

Authority, Paternity and Currency in André Gide's "Les faux-monnayeurs"

Author(s): Robert K. Martin

Source: *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer, 1991), pp. 10-16

Published by: Modern Language Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195084>

Accessed: 27-04-2016 09:42 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Modern Language Studies* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Modern Language Studies*

## Authority, Paternity and Currency in André Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs*

Robert K. Martin

If homosexuality is not exactly identical with modernism, it certainly seems to be easily at home there. Anyone's list of the great figures of modernist fiction—James, Proust, Mann, Gide, Woolf, Stein, Barnes—is bound to look like a list of the great homosexual artists of the modern period. Of course one could see this closeness as simply the result of an historical phenomenon, the apparent emergence of self-conscious homosexuality as an identity in the latter part of the 19th century. But to do so would be to see history itself as natural, rather than as the result of shifts in the construction of meaning. I would therefore like to suggest that we consider instead the correlation between modernism and homosexuality and inquire whether the textual and the sexual practice and theory may not arise out of a similar set of circumstances, may not indeed, write the same thing in a different script.

One mode of entry to the problem may be through the examination of the author most likely to be cited as the exception to the frequent overlapping of modernism and homosexuality—James Joyce.<sup>1</sup> Joyce does of course deal with homosexuality in many of his works, where it remains shadowy, threatening, and reactionary. In *Ulysses* the father's search for his "son" (both the "real" son Rudy and the "symbolic" son Stephen) requires his passage through an underground where the sexes are reversed and he is anally penetrated by Bello. Although this experience is one that ultimately leads to the reassertion of conventional gender roles, as Sandra Gilbert has argued, it demonstrates the fundamental relationship between modernism and sexuality, and the special insistence on fatherhood as a theme in the works of male modernists. Over and over again in these works it is *not* being a father that is central, as fatherhood itself is denaturalized, its fictive quality insisted upon (here Freud must be included as one of the great modernist writers). Even in the case of Joyce, where there is an attempt to recuperate wife and family, albeit in radically altered form, there is a sense of connection, a pattern of metonymy between a variety of once-fixed verities that have been challenged beyond recall.

The theme of paternity plays a crucial role for male modernists because of a larger crisis of authority. The challenge to the father/state/phallus is also a challenge to the function of literature as representation/reproduction. Writing, *écriture*, opposes to the fatherhood of the realist text an endless replication of meaning, a sustained illegitimacy/infidelity. Like homosexuality, it begins by an act of reading difference. Bernard's access to the primal text(s) gives him access to language, as the discovery of the father's absence makes him his own originator. Reading the letters, he writes his own life, a life without paternity, a text without authority. Modernist writing, like homosexual self-writing, is the unnatural reproduction of signs in an endless multiplication of meanings, and hence

exempt from, or outcast from, the economy of fiction in which, as in coinage, a stands for b. The system of financial exchange is crucial to sexual politics, for it is an exchange of women, *between* men, as Eve Sedgwick and others have reminded us. Coining themselves, the counterfeiters put into question all exchanges, and replace the symbolic transaction by the metonymic. It is an exchange in which nothing produces something, in which an inflation of meanings casts aside a gold standard of jealously guarded excrement.

The French paperback edition of André Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs* (1925) quotes, alongside an image of Gide, a brief exchange from chapter 3 of the second book, in which Mme Sophroniska asks Edouard about his novel, also called *Les faux-monnayeurs*. "Et . . . le sujet de ce roman?" she asks, to which Edouard replies, "Il n'en a pas." A novel without a subject, by an author who is a character in a novel of the same name. There is thus at once no author, and at the same time an over-determined author. We might be excused for thinking we have fallen into a hall of mirrors. The playfulness of these structures is not without its serious side. The novel (that is, both Gide's and Edouard's) is indeed *about* novels, and in particular about the problem of representation. But this is not a matter of self-indulgent navel-(or even novel-)gazing. The questioning of the author is part of a larger questioning of authority, suggested throughout the text in numerous ways. Homosexuality, in this context, must be seen, not so much as a set of fixed preferences, but rather as an instability in the gender system, a challenge not only to the political institutions of the patriarchy, but to the very claim of meaning. The cross-currents of desire in Gide are a constant reminder of the fictionality of such apparent verities as gender and sexuality.

The central figure in Gide for this crisis of authority that we customarily call modernism is of course the counterfeiting of the title. As Jean-Joseph Goux has shown, Gide's use of the figure of coinage coincides with, and is enabled by, the abolition of the gold standard and the concept of redeemable currency. Once again the historical and the literary coincide, in a manner which suggests that history itself be read as a modernist text: one might ask whether the elimination of the gold standard is the enactment, in economic terms, of the *mise-en-abyme* of the modernist project of fictionalization (one might recall Keynes's place amidst the Bloomsbury writers). The title of Gide's novel calls attention far more to the trope than to any incident of plot: the counterfeit money is introduced late in the story, and plays a very small part in it. What is essential is the way in which the illegal copying, or representation, of money calls into question the fictionality of the entire system of economic exchange. A coin is after all valid (i.e., possesses value) because both parties to its exchange believe it to be valid. If it is made of a precious metal, it has both intrinsic value (what it can be sold for as metal) and symbolic value (what it is worth by virtue of being stamped with the image of the sovereign). By the 1920s this second form of value was highly questioned, as the first disappeared: the heads of many states had fallen, and no longer possessed any power to transform base metal into riches. Inflation made the accumulation of wealth problematic, once again providing a "real" analogue to an abstract situation. The loss of faith in

the currency both depended upon, and created, a challenge to the power of the state and its nominal head: that very head that could be copied infinitely in a system of symbolic coinage.

Long before Gide turns to the issue of coinage directly, his novel concerns itself with the relations between fathers and sons. The novel opens with Bernard's discovery of his "illegitimacy" by means of letters to his mother that he has removed from their secret hiding-place and read. From the very beginning it is thus an act of reading that is directly implicated in the discovery of his own displacement, just as it is by an act of writing that his paternity is constituted. This is the first of many episodes of hidden letters read by others in the novel, which maintains a pattern of close association between the ideas of sexuality, property, and language. It is, after all, the written word that both establishes and denies Bernard's status as son. Having learned that he is not his father's son (that is, that he is the product of a radical separation between the role of father as *genitor* and that of father as *pater*, between a "natural" or biological function and a social one), Bernard flees his home in search of a substitute. That what is at stake is not merely the issue of monogamy and paternity (although monogamy is repeatedly shown to be a fiction often maintained knowingly by all participants) is suggested by Bernard's father's status. As a judge, it is Profitendieu's job to enforce the *letter*, and he identifies his functions expressly with the maintenance of order: he thinks as we first see him that "les préjugés sont les pilotis de la civilisation" (17). He and his friend Molinier are discussing the closing of a brothel frequented by young boys. Molinier (who will later himself be discovered, through some hidden letters, to be a less than faithful husband and indifferent to his children) is ruthless with regard to the women ("nous avons affaire ici à quelques créatures d'une insondable perversité et dont il importe de nettoyer la société") and forgiving to the boys (whose parents think of them as "anges de pureté et d'innocence"). His rhetorical question, "Est-ce que nous songions déjà aux femmes à cet âge?", loses some of its effect when he reflects, "ou si nous y pensions . . . c'était idéalement, mystiquement, religieusement . . . Ces enfants d'aujourd'hui . . . n'ont plus d'idéal" (19).

Profitendieu's name suggests the ways in which the various forms of power are intertwined. His law operates in the name of God for the benefit of capital, or profit. Bernard's refusal of his name is thus not merely the rejection of a false patronymic but the rejection of a pattern of false authority. His attempt to give back his name to the father ultimately fails, for he is far more the "son" of the man who has raised him than of the one who engendered him. His father's name is a part of the past that he must carry with him. So too he cannot totally escape the presence of God, although he will ultimately confront him in a radically altered form. Gide's choice of the name Profitendieu calls attention to the connections between worldly fortune and divine authority, connections given special significance in Gide's own Protestantism. It proclaims the central act of the text as one that renounces, or attempts to renounce, the power of money, which is challenged by the ability to reproduce false coins, and the power of the father, spiritual and physical, which is challenged by a new view of relations

based on free choice. Bernard's act of returning his father's name to him is the announcement of his own selfhood. When he is asked by Laura for his family name, he replies, "Je n'ai pas de famille," and when she insists, asking what his parents' name is, he replies again, "Je n'ai pas de parents," clarifying this time that he is a bastard, and reminding Laura that her child will be as well. The family name serves as a reminder of the social situation of the self, never wholly free to make itself and yet no longer bound to an authority that has ceased to function.

If Bernard's father is deposed, another father, the comte de Passavant, is dead in a scene that joins a cruel sense of rejection to a recognition of the death of God. Robert de Passavant refuses to mourn his father, still suffering from the refusal of the love that he had proffered him. The count had believed that "tout lui était dû" (45). Robert's younger brother Gontran keeps watch over the body, but he is distressed by his father's hands, and tries to bring them together to hold the crucifix. His attempts only make things worse, and leave the crucifix lying across the sheet, as he hears a voice (actually his own) proclaim "Nom de Dieu," the familiar French exclamation restored to its literal meaning in this scene of primal loss, in which God the Father remains permanently beyond reach.

The adolescents of *Les faux-monnayeurs* are neither as evil nor as innocent as they are sometimes imagined to be. They are certainly capable of acts of great evil, such as the death of Boris. But the question of moral responsibility is always one that can be returned to an earlier situation. Does not La Pérouse who rejected his son and his former music pupil, Boris' parents, bear the ultimate responsibility for Boris' death by his pistol? And is there not a sense of a larger, social responsibility implied in the name of the group that arranges the "game" that leads to Boris' death: la Confrérie des Hommes forts? Boris dies in part because he accepts a code of masculinity that will not allow fear: "Je n'aurai pas le trac." Molinier's attitude toward bastards is one of the most outrageous acts of hypocrisy in the novel. He wants Olivier kept away from Bernard because, in his words, "le fruit du désordre et de l'insoumission porte nécessairement en lui des germes d'anarchie" (227).

There is an obvious temptation to accept Molinier's view, without the value judgments, and to declare that bastard<sup>1</sup> is Gide's figure for a kind of natural goodness. The very term in French for the "illegitimate child," "enfant naturel," would seem to encourage it. But Gide resists this temptation. He does not accept what we might term the romantic view of homosexuality, as an act of rebellion of nature against culture, but instead, as Gerald Storz has argued, replaces this view with the concept of the "idiosyncratic being." Gide was fascinated with the fact and the concept of the bastard. He himself became a "natural father" just before the book was published, while at the same time being involved in the great love of his life, for Marc Allegret. In both of these relationships Gide substituted a form of elective paternity for a legal paternity. Edouard's love for Laura, Olivier, and Bernard in the novel undoubtedly owes much to Gide's own experiences. But there is also a conscious attack on the institution of the family. Edouard, strangely anticipating Foucault, proposes to call one of the chapters of his novel "Le régime cellulaire,"

referring to the family, and he declares “l'égoïsme familial” to be “à peine un peu moins hideux que l'égoïsme individuel” (114). The family is for Gide the fundamental institution of power and surveillance; it needs to be replaced by a system of elective relationships, which may include those of the conventional family, but only when they are based on a choice, such as Bernard's return at the end of the novel.

These incidents of plot are not merely incidental; they are fundamental to the critique of authoritarian fiction that Gide undertakes. The author/narrator's relationship to the traditional (*lisible*, in Barthes's term) novel is that of the father to the family, the sovereign to the nation, or God to the faithful. The novel is a reflection of a world-view based on submission and order. Its single perspective reflects a belief in a single truth. Modernist experimentation with narrative form is not therefore for Gide a mere playing with conventions: it is an attempt to free the form from its obligations to truth. Thus the multiple perspectives of this novel—its novel within a novel, its letters quoted whole, its excerpts from Edouard's diary—as well as the self-conscious appearance of the author as puppeteer are designed to challenge the univocality of fiction conceived as representation. By appearing within the text, Gide calls attention to the very artificiality of the assumption of the author's absence, to the fact of the work as artifice. By denaturalizing the novel, modernists insisted on the experience of the reader as an active participant in the act of writing. How shall we decide whether the account of things in the frame novel, or in Edouard's novel of the same name, is true? And what is truth?

The dispersion, to use Gide's term, of the novel is directly connected to a view of the self. Edouard cannot accept the notion of sincerity because there is no such thing as a true self: “Je ne suis jamais que ce que je crois que je suis.” He can accept at most the idea of a “substrat” of “continuité foncière,” to which there is occasional access. He finds his life, not as the discovery of a true self, but through the exploration of a series of masks, or other selves. This sense of dispersion is central to his life, not merely to his fiction, and in this Edouard is the modernist self or selves: “Cette force anti-égoïste de décentralisation est telle qu'elle volatise en moi le sens de la propriété.” This is said as Edouard's explanation of why he cannot marry Laura, for he sees marriage as an institution of property and, as we have seen, of inheritance. Marriage is a form of legitimation that is based upon a central absence: the assumption of fidelity and the need for assurances of paternity. Since all fatherhood is putative, like all money, the pressures placed on women must be sufficient to preserve the system's fictionality as truth. The decentralising of the ego is a force that marks the modern age in its many manifestations. All of them, from the nature of fiction to the nature of marriage and gender, are related to the collapse of a central truth. We are thus all the products of our systems of thought, beyond which we can have no existence. The responsibility for a novelist like Gide is, as Derrida says, to greet this loss not with nostalgia or even resignation, but with Nietzschean joy.

What is the place of the homosexual in all this? Above all, the male homosexual serves as a constant reminder of the non-identity of phallus

and penis, or of patriarchy and maleness. Edouard, the “uncle” of this novel, is obviously set off from the fathers, even as he serves as a far better father to Olivier than Molinier (as Pauline recognizes when she in effect gives her son over to Edouard, saying, “Je sens bien que vous l’aimez autant que moi” [306]). Edouard’s freedom, his flirtatiousness, his independence from a system of currency and exchange (he drops the claim ticket for his suitcase which Bernard picks up while he is worrying about his appearance as he meets Olivier) mark him off as different. But his difference is social. Unlike Proust Gide does not see the homosexual as belonging to a race. There is no essential homosexual. The nature of homosexuality is to be unnatural, not so much *against* nature, as *without* nature.

Gide’s imagination is fundamentally pederastic, and he sees a reciprocal relationship between the lover and the beloved, with both being transformed by the encounter. Although his model is Greek, he gives it a modern twist by making both partners benefit. As Pauline tells Edouard, speaking of her son, “C’est Olivier qui vous fera meilleur. Que n’obtient-on pas de soi, par amour?” (307). Related to this moral advantage is a matter of sexual practice: Gide was not attracted to sodomy, which for him recreated a politics and a bodily practice of heterosexuality. He said of himself that he “ne comprends le plaisir que face à face, réciproque et sans violence” (*Grain*, 346) and associates his practice with that of Whitman. He thus locates sexuality firmly as politics, and makes clear his sense of an affectionate bonding without sexual mastery. For Gide the “inferiority” of his partners, whether by age (as with Marc Allégret) or social class and race (as with Athman), was only apparent, a means (for him at least) to recapture the sense of a lost childhood. He does not seem to have thought much about the inevitable power relations of the pederasty that for him served so crucially to break away from the power of the patriarchy, and, in *L’Immoraliste*, to locate that patriarchy squarely in colonial practice.

The coincidence between modernism and homosexuality is based largely on the idea of the dispersed self. As Gide believed in the need to rid himself of property, so too the modernist hero needs to rid himself of the burdens of the imperial self, the self as possessor of power over others, and the very concept of a single, unified consciousness. The modernist critique of essence coincides with an attack on a dichotomy between self and other that can be enacted in many forms, from colonialism to racism. In both these regards the homosexual serves as a crucial figure, for his very constructed self, his own creation as the product of homophobia, and his affirmation of a continuity between self and other, put into question not only a traditional social order but also a traditional ontology. For Gide, once Bernard passes out of the house of his father, Profitendieu, he enters into a world of flux in which he is at once penniless and in possession of a “forgotten” coin, a thief and a voyeur. Picking up Edouard’s discarded claim ticket, this title to property, he enters into Edouard’s world, both literally by becoming the possessor of Edouard’s suitcase, and hence both Edouard’s money and his notebooks, and figuratively by entering into a world where all is shifting appearance. Edouard, the good “uncle,” is a constant challenge

to a system of property located in the family (he gives away his money as he seduces his nephews). The novel's achievement of a state of multiplicity, its deserving or deconstruction, is signalled by its wonderfully comic and impertinent conclusion: Edouard is invited to dinner with Bernard, Profitendieu, and the Moliniers, and is anxious to meet the youngest: "Je suis bien curieux de connaître Caloub." This act of impertinence, in its insistence on the perpetuation of sexual desire and its constant lack of fulfillment, becomes the novel's incarnation of a principle of refusal of closure, of an open-endedness that is to fiction what the deliberate act of divesting one's money, spending one's sperm, may be in other realms.

A self-reflexive sexuality, then, one without productivity, is the figure for a world as process not product, in which there are only endlessly unfolding selves, none possessing any absolute truth. Thus Gide's austere Protestant vision could be one with a sense of triumphant sexuality, achieved precisely, as in *L'Immoraliste*, by giving up the self. Spending money, giving away property, denying the Western reign of the head over the body, leaving behind community and tradition, denying the father were all parts of a single gesture, one that is crucial to the constitution of the modern homosexual as the hero of a self-creating and self-destroying quest, assuming and defending an identity that at the same time he knows to be a fiction.

Concordia University

#### NOTE

1. I do not count Eliot as an exception. His repression of his homosexuality seems to me central to the anti-modernist project that he places at the heart of his "modernist" work, *The Waste Land*.

#### WORKS CITED

- Roland Barthes. *S/Z*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1970.
- Jacques Derrida. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1978.
- Michel Foucault. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- André Gide. *Les faux-monnayeurs*. [1925]. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- . *Si le grain ne meurt*. [1925]. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- Sandra Gilbert. "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980), 391-417.
- Jean-Joseph Goux. *Les monnayeurs du langage*. Paris: Galilée, 1984.
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Gerald Storz. "The Homosexual Paradigm in Balzac, Gide, and Genet." In George Stambolian and Elaine Marks, eds., *Homosexualities and French Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979, 186-209.