ANDRÉ GIDE *Two Legends:* *ŒDIPUS and* THESEUS

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OOK

ANDRÉ GIDE

Two Legends

Oedipus

AND

Theseus

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

John Russell

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A Note on Œdipus and Theseus

by John Russell

André Gide was always fascinated by the history and mythology of the ancient world, which furnished him throughout his career with a vast repertory of symbolic events—the prototypes, in short, of many of those which have most affected us in the last fifty years. Herodotus and the Bible served him, at the turn of the century, in the creation of Saul and Le Roi Candaule; Prometheus is not only the hero of one of his most original works, but an ever present image of hardihood; and even his reflections on the Soviet Union are prefaced with a long allusion to Demeter. The two works in this present volume, though superficially incongruous (the one is a play, dating from 1930, and the other a philosophical *nouvelle,* written a dozen years later), are linked by a common preoccupation with the myth of Œdipus and the possibility of its reinterpretation in modern terms.

Œdipus is mercifully remote from those modern adaptations in which the text lumbers, for good or ill, in the tracks of Sophocles until eventually the admired actor of the day can be led, bleeding and ululant, from the stage. In Gide's play human dignity puts the horrors in their place; and for the spectator its appeal is rather to the intelligence than to any variety of primitive astonishment. It is basically a stringent intellectual debate; as in the masterpieces of

Poussin (a painter whom Gide particularly admired) the realities of physical violence are subordinated to the grand, overmastering instincts of order and design. The Œdipus whom Gide evokes is not the Œdipus of Freudian legend. To this Œdipus the disasters of his family history are merely incidental to a greater misfortune—the failure, as it seems, of his ambition to make Man independent of the gods. It is this theme that recurs in *Theseus*; and it was at André Gide's suggestion that the two compositions were brought together.

Theseus was the last of Gide's works, but it was one that had been long projected. For more than thirty years the idea had possessed him, from time to time, of committing to paper a new manipulation of this ancient legend. Other images of Theseus reverberate, as is natural, within this new version. The Theseus of Plutarch is here, even down to the feathery branches of asparagus among which the beardless hero carried out the first of his summary but appreciative sexual experiments. The Theseus of Racine is here, forever aghast at the murderous favors accorded to him by the gods. But Gide's Theseus is a different, more constructive character. He discourses to us in the cloudless evening of his life, with the motiveless lechery of his early manhood quite laid aside, and the more disreputable episodes (so carefully husbanded by Plutarch) discounted as fables. Nor do we see him reduced, like the Theseus of Racine, to the point at which an anonymous exile alone offers the possibility of requital. It is rather for Œdipus to propose this point of view, in the dialogue that closes the book. This Theseus eventually surmounts his private griefs, and sets himself to found a great city, governed by an

aristocracy of the intellect. It is as an old and lonely man that we leave him, but one secure in his glory; and these last pages resume the dialogue between Christian and non-Christian laws that has always been, for Gide, at once brake and accelerator.

One can distinguish many others among the elements that Gide metamorphosed for our enjoyment. The full-scale evocation of ancient Crete owes something to Flaubert, something to Sir Arthur Evans; but the essentials of tone and pace, the golden sensuality and the pondered detail, are Gide's alone. And what concept could be more Gidian than that of the ordeal in the labyrinth—an ordeal, not of endurance, but of pleasure? In the Minotaur himself, that flower-struck beauty, lulled into hebetude by the delights of his surroundings, we glimpse the Sudanese Negroes whom Gide had watched in Tunis, more than sixty years ago, stuffing flowers into their nostrils.

Present and past are mingled, moreover, in the construction of Theseus himself. Pre-Roman and post-Renaissance traits have coalesced in this egregious hero. Wraith-like, other admirations of Gide's—not to speak of Gide himself—compose part of Theseus; nor can all these affinities be passed on to the English reader, since some of them may be descried only through verbal parallels in the original text. When Theseus says: *"Je n'ai jamais aimé la demeure, fût-ce au sein des délices,"* it is possible to recall that Gide has written of his old friend Paul Valéry that *"Fût-ce dans les delices, il ne lui plaisait pas d'attarder."*

Valéry had always symbolized, for Gide, an ideal, undistractible vigor; and Theseus, too, is endowed with the same grand individualism. Theseus at times is not so much man as a committee, with Gide at its

head. When Theseus forswears private enjoyments and dedicates himself to the salvation of Athens, he remarks: *"il ne s'agissait plus de conquérir, mais de regner."* One cannot but remember the lines from *Bérénice* which Gide quoted in 1941 in order to show that Racine did sometimes allow higher interests to overrule the claims of love. Theseus here echoes Titus:

Je sens bien que sans vous je ne saurais plus vivre.
Mais il ne s'agit plus de vivre, il faut regner.

Olympian Goethe takes his place on the committee, beside Valéry and beside Racine's Titus. For whereas, in politics, Theseus pursues a modified Stalinism, and he has, in the life of the senses, the uninhibited command of enjoyment which Gide tried to transplant from the Tunis of 1894 in the western Europe of our own epoch, he also derives, in religion and in personal morality, from the Goethe whom Gide pictured in his preface to the Pléiade edition of Goethe's plays. Even his motto, *"Passez outre,"* which clangs like a bell-buoy throughout the story, is attributed also to Goethe. Theseus, as much as Goethe, valued love as a liberating force; and, like him, he knew when to have done with it. Nor can one fail to detect the Goethean affirmations that Theseus opposes to the mysticism of the transfigured Œdipus. There Theseus makes, on Gide's behalf, an act of confidence. The story of Theseus, once begun, took on a panoramic aspect, as if Gide were out to display every resource of art and language, and to rediscover his own spiritual history in the story of the founder of Athens. No palpable city bears witness to Gide's own long effort; but he passed on his conviction that man has not yet said his last word; in his last years he gath-

ered up the ends of a lifetime of work; his language took on a definitive grandeur; and it became only just to acclaim him, as he acclaimed Goethe, as "the finest example, at once grave and smiling, of what man can wrest from himself without the help of Grace."

I should like to express my gratitude to Madame Simon Bussy, who, with signal generosity, has allowed me to profit by her unique experience and authority as translator of Gide.

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ACT I

Many things are admirable;
but none more admirable than man.
SOPHOCLES:
CHORUS FROM ANTIGONE

ŒDIPUS: Here I am, all present and complete in this instant of everlasting time; like someone who might come down to the front of the stage and say:

I am Œdipus. Forty years old, and for twenty years a king. With my own strong arm I have pulled myself up to the highest point of happiness. A waif and a foundling, without papers or citizenship, I am glad above all that I owe nothing to anyone but myself. Happiness was not given to me; I conquered it. That way complacency lurks; and to guard against it I wondered at first if my case was not one of predestination. Fearful of that giddying pride which has unsteadied certain leaders—and they not the least famous— But there you are, Œdipus, off again on those overlong phrases that you don't always know how to finish. Just say simply what you have to say, and don't go in for that inflated manner

which you claim to have cut out of your life. Keep things simple and they'll turn out all right. Be simple yourself: direct as an arrow—straight to the target. . . . That brings me back to what I was saying just now: Yes, if I sometimes manage to think that I have been launched on my way by the gods, I do it to redouble my own modesty and to refer back to them the credit for my destiny. For in my particular case it's rather difficult not to get a little puffed-up about oneself. I escape it by creating above me a holy power to which, whether I like it or not, I am subject. Who would not gladly bow down to such a power, if it led him to where I now am? A god is guiding you, Œdipus, and there aren't two like you. That's what I tell myself on Sundays and holidays. The rest of the week I've no time to think about it. Besides, what would be the use? I'm no good at reasoning; logic's not my strong point; I proceed by intuition. Some people, whenever they get mixed up in the traffic, keep saying to themselves: "Should I give way? Have I the right to overtake?" For my part, I always behave as if a god were telling me what to do.

(*The Chorus, divided into two groups, comes downstage, to right and left of Œdipus.*)

BOTH CHORUSES: We, the Chorus, whose particular function in this place is to represent the opinion of the majority, declare ourselves surprised and grieved by the profession of so aggressive an individualism. The views that Œdipus has disclosed are intolerable in other people—unless they are disguised.

Of course it is a good thing to put the gods on one's side. But the surest way is to be on the side of the priests. Œdipus would do well to consult Tiresias; he's the man who's really got the gods in hand. Under pretense of serving our interest, Œdipus runs the risk of turning them against us, and there's no doubt that it is to him that we owe the evils which are overwhelming us at this moment. (*In a lower voice*) We shall try, with inexpensive sacrifices and well-directed prayers, to earn their indulgence; and, by dissociating ourselves from our king, to direct against him alone the chastisement that his pride deserves.

RIGHT-HAND CHORUS (*to Œdipus*): That you yourself are happy, no one would deny, though you do say it too often. But we are not happy, we, your people, O Œdipus; but we, your people—ah, no, we are not happy. We should prefer to hide it from you; but the action of this drama could not proceed unless we give you a most lamentable piece of news. The plague—since we must give it its real name—continues to bring mourning to Thebes. Your family has so far been spared; but it is seemly that a king should interest himself in his people's misfortunes, even where these do not affect him directly.

LEFT-HAND CHORUS: Besides, we can't help thinking that your happiness and our unhappiness are linked in some mystical way; at least, that is what Tiresias' teaching has allowed us to glimpse. It is good that we should get this point quite straight. Apollo must give us the facts. You yourself have been good enough to dispatch the excellent

Creon, your brother-in-law, to the sanctuary, and he will soon be here to give us the oracle's much-awaited answer.

ŒDIPUS: Here he is, just back at this very moment. (*Enter Creon. To Creon*)
Well?

CREON: Wouldn't it be better if I spoke to you alone?

ŒDIPUS: Why? You know I despise all forms of subterfuge. You shall therefore say everything in front of everyone. I invite, I command you to do so. If anything can remedy the evils of my people, they as much as I have the right to know it. Only thus can they help me to put things right. What did the oracle say?

CREON: Just what I expected: something is rotten in the kingdom.

ŒDIPUS: Stop. The people are not enough. Your sister Jocasta and our four children must also be present.

CREON: One moment. I approve of your summoning Jocasta. You know that I am a man of the liveliest family feeling. Besides, she may give us valuable advice. But the children seem to me very young to take part in the discussion.

ŒDIPUS: Antigone is already no longer a child. Eteocles and Polynices are what I was at their age: reckless, quick to act, and anything but stupid. It is a good thing that they should know something of anxiety. As for Ismene, she won't understand.

(*Enter Jocasta and Œdipus' four children*)

ŒDIPUS (*to Jocasta*): Your brother is just back from Pytho. I wanted you all to be here with me to

hear the god's answer. Come on, Creon, tell us now: what did the oracle say?

CREON: That the wrath of God would never be turned away from Thebes until Laius, the late king, had been avenged.

ŒDIPUS: Avenged of what?

CREON: Surely you know that the man whose place you have taken in my sister Jocasta's bed, and on the throne of Thebes, died at the hand of an assassin?

ŒDIPUS: Yes, I know—but was the culprit not punished?

CREON: The police could never lay hands on him. In fact, we must even admit that they never looked very hard.

ŒDIPUS (*to Jocasta*): You never told me—

JOCASTA: Every time I wanted to tell you, my dear, you interrupted me. "No, don't talk of the past," you burst out, "I don't want to know anything about it. A golden age has begun. All things are made anew. . . ."

CREON: The word "justice" was turned on your lips to "amnesty."

ŒDIPUS: If I knew the swine who—

JOCASTA: Calm yourself, my dear. It's ancient history. Why go back to the past?

ŒDIPUS: I won't keep calm. I only wish I had known it sooner. Damnation, I'll not rest till I find the culprit. I'll hunt him down, no matter where he's hiding. He'll not escape me—that I swear. How long ago did all this happen?

JOCASTA: I had been six months a widow when you succeeded Laius. That was twenty years ago.

ŒDIPUS: Twenty years of happiness—

TIRESIAS: —which in the sight of God are as one day. (*Tiresias, blind, dressed as a friar, has come in unnoticed, accompanied by Antigone and Ismene.*)

ŒDIPUS: God, what a bore that man is! Forever meddling in other people's business. Who asked you to come?

JOCASTA (*to Œdipus*): My dear, you shouldn't speak so before the children. It isn't wise to diminish the authority of the man whom we have chosen to be their tutor, and who has to go with them everywhere. (*To Tiresias*) You were saying—?

TIRESIAS: I do not wish to vex the king.

ŒDIPUS: It is not what people say that vexes me, but what they think and don't say. Speak.

TIRESIAS: Alone, and man to man, Œdipus, we will speak of your happiness—of what you call happiness. But for the present we must discuss the unhappiness of the people. The people are suffering, Œdipus, and their king cannot but know it. Between the prosperity of the few and the indigence of the majority, God weaves a mysterious thread. The name of God, Œdipus, is often on your lips; I don't blame you for that—far from it—but for seeking to make God your assentor instead of your judge, and for feeling no awe in His presence.

ŒDIPUS: I have never been what is called a funk.

TIRESIAS: The more valiant a leader may be before men, the more pleasing is his submissiveness to God.

ŒDIPUS: Had I felt awe in the presence of the Sphinx,