

# PALUDES AND THE QUESTION OF NARRATIVE ORIGINATION

David R. Ellison

What does it mean to celebrate the legacy of a literary work? In Latin, the verb *legare* has two principal meanings: 1. to appoint a person, to delegate authority to someone; 2. to bequeath or leave property to someone (*Cassell's New Latin Dictionary* 340-41). In French, the noun *legs* means "aliénation, don, donation, libéralité," and is used most often in the situation of a gift from donor to recipient, or from one generation to another in an inheritance (*Le Petit Robert I* 1083). What should be noted from these definitions is the fact that a legacy is something that binds us to an object in the past while giving us this object to enjoy in the present. But the act of transmission itself is not unproblematically transparent, as the term "aliénation" suggests: the gift, in travelling from hand to hand through time, loses its status of belonging, is pulled or wrenched from one hand to the other, can become mine only if it is no longer his or hers. One sees the interesting linkages to be made, in French, between "aliénation" in the sense of legacy and two other senses of the word -- "aliénation mentale" and "aliénation" understood as the translation of Hegelian/Marxian *Entfremdung* -- both expressions implying a fundamental and violent loss of self.

It is singularly appropriate to have chosen *Paludes* as legacy-work, not so much because it has been one hundred years now since its publication, but because Gide, in his short prefatory note to this *soit*, presents the problem of literary interpretation (or, let us say simply, of reading) in much the same way that the problematic of the legacy emerges from a reflection on its etymology and diverse definitions. Indeed, in writing "Avant d'expliquer aux autres mon livre, j'attends que d'autres me l'expliquent" (*Paludes* 11), Gide suggests that the work of literature, when written authentically, is an act of collaboration in which the reader supplies meanings, many of which may have been unintended by the author. The work *Paludes*, in passing from Gide's hands to mine (or yours, or ours), is no longer Gide's, but that is good -- good precisely because the Christian *fond* of the writer's thought is not to be underestimated, ever. Thus, while the notion of "aliénation" as *Entfremdung* is linked to an ultimate *Aufhebung* (lifting, *relève*) in a dialectical synthesis, in the case of Gide, the part of the literary work that has gone into its meaningful totality without the author's conscious knowledge is called here "cette part d'inconsient, que je voudrais appeler la part de Dieu" (*Paludes* 11). What is always lost to the author -- those meanings he did not know he placed in his book but

which are there, nevertheless, thanks to the intrusive hands (or eyes) of the reader -- ultimately emerges within the latter's interpretive consciousness: "aliénation" is thus a mere temporary loss soon to become a gain in the "accueil" reserved by God to man, or by the reader to the writer: *qui perd, gagne*, the last shall be first, a very Christian thought.

But how does a loss become a gain, in literature? I will suggest, today, that this happens *narratively*, through a certain play (*jeu, Spiel*) with beginnings and endings. I will get to this point -- the "point of my paper" -- a bit later on, but wished to raise it now, if only in the playful manner of *Paludes*, by saying "I am writing this paper" to people who might wonder if, indeed, I am doing any such thing. The preliminary point I would like to make at this early stage is that Gide's prefatory remarks are not simply to be taken as an apologia for the reader's interpretive liberty vis-à-vis the polysemic or even "undecidable" text -- which would mean that Gide's legacy to us would be essentially his foreshadowing of a certain experimental or "postmodern" literature<sup>1</sup> -- but that the praxis of *Paludes* is to be understood as an artful elaboration of the giving and taking of meanings from writer to reader, wherein literary reception implies not a gratuitous freedom, but the generosity of an *accueil*: Michelangelo's Adam receives the gift of life from God lying down -- *recubans*, a crucial word in *Paludes* -- and lying in the flatlands, as we learn throughout the text, is a complex form of action/inaction worthy of further study.

Indeed, if there is one interpretive problem that all readers of *Paludes* need to face, it is that of the activity and/or passivity of the protagonist -- a problem that Gide poses with humor in the very first pages of the text. In fact, it is this particular, thorny problem and the way in which it is handled rhetorically by the text's various characters that provides what one might call the "motor" of the *soûe*, its *modus operandi*. When the protagonist first visits Angèle, she enumerates in some detail all of Hubert's activities (membership in industrial companies, co-directorship of an insurance agency, multiple charitable occupations, passion for the hunt), then asks the writer:

"Et vous! vous, qu'est-ce que vous faites?"

"Moi! répondis-je un peu gêné, -- j'écris *Paludes*."

"*Paludes*, qu'est-ce que c'est?" dit-elle." (18)

Angèle's question as to the nature or content of *Paludes* engenders the first of a number of similar dialogues that run through the text like the proverbial Goethian "red thread": each time this question is asked,

the answer differs, and it is from the variety of answers that the text's Protean essence emerges (or, according to many of the protagonist's skeptical interlocutors, it is this variety of responses that testifies to the putative text's abysmal confusion). But let us look for a moment at the underlying problematic of the first two lines of the dialogue cited above. First, Angèle is implying that writing is *not* action: the protagonist, in creating *Paludes*, is not doing anything, really. Now one postmodern way of interpreting Angèle's implicit criticism of her friend would be to say that she is a Philistine: she is one of those uninitiated unfortunates who do not understand the self-reflexive nature of writing or, for that matter, the hard work that goes into literary creation. But this kind of interpretation misses the deeper irony of the Gidian dialogue. In fact, of course, in the strictest sense, when the protagonist answers Angèle's question -- "qu'est-ce que vous faites?" -- his response, "j'écris *Paludes*" -- is not correct, for the simple (but important) reason that *when he answers the question he is not writing 'Paludes' but answering a question about 'Paludes'* -- and in this moment he may be farther removed from textual work than at any other time. All further and future "definitions" of *Paludes* derive from this initial differential space between the question "what are you doing?" and an answer which is not an answer, or, let us say, an answer that is both false and uninformative. When the writer says "I am writing *Paludes*," since he is *not* in fact writing *Paludes* at the time, the reader (all of us, in other words, readers and critics) can never know if writing is or is not an *activity*. But this is a non-trivial problem, because it can be argued that the text as a totality is "about" whether writing can or cannot be considered an activity.

The entirety of *Paludes* is constructed (or appears to be constructed) around three central polar oppositions: writing/action; inside/outside; and immobility/movement, it being understood, of course, that these sets of oppositions relate quite closely to each other. Thus, to simplify to the extreme: the protagonist is a writer who, throughout the book we read as *Paludes* (the book published under that title in 1895 by André Gide), seems to wish to prove his social worth by constantly explaining his in-progress book to his friends and literary colleagues, his reiterated explanations having as their central purpose the establishing of writing as valuable and relevant activity. And if writing is an activity, then the stark oppositions between inside and outside, immobility and movement, do not hold. Indeed, the writer might argue (and does argue, on a couple of occasions) that the fictional representations of which his text is composed give a truer account of exterior reality than one could gain through simple

experience (or mere "living in" that reality), which would mean that one of the main ways we gain knowledge of the world -- the physical displacement of travel -- cannot be considered superior to supine contemplation and satisfaction with one's limited marshy field.<sup>2</sup> If one takes seriously one of the text's most visible threads, that of the wisdom inherent in the reclining position, one could be tempted to read *Paludes* not so much as a forerunner of the *nouveau roman's* formal and self-referential reflexivity, but rather as a playful late version of Montaigne's cautionary "De la diversion" and Pascal's devastating meditation on "le divertissement" -- the human, all-too-human need to escape oneself by constant movement outwards, by voyaging instead of reclining. Thus, for the reader of the later Gide, the frenetic travel of Michel and Marceline in the last section of *L'Immoraliste* and the mixed-up peregrinations of the badly-assorted "couples" in *Les Faux-monnayeurs* are undercut from the start, revealed already in their pathetic inanity. Biskra and Saas-Fée stand as signs of the human being's inability to face himself *sur place*.

If the literary work is not to succumb to the dispersal of self that is characteristic of the human being's incessant search for diversion, the first thing (the fundamental, foundational thing) it must do is to *inaugurate itself, to begin*. It must establish a narrative beginning. But Gide, already in 1895, is acutely aware of the difficulty of any originating act, and expresses this fact most cogently in a late conversation between the protagonist and Angèle, after the short and unsuccessful "trip" they undertake together. When, in a despondent moment, the protagonist expresses his *ennui* with *Paludes*, Angèle suggests that he simply drop the project, that he "leave it" and move on to something else, to which he responds:

Angèle, Angèle, vous ne comprenez pas! Je le laisse ici; je le retrouve là; je le retrouve partout; la vue des autres m'en obsède et ce petit voyage ne m'en aura pas délivré. . . . Ne pourrions-nous jamais poser rien hors du temps -- que nous ne soyons pas obligés de refaire. -- quelque oeuvre enfin qui n'ait plus besoin de nous pour durer. -- Mais de tout ce que nous faisons, rien ne dure sitôt que nous ne l'entretenons plus. Et pourtant tous nos actes subsistent horriblement et pèsent. Ce qui pèse sur nous, c'est la nécessité de les refaire. . . (132)

How can there be an act of origination so strong, so authentic that it does not immediately succumb to the *usure* of habit, of mechanical

repetition? *Paludes* must have already been begun, since it is impossible for its author to disengage himself from this ubiquitous work. The distraction of travel is only a temporary and futile effort to forget the work-in-progress. What Gide raises here is the difficult, paradoxical question of the transitory and/or permanent nature of artistic creation. The writer of *Paludes* cannot escape *Paludes*, which is "around every corner," so to speak. At the same time, however, he despairs that *Paludes* will have any lasting value: "Rien qu'on puisse laisser derrière soi, disant: CELA EST" (133). The literary work, viewed in this way, can only be described in a paradoxical formulation, as an *act of uncertainty, an uncertain act*. *Paludes* will have always begun, but its beginning is unsure, its traces obsessively left behind but also not durable.

Is *Paludes* a work at all, in any sense? On one level, one has to say that it is for the simple reason that, at the end of the book we read as *Paludes*, the author of *Paludes* "concludes" his text and moves on to another one, entitled *Polders*.<sup>3</sup> In the most basic narrative terms, this would mean that "progress" has taken place, that we have moved from point *a* (the writing of *Paludes*) to point *b* (the writing of a different work, called *Polders*). But the question is whether *Paludes* has ever been written at all, or merely talked about and, occasionally, cited. The intelligent perversity of Gide's literary gamesmanship consists in ending a work that may have never begun.

To conclude this brief article (or rather, in Gidian terms, to "leave" it before it has a chance to become another article), I would like to point out, in passing, an uncanny similarity between one sequence in *Paludes* and the Overture or "Incipit" of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* -- a similarity within difference that may help to illuminate both Gide and Proust in their respective efforts to inaugurate literary texts. The passage from *Paludes* occurs at the end of the chapter entitled "Le Banquet" and is a description of the protagonist's hesitation between wakefulness and sleep, that very hesitation with which (or within which) the *Recherche* begins. The Gidian passage begins thus:

Je ne sais plus ce que je voulais dire. . . ah! tant pis; j'ai mal à la tête. . . Non, la pensée serait perdue, -- perdue. . . et j'y aurais mal comme à une jambe de bois. . . jambe de bois. . . Elle n'y est plus: on la sent, la pensée. . . la pensée. . . -- Quand on répète ses mots, c'est qu'on va dormir; -- je vais répéter encore: jambe de bois, jambe de bois. . . jambe de. . . Ah! je n'ai pas soufflé ma bougie. . . Si. -- Est-ce que j'ai soufflé ma bougie? . . . Oui, puisque je dors. (95)

And in Proust's case, we have:

Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: "Je m'endors." Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles-Quint. (*A la recherche du temps perdu* 3)

Both passages are constructed on an initial uncertainty: is the writer awake or asleep? And both texts "demonstrate" that it is impossible to know which is true; or rather, both illustrate a protagonist drifting in and out of consciousness, alternately experiencing the light of rationality and the dark of the dreamworld. What is interesting, however, is that the Gidian and Proustian meditations, having begun similarly, diverge notably in their concluding moments. The protagonist of *Paludes* dreams that he is imprisoned in a labyrinth of narrow corridors from which there is no escape, and the anxiety of the dream causes him to wake up: in other words, the uncertain and uncanny dream visions find no outlet, but combine to drive the protagonist back to rational consciousness, back to the four walls of his room. In Proust's case, however, the vertiginous alternation between certainty and uncertainty ends not with anxiety, but with the triumph of certainty:

Certes, j'étais bien éveillé maintenant, mon corps avait viré une dernière fois et *le bon ange de la certitude* avait tout arrêté autour de moi, m'avait couché sous mes couvertures, dans ma chambre, et avait mis approximativement à leur place dans l'obscurité ma commode, mon bureau, ma cheminée, la fenêtre sur la rue et les deux portes. Mais j'avais beau savoir que je n'étais pas dans les demeures dont l'ignorance du réveil m'avait en un instant sinon présenté l'image distincte, du moins fait croire la présence possible, *le branle était donné à ma mémoire*. . . . (8-9; my emphasis)

The fundamental, foundational difference between Proust and Gide is that the former postulates (with undeniable humor, a humor that is not always noted by his earnest critics) the *deus ex machina* of a "good angel of certainty" whose role is to intervene from on high, to dispel the uncertain transitional state of dream/wakefulness so that memory might be put into movement -- in other words, *so that narrative as such might originate from within the totalizing power of memory*. Gide, who is not averse, later in his career, to introducing angels into his fictional universe (one thinks of Bernard's "combat avec l'ange" in *Les Faux-monnayeurs*), refuses to do so in *Paludes*, and thereby refuses the consolation of a genial and transcendently-guaranteed beginning. If I may be permitted a playful rejoinder to Gide's own playfulness in his preface to *Paludes*, I would say the following: although the protagonist-writer tells us there that the literary work always means more than it says on the surface ("On dit toujours plus que CELA"), I would say that is also, equally true that *Paludes* says "toujours moins que CELA" -- the "CELA" being that unfolding of meanings that both did and did not take place in a work that, having not really begun, will have been read with delectation.

University of Miami

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> At the "Rencontres André Gide" held at the Collège de France in 1970, Pierre Albouy noted the proximity of *Paludes* to the *nouveau roman* and to the self-reflexive nature of contemporary literature. His paper was published two years later in the *Cahiers André Gide* as "Paludes et le mythe de l'écrivain." Albouy finds in *Paludes* a meditation on "the myth of the writer": "cette inquiétante apparition de l'écrivain . . . , cette liberté, cette ligne de fuite, ce mythe de l'homme-écrivain et du monde-écriture à perte de vue" (Martin 63). The "modernity" of *Paludes*, or even its "postmodern playfulness" are now commonplace expressions to describe this *sortie*. For important recent interpretations of *Paludes* that emphasize its textual and intertextual complexities, see Monique Yaari and Françoise Calin.

<sup>2</sup> It is common currency in Gide criticism that *Paludes* needs to be read as a "negative" of *Les Nourritures terrestres*, which was probably begun before *Paludes* but appeared two years later, in 1897. It is often said that *Paludes* is a parody of the stifling atmosphere of Parisian

intellectual life during the 1890-95 period (and most notably of symbolism and decadence). Gide, having returned from Africa, depicts Tityre as being bogged down in the Parisian hothouse, which contrasts dramatically with the sunny freedom of Biskra and related sites. Thus, whereas the universe of *Paludes* is characterized by enclosures and a vicious circularity, *Les Nourritures terrestres* is an invitation to openness and freedom. One should be careful not to reduce *Paludes* to a mere negative of *Les Nourritures terrestres*, however. Living in the reclined position affords a certain perspective that is not without its benefits, and it can be said that *Paludes* offers a useful *contrepoids* to the exuberance of Gide's later lyrical work.

<sup>3</sup> One of the best close readings of *Paludes* that respects the text's structure and narrative strategies is that of G.W. Ireland, who finds that Gide's *sotie* designates its own "insufficiency" as text by announcing the forthcoming *Polders*. The very term "polders," according to Ireland, promises a turn from the stagnation of *Paludes* to a later fruition: "And what are polders but reclaimed marshlands that have been rendered fruitful?" (*Ireland* 118).

### WORKS CITED

- Albouy, Pierre. "Paludes et le mythe de l'écrivain." *Cahiers André Gide* 3 (1972): 241-51.
- Calin, Françoise. "Paludes, le flottement du sens et l'infini des mots." *La Revue des lettres modernes* 1033 (1991): 121-38.
- . "Une occultation révélatrice: Le paratexte de *Paludes*." *Australian Journal of French Studies* 25.3 (1988): 247-60.
- Cassell's *New Latin Dictionary*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1959.
- Gide, André. *Les Faux-monnayeurs*. Paris: Folio-Gallimard, 1987.
- . *Les Nourritures terrestres*. Paris: Livre de poche-Gallimard, 1967.
- . *L'Immoraliste*. Paris: Folio-Gallimard, 1989.
- . *Paludes*. Paris: Folio-Gallimard, 1980.
- Ireland, G.W. *André Gide: A Study of His Creative Writings*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Le Petit Robert 1: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*. Paris: Le Robert, 1984.
- Martin, Claude. *La Maturité d'André Gide: De "Paludes" à "L'Immoraliste" (1895-1902)*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1977.

- Montaigne, Michel de. "De la diversion." *Oeuvres complètes*.  
Comp. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat. Paris: Pléiade-  
Gallimard, 1962. 808-17.
- Pascal, Blaise. "Divertissement." *Oeuvres complètes*. Comp. Louis  
Lafuma. Paris: Intégral-Seuil, 1963. 516-18.
- Proust, Marcel. *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Ed. Jean-Yves Tadié.  
Vol. 1. Paris: La Pléiade-Gallimard, 1987.
- Yaari, Monique. "Osмосе ou parodie: une lecture intertextuelle de  
*Paludes*." *French Forum* 10.3 (1985): 325-37.