gide was one of the four coordinates of twentieth-century thought, the other three being Marx, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, readers were quick to see in Michel's quest for freedom the beginnings of existential emancipation.² After the passing of existentialism and the advent of the nouveau roman the audience could emphasize *L'immoraliste's* specular levels—the novel within the novel, its self-consciousness, and the shifting narrative voices. A recent addition to Gideana stresses the centrality of homosexuality to everything he wrote. These varied responses attest to *L'immoraliste's* multileveled richness and yet, despite his good fortune, Gide is no longer as popular or, it seems, as relevant as he once was. Nonetheless, his work continues to address important issues of the 1990s.

Gide has always championed the rights of women, children, and homosexuals. Indeed, he was acutely aware of alterability, difference, and marginality. *L'école des femmes* (1929) did for women what *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926) and *Corydon* (1924) had done for children and gay men. *L'école des femmes* (1929) dramatizes the plight of a woman whose identity is being snuffed out by the paternalistic rhetoric of society, marriage, and the church. These works, with another special place for *Les faux-monnayeurs* (1926), continue to be topical, and they can be taught in ways that stress their usefulness, if indeed social relevance, rather than art, defines literary standards.

Fortunately, Orientalism as a topic encompasses both aesthetic values and social concerns, and it is recent enough to shed new light on Gide's works, particularly *L'immoraliste*. This essay will therefore focus on Orientalism, the title of a book published in 1978, by Edward Said. As a concept, Orientalism concerns it-

¹ André Gide, "L'immoraliste," in *Romans Récits et Soties. Oeuvres Lyriques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958) 365-472. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, "Gide vivant," *Les temps modernes* 65 (March 1951): 1538.

self with the discourse of the West about the East. This discourse is made up of a vast body of texts that has been growing since the Renaissance and it deals with literary, topographical, anthropological, historical, and sociological matters. Said focuses on writing about the Near East and argues that the discourse is self-validating and tautological. Orientalism, he says, constructs certain stereotypes that become accepted as self-evident facts—facts that dovetail both consciously and unconsciously with Western political and economic imperialism. In his introduction Said says that "taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution of dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."³ Said goes on to demonstrate that the books about the Orient have determined the West's perception of it, that the West's discourse about the Orient is a hegemony of enormous proportions. Orientalism is, in fact, a striking example of the postmodern dictum that language structures reality, that the West's representation of the Orient becomes the Orient, that the West is not dealing with reality but with a representation of reality. Although we might argue that all language distorts because the signifier is not the signified, Said's point is that Orientalism is synonymous with the West's imperialism because it is based on a self-serving definition of Europe in relation to the rest of the globe. Moreover, it was knowledge of the Orient that created the Orient, the Oriental, and his world.

In view of the fact that Gide was one of many French writers to incorporate the Orient into his writings, the interesting question is whether *L'immoraliste*, either consciously or unconsciously, reflects the Western stereotypes that Said describes. Napoleon, Sylvestre de Sacy, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Nerval, Hugo, Renan, Flaubert, Gauthier, Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Lotti, among others, have a great deal to say about the Orient, and all of them, in one way or another, in their writings, reflect Western stereotypes of conquest, knowledge, control, proselytizing, fantasy, the femme fatale, and exotic sex.

According to Said, the Orient provoked a writer to his vision but very rarely guided it. Indeed, "the history of Orientalism has both an internal consistency and a highly articulated set of relationships to the dominant culture surrounding it" (O 22). Chateaubriand believed that "the Oriental Arab was 'civilized man fallen again into a savage state,'" and he advocated a redemptive Christian mission to revive a dead world (O 171-72). Lamartine believed that the Orient was "waiting anxiously for the shelter" of European occupation (O 179). Renan took it for granted that the Occidentals were superior to the Orientals (O 15). "In contrast to Nerval's negative vision of an emptied Orient," Flaubert's view was full and corporeal (O 184). Whereas Nerval sought for "the traces of his personal sentiments and dreams," Flaubert's most celebrated moments were with Kuchuk Hanem, a famous Egyptian dancer and courtesan, whose "learned sensuality, delicacy, and . . . mindless coarseness" were to flesh out the characters of Salammbô and Salomé (O 186-87). For all of these writers the Orient was an archive of information (O 41)

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Putnam, 1978) 3. Subsequent references to this work will appear after the abbreviation O.

and for some, such as Nerval and Flaubert, a place of déjà vu (O 180). The Orient gave them what they brought to it.

Although Gide differs markedly from his predecessors, his *Immoraliste* fits into two Orientalist categories: the accumulation of knowledge about the region and sexual freedom. Despite the philosophical veneer that he imposes on Michel's choices, it may be useful to look at his anarchic conduct in the light of these two categories, because, in due course, Michel's Orientalism reverses itself. He becomes the living embodiment of an Orientalism *à rebours*: instead of proselytizing for Western values, he espouses the immediate sensuality of the Orient and incorporates it into his life as he begins to subvert the order, logic, measure, and control of European ideology (or what it was alleged to be)—the very ideology that invented Orientalism. But I am getting ahead of myself. What are the characteristics that define Michel as an Orientalist?

A professional scholar by the age of twenty-five, Michel knows Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, and he is an expert on the cult of the Phrygians (373), the people who lived in Phrygia, an ancient region of central Asia Minor (now central Turkey) that was settled about 1200 B.C. It was later occupied by the Romans and most of it was assigned to the province of Asia. Despite Michel's background and training, however, when he goes to Tunisia, he does not, as many of his countrymen before him, from Chateaubriand to Huysmans, impose a ready-made vision of the Orient on that country, but succumbs, instead, to those sensuous elements of the Arab world that have become clichés in the Orientalist's lexicon, "qu'importait la pensée? je sentais extraordinairement" (392). He does not try to change the Orient, it changes him. He internalizes the alleged "weaknesses" of the Arab world (as defined by Orientalism) and uses them to subvert the core of Western ideology. His course at the *Collège de France* is on the Goths and Athalaric's rebellion against his mother, Amalasantha. What attracts Michel to Athalaric, is his revolt against his Latin education and the wisdom of Cassiodorus in favor of barbarism and debauchery. Michel, like Athalaric is also rejecting the civilizing elements of the Roman empire in favor of the vandalism and anarchy that led to the dark ages.

Earlier, while in Syracuse, on his way back to France, Michel rereads Theocritus as he contemplates the shepherds in the fields, and he imagines that they are the same ones he had loved in Biskra (398). We need to remember that the history of the pastoral begins with Theocritus, the Alexandrian Greek poet born in Syracuse (c. 270 B.C.). In this connection, it is interesting to note that Michel imposes the memory of the inhabitants of Biskra on the landscape of Syracuse, but it is an association that he now finds cumbersome. "Mon érudition qui s'éveillait à chaque pas m'encombrait, empêchant ma joie. . . J'en vins à fuire les ruines" (398).

He used to read Homer, but he has not read him since his departure from Biskra. He now admires the Arab people because "son art, il le vit, il le chante et le dissipe au jour le jour; il ne le fixe point et ne l'embaume en aucune oeuvre" (464). Clearly, Michel is devaluing Europe's culture and exalting the Orient. But Michel's admiration for the Arab people is not without mixed blessings: he trades the monuments of the past for spontaneity and immediate freedom, but, ironically, it is his sexual liberation that undermines his moral discipline.

Instead of judging Moktir's theft of Marceline's scissors, Michel is overcome with joy, and from that moment on Moktir becomes his favorite Arab boy (394-95). This is a lesson in dishonesty that Michel will use on his estate at La Morinière. In due course he not only questions all authority, he also divests himself of his belongings (La Morinière, Marceline, God, France) by rejecting the very idea of property. In Paris he renews contact with former colleagues, archeologists and philologists, "mais ne trouva à causer avec eux guère plus de plaisir et pas plus d'émotion qu'à feuilleter de bons dictionnaires d'histoire" (423). What Michel really wants is "life," not books or bookish people, and he will go to any lengths to find it. He abandons his wife periodically for the company of Arab boys, he rejects essentialism in favor of existential choices, and he embarks on a quest for absolute freedom. When he returns to France, the landscape and the values of North Africa are internalized as a home away from home. Indeed, the memory of place is the impetus that challenges marriage, religion, and tradition. A reverse exile lifts the veil of opportunity even as it foregrounds the differences between opposing ideologies.

The violence that attracted Michel to the Goths is also manifest in the behavior of the farmers at La Morinière, Michel's country estate. In the Heurtevant household the father sleeps with his daughter and he encourages his son's rape of a servant girl by holding her down. Michel questions Bute, one of his associates, about these events with the same pleasure he had displayed earlier in researching the Goths. "De ses récits [Bute's] sortait une trouble vapeur d'abîme qui déjà me montait à la tête et qu'inquiètement je humais" (446). While roaming his fields and his woods, Michel carries the memory of Africa with him, and when he hears one of the Heurtevant boys singing he says: "je ne puis dire l'effet que ce chant produisit sur moi; car je n'en avais entendu de pareil qu'en Afrique" (445). Africa has become a home away from home and, because of Michel's clandestine behavior, La Morinière now seems more decadent than Tunisia. His subversion of law and order on his estate not only tests the limits of the possible, it undermines the values of French social propriety. In these endeavors Michel also embraces the heavy, sensuous collusion of nature; so much so that, after one of the poaching episodes, he says, "je rentrais à travers champs, dans l'herbe lourde de rosée, ivre de nuit, de vie sauvage et d'anarchie, trempé, boueux, couvert de feuilles" (449).

Gide explores the opposition between the values of Europe and the values of the Orient. Western ideals based on the acquisition of knowledge, dominion over others, the exploitation of land and property, and the proselytizing for Christianity—this is Said's Orientalism—are undermined by Michel's actions because the West's values are perceived as inimical to his physical well-being. Michel survives physically (he is dying of tuberculosis) perhaps because he rejects dogmologies that are killing him. But the grand experiment that saves his life is also the cause of his wife's death. His two journeys into the Orient may mean life for him, but the second one is death for Marceline.

It is worth remembering that Orientalism coincides exactly with the colonial expansion of Western Europe in the nineteenth century, and that it was a movement of power, control, and exploitation. For France it began with Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and the subsequent occupation by later regimes of all of North Africa as well as the territories further south. There is an irony, therefore, in Gide's use of Arab values, as defined by Orientalism, to subvert an ideology that

was part and parcel of France's hegemony. After his immersion in Tunisia, Michel refuses all homegrown values, disciplines, and practices. He accepts the temptation of the East, a condition he does not fully understand and from which, at the end, he cries out for help, but only after the stereotype of the Orient is evoked as a place of permissive sexual practices. Meanwhile, Marceline is dying and, after her death, Michel continues to live in the present, from day to day, sleeping alternately with Ali or his sister. Michel's will has been undermined and he is now the prisoner of his senses.

Although Michel's cry for help seems to reverse the novel's statement of faith, *L'immoraliste* has, nonetheless, cleared the way for a definition of freedom that remains topical for artistic, philosophical, and cultural reasons. It is a novel that refuses closure because Michel's quest is both a triumph and a failure. It is a work in which the origins of being are endlessly deferred because his search for the blueprint of human nature uncovers nothing. Michel rejects the cultural hegemony of Orientalism, incorporating a life-style and a way of life that, for a century, hard-core Orientalists had been denouncing as inferior. Michel's new life and professional activities veil an Orientalism *à rebours*. He frees himself from the tyranny of European thought, but his dilemma is that he does not know how to transcend the tyranny of the senses.

Michel may have begun as a young Orientalist—a man of great, singular, and youthful accomplishment—but, ironically, he ends up a prisoner, a person immobilized by events he can no longer control, and he calls for help because he is unable to manage his freedom or his bondage. Europe's culture almost killed him, physically, but the mores he discovers in Biskra atrophy his moral being. Nonetheless, it is in Tunisia that Michel finds the strength and the courage to reject the values and encratic language that had been stifling him. But Michel is in limbo, the casualty of a dual exile: a man caught between two cultures and two affective states, unable to reconcile the mind and the body or Europe and the Orient. He has found freedom, but freeing oneself, he says, is nothing. The most difficult part is knowing what to do with it (372). Freedom has become an ontological state, and exile is experienced as an alienation from self. Michel's cry for help is thus a tacit acknowledgment of moral failure. The corollary to despondency is exile from happiness and from authenticity. As an Orientalist in exile, Michel provides a useful corrective to the stereotype despite, or perhaps because of, his flawed behavior.