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Thésée

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.