

The meaning of freedom:

The Vatican Cellars a hundred years on

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How to live? How to reach meaning? Such questions tend to provoke a response of fragments.

Four hundred years ago Blaise Pascal held that the human being's only answer was through the love of God. By the nineteenth century Søren Kierkegaard proposed a deep individual subjectivity, backed up by submission to the divine. For Jean-Paul Sartre a hundred years later, God had vanished: the individual must encounter themselves in the world and define meaning out of their own actions.

Together, these three are often taken to be representative respondents to the question of existential meaning. But in the summer of 1914 another French novelist offered his answer. In *Les Caves du Vatican – The Vatican Cellars* – André Gide had no recourse to God or to the tone of his previous work. In fact *The Vatican Cellars* was partly a reaction against his reputation. In his journals of July 1914 he recalls meeting a rich and titled admirer of *Strait is the Gate*:

‘At each compliment she pays me, I feel like sticking my tongue out at her or shouting, Shit! “You so delicately depicted spiritual solitude... you have discovered a new psychological law that no one had ever stated before”

And it goes on and on.... It was time to write the *Cellars*.¹

When it was first published pseudo-anonymously, Gide's story – we would call it a novel but he preferred 'sotie', originally a medieval satire in which the actors mocked authority, often the Church's – surprised his friends and alienated his critics. Critics on the Catholic right attacked him for the book's attitude to the established Church, but many more were appalled by his nihilism, given shape in the book's hero Lafcadio Wluiki and particularly his motiveless murder of a fellow train passenger

Gide had found the perfect vehicle to make mischief. He sensed that he had mastered a new story and a new way of telling it. Commercially *The Vatican Cellars* was not a success, but its initial failure was in proportion to its newness and its significance. Several years after it was published he wrote in his *Journals*,

'I have scarcely known, throughout my 'career', anything but flops; and I can even say that the flatness of the flop was in direct ratio to the importance and originality of the work, so that it was to *Paludes*, *The Fruits [of the Earth]*, and *The Vatican Cellars* that I owed the worst ones'

(15 July 1922)

The Vatican Cellars may have been an affront to polite readers, but Dadaists and later Surrealists admired its anti-bourgeois, anti-literary values (although Gide later complained that

¹ *Journals* (translated by Justin O'Brien), vol. II 1914-1927.

just because he had written a book they liked did not make him a Dadaist). It was a basis of his work that ‘each of my books turns against those who were enthusiastic for the preceding one’ (*Journals*, 24 June 1924). People should take each work for what it was: a piece of art.

But the Surrealists at least saw part of the book’s intention, which was to excavate a deep social and psychological underground beneath the clichés that seeped into public behaviour and paralysed individual freedom. The cellars under the Vatican represented that cavern perfectly.

For Gide the cellars have an allusive part to play in the imbroglio of his plot, but their main purpose is to encompass everything that is mysterious, unworked-out and unspoken in the conventional world above ground. The ambiguities of his French title (the Latin ‘*cave*’ counselling caution, the slang French ‘*cave*’ meaning ‘coward’) begin the reader’s journey into a several-sided account that is part anti-Catholic satire, part farce, part thriller and part provocative extravaganza, about those suppressed mysteries at the start of the modern era.

A curiosity of the novel is that almost all its characters are members of the same family by blood or marriage. And *The Vatican Cellars* is a deliberately familial story. It exploits a confused comedy of family relations while it simultaneously explores the disasters of illegitimacy, rejection, fratricide and incest that individual family members visit on each other. The only two significant characters who do not belong to the family are the swindler Protos and Carola, a prostitute and Lafcadio’s former lover. They stand for the world’s spare capacity for evil and good: they are able to catalyse a chain of events, but its deepest reverberations always occur inside the family.

Lafcadio's adventures are only a part of the farrago of *The Vatican Cellars*, onto which Gide delightedly overlays a chaotic sort of reality where everything that happens could happen – just.

The factually true basis of Gide's narrative gave it strength. A series of reported events dated back to 1892 when, in Lyon in southern France, a trio of confidence tricksters started a rumour that Pope Leo XIII had been incarcerated in the Vatican's cellars by a group of cardinals sympathetic to the freemasons, and that a false pope was sitting on Saint Peter's throne. The supposed incarceration, recounted to gullible Catholics in great secrecy, was used to extort money from them that was allegedly to finance a 'crusade' to restore the true pope.

Gide was struck by the story's farcical potential, but the catalyst for writing a fictionalised account of the swindle may have been the attempt on his soul by his friend Paul Claudel, a devout Catholic, in 1905.

The swindle and bogus crusade unfold in parallel with the biography of the mysterious Lafcadio. The network of family connections that links the stories both confirms and undermines the family's integrity. When Lafcadio's father, Juste-Agénor Baraglioul, summons his illegitimate son to his deathbed, he concludes with the axiom, 'My boy, the family is a great and closed institution. You'll never be anything but a bastard.' Simultaneously characters who are interrelated by legitimate blood and marriage are helpless to control the consequences of their slightest acts on other members of the family. The family is a non-linear system – and Gide shows how, as family members, we are vulnerable to events. We can spend our entire life playing the family game by one set of rules, and at any moment discover that it is taking place according to another.

The modernity of Gide's *sotie* is not confined to his understanding of the family as a chaos-generating system. The story was widely misunderstood on its first appearance because conventionally minded readers missed that, as in a fairytale, he had given the narrative its own internal logic by paring down the story, compressing the dialogue and switching from scene to scene with such speed that improbabilities were dissolved in spontaneity. It is not a particularly linear narrative, but a more modernist creation, built from intersecting planes of different perspectives to provide the significance or turbulence Gide was looking for.

First there is the atheist Anthime Armand-Dubois, along with his Catholic brother-in-law Count Julius de Baraglioul. Then Lafcadio appears – his behaviour will take the novel, and family relations, in a new direction.

Gide's third plane of narrative begins with the Comtesse de Saint-Prix, Julius's devout widowed younger sister. When the priest Fr Salus visits her with an urgent secret request for financial help to rescue the pope, the plot is set. Salus of course is Protos, leader of the swindlers' gang, and his interview with the Countess is the first of Gide's extended jokes at everyone's expense, Catholics, freemasons, rich and titled ladies.

It is also the prelude to the novel's central comedy, as the Countess rushes to tell her sister-in-law Arnica Fleurissoire, which results in the pious Amédée's departure for Rome to save the pope singlehanded.

Amédée Fleurissoire's comic treatment is harsh. But Gide risks readers' resentment in order to reveal how we are unable to see reality clearly.

From the start, there is a hint of misplaced virility in Fleurissoire's mission to deliver the imprisoned pope. Bound by inept ideas of virtue to embark on an unconsummated marriage, he rushes to Rome like the hero of a chivalric romance. Virtuous as a friend,

virtuous in his religious crusade – twice directed by the doctrine of his faith, he twice misunderstands himself.

The Rome section of the novel – the most comic and fantastic plane of Gide's reality – is titled 'The Millipede': the codename of the conspiracy set up by Protos. The millipede, in the person of Protos and his associates, ubiquitous and irresistible, is for Gide however not some personification of Satan, but an expression of our existential vulnerability. Reality is not the world as it appears to Amédée Fleurissoire (or us). Reality in Gide's view is created moment by moment, coming into being (or failing to) in the actions we take (or don't) to confirm our existence.

Now Gide begins to draw together the planes of his narrative. As the overturning of Amédée's sense of reality continues in Rome and then in Naples, he enters a world of misperceptions, coincidence – and gratuity. He enters Lafcadio's compartment to get away from another traveller. Lafcadio is on his way to Brindisi and his internal monologue shows him to be on the lookout for chance opportunities.

Spontaneity has already shown Lafcadio capable of good actions, as when he rescues a young mother's children from a fire. He has also committed the odd modestly bad act. But the sap of moral relativism is rising in him: he considers what might have happened if he had strangled the old woman whom he kissed at the top of the hill.

As his relative from Pau ties his tie in his reflection in the window-glass, he realises that his opportunity has come. The door handle by his hand, the door swinging open, a man falling. A crime without motive.

Lafcadio is as capable of disinterested good as of disinterested badness. He is determined to taste the intensity of experience, to master events: to retain his freedom. An outsider, in the entire *sotie* Lafcadio is one of only two characters – Protos is the other – who are free of fear and limitation, when almost everyone else is comically shut off from reality by their fears and manias.

The novel's last pages describe a chaotic collision between the worlds of real and apparent meaning, and of convention and freedom, most notably when following Protos' arrest, Lafcadio confesses the crime to Julius. Julius, with his usual opportunism, points out that the presumed murderer is already in custody and Lafcadio only need confess himself to God, conveniently avoiding the law.

Honesty puts in an appearance when Julius's daughter Geneviève comes to Lafcadio's room to beg him to escape, and he announces that he will give himself up to the police the next day. When the story ends with the lovers in each other's arms at sunrise is Gide delving into immorality, approving the lovers and Lafcadio's crime? Is he offering a happy ending as fully ironic as life is: life as a loose end enlivened by desire and hope, a union of two characters denied the promise of 'happy ever after' but offered the shelter of here and now? Who knows what will become of these two waifs? 'A new book starts here.'

Lafcadio's escape from censure was another reason for Gide's critics to condemn him. His lack of explanation was felt to be particularly enraging. But how could he offer judgment or justification, without negating a central purpose of the novel, which was to uncover the imposed, convention-bound, external nature of *all* judgments?

From a narrative perspective, Lafcadio's 'gratuitous act' is a marvellous 'Stop' sign, pulling up the reader short, wrecking the novelistic chain of cause and effect. It is a *coup de théâtre*. Yet on a deeper level the *acte gratuit* is best read as a theory of possibility – a symbol of our need for liberty – rather than a real act championed by the novelist. It remains a potent concept. If the bastard is a theoretical case of pure freedom, the motiveless act is its counterpart, freedom of *action* represented in purest form. Before Gide, Bergson, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky had made free with aspects of gratuity in their work; thirty years later Sartre finally formalised his ideas on motivation.² But in *The Vatican Cellars*, with immense delicacy, Gide is already playing out the puzzle in full. Lafcadio's act, to be truly motiveless, would be without meaning, so the meaning of gratuity could not be ascribed to it. If it is to be understood by the reader as part of the novel's pattern of action, it simultaneously requires, or acquires, a motive – and is immediately purged of gratuity.

That motive, I believe, is the bastard's riposte to convention (and maybe for Gide himself the homosexual's riposte to convention): the riposte of Lafcadio, bright, resourceful, nihilistic and rich, butting like a young bull at the bourgeois world personified by credulous, pitiable Amédée Fleurissoire. Lafcadio's need for fatherly love and contact is expressed in rejection and possibly temporary delinquency. Possibly not. We cannot know. 'A new book starts here.' That new book is *the* new novel of the twentieth century, of alienation from social and formal norms; the novel of revenge against the nineteenth century.

There is one more element to Lafcadio's act. He also offers us a metaphor for the forces that lie outside ourselves. In his version of existence's gratuity – his defenestration of Amédée

² In *Being and Nothingness*.

– we glimpse the protean disorder of our universe. It is a prophetic statement in a novel written at the outset of a gratuitous century.

But perhaps we should reserve our admiration for Gide's creation of one of the first and most subtle expressions of the modernism that would shake Europe in the 1920s – and, in the episode of Lafcadio the murderer, one of the most completely expressed formulations of that revolt.

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