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GIDE'S LETTERS TO GOSSE

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THE J. A. SYMINGTON Collection of the Rutgers Library contains thirty-eight letters in French which André Gide wrote to Edmund Gosse¹ between July 14, 1909 and January 16, 1927. Four by other persons were enclosed in Gide's letters: one from Jacques Copeau² to Gosse concerning the war in 1914; a formal announcement by the *Mercure de France* of a subscription for a portrait of Emile Verhaeren³ by Théo van Rysselberghe⁴ to be offered to the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris; a letter to Gide from Dr. Bonniot;⁵ and one from his wife, Madame Bonniot née Geneviève Mallarmé, concerning Swinburne's⁶ letters to Mallarmé.⁷ Most of Gide's letters were written at his wife's home in Cuverville,⁸ some in Paris,⁹ a few in London, two in Rome, five in Cambridge, England, one in Carnarvon, Wales, one in Bangui, French Equatorial Africa, one in the Alpes Maritimes, and one postal card, in Spain. This

¹ André Gide, 1869- . Sir Edmund William Gosse, 1849-1928.

² 1879- . French actor and director of the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier.

³ 1855-1916. Belgian poet, killed in a train accident.

⁴ 1862-1926. Belgian painter.

⁵ Husband of Madame Geneviève Bonniot, who was the daughter of Stéphane Mallarmé.

⁶ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1837-1909.

⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, 1842-1898.

⁸ Cuverville near Criquetot-L'Esneval, in the department of Seine Inférieure.

⁹ Villa Montmorency or 18 Avenue des Sycomores or 14 rue Claude Lorrain. During 1914-15 Gide lived with Théo van Rysselberghe at 44 rue Laugier and frequently wrote at the Foyer Franco-Belge located at 20 rue Royale and, later, 63 Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

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Mon cher Edmund Gosse

Quelle excellente lettre je reçois de vous, et combien profondément elle me touche!

Pourquoi j'ai écrit ce livre? - Parce que j'ai cru que je devais l'écrire.

Et que j'en attends? - Rien que de très faiblement pour moi (et pas seulement pour moi, hélas!) Et c'est là à peine que cette obligation morale fut bien impérative pour me faire passer outre; mais, vraiment, il n'est pas facile de ne laisser arrêter par la considération de cette peine et du danger. Je voulais que je ne ^{possérais} ~~posséderais~~ pas ^{rien} ~~rien~~ si j'avais gardé tout cela sur le cœur.

Cher ami, j'ai le message en français. Je ne puis prouver mon parti de ce camouflage conventionnel

C'est ce que je veux dire, un livre-épave de son grand destin et de son destin. L'âme de l'homme est un livre-épave.

LETTER OF ANDRÉ GIDE TO EDMUND GOSSE
JANUARY 16, 1927

correspondence is incomplete, because Gide makes references to letters which are not in the collection. Gosse travelled a great deal and may have kept only those he received in London. Moreover, during Gide's trip to Tchad and Cameroun, much of the mail was lost, as he stated in a letter after his return.

It is hard to tell whether the correspondence between Gosse and Gide began with this first letter of July 14, 1909. One might doubt it from the informal beginning of "Cher Monsieur Gosse," if one did not know that Gide used the "cher" form of address more freely with persons he had not actually met¹⁰ than the usual French politeness permits. What is certain is that Gide had read some of Gosse's critical studies and had addressed to him the only copy he sent to England of his *La Porte Etroite* (*Narrow is the Gate*) in 1909. Gosse wrote to Gide praising this work,¹¹ and it is that letter that Gide answered by this first and very enthusiastic letter of thanks. In it, Gide also stated what he thought was his present position in France and Germany and his possible future one in England. Apparently Gosse had invited Gide to come to England, for Gide said that he always had an affinity for that country but that it both attracted and frightened him. Gide concluded this first letter by asking Gosse to send him a copy of his *Father and Son*.

From then on the two writers sent each other books and articles, exchanged views on authors and publications as well as on their own works and each other's criticisms of them. In 1911 Gide arranged for Gosse to attend the meetings at Pontigny,¹² where they went together from Paris. This trip was repeated in subsequent years and was one way for Gide to know Gosse and to hear him read English poetry. Gide spent the Christmas of 1912 with Gosse and his wife in London, at which time he must have met Henry James.¹³ In 1913 the French Academy bestowed its honor on the author of *Father and Son* and in 1924 Gide became a member of the Royal Academy of Arts. According to the letters, Gosse was to a large extent responsible for

¹⁰ See, among others, Gide's letters to Francis Jammes published in the April 1948 number of "Biblio".

¹¹ Gosse had written an essay containing praise of *La Porte Etroite*. This essay was published with excellent additions (see Gide's letter of November 28, 1912) in Gosse's "Portraits & Sketches", 1909-1912.

¹² Pontigny, old town in the department of Yonne, France, where literary meetings are held every summer.

¹³ December 23, 1916.

Gide's election and Gide expresses his deep appreciation to him; but Gide not only appeared not to have known beforehand that Gosse's book was to receive the prize but felt so hurt at not having had the opportunity to be among the first to applaud Gosse that he put off these felicitations and congratulated his country for having given official recognition to the wise and beautiful friendship Gosse had always shown France.¹⁴

Except for this somewhat childish letter, as well as that of astonished indignation of December 30, 1926, concerning *Si le grain ne meurt*, (*If it die. . .*) and those of hurried preoccupation written at the Belgian refugee center in Paris in 1914-15 where Gide participated in the war effort for several months, the tone of Gide's letters to Gosse is one of great warmth, of admiration and affection, unaffected by months of silence and years of separation. Furthermore, Gide seldom neglected to send his best regards to Mrs. Gosse and to transmit those of his wife, of whom he speaks with unexpected devotion and feeling. The two friends breathed in an atmosphere of respect and understanding where the expression of opinions and feelings was easy and unhampered and where polite and cultured language furnished the nuances for the most delicate shadings.

Their relations, nevertheless, seem to have been limited to the realm of their art. Except for a few rare occasions, only personal matters or individuals that bore directly on some book, study, poem, publication, etc. were discussed in the letters. It was only, for example, because in 1909 Gide was reading Gosse's *Father and Son* very slowly that one learned that in his youth Gide has studied German rather than English being too discreet to want to understand the language which his parents spoke when they did not wish their children to know what they were saying; also, that Gide and his wife were reading the book together. By 1912, Gide had read Chaucer, Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; during a short exile in the Apennines, his only reading consisted of *Paradise Lost* and Gosse's *Critical Kit Kats*.¹⁵ In July 1915 Gide was ready to translate the last sonnets of Rupert Brooke¹⁶ into French, and in October, 1917, he was working on the translation of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, because Ida Rubinstein¹⁷ wanted to play the lead as soon as the war was over. A sentence concerning

¹⁴ January 8, 1914.

¹⁶ 1887-1915.

¹⁵ 1896.

¹⁷ Living French actress.

Marcel Schwob¹⁸ in Stevenson's correspondence¹⁹ made Gide smile at his own overloaded desk, and Copeau's temporary absence from the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier made him regret that Copeau could not produce one of Congreve's plays. Gide helped to make the necessary contacts for the translation and publication of Gosse's *Father and Son*, Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*, and Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, to mention only a few. Gide must have quickly acquired a rather good knowledge and understanding of the English language as well as of the literature and the people, since his quotations reveal his appreciation of nuances in speech, images, and feelings.

As a matter of fact, Gosse and Gide exchanged a few business services and favors. When in 1913 Gosse asked Gide to secure for publication Swinburne's letters to Mallarmé from the latter's daughter, Madame Bonniot, who was most hesitant and reluctant, Gide's persistence persuaded her to look for them; she finally found them in the cellar of a house where a recent flood had damaged many of them. Gide even engaged the assistance of Henri de Régner,²⁰ who, on that occasion, informed Gide that he had a very important letter which Swinburne wrote to Hérédia.²¹ Gide wanted to translate Swinburne's letters into French and arranged matters in such a way that Madame Bonniot would turn them over to him for transmittal to Gosse. Madame Bonniot, obeying her father's expressed desire not to have any of his correspondence published, inquired from Gosse through Gide whether he could obtain from whoever had them the letters which Mallarmé had written to Swinburne. Gide wanted Gosse to send these letters, should they be found, to Madame Bonniot through him, so that he could copy them, especially since they were not to be published!

The fewest letters discussing literary matters were exchanged between the fall of 1914 and the spring of 1916, when Gide participated in the work of war refugees at the Foyer Franco-Belge in Paris which gave aid to refugees from all the invaded provinces. It was a time- and energy-consuming job which left him few spare moments to himself. It seemed to Gide himself that he had lost his talent as

¹⁸ 1867-1905.

¹⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, 1850-1894. Letter to Marcel Schwob of February 8, 1889.

²⁰ 1864-1936.

²¹ José-Maria de Hérédia, 1839-1907. Father-in-law of H. de Régner.

a writer, for all his pen could still do was sign slips for billeting and subsistence allowance. Once in a while he did manage to see a copy of the *Edinburgh Review* if a friend brought one to him, but he did not see all of Gosse's translations even in the French journals because he lacked the time, energy, and occasion to read them at the Foyer. Nevertheless, he continued to be interested in English literature. He asked Gosse to inquire about the rights of translation of Rupert Brooke's poems and to give him some information about a "White Hall" (William Hale White)²² of whom he knew nothing, but whose *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance* he wished to translate for the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. He also complimented Gosse on some of his articles on Péguy²³ and on Pontigny, and he went to see the publisher Gallimard about Gosse's *Father and Son*.

During this period at the Foyer, Gide lived with his friend, the Belgian painter Théo van Rysselberghe, while his wife had her house of Cuverville filled with family, friends, guests, and refugees. It was at the home of the van Rysselberghes that Gide fully learned to regret the death of Rupert Brooke who had been a friend of the daughter of the house. The letters of these months give news of the war activities of some of Gide's friends and known personalities. When, for example, Jacques Copeau became a soldier in 1914, his wife and children went to live with Madame Gide in Cuverville. In 1916, Copeau returned to the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, where he exhausted himself directing and playing almost every evening on account of the insufficient number of actors in his small group. This troupe, nevertheless, was more successful than had been expected, and Copeau took it to Geneva to play *Barberine*, *La Femme tuée par la Douceur*, and *La Paix du Ménage*—a very satisfactory tour. While in Switzerland, Copeau took the necessary steps to have Jacques Rivière,²⁴ a prisoner since October 1914, transferred to France because of his poor health. Upon learning of these efforts, Rivière begged his friends to cease all requests, because he wanted to bear his cross to the end and would not forgive himself if he had lightened his burden in any way. Jean Schlumberger,²⁵ who enlisted in the artillery in 1914, was with Headquarters in Belfort in 1916, where he and Gide's brother-in-law, Marcel Drouin, had to read German newspapers and write a daily report on the situation in the

²² 1831-1913.

²⁴ Jacques Rivière, 1886-1925.

²³ 1873-1914.

²⁵ Jean Schlumberger, 1877-

interior or "carte des esprits" as Gide called it. Henri Ghéon,²⁶ the poet, a Major in the Medical Corps, left for Dunkirk in December 1914 but continued to write poems, the latest collection of which Gide praised in his letter of July 27, 1916, as ringing true, as really authentic because written behind the line of battle.

An attitude of Gide (the customary flowered grandiloquence of 1914-18) reaches a climax, on both the literary and sentimental levels, in this letter which strikes as odd those persons who, behind the front lines, have experienced the sober tone of the reserved heroism of World War II. Here Gide speaks the well-rounded and beautifully sounding sentences of his day, as did Anatole France, Courteline, and others. Earlier he had written "What price this war will give to all we cherish!"²⁷ Admiring young men who enlisted, like his nephew Dominique Drouin, he said that their "enthusiasm is real, profound, grave, and it is with all the sincerity of their hearts that they wish to offer themselves to danger and become impatient for not being able to go to the front lines immediately. . . . Likewise all our young soldiers of Cuverville, I mean, the children of the peasants from around here, are heroic. . . . The glory we prepare at Verdun is bloody. . . ."²⁸ After hearing a speech of Lloyd George, Gide said that "England and France are both really full of dignity and both, worthy of winning."²⁹ Gosse had, apparently, written several articles on the war and had spoken of its relation to the war of 1870; for Gide concluded thus: "The tap which in 1870 suddenly knocked us down, remained, in a manner of speaking, exterior to France. What is wonderful today is that the sound of the bugle of August the 2nd resounded in the very heart of the country."³⁰ The famous story of the seriously wounded soldier who insisted on standing when being decorated, even at the risk of his life, seemed absurd to Gide but also admirable.³¹ (Gide's articles and sentences in his *Journal* 1939-1942 do not have this assurance or eloquence.) Yet, as soon as Gide had recuperated a bit at Cuverville from his strenuous work at the Foyer and while the house was for a fortnight being shaken by a British cannonade in the distance, Gide began to write again but without thinking of publication: "One's head and heart are too much

²⁶ Henri Ghéon, 1875-1944.

²⁸ July 3, 1916.

³⁰ July 27, 1916.

²⁷ July 19, 1915.

²⁹ December 21, 1916.

³¹ February 6, 1916.

absorbed by the idea of war and by what one must call the anguish of hope." This on July 3, 1916!

As for the literary side of the war, Gide believed that authors, especially poets like Ghéon, who wrote behind the front were the ones whose works would eventually be found superior to those written in battle. He warned that wise criticism should later not try to assimilate the two.³²

Gide wrote³³ of his duties at the time of Verhaeren's death. Gide told Gosse that Verhaeren was very fond of Gosse and that he and Verhaeren had become quite friendly during Gide's stay at the van Rysselberghe's. Théo van Rysselberghe was ill in bed when the death occurred and Gide had the unpleasant duty of bringing the sad news to Verhaeren's wife and of attending her during the first days of her grief. Gide also made the necessary arrangements for the funeral and the burial at La Panne, Belgium. The ceremony had all the beauty and heroism worthy of Verhaeren; it moved Gide to quote Walter Pater in English: "It seemed as if the gods had given him a death which, for its swiftness and its opportunity, he might well have desired."³⁴

One other bit of biographical information which one gathers from the letters to Gosse concerns some trips Gide took during these years. In 1910 he sent a postal card from Spain; in April, 1913, he visited Rome with Henri Ghéon who had not been there before; the trip to Constantinople and Brousse in Turkey was put off in June, 1913, on account of the disturbances in the Balkans; but in December, 1914, Gide did manage to make a short trip to the Apennines.

Gide made several very short visits to London: July 1911, January 1912, Christmas 1912, August 1920. In 1918 he spent the four summer months in Cambridge where his nephew, Marc Allégret, had succeeded in matriculating. On none of these occasions did Gide write any personal impressions or state any reactions to the new environment. If Rome or London recalled anything to his mind or impressed his senses, his letters did not reveal what. Only the Old Vicarage near Cambridge brought him to mention Rupert Brooke who lived in it; the charm of the town and the friendliness of the people prevented him from finishing his book (*Si le grain ne meurt*), because he listened to the voices of the past.³⁵ It is understandable

³² July 27, 1916.

³³ December 21, 1916.

³⁴ Walter Pater: *The Renaissance*. "Winckelmann".

³⁵ July 31, 1918.

that the light, color, and weather of England may not have had a special appeal to Gide's sensuous nature; but one would expect—and particularly so after a book like *L'Immoraliste*—that the profusion of sound and color of French Equatorial Africa would make his whole being vibrate. Whether all his reactions and observations were to be reserved as the source of a new book or whether travel impressions were simply not a topic considered appropriate for discussion, at the beginning of his trip into Central Africa, while in Bangui, Gide wrote about literature to Gosse. The end of the journey, Cameroun, meant to him simply heat and fatigue. The only interesting comment about any of his trips concerns Tchad and, surprisingly, the people, not the landscape or individuals:

I went as far as Tchad; and I even crossed that awful lake. No one will ever tell the monotony without grandeur of this immense country, the shapelessness of the landscape; but the interest in human, social, moral questions etc. which arise at every step in front of you surpasses anything that I could expect and fully compensates for the disappointment which nature may cause you. I hope that some of it will be reflected in the account of this journey³⁶ which I expect to give soon.³⁷

It is most revealing and, perhaps, the strongest confirmation of the actual relations between Gosse and Gide—or at least Gide's relation to Gosse—to find that at a time and place where entirely new impressions, feelings, thoughts, images, colors, sounds dominated and absorbed Gide in Bangui, his Christmas and New Year's greetings to his far-off British friend were accompanied by one sentence which summed up their history:

The great distance which separates us (here I am almost in the center of Africa and, before long, I shall go even still farther inland) diminishes in no way the deep affection I still have for you and my great gratitude. At a time when hardly anyone gave me a thought, in France, you were good enough to take me seriously.³⁸ [Gide's underlining]

It reminds one of that exuberant first letter written sixteen years earlier.

From the very beginning Gosse had taken a certain ascendancy over Gide which the latter still acknowledged in 1925 and later. Their relations were almost exclusively literary. A certain congeniality

³⁶ "Return from Tchad", published in 1928.

³⁷ July 27, 1926.

³⁸ October 25, 1925.

permitted their friendship to grow warm and strong; but even these feelings were based on literary understanding mostly, as proved by this sentence of Gide who, when working on his *Si le grain ne meurt*, wrote to Gosse: "That is in some way my "Father and Son."³⁹ Their friendship deepened as they found an increasing number of authors, ideas, images, phrases, etc., the appreciation of which they shared with each other. Gosse chose the works of those English writers with whom Gide had a certain affinity, for none of those discussed ever met with Gide's disfavor. Gide frequently quoted, in English, those to whom Gosse had thus introduced him, and one has the impression that the sentence or phrase Gide quoted was just the one Gosse would have expected him to select, including some of Gosse's own works.

Sometimes, each evaluated the other one's opinion not only as the expression of his thought but also as that of a representative of his country. For example, Gosse's first judgment of *La Porte Etroite* was to Gide not only the opinion of an intelligent and sympathetic reader and critic but, particularly, that of an Englishman. Later on, when Gosse had made a translation of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, Gide seemed to have considered it his duty as a Frenchman to explain, as it were, La Rochefoucauld in France or La Rochefoucauld and France to an Englishman. Gide said that he enjoyed La Rochefoucauld a great deal and admired Gosse's translation, but, also, that the introductory pages showed how closed the English mind was to La Rochefoucauld's kind of psychological cynicism. Gide proceeded then to prove how the *Maximes* first helped to emancipate the French mind and later enslaved it by reducing the motives of human passion in the works of moralists and novelists to self-interest and egotism. According to Gide a psychological discovery could be made now only by doing the contrary of what La Rochefoucauld had done.⁴⁰

From the first letter in this correspondence it was learned that, before Gosse's essay on Gide, the latter was unknown in England, that his works were read immediately in Germany and were often translated into German before they came off the press in France, but that his compatriots bestowed very little favor and attention on him. They even became openly hostile to him at the publication of *Corydon* and *Si le grain ne meurt*.⁴¹ Gide was profoundly grateful to the man who first brought him before the eyes of the British

³⁹ October 24, 1917.

⁴⁰ July 31, 1918.

⁴¹ September 12, 1924. October 26, 1924.

public, who spoke of his work with a rare comprehension and competence, and who praised him very highly for the caliber of his writing, his quality as a writer.⁴² It gave Gide the encouragement he needed to write what he felt he must say. He wrote Gosse concerning his *Paludes*:

I am particularly happy that you liked this book; its tone and humor announce, to some extent, the novel which I am writing now,⁴³ which lets me hope that you will like it, too. And you would not believe, my dear friend, how much your approbation supports me and encourages me, how many times I have called on you when I felt worn out. . . . I have spent entire weeks during which my confidence failed me almost completely. All is well again; I have come close to the end—and my impatience to show it to you spurs me on.⁴⁴

Gide had sent Gosse the first part of his *Les Caves du Vatican* (*Lafcadio's Adventures*) and was delighted that Gosse had not been disappointed by it. He wrote:

How many times I thought of you as I wrote it: desiring, hoping, wanting that you may be pleased with it. Your praise inflates my pride but gives me real strength, too, for now I know [Gide's underlining] that my book is a success.⁴⁵

When working on *Si le grain ne meurt*, Gide needed to think not only of Gosse's personal encouragement but also of Gosse's work in order to find and keep enough confidence in himself to finish the book. As Gosse in *Father and Son* described his religious evolution, Gide felt the necessity for an even broader explanation:

I understood that I should never succeed better in explaining my position vis-a-vis certain religious and moral problems than by telling their story. Not the story of these problems, but the story of my position, if I may say so.⁴⁶

Before Gosse had a chance to read this book, he enjoyed Gide's *Incidences* and delighted the author by his praise; he also inquired as to the reason why Gide had not sent him a copy of *Corydon*. Gide, purposely, had not given a copy to anyone. He said he wrote it because a deplorable lack of understanding and tragic misunderstandings, which caused some people to undergo cruel suffering witnessed by Gide, forced him to do it.⁴⁷ Gide defined these misinterpretations more specifically a month later when he wrote a-propos of his election to the Royal Academy of Arts:

⁴² September 9, 1909.

⁴³ *Les Caves du Vatican* (*Lafcadio's Adventures*).

⁴⁴ November 28, 1912.

⁴⁵ January 8, 1914.

⁴⁶ October 24, 1917.

⁴⁷ September 12, 1924.

It is the compensation for the attacks of which I have been the object for some time: a party of neo-thomists gives me the figure of an anti-christ and points me out to the indignation of the nationalists. I take care not to answer otherwise than by quietly continuing my work.⁴⁸

Yet, Gide could not bring himself to believe that he was wrong in publishing *Si le grain ne meurt* when he did; he was even hopeful that he might have been right, because some of those who were most strongly opposed to it at first were beginning to change their opinion.⁴⁹ The book aroused both enthusiasm and indignation; Gide thought it deserved both.⁵⁰ What Gide had a great difficulty in understanding and what he did not know yet when this correspondence ended, was why, in spite of some specifically explained similarities with *Father and Son*, Gosse did not like the book, at least as much of it as he had read at the end of the year 1926. Gide, in answering Gosse's question why he had written *Si le grain ne meurt*, gave a testimonial of courage and of honesty which every writer must admire and to which all, even Gosse, must have subscribed.

Why I wrote this book? Because I believed that it was my duty to write it. . . . I felt that I could not die satisfied if I had kept all that on my chest.

Dear friend, I hate lies. I cannot take my share in this camouflage of conventions which automatically disguises the work of x, y, and z. I have written this book "to create a precedent," to give an example of frankness, to enlighten some and reassure others, to force public opinion to take into account what people do not know or pretend not to know—to the great loss of psychology, morale, art,—and society.

I have written this book because I prefer being hated to being loved for what I am not.⁵¹

And Gide ended his letter—and this correspondence—by showing that all he had just said was but another proof of the high esteem in which he held Gosse and the profound friendship he felt for him.

⁴⁸ October 26, 1924.

⁵⁰ December 30, 1926.

⁴⁹ December 22, 1926.

⁵¹ January 16, 1927.