

EXOTIC AFRICA OR THE LAND OF THE INITIATING TRAVEL IN GIDE'S WORK

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Abstract: Africa was for Gide a mysterious country, his hope to achieve the perfect harmony of senses and spirit, like Eliade's India. Apparently egotist and narcissist, Gide recognizes the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa not as elements of the landscape, but as beings suffering and dreaming. Continuing the work of his literary ancestor Montaigne, he opens the way for the literature of exoticism travelling to find a meaning in life, to grasp the imperceptible. During his journeys, he hardly admits that the passage of time and death may be present in Africa, land that is the source of the desire to live. Gide's voyages to Africa, especially to Congo and Chad help the author to discover unknown, virgin territories, full of philosophical meaning. The voyage to Africa corresponds to the author's moral dilemmas. The anxiety related to the obsession with death felt by the Western man finds its echo in his trips to Africa that become cathartic due to the exotic land.

Key-words: initiation, travel, exotic, Western imagination, discovery

André Gide was a keen observer of many areas: religion, politics, sexuality, literature. He was involved in many battles: against colonialism, communism, in denouncing Stalin, in recognition of homosexuality, against taboos and spirit constraints. Africa was for him a mysterious country, his hope to achieve the perfect harmony of senses and spirit, like Eliade's India. Gide recognizes the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa not as elements of the landscape, but as beings suffering and dreaming.

Gide travels in order to give a meaning to his own life, to seize the unseizable, to discover himself through a process of sensual initiation. For Gide as for Maupassant or Baudelaire the travel is like a kind of door through which they try to escape in order to penetrate the unexplored reality, which seems to be like a dream. Later, in the Romanian literature, Eliade will live the same experience of exotic freedom. The charm of the African realm corresponds to Gide's desire to be different from others. In Africa, Gide discovers the essence of his spirit which was dormant and unexpressed, mostly because of his education. Also, in Africa, these latent feelings and desires will be realized: Gide experiences a kind of euphoria which can be called "resurrection".

A keen observer of Gide's literature concerning Africa can distinguish two kinds of approach: one of the fictional writer and one of the official traveler/journalist, that is the description of Africa is presented to the eyes of the reader first from the point of view of Gide's imagination, through the novel *l'Immoraliste* and after that at a distance of 25 years he manages due to an official mission given by Léon Perrier, Minister of the Colonies to paint a very realistic literary canvas of the various regions of a continent which had been fascinating the Western literary world even from the nineteenth century.

So, Gide's African initiation will firstly be experienced through his mind under an idealized form illustrating "a common Parisian imagination of an exotic primitive culture" (Phyllis Clark, *Gide's Africa*), but secondly his travelogues *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* will slowly and painfully reveal the cruel reality that the author had met during his voyage, obviously antithetic to his great expectations.

This article will focus on the difference between Michel's initiation which we could also name a revelation of the self in the novel *L'Immoraliste*, and an inner self which cannot escape to the Western prejudices, maybe unaware of his appreciations concerning the African people. The common point of both the perspectives is the high desire of the characters fictional or not, to forget the French society and its rules and to discover a world just through senses.

The approach of the African experience or initiation will be analyzed diachronically that is, beginning with the novel *l'Immoraliste* which was written before the two travelling journals: *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*.

In the novel Michel leaves to Africa for a honeymoon travel starting with Tunis, so with the North or White Africa. Michel's attitude towards the land he was discovering is even from the beginning arrogant, showing a certain disappointment even from the first day, because he is

practically unable to resist the temptation of filtering this raw civilization through his philological education. But his senses defeat his wish of decoding and he begins to realize that he is in front of a new cultural context, totally opposite to the European one, but propitious to a new system of values. Even from the beginning of the novel Michel turns ill and his disease works according Phyllis Clark like “an allegorical embodiment of his moral quandary in the narrative.” (Phyllis Clark, *Gide's Africa*). So, the disease is a symbol of his inner trouble and an attempt to resurrection, trying to acquire a new set of values and principles, without rules.

Michel's spiritual metamorphosis starts when he meets an Arab boy, Bachir, paradoxically due to his wife. Why paradoxically? Well, because this contact will bring up his homosexual side too, the reader being obviously stricken by the erotic connotations of the boy's portrait: “Je t'amène un ami, dit-elle ; et je vois entrer derrière elle un petit Arabe au teint brun. Il s'appelle Bachir, a de grands yeux silencieux qui me regardent. Je suis plutôt un peu gêné, et cette gêne déjà me fatigue; [...] Ses pieds sont nus ses chevilles sont charmantes, et les attaches de ses poignets. [...] Ses cheveux sont rasés à la manière arabe ; il porte une pauvre chéchia qui n'a qu'un trou a la place du glant. La gandourah, un peu tombée, découvre sa mignonne épaule. J'ai le besoin de la toucher. Je me penche ; il se retourne et me sourit. Je fais signe qu'il doit me passer son sifflet, le prends et feins de l'admirer beaucoup.” (André Gide, *l'Immoraliste*)

Bachir as depicted by Michel with erotic sensual connotations represents the image of the Self which Michel seeks in Africa. So, in fact, it is the projection of the unknown, undiscovered and buried Self under the constraints of his philological education. The entire novel is a dichotomy between the civilized conception about life and the barbarian people with whom Michel enters in contact. This parallel between the worlds is best illustrated by the differences of the two characters who represent these ways of living: Michel who stands for the mythological Apollo, for the reasonable man governed by his intellectual and laws while the little Bachir is the nietzschenian boy of the Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit, the authentic spirit but also the sensual and emotional side of the man, antagonistic to Michel, he wears the name of the antic Latin god Bacchus, god of wine, and physical pleasures. Bachir is submitted to a process of dehumanization, the relationship between him and Michel turning into that of the hunter vs. the hunted. The process of initiation turns to be equivalent to “a quest for liberation” according to Ben Stoltzfus, “from religious and social constraints” (Ben Stoltzfus, *Gide's Immoraliste: Orientalism Against the Grain*).

Michel's initiation is completely different from that of Wilhelm Meister, Goethe's character, who was a young man in search of knowledge and discovery of the world, because Michel is an erudite, he can understand Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic and he is also an expert of the Phrygians' cult. So, his initiation is realized at a sensorial level: "qu'importait la pensée? Je sentais extraordinairement." (André Gide, *l'Immoraliste*) Michel rejects the company of civilized men, the "bookish people" to discover his self within the eyes of the African boys.

Africa is for Michel a virgin land of freedom, of redemption, of physical well-being, which inverts all his Western values. The antidote for Michel's illness is discovered in a place which lacks of rules, but whose primitiveness offers him a resurrection, the character's blood symbol of fatigue and disease being opposite to Bachir's who embodies a healthy African environment. Little by little Michel turns into the prisoner of his own senses. The paradox is that he manages to free himself from the chain of the European values and traditional principles, especially that of property jumping in a kind of tyranny, submission of his own senses. Michel may have begun as a young Orientalist, but, ironically, he becomes 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. After being almost killed by Europe's culture, physically, the mores he discovers in Biskra atrophy his moral being. "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." (Ben Stoltzfus, *Gide's Immoraliste: Orientalism Against the Grain*). The part that really counts is what he has going to do with his freedom.

Michel is charmed by a world which can be understood only by making appeal to a raw way of thinking. In this particular environment Michel develops his homosexual senses, his sexual freedom, although "an explicit defense of homosexuality never takes [a] center stage" (Phyllis Clark, *Gide's Africa*) and this attitude towards the individual's sexual freedom reveals a criticism against his society and its set of rules and values. After discovering this land, stereotypes of Western imperialism lose their significance and Michel's image about the Oriental world reverses itself. Arriving home Michel remembers all the African fields, chants and does not feel La Morinière as home, because the French social property lacks of importance after his voyage. Michel's representation of the African landscape is practically a projection of his state of

mind. When he feels stronger he makes joyful observations concerning the weather: “Cette terre africaine, dont je ne connaissais pas l'attente, submergée durant de longs jours, à présent s'éveillait de l'hiver, ivre d'eau, éclatant de sèves nouvelles ; elle riait d'un printemps forcené dont je sentais le retentissement et comme le double en moi-même.”

In his descriptions about the African land, Michel reveals his own emotions and psychological states, so his vigor and exuberance reflect in the afternoon description of the African countryside while his primitive instincts are depicted in terms of animal instincts. The African land / la terre africaine becomes a malleable substance in hands of Michel's dynamic representation.

Gide explores the topos of voyage as Bildungsroman because the main character deals with an inner and an outer accomplishment. Jocelyn Van Tuyl explains in *Figurations du voyage dans El Hadj* that the two of these itineraries do not progress lineary. She also adds: “Michel est obsédé par la poursuite de la quête de son authentique être, et ce sont ces errances psychologiques et géographiques qui génèrent l'intrigue du récit.”

Opposite to Michel's experience we can situate the writer's travel to Congo. Relieved by the idea of quitting Paris he feels joy thinking that finally he will discover the black Africa, he has just imagined through his fiction. He sees in his voyage a certain fatality as all the important moments of his life : “une sorte de fatalité inéluctable - comme tous les événements importants de ma vie. Et j'en viens à presque oublier que ce n'est là qu'un „projet de jeunesse réalisé dans l'âge mûr“; ce voyage au Congo, je n'avais pas vingt ans que déjà je me promettais de le faire.” (André Gide, *Voyage au Congo suivi de Le retour du Tchad. Carnets de route*). Even from the beginning of the travel, the expedition is charged with a particular significance like any other limit experience, because it seems to be full of unknown and unpredictable. Arriving in Dakar on 26th of July, he notes on 10th of August: “Un absurde contretemps m'empêche, en passant à Bôma (Congo belge), d'aller présenter mes respects au Gouverneur. Je n'ai pas encore bien compris que, chargé de mission, je représente, je suis dès à présent un personnage officiel.” (André Gide, *Voyage au Congo suivi de Le retour du Tchad. Carnets de route*). A couple of days later, at Brazzaville, he writes: „Je prends ces notes trop „pour moi“, and later, as being discouraged by the amplitude of the task and like an excuse : „trop neuf dans le pays“.

The tone of his travelogue is that of a bitter disappointment and of frustration from the moment he sets foot on African soil. Gide's perception and representation of various landscapes

provide the best illustration of his frustration. In fact, in *Voyage au Congo* he shows an ironic dissatisfaction because his literary imagination, nourished for some twenty years with mythical visions of Africa, is confronted with an unanticipated reality. The author expected to find an aesthetic spectacle of primitive exoticism, a contemporary vision of Africa which had been a source of inspiration for avant-gardes in Paris, for example Picasso's Africanist epiphany in 1907. The exotic paradise he expected to find is symbolized only by an azure sky.

This time, it is the writer who is the subject of an initiating process in the African culture, starting from an official mission. Gide's adventure in the Congo was intended to be a face to face interaction with primitive people, but after a few weeks, it changed into a humanitarian investigation. The traveler is horrified by the way the concessionary companies treat the natives considering it as an injustice achieved through incredibly savage methods. The "compulsory service" is for Gide a euphemism for a new slavery because the natives are forced to collect rubber. He listens to the complaints of the villagers and his observations dictate his conduct. He thinks now that his mission is to intervene and approach the French authorities to help this exploited people and redress their unjust treatment. During his voyage, Gide observes how brutally women are controlled by the militiamen while repairing the road along which Gide and his escort are travelling. He names these women as poor human cattle and he is terrified by the picture which reveals in front of his eyes, women breastfeeding while working. Progressively, Gide becomes aware of the reality of the hell in which these natives are living because of some Administrators and the concessionary companies. His mission takes contour now because he understands why he was there and he decides that he has to draw the attention of the French government to the odious behavior of the concessionary companies in order to put a stop to it. On his return to France, Gide will not be at peace with himself until he has published his books and in *la Revue de Paris* of 15 October 1927, an article on the distress of the inhabitants of Equatorial Africa.

At the age of fifty-six Gide is not going to undertake an initiating voyage towards personal fulfillment, on the contrary he seeks an achievement of his knowledge concerning the African mysticism. A desire to escape, a self - renewal and his admiration for Conrad determine the French writer to leave for a voyage from which Paul Claudel never expected him to return. Unlike Conrad he decides not to write fiction, but to express all his impressions through notes, letters or documents all of them under the form of a journal.

Through his notes Gide reveals himself, apparently, as an ordinary tourist with a position of pure exteriority, but under the image of a disinterested trip is hidden an obsession with Africa, an earlier project which took the name of *Amyntas*. So, being supported by friends, by Roger Martin du Gard and the Ministère des Colonies he falls into the voyage as an European observer, considering his position as a given and having as model La Fontaine whose fables he rereads while shipping along the Western Coast of Africa. “The classic dichotomy of mind and heart, sense and sensibility, underlines the binary nature of the logic Gide attempts to impose on his experience in Africa” (Marja Warehime, *Exploring Connections and Rediscovering Difference: Gide au Congo*). He confronts with realities totally different: on a hand the raw beauty of the landscape and people and on the other hand the illness, famine and exploitation which are sieved through his Western canons of value, Gide reading all his trip Conrad, Walter Scott, Molière, Goethe, Corneille, Racine. Because of his previous education Gide is confronted to the spectacle that the African territory delivers to a new traveler, unable to describe it. But, using the Cartesian method, he manages to draw in his journal aspects of the nature, but in front of the human complexity his powers of description fail him: “Ce que je ne puis peindre, c’est la beauté des regards de ces indigènes, l’intonation émue de leur voix, la réserve et la dignité de leur maintien, la noble élégance de leurs gestes. Auprès de ces noirs, combien de blancs ont l’air de goujats. Et quelle gravité triste et souriante dans leurs remerciements et leurs adieux, quelle reconnaissance désespérée envers celui qui veut bien, enfin, considérer leur plainte.” (André Gide, *Voyage au Congo suivi de Le retour du Tchad. Carnets de route*)

The unfamiliar African culture is described using familiar elements, Gide trying to make according Marja Warehime, some “linkages” between the foreign reality and his cultural values. Gide tries through a system of comparisons and associations of elements to discover and to explain himself a new world having as a starting point familiar terms. The danger was that he could have reduced Africa to a poor imitation of Europe. But the unknown and the strangeness of that “fantastic land” start Gide’s initiation process in discovering and dealing with a world which lacked of dimensions both in length and time: for example he couldn’t measure the distances between villages, his watch broke down, and later on he also loses his glasses being unable to distinguish clearly. As a man who cannot see properly he had to develop his other senses to perceive the environment. From this moment Gide’s has no more standard comparison values everything becoming unclear and the African territory gives him the impression of monotony.

Only the African music with rich harmonies and polyphonic effects seem to revitalize his perceptions, but he cannot distinguish properly the notes.

The cultural initiation, which Gide underwent, helped him to understand his limits as an observer and to penetrate the sense of the notion “differentiation”. Gide, in search of private revelations, was led by his African experience to the public and political attention, his trip metamorphosing his career.

In conclusion, if in *l'Immoraliste* Gide thematizes Michel's conscious attempt to free himself from the constraints of his Western European bourgeois education, *Voyage au Congo* shows the reader that Gide's African fantasies nourished before setting sail for Africa were brutally disrupted by the colonial reality he found in the Congo. Gide's location in French culture is defined by his affirmation of moral principles and cultural values in *Voyage au Congo*, which are almost the exact opposite of the cultural comparisons the narrator of *l'Immoraliste* imagines. Reading these two texts in juxtaposition illustrates how many prejudices of Africa in Western imaginations were born of an adversity towards modern European culture during the early part of the twentieth century, shaped mainly by Western desires. “Finally, a comparison of these two texts reveals how a redemptive drive motivated Western imaginations of Africa which were unconsciously anchored in a colonialist conceptual framework that defined and limited Gide's cultural perspective in his representations of Africa as well as his intervention on the colonized's behalf” (Clark Phyllis, *Gide's Africa*).

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