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57

57

VARIETY

Philip Roddman

GIDE'S HAMLET

When *Hamlet* opened in Paris after the war, I was asked by the French Radio to interview the translator, André Gide. At that time, November, 1946, I was studying at the Sorbonne, and finding everyone very kind to the handful of Americans left in Paris after the army's departure. The interview was arranged for me by Mademoiselle B., and on the second of November, at eleven o'clock in the morning, I appeared in André Gide's sixth floor apartment on the Rue Vaneau, eager to discuss with Gide the old problem of Hamlet, the true Northern hero, whose cousin and rival Siegfried was now deep in the doldrums.

André Gide greeted me in English, simply, warmly, in grandfather style. He recognized my uniform, and addressed me by my military title. We entered his study, in whose great window I saw the Eiffel Tower, the Dome of the Invalides, and the ash-dark line of the Bois de Boulogne under a dove-gray sky. Gide put a stick of wood on the dying fire, and asked me whether I had seen the play. I told him I had been to see it with several American friends, who had found a number of strands

in the play unusual. He became all ears. They thought, I said, that the Horatio-theme had been given more prominence than it needed, and the evil men less villainy than the action intends. Gide smiled, and the eyes under the bushy eyebrows looked sharp and clear. "Do you think I am wrong in considering my translation of *Hamlet* the best in French?" he asked. I assured him that having read only one other translation, reputed superior, I found his so much more luminous and flexible that I thought it a masterpiece, *et d'une splendeur!* "How could it be otherwise?" I asked. "You are not a professor turning one counter into another; you are a writer recreating language. Your *Hamlet* is not a mere translation: it is a re-thinking, a re-feeling, a re-nerving of the play." Upon this Gide, who had by now slipped into French, complained that the American edition of his translation had printed the French opposite the English line for line, giving the effect of a blank verse rendition. It was most unfortunate that the American reader should receive any such impression. His translation into French prose in no sense intended the effect suggested.

He left the room to fetch a copy of the American edition, which I had not yet seen. I noticed that his walls were lined with contemporary French books, and that in the next room his secretary was busily

engaged in typing from a manuscript. Gide asked her to find in the files a copy of a letter to Roger Martin du Gard, in which he discussed the wisdom of Barrault's opening the Martigny Theater as a new venture with a play as difficult as *Hamlet*. Gide felt that Kafka's *Trial*, in its play form, suited the times more closely.

As he returned to the room, bearing the letter and the copy of *Hamlet*, I thought how like Yeats was this old man before me, outliving the tragic generation of Wilde and of Proust, renewing himself constantly and revealing a mind more efficient and far-ranging than that of a business executive or a scientist in the atomic age. His business was literature; his theme of research was not the medieval one of Proust, of what happens to people, but the modern one of Kant and Nietzsche, of what people do. The energy in his baritone voice, in his walk was the energy of a man who returns from each bout with outward circumstance convinced that the bout itself was the meaning, not the pleasure and not the pain. He looked eternal, like someone for whom love and death and truth and beauty are casual shapes one recognizes on the way but does not allow to break the heart or unsettle the mind. Here certainly was the new writer of a naturalist age, master of the *gai savoir*.

"Do you mind," he asked, "if we continue in French? I have a

certain *pudeur* about speaking in your tongue. But I see that you know the play well, and I should like you to comment on some of my versions."

He opened the book, placed the black tortoise-shell glasses on his nose, and looked formidably at the text.

"What do you make of Laertes' words to Ophelia: *And keep you in the rear of your affection. . . ?* This is a military image. I could not render it otherwise than: *. . . ne l'aventure pas au bord de ton amour.*"

"Since the English tells Ophelia not to advance so far as her affection would take her, I think the sense has been well rendered. I do not see how the violence of Laertes' image, mixing love and musketry, can pass without violence into the French."

"Then," he said, "there's the curious idea in Hamlet's 'Thus bad begins and worse remains behind,' about which I have appended a note in my translation. I translate it as '*Mauvais début; la suite sera pire.*' What would you say does it mean?"

"I have always taken this line to follow the thought of the preceding one:

*I must be cruel only to be kind:
Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.* I should think the 'bad' means that Hamlet has become an instrument of evil in the service of good, while the 'worse' refers to the agents of evil in the

service of evil who manipulate the strings of his destiny. I notice that you separate the two lines, reading them:

'S'il m'a fallu être cruel, c'est par tendresse. Mauvais début: la suite sera pire! Of course, your version is dramatically just; you take 'behind' to mean 'in reserve'."

Gide seemed pleased, and turned the pages of the book, coming upon the words:

. . . is't not perfect conscience To quit him with this arm?

"How do you like my rendering the word 'arm,' not in the sense of hand, but in the sense of weapon or 'trick. All translators of Shakespeare, even Schlegel, stick to the literal 'this arm.' *'Je me ferais scrupule de retourner contre lui ses*


propres armes?'"

I agreed that turning the king's own methods upon him might be in keeping with Hamlet's new mood after his return from the sea voyage, but that for me 'this arm' would be truer to the tenderness of Hamlet, his scrupulousness, and the fact that he has never stooped to using the king's methods, like spying and so forth. "The Hamlet who would say, 'I shall pay him in his own terms' would be a character out of the Resistance," I ventured, "and no less noble, of course, for his realism."

Gide had rendered the word 'nunnery' by 'couvent.' He told me that he had suspected the Elizabethan slang meaning of the term from the text, but that he could find no one

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to confirm it. I suggested J. Dover Wilson.

We were smoking Pall Mall cigarettes, of which I offered him a package. Cigarettes, with the Americans gone, were then very difficult to come by. But when I returned to see him the second time, there were three different brands of American cigarettes spread out on his writing desk, and he asked me to choose among them. This was in the middle of November, and this time we were to complete the interview that the first two hours had not permitted. Gide had returned a day or two before from a trip to Brussels, where he had seen an English company do *Hamlet* in a one-night stand. The performance had delighted him, and it was with the playing of that company in mind that he considered the answers to the questions that I had proposed during our first interview. He had then declined to answer them because he felt that they required very careful thought. Of my original nine questions he had decided to answer only four. The five questions rejected were: 1) *Hamlet* in Gide's novels, 2) *Hamlet* and Montaigne's *Apologie de Raymond Sébond*, 3) *Hamlet* and *Alceste* of *The Misanthrope*, 4) *Hamlet*'s secret ("the heart of my mystery") and psychoanalysis, 5) *Hamlet* and T. S. Eliot's statement that *Hamlet*'s emotion is in excess of the facts. I was somewhat disappointed that he had chosen the old chest-

nuts among my questions, the schoolroom glories, but it pleased me that he had carefully written out the answers in his absolute French. He wished to see my translation when I had made one, he told me. I then posed my first question in his order, which was:

"What specific feature or quality of the play *Hamlet* did you emphasize in your translation of the work?"

"There are numerous French translations of *Hamlet*, and they have all proved very useful to me in my work. They indicate a great care for precision. That I persisted in working on my translation, and, upon the earnest entreaty of Jean-Louis Barrault, brought it to completion, I ascribe to the fact that I have always felt something lacking in the earlier translations, something that I considered indispensable: the poetic as well as the musical essence that animates the play throughout; a kind of lyrical transposition of key, vibrating in a surcharged atmosphere that bathes the characters and colors their speeches. It seemed to me that my work would be in vain if I conveyed into the French no more than the meaning of these speeches, which a number of the earlier translators had rendered quite well, but at the cost of the rhythm, the rapture, and the peculiar latent music in which Shakespeare's genius sports. That is what I proposed to render, and without sacrificing the precise meaning of

the words. For, as I have explained in a brief preface to my translation: 'There is nothing simpler than abandoning precision for lyric flights and losing one's footing. But the real problem was to lose nothing, neither footing nor wings, neither rhyme (nor rhythm) nor reason, neither logic nor poetry.' But that spelled a difficulty that often seemed insurmountable. It is that difficulty that was primarily responsible for my abandoning the project after the translation of the first act. That one act had given me more trouble, cost me more in effort, than the five acts of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. That first act appeared on the book stalls more than twenty years ago. It was the friendly insistence of Jean-Louis Barrault, during a providential encounter in Marseilles in 1942, that again set me to work, and for this I am gratefully in debt to Jean-Louis Barrault. I worked at his behest, with the prospect of reward in seeing him interpret in my translation the most exacting of roles. Now in Paris he has been having a triumphant success in it."

"Is *Hamlet* your favorite among the Shakespearian tragedies?"

"After a lecture delivered in Cairo, I was approached by a number of students who asked me for the title of my favorite Shakespearian play. I replied without hesitation: the one that I have last reread. Few months go by without my taking up one or another of the plays, and always with a fresh ac-

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ness of wonder. I can say with certainty that Racine surpassed himself in *Phèdre*, and I can put this tragedy at the summit of his achievement—for each of his tragedies moves, more or less successfully, towards the same ideal perfection. It is otherwise with Shakespeare: not only in subject matter does each one of his plays differ from the others, but also in manner, in insight, in language. Were it not for a certain incomparable master-craft that in equal degree animates each play, one might be led to believe that they were produced by different hands. But not a single one of Shakespeare's contemporaries attained to this nobility, to this profound sense of order, to this plenitude, to this splendor, to this powerful radiance. If therefore each one of his masterpieces seems to us wonderful in itself, it is all the more wonderful that a single mind was capable of such a variety of masterpieces. I would not know how to choose my favorite among them, as I have said, and, truly, *Hamlet* is far from being the most perfect of the plays."

"What is there in *Hamlet* that, across the centuries, holds us spellbound?"

"*Hamlet* is doubtless the one work that most astonishes, that troubles most, the one that lends itself to the greatest variety of interpretations, and the one that catches up with us, across the years, in most secret fashion (I almost said: in a most indiscreet fashion):

no, indeed, it is not the most perfect work. Let me add that with a like subject perfection is inadmissible. The conciseness, the clarity of design of *Othello*, of *Macbeth*, of *Julius Caesar*, or of *Coriolanus* would never suit *Hamlet*, whose temper involves a certain twilight, a certain imprecision of outline, an unbroken possibility of elusiveness in all directions. What is most astonishing is that this play, so esoteric in quality, so opulent in its trappings, so subtle and ornate in expression that it would seem to speak to the most cultivated minds only, should, in counterpoint to the philosophizing, admit of an action that is so startling and so adroitly handled that it compels the interest and holds in suspense the attention of the most diversified public. It is for *Hamlet* that the public declares, we are told, in preference to any other play. It is *Hamlet* that Fielding's Partridge sees on the boards in London; it is *Hamlet* that comes up in the novels of Dickens. It is *Hamlet* that first enters into the literature of the most diverse nations."

"At school we talk for hours about why Hamlet delays killing the King. Why does he?"

"Curious question! Had Hamlet killed the King, there would have been no play. The very subject of this play, the secret of the character of Hamlet, is that he thinks before acting.

*And thus the native hue of
resolution*

Is sicklied o'er with the pale
cast of thought . . .

And it is in this that he differs from all the other Shakespearian heroes, all of whom are, more or less, impulsive men. Is it with Hamlet only a question of temperament? Is there not to be seen in his irresolutions, in the 'to be or not to be,' the effect of his long sojourn as student in Wittenberg? I have often wondered about this and have already written of it. What part did the teaching he heard in Germany play? Who were the teachers of those days that, before Kant and Schopenhauer, invited the students to metaphysical speculations, and perhaps put in

doubt the reality of the external world? What doctrines were taught in those days in German universities that encouraged in Hamlet this predisposition to inaction? Doubtless I am not the first to pose this question; I should like to know whether it has been answered."

I did not know whether the question had ever been posed or answered. I said that very likely Belleforest and Montaigne had more to do with *Hamlet* than any German influences. But that day, at any rate, Montaigne told Gide nothing about *Hamlet*. I phrased my final question:

"You speak of predisposition to inaction? Yet Hamlet does act. At

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times he goes even too far, as when he murders Polonius. . . . ”

“ . . . Thinking he is killing the King. . . . Yes, indeed, he does act, but in a quasi-spasmodic manner. And I believe that even from a clinical, a medical point of view, the condition of semi-aboulia, or partial loss of will-power, is admirably indicated. As soon as he has left his ruminations behind, he goes berserk. He is so badly adjusted to reality that each one of his decisive acts is preceded by a kind of trial act, a flash-in-the-pan. And nothing appears more baffling, more daring, more skillful than this time-lag, this lagging and listing that continues from scene to

scene, from one end of the play to the other. And it is already present at the very beginning, in the conversation with the ghost; then in no matter what business in which Hamlet engages, with his mother with the King, with Ophelia. . . . He first rough-hews the act. . . . Doubtless there have been Hamlets in all ages; and therefore he appears to us as the most modern of Shakespearian heroes. But now I would only be repeating what has already been said, many a time.”

When a few days later I called for Gide's approval of my translation, his secretary gave me the neatly-typed envelope containing the French and English versions. Gide had a cold that day and stayed in his room, but when he heard my voice saying goodbye at the door, he entered in his bedroom slippers. He looked like a grandfather, but, with that admirable head, not just anybody's grandfather, but one conceived by the mind of Virgil or Henry James.

“Don't go before I tell you this little story,” he said. “Once I bade an American goodbye, hoping to see him again. The American never returned. Meeting him in the street one day, I asked him why. ‘Oh,’ said he, ‘goodbye is goodbye.’ ‘But,’ I said, ‘you have no word in English for *au revoir*.’ ‘Yes,’ said the American, ‘we say *So long*.’” So Gide shook my hand, and said: “So long!”

Philip Roddman

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