voir in Correspondance Générale Divers
Lettre de Montgomery Belgion

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DR. GIDE AS TRANSLATOR

14 June 1947

SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet.* Translated into French by André Gide. Paris: Gallimard.

ANDRÉ GIDE: *Thésée.* Paris: Gallimard.

The honorary doctorate which Oxford bestowed the other day on M. Gide may be considered the return by the English of a compliment which this Frenchman has long been paying us. Although he is at home in German, and looks on Goethe as one of his masters, ours is the alien literature to have really captivated him. If we have now gracefully recognized the unemphatic virtues of an impeccable prose, he, in the intervals left by many years of original composition, has acknowledged his enthusiasm for the English literary imagination by putting into his own words writings as diverse as *Antony and Cleopatra, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* a novel of Joseph Conrad's, and Mr. T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding.* The diversity is not the result of mere chance or impulse; it is as much due to the stylist's need of varying the problems which he takes up for exercise.

One such problem seemed beyond him. It is more than eighteen years ago that he first tackled *Hamlet* and stopped in exhaustion after having rendered the first act. This had cost him, he says, more effort than all five acts of *Antony,* and in comparison with *Hamlet* he finds every Shakesperian play, with the possible exception of *Troilus,* limpid as water from the rock. But for the translator into French—a language exacting, clear, precise and prosaic—to be confronted with the complexity of *Hamlet* in stating the simple, and with its ambiguities, traps and snares, proved a challenge he could not for ever resist. It is true that at least three French versions of the play had been made in the previous half-century. Yet, as a recent French analyser of *Hamlet* has pointed out, each of the previous translations was the expression of a desire to approximate more closely than any one before to "the poet's thought," whereas Shakespeare, M. Gide insists, is not a thinker but a poet. He therefore felt that it remained to attempt the reproduction of the poetic soaring. Moreover, he considered that the French stage was entitled to a version of *Hamlet* it is possible to act and one that can hold and yet not fatigue an audience. So he picked up his translation again and completed it. Its successful run in Paris last autumn is the best testimony that his aims are not unfulfilled.

Nor should the French be alone in welcoming a prose translation on which unremitting thought and care have evidently been lavished. An English reader also may be glad M. Gide ultimately triumphed over a task which once defeated him. An English reader will not complain that, in subordination to the intent of recapturing the Shakespearian tone and sweep, the lines allotted to the players in the second and third acts have been curtailed, at the same time as they have been contrasted with the rest of the text by being rendered in intermittently rhymed verse. Possibly he will not even notice that the first speech in this verse contains deliberate, yet surely inappropriate, echoes of Racine's most famous line. It will be enough for an English reader that numerous familiar passages of *Hamlet* seem to acquire in this French dress a new vividness and clarity.

Racine inevitably comes to mind again in a reading of the last chapter of *Thésée,* a work which was written in Algeria during the German occupation of France. But it is only in that chapter and obliquely that the subject of Racine's *Phèdre* is mentioned. If *Thésée* is in its way a translation also, it is not, as that of *Hamlet,* one of language: it is the translation of a legend into the author's attitude of mind. In it he has sought to be true solely to his own theories of evil and self-fulfilment. When Theseus lost his son Hippolytus after having credited Phaedra's tale that it was the boy who had a passion for her, the bereavement was, according to M. Gide, the price he owed the gods for his earlier successes and his hubris. The story of the successes forms the substance of the little volume. It is an extended apologue reminiscent of the early *Le Retour de l'Enfant prodigue.*

The character of Theseus first fascinated M. Gide many years ago. It is misunderstood, he wrote then, by anyone who imagines that it was inadvertently that the bold hero left the black sail hoisted on the ship that brought him back to Greece, the fatal black sail that caused his father to throw himself into the sea and leave vacant the throne for Theseus to ascend. Likewise now and here, in the short autobiography which Theseus is to be supposed as having meditated writing for the enlightenment of Hippolytus and as having proceeded with notwithstanding the latter's monstrous death, he declares that the first and most important conquests of men must be won over the gods. Having briefly told of much prowess as a boy, he describes how he went to Crete in order to free Athens from the annual tribute to the Minotaur. He was then full of assurance, strength and deceit. His resource in subterfuge is indeed what gives salt and significance to his adventures, his circumvention of the love with which he inspires Ariadne, his own passion for Phaedra and his successful expedition into the maze. It remained for M. Gide to disclose to the world that the chief protection of the maze consisted in neither barriers nor ditches, but in vapours that paralysed the will.

(Montgomery Belgion)