
H-France Review Vol. 16 (December 2016), No. 291

Anne-Sophie Angelo, *Le Sens des personnages chez André Gide*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 469 pp. Notes, bibliography, indexes. €29 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-5987-0.

Reviewed by Pamela Genova, University of Oklahoma.

In this new study, Anne-Sophie Angelo focuses her attention on the remarkably complex nature of the notion of *personnage* in certain Gide works, which she shows to be absolutely fundamental on a variety of levels in the writer's formulation of his characters. Exploring the extremely subtle differences among such significant terms as *personnage*, *personnalité*, *persona*, *caractère*, and *caricature*, Angelo aims in her work to sound the depths of the relationship between the creation of Gide's fictional characters and the degree of similarity between that relationship and his own lived experience. She accentuates what she sees as the necessary importance of the merit of autobiographical elements obvious in such figures as André from *Les Cahiers d'André Walter*, Jérôme from *la Porte étroite*, Édouard from *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, and Michel from *L'Immoraliste*, while other figures, such as Tityre and Ménélaque, borrowed from external sources (such as Virgil), display a different kind of dynamic, one in which she is less interested with regard to the purposes of the specific analysis she proposes in her new book.

Angelo situates her study in relation (and, at times, in counterpoint) to a host of earlier Gidean analyses, arguing that no book-length study has yet to appear that concentrates solely on Gide's techniques of characterization, though numerous scholars have included of course an examination of characters within a larger thematic or stylistic framework. She therefore makes clear how her interest is different from that of many who have written on Gide's fiction, such as Marie Ascarza-Wégimont, Frank Lestringant, Daniel Durosay, Elaine Cancalon, David Steel, Naomi Segal, and others. Working from the notion that Gide avoids constructing his narrative until he feels a true sense of how his characters would act and react in a variety of given situations, Angelo highlights how important (and, at times, unfortunately overlooked) the very notion of character becomes for a true understanding and appreciation of Gide's writing, even with regard to the question of the structural organization and aesthetic compositional backdrop of his books. The Gidean protagonist, for Angelo, represents a powerful narrative tool which can provide a vehicle for key aesthetic and moral ideas and a means by which to project authentic values to the author's readership. As she writes, "Le personnage permet d'organiser la perception du monde qui nous entoure non plus selon une logique des causes et des effets ..., mais selon des affinités nouvelles entre tel et tel objet" (p. 431).

The critic makes clear early on the reasons for her choice to limit her study to four celebrated Gidean texts: *L'Immoraliste*, *La Porte étroite*, *les Caves du Vatican*, and *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, in part by accentuating the difference of this specific corpus when compared with works that preceded or followed it. She explains that her investigation does not include three works that also appeared during the period on which she chooses to focus (i.e., 1902-1925), *Le Retour de l'enfant prodigue* (1907), *Isabelle* (1911), and *La Symphonie pastorale* (1919), as she identifies in the four cornerstone works she does choose a shared sense of unity and coherence, specifically with regard to the manners by which the author forms his characters, less obvious in the three texts she decides to leave aside. She writes that analysis of this

small group of texts allows readers to understand the exact problem she wishes to explore, “l’efficacité pratique du personnage qui naîtrait de l’intimité que l’auteur parvient à créer avec des personnages dont il reconnaît l’altérité et en lesquels il se dépersonnalise, et le fait que le personnage ainsi créé permettrait à l’auteur comme au lecteur d’élucider leurs propres principes éthiques” (p. 39). Or, as she also puts it, “Les personnages littéraires que Gide élabore sont en quelque sorte des personnages au second degré: des personnages littéraires représentant les personnages qui agitent le moi de leur auteur” (p. 19). One of her aims related to this idea targets the elucidation of a detailed approach to Gide’s fictional characters, considered in relation to how exactly these characters are perceived and understood by his readers.

For Angelo, Gide’s technique of creating some of the most recognizable figures of his writerly corpus centers on his manner of analyzing the people with whom he comes in contact in his daily life and creating what she names a “mode du caractère” (p. 423), a notion to be understood as a grouping of essential traits that represent the most fundamental aspects of a person, those habits, mannerisms, and tics that guide an individual in his or her own unique styles of behavior. Further, she writes of a kind of sympathy that Gide exudes towards his characters, as they face complex ethical challenges, particularly within the framework of the search for one’s authentic self. Angelo perceives Gide’s methodology as one based on multiplicity, blending moral, symbolic, and temporal elements, as the reader follows a specific character’s development along the path drawn for him or her by the author, as he underscores the trajectory that leads an individual to an important decision or action. In a way, then, the “sens des personnages” to which the book’s title refers implies Gide’s own sense of perceiving and interpreting those who surround him, the very people who become fictionalized in his work, as he molds them into imagined creatures of interest and even provocation, with the intent of capturing the attention of his readers and inviting them to examine their own sense of self—and of others—in their lives. Through the gradual unfolding of the innermost evolution of the protagonists, readers find themselves faced with important questions about how one should best read fiction, as well as about the ways in which we might judge the actions of a character, and then appreciate or condemn his or her success or failure. These decisions on the part of the reader become integral to the eventual legacy of the characters, a phenomenon that remains *hors-texte* in the cultural imaginary of French culture long after these books are published.

One distinctive means by which Gide formulates the *caractère* of a future fictional character in a novel or *récit* involves a process not unlike that of certain painters, who make several *esquisses* in a quick and informal manner, before realizing the image more fully in its final form, as a painting, sculpture, or other artwork. As an example, Angelo reminds us of Gide’s real-life observation of a young man attempting to steal a book from a *bouquiniste* stand; once the teenager notes that Gide has seen him pocketing the text, he blushes, apparently exchanges a few words with the author, and then, returns the book. Obviously, this actual experience of Gide’s, which he describes briefly in a few words in his notebook, plays a substantial role in the presentation of the critical scene in *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, in which Édouard watches the young Georges steal a book (the fictional novelist then spends three and a half pages to describe this event in his own personal journal). It is also interesting to note that Gide does not present the entire intellectual or sentimental *formation* of a specific character, but rather focuses on an important ethical moment, on a significant stage of life that proves decisive in his or her future existence. Gide does not leave us with a final determination of that existence; as Angelo reminds us, Gide can affirm that he has finished his work (in this specific case, *Les Faux-monnayeurs*) “sans épuiser son sujet” (p. 428).

Interestingly, too, Angelo suggests that Gide’s characters also reveal a good deal about the writer’s conception of literature itself, as they play a principal role in his project to come to terms with the fin-de-siècle Symbolist desire for the poetic manifestation of ideas, while they simultaneously address head on concrete reality, which had regained ground as a topic and technique of merit after the Mallarméan era had passed. Angelo demonstrates how, in Gide’s fiction, the presence of the milieu is vital in the formulation of his characters, and in the obstacles they face. Their social class, educational background,

religious stance, and the pure happenchance of their everyday lives create a situation from which they are never completely disassociated. They incarnate as well certain types, different groupings of human beings with which Gide was familiar; she gives one interesting example among others of the complicated relationship between Michel and Marceline in *L'Immoraliste*, in which Michel can be seen as a representative of that grouping of individuals for whom language itself embodies a problematic realm, particularly difficult to navigate effectively. The feelings that most strongly animate the principal players in these texts are characteristic of the growing sense of democratic individualism of the late nineteenth century—ennui, a desire for distraction, and *ressentiment*, for example. (The relationship of Gide's characters to feelings such as these represents a subject that Angelo rightly suggests could be fruitful for further research).

What is more, secondary characters often serve as a sub-group off which the primary players resonate—not unlike the design one finds in the prose of Charles Dickens or George Eliot. Within this context, Angelo also discusses the often humoristic use of characters' names (especially in *Les Caves du Vatican*, but also discernible in the other works). Understood best as what Angelo names a "géographie des personnages" (p. 426), Gide's writerly system in the prose of these books presents a variety of possible responses to a given ideological or existential problem, often obvious to the reader as early as the first time he or she encounters a character's name. Some characters clearly choose to act in a way that conforms with the image they project to others—with important exceptions, such as Édouard, or even Passavant and Strouvillou; in such a way, these figures take on the role of a character of a character. Of this dynamic, Angelo offers as prime examples Bernard at the beginning of *Les Faux-monnayeurs* and Michel throughout *L'Immoraliste*.

Yet obviously in Gide's work we do not find a return to a typical nineteenth-century Naturalist ideological stance, in which freedom of choice is absent and determinism reigns supreme. Angelo does however demonstrate the influence on Gide of such writers as Hippolyte Taine and Paul Bourget, particularly with regard to how these men take on the theoretical question of defining the character of an era; for example, of Bourget, she notes: "La méthode suivie par Bourget est double, mais procède d'un même principe: il existe des lois de causalité qui régissent l'enchaînement des manifestations de la vie des hommes" (p. 165). From this perspective, Angelo places important emphasis on how exactly the temperament of the latter half of the nineteenth century helps to form that of the generation to come, and in so doing effectively inserts Gide's concept of characterization into a larger historical framework. Yet, through the exploration of the potential of various genres (rethinking, for example, the medieval *sotie*) and through original linguistic experimentation, the author crafts a remarkably new relationship between author and character, between man and word.

Indeed, the question of language, particularly as it is presented in various types of narration, introduces an engaging discussion of the use of the first person (as in *L'Immoraliste* and *La Porte étroite*) versus that of the third person (which Gide chooses for *Les Caves du Vatican* and *Les Faux-monnayeurs*). Working from the theories of Dominique Rabaté in *Le Roman et le sens de la vie*,^[1] Angelo discusses the presence of a unique perspective, named "stéréoscopique," in which the reader of a novel is able to perceive fictional characters in a paradoxically double manner; Angelo writes: "Le personnage romanesque est saisi à la fois extérieurement (l'emploi de la troisième personne et la composition même de la narration le mettent à distance) et intérieurement (puisqu'il est possible de connaître ses sentiments les plus intimes" (p. 425). This dual perspective is significant in distinguishing a novel from a biographical or autobiographical work, and even in the two texts under examination that are written in the first person, we see how Gide makes ludic use of the vision provided the reader—one needs only to think of the extremely original figure of the narrator in *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, but the same creative construction is present in the other works, as well—particularly with regard to the play of narrative distance (between reader and characters, but also, more interestingly perhaps, between author and characters).

Not surprisingly, language itself is revealed to be crucial equally with regard to the question of how certain characters embody emblematic linguistic representatives (the Arab boys of *L'Immoraliste* or Boris of *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, for instance, either do not speak at all or speak in a particularly unusual way). Making reference to such notions as *phantasia* and *Gestalt*, Angelo also argues that the fictional characters in Gide's work allow for an appreciation of the unsuspected bedrock that grounds the structure of the entire text in question. Referencing Sartre's notion of the *analogon* in his own evaluation of the work of Gustave Flaubert, Angelo suggests that the fictional characters form a coherent ensemble, one undeniably linked to the world outside the text; for her, Gide's characters are situated between, on the one hand, symbolic ensembles, and, on the other hand, specific historic and cultural contexts, framed within an intricate system in which they set out to make their own destinies, forging for themselves futures that in no way exclude the influence of the world outside the text, a realm that includes both author and reader.

Meticulously researched, carefully annotated, very detailed in its analyses of the four texts in question, and often dense in its prose, clearly this is not a book destined for the general reading public, and unmistakably has as its target audience advanced scholars of the work of André Gide. That being said, Angelo's work does not exclude researchers from a number of other fields, such as psychoanalysis or narratology, as questions of the difficulty of distinguishing among figures such as author, narrator, and fictional character, as well as the problem of the definition of the self with regard to how one defines one's own "I" when faced with alterity, also represent meritorious aspects of her work that bring to other fields useful insights.

NOTES

[1] Dominique Rabaté, *Le Roman et le sens de la vie* (Paris: Corti, 2010).

Pamela A. Genova
University of Oklahoma
genova@ou.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172