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A View of *Les Faux Monnayeurs*

I

If *Les Faux Monnayeurs* is a confusing novel, the reason is that it contains more of life than any other ever written. This is not to say more of life's *experiences,* but rather more of those formulae, ideas, "truths" by which the human mind defines experience and prescribes for it. The realm of ideas is the realm of Gide's art. A cliché of criticism has it that a concern with ideas must result in some violence to life's rich complexity. From such a danger Gide has been saved, however, by the peculiarly Protestant sincerity with which he has always examined a self too wide and too much in motion for any formula that stood still. To this has been due a mistrust of formulae equal to his interest in them. The tension between these two movements of his mind, in fact, may be regarded as itself the formula for his entire career and many of his works may be regarded as attempts to discredit some cherished principle, cherished, that is, by himself.

In *Les Faux Monnayeurs* this tension receives for the first time its total expression. Unlike the works which preceded it (and in this respect, perhaps, his "first novel"), it examines not a single formula and the situation in which its rising and falling truth may be tested, but a life-like multiplicity of both. Moreover, following out to its extremity his own logic, he has provided the novel with a second level, a level below that on which the narrative we watch—the parade of its "truths"—takes place. On this level, that of Edouard's composition of his own *Faux Monnayeurs,* we are shown the formula-making process itself. It is the function of the second level to cast doubt upon the first. *Les Faux Monnayeurs* tries to answer then, by thus facing it head on, the ultimate question of Gide's intellectual life: in a world which the human mind can only grasp after subduing it to formulae, but in which both observer and observed are so complex and changing that none can do their relationships justice, what is the formula in which men *can* come to rest? We may well watch with suspense the result of such an experiment since the problem is not only Gide's, but that of the modern mind in general, of which his own, divided and self-rejecting, is an adequate symbol.

The subject of *Les Faux Monnayeurs,* as Edouard defines it, is precisely this "rivalry between the real world and the representation we make of it to ourselves. The manner in which the world of appearance imposes itself on us and the manner in which we try to impose on the outside world our own interpretation, this is the drama of our lives." In other words, the novel's subject is no other than Gide's own

struggle to write it, which is to say, his own effort to understand his life truly, to find a unified structure of ideas which will permit him to transpose it without loss of value into coinage of the mind. How is this to be done? Gide begins by denying himself the single insight—or homogeneous cluster of insights—which, conscious or unconscious, forms the core of all other novels and by which its material is organized in advance. To keep his novel true to its subject, he leaves it *open,* as in fact the mind which would preserve its relevance and justness must remain in life. "It is essentially out of the question for a book of this kind to have a plan," Edouard observes. "Everything would be falsified if anything were decided beforehand. I wait for reality to dictate to me." If the book's confusing variety sometimes suggests that it is in his narrative that Gide has left himself thus free, this is not, however, on the whole, the sense actually intended. Too many of the story patterns come out "right". The freedom Gide has chiefly made use of is the freedom to *change his mind,* to permit every new development to suggest some new measure by which people and events, true and false, good and evil, healthy and moribund are to be understood. This is what accounts for the novel's terrible difficulty. There is no one whose point of view it is always safe for the reader to trust—even Edouard is finally discredited—and no principle emerging as the moral of any particular episode and seized by the panting reader as a possible theme, which it will be safe to apply to all others. We do in fact come at last to one which seems durable. But this is so only because it is itself an open door to all others, and far from solving the endless problem, offers rather a touchstone by which to measure a given solution's varying adequacy.

I have said that the picture of Edouard's struggle must cast a doubt on the result of Gide's. That is not the only reason for doubt. Since the clash between reality and our formulae must necessarily be endless, how could Gide's attempt to write a book which will justly formulate his material ever come to an end? Edouard's does not. At the close of Gide's novel, Edouard's is still unfinished. In the *Journal des Faux Monnayeurs* Gide suggests it will never be finished because Edouard is incapable of a "veritable devotion" to anything. "He pursues himself incessantly and through everything." But what is Gide's own peculiar distinction if not this incessant pursuit of himself, which is only a search for his true reactions to what is being observed? The other name for this pursuit is integrity. It is Edouard's extravagant integrity that will keep him forever at work. To stop seeking further at any moment of apparent understanding would mean a closing of his book to life, where the search is necessarily continuous, which would, precisely, invalidate it as

an embodiment of his theme. Gide, then, has put a limit to his own integrity in stooping to finish the book we have. It is a betrayal by which all its truth stands forever compromised. But if he has cheated us, as all novelists must, he has done what none has ever done before. He has helped us to find him out.

II

The narrative of the book, then, is the realm of its (intentional) confusion, as Edouard's attempt to formulate it in a coherent novel is the source of its unity. But even for the confusion, or rather for the processes which engender it, Gide has found formulae to help us grasp them, and his chief symbols for these are the counterfeit and the devil. Without understanding the full, the developing import of each it is impossible to understand the book.

The counterfeit gold coin begins, of course, by symbolizing the false, the inauthentic individual: a major preoccupation of Gide's career. "I should like," says Bernard, "all my life long at the very smallest shock to ring true. Nearly all the people I have known ring false." In the light of this, characters like Pastor Vedel, professionally virtuous, or the literary parasite de Passavant are immediately understandable as examples of the counterfeit. Nor do we see only "evil" pretending to be "good," but also the reverse, as when Armand, basically in love with virtue, apes out of despair, a nastiness he loathes. And between these poles will be found many other degrees and variations of the process.

But the circle of suspicion widens. Even thoughts and feelings we entertain in all *sincerity* may be counterfeit, taken for granted once and for all because we believe, says the villainous cynic, Strouvilhou, "everything we see in print." In literature, he tells us—and surely by extension in all the media from which we learn what to feel and think, as we learn the only language we know—"feelings may be as arbitrary as the conventions which the author believes to be the foundation of his art." They may "ring as false as counters, but they pass current... A man who should offer the public real coins would seem to be defrauding us...If I edit a review," he continues, "it will be in order to prick bladders—in order to demonitize fine feelings, and those promissory notes which go by the name of words." Though Strouvilhou is a monster, we may not shrink from the truth of what he says.

We come next to a complication more audacious still: the symbol ceases to be pejorative. Bernard has told us of his indignation at hearing a tourist boast of robbing the customs. " 'The State is nothing but a convention,' he said too. What a fine convention it would be that rested on the bona fides of every individual!" Though even the conventions upon

which society rests are not so much true as believed to be true, like the counterfeit coin not yet found out, we are not therefore justified in denying them full value. Their value is the value they elicit from us, which we unite to grant them. It is by such counterfeits that we organize the multiple possibilities of human nature in a desired direction. Objectifying thus the best in ourselves, we are sustained at the ennobling level by what we have created.

With the road thus opened, there is no place to stop. For Edouard, "ideas of exchange, of depreciation, of inflation gradually invaded his book." Whatever his mind rests on begins to appear to him, good or bad, as a kind of currency with questionable backing. Remember indeed how he defined the very subject of his book. What emerges at last is the suggestion that *all* the ideas and images by which we represent reality, and by which we must perforce live, are a species of counterfeit, waiting like Bernard's gilt-covered coin of glass to be seen through and discarded. The real culprit is the human brain which cannot with the best will in the world truly represent reality. When, in the light of this, we turn back to Bernard's description of the false coin, every modest phrase swells with meaning. "Just hear how true it rings...I was taken in by it this morning, just as the grocer who passed it on to me was taken in himself, he told me. It hasn't quite the same weight, I think, but it has the brightness and sound of a real piece; it is coated with gold, so that all the same it is worth more than two sous; but it is made of glass. It'll wear transparent. No, don't rub it...One can almost see through it as it is." For coin read the ideas, indeed the axioms, of any epoch or any individual, which, until time has rubbed their value away, ring wonderfully true, and are passed, innocently or not, from grocer to customer to whom you will, and on through a whole society. If we had not arrived at the point from another quarter, we would see from this that the chief counterfeit with which Gide presents us is the novel itself, as he is the chief of its counterfeiters. The novel pretends, as fiction must, to represent reality, a pretension to which it is itself designed to give the lie. And the failure of Edouard is due simply to his unattainable desire to make of his own a coin of solid gold.

Gide, however, is no mere skeptic. Though he shirks none of the difficult obstacles, he insists always on moving beyond despair. There is a chink in the darkness of Bernard's description. The coin "is coated with gold, so that all the same it is worth more than two sous." There *is* a way of being true that our counterfeits possess, even if that truth, with rubbing, must prove impermanent. The formula for it will be the same as that by which we outwit the devil, and we will come to it in its place.

III

"I should want one (character), the devil," Gide wrote in the *Journal des Faux Monnayeurs,* "who would circulate incognito throughout the book." This character is indeed the most important of all. If we examine a few of his appearances, we will find that he gives himself away.

It is the devil who leads Vincent to gamble with the money intended for Laura, and then helps him to invent an ethic to "legitimize" his behavior. For Vincent "continues to be a moral being, and the devil will only get the better of him by furnishing him with reasons for self-approval." Edouard, in confiding little Boris to old Azais as for an interesting experiment, has allowed curiously flimsy reasons to conceal dangers he should have foreseen. His sophisms "must be promptings of the devil, for if they came from anyone else he would not listen to them... There often lies hidden behind the good motive a devil who is clever enough to find his profit in the very thing one thought one was wresting from him." And, "Have you noticed," asks the wretched La Perouse, "that in this world God always keeps silent? Or at least, at least... however carefully we listen, it's only the devil we can succeed in hearing." Finally, in a fragment of dialogue in the *Journal des Faux Monnayeurs,* we learn that though one can only regard the devil as a childish substitute for the rational solution of certain psychological problems, "the devil himself would not speak otherwise; he is delighted; he knows that he hides nowhere as well as behind these rational explanations." And his first words are bound to be: "Why do you fear me? You know I don't exist."

The devil thus delineated is the *self.* He is the voracious, sly inextinguishable self, whose sole motive in every situation is the free gratification of appetites, but who must adopt, to overcome a variety of fears and scruples, an appropriate variety of disguises. This metaphor is complemented by an earlier one of Gide's. I do not love man, he said, but only that which devours him. What devours the self is a love of and aspiration toward something *other,* by which the self is used up, and which subordinates the gang of its clamorous short-sighted appetites. For the self's immediate gratification the latter would destroy each other, destroy their own power of enjoyment, destroy the man. We need not be told, after the labors of depth psychology, how wonderful is this devil's cleverness. There is no principle, however self-denying, that he cannot find a way either to outwit or to turn to his own advantage. Indeed, the freezing suggestion of La Perouse is that every audible voice in his, that we are incapable of hearing—in a self-less motive—the voice of God. Why does the devil delight to be regarded as a fiction? Because those who leave him out of their calculations, leave out, that is, the

immeasurable subtlety of their selfishness, will perforce accept those reasons which the devil provides to "legitimize" their behavior. On this account scientific explanations are of course best of all. Screened by such authority from the gullible conscience, the liberated appetites may proceed to gorge themselves in perfect peace. As the case of Edouard showed us, however, reasons need not be iron-clad if they come to grant us our desire.

In the novel we are presented with four kinds of relationship to the devil—two based on denial of him and two on his recognition. The virtuous and the simple are his victims through denial. The first (Vedel and Azais) because they are convinced that, though he exists for some, he has no place in behavior like theirs, covered by all the rules of virtue. They yield to him with all the gusto of self-righteousness, having equated their desires with the will of God. The simple, on the other hand, like Douviers, whose "goodness" is so sincere and modest Edouard feels cheap to treat it with irony, yield not out of pride in their virtue, but because they lack the imagination to suspect their own good motives, to fear another, a darker side to every act and profession.

The second pair begins with the Passavants and the Lady Griffiths, who may well be considered to grant the devil's existence since they deny rather the possibility of any other master. These are less his victims than his infatuated votaries, votaries, that is, of their own untrammeled appetites. They demonstrate, moreover, how dangerous are those appetites, is the merely liberated self, leading to the absolute inferno of ennui and ultimately to the destruction of the individual. Finally, there are the wise, to whom Edouard, like most of us, can belong only intermittently, and whose nature the above-quoted dialogue makes clear. The wise are those who acknowledge the existence of the devil as adversary. Granting his existence, they are in possession of a clue with which to penetrate an infinity of disguises, a clue which prevents the natural carelessness of equating him with one or two of his forms. Too often we lull ourselves by such equations into believing that these forms are all we have to fear, whereas to know the devil who is their protean essence is to beware of him everywhere, in every form, and even the least likely. We are put on guard against *all* our reasons, that is, against ourselves.

In the *Journal des Faux Monnayeurs* Gide writes: "The renunciation of virtue through abdication of pride." The wisely virtuous man must give up the pride of confidence in his virtue. Suspicious of himself, he is at least free at every moment to modify his behavior when, in spite of the handsomest justifications, he finds himself doing evil. Skeptical of reasons, he learns to judge by results. He is forearmed against the danger that his most disinterested profession may only mask the selfish

motive, the devil, which renders it other and less than it appears, which renders it *counterfeit*. It is thus the two metaphors come together in organic—not arbitrary—unity. The devil is the glass beneath our gold.

One thing remains to be said. We have seen that, though the devil is evil, it is positively wisdom and health to get to know him. Moreover, the speaker in Gide's dialogue expresses approval of Goethe's insight that the profoundest genius must be partly demonic, and in his *Dostoevsky* Gide himself coins the maxim: "The Fiend is party to every work of art." This is no contradiction. Electricity too is a murderer unless recognized and controlled. Is not the artist preeminent among those who see through the counterfeits of word and deed to the hidden self who is their true author? And what gives him the clue to this *other* side, if not an intimate acquaintance with the devil in himself. It is precisely the artist's knowledge of the horrors that lie potential within his own breast that provides his art with its third dimension.

IV

At the moment when Bernard, wholly self-liberated, must decide in which direction to proceed, an angel comes to hint that the devil's is not the only path before him. The principle which accomplished his liberation, that the self has a higher authority than whatever would prevent it from knowing or being itself, has begun to grow equivocal in its implications. Freedom alone provides no measure for the value of his acts nor any guide for his aspirations. For reasons which will grow clear, the angel cannot bring such a measure or such a guide, but what he does is more important: he awakens a desire for them.

Look again at the story of the angel. You will see that from the moment when he appears with a foot so light it might walk on water—*like the foot of Jesus*—his every act and effect involves sympathy for others. By the same token, it is when Bernard is seized by a contrary feeling, contempt, that the angel temporarily disappears. The angel is that in us—or elsewhere—which opposes the devil-self and would make of it a sacrifice to God. Jesus provides the form of this angel for many, and a chief sign of his influence, as in the novel, is love, generosity, the substitution of another's self on the altar where one had worshipped one's own. Actually, however, the form of every man's angel is unique, adapted as it must be to the unique self it will oppose; this is the reason Bernard cannot see the other angels wandering in the church. In their night long wrestling, neither conquers. Not Bernard, because, as this chapter's significant first sentence tells us, he is one "for whom there is no greater joy than to rejoice another being," that is, because his selfishness can never wholly conquer his generosity. And not the angel

either, because selfishness is after all inextinguishable. Yet the *conscious* struggle accomplishes the highest object one may hope for from it: it brings Bernard to maturity, which means to an awareness of the issues and conditions of life, in short, to a knowledge of good and evil. His struggle is that of every young man evolving, after the self-absorption of childhood and against his own "interests," a conception of virtue, and a goal more worthy of his gifts than personal aggrandizement.

But the angel's gift of maturity is not an answer; it is a question. The next day, seeking a definite rule for his life, Bernard goes to Edouard for advice. The ensuing dialogue contains the ripest Gidian wisdom. The novelist has nothing definite to offer. All he can say, when pushed at last to rock bottom, is this: "It is a good thing to follow one's own inclination, provided it leads uphill." Indefinite—but the little sentence is far less modest than it looks. For even an angel who brings us the knowledge of good and evil cannot be expected to define a goal whose pursuit will guarantee our virtue. Of what value is a single fixed goal for men who are various and in constant motion? My goal will not be yours, and the goal which led me upward today will tomorrow hold me back. Dynamic to match the dynamism of life, Edouard's formula is, in fact, the only one which can keep us moving forever in the general direction of a God necessarily and properly impossible to pin down. Both its elements are essential, the first, that the self—yes, the devil-self—be frankly consulted, and the second, that the result lead uphill. Whenever the two are at war the devil wins an advantage. For just as the heedless gratification of the self means the devil's triumph, so does the most virtuous program which involves its falsification or denial, since the self will only explode at last into rebellion against all virtue. (The fate of Armand brought up by the blameless Vedels.) Every right act, in short, must be a collaboration between the devil and the angel.

This concluding formula has implications as wide as the skepticism which preceded it. Though every image of reality is counterfeit, we need not despair, there remains a basis for choice among them. That basis is the self's needs, honestly acknowledged. Not absolute truth, but relevance to man's changing needs determines the value of his mind's coinage, as it is the growing irrelevance of that coinage, through changes in men and their situations, which rubs away the layer of gold, and enables us to see through it like glass. The bringer of a new truth is simply the man who has become aware of needs which the old was not designed to satisfy. His will not be more permanent (insofar as it pretends to be it is a counterfeit like all the rest) but only more suitable. It is proper, then, that each age and each man, in some degree, make counter-

feits of their own for the solution of their own felt problems, provided only that they are restrained from capitulation to unbridled appetite by endless care that the solutions lead always uphill. When will the often wearisome necessity for such care, for continuous fresh examination and evaluation, come to an end? When can we find rest in currency of pure gold? Never. For then change should have ceased, which is to say, we should be dead.

But *this* truth at least, the formula Gide does arrive at, this is gold, is it not? Alas, no. It is only the ultimate truth of the novel's first level, that of its material, of Gide's life. But the book's subject was precisely the impossibility of representing life truly. The only answer it gives us then is this: examine this final coin for yourself. Has the gold rubbed off it yet? Not yet? Then you don't know yet that it is false. Apply to it, as you must to every principle, the test itself advises. And when it ceases to conform to your personal needs—or to lead you upward—throw it away.

That formula (the conclusion of its first level) and this willingness to grant that it too is provisional (the conclusion of its second) is the moral of Gide's great novel, and the final equilibrium of the conflict in his thought with which our examination began. But as Gide's problem is the portion of free minds everywhere in our tormented self-conscious epoch, so its solution too extends in relevance beyond the book. It is such a moral, if any, that can be for all of us at once the safeguard of our freedom and the guarantee of its health and fruitfulness.

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