CHAPTER TWO

Rebellion and the
"State of Dialogue"

I have never been able to renounce anything: and protecting in me both the best and the worst, I have lived as a man torn asunder. . . . The most opposite tendencies never succeeded in making me a tormented person; but made me, rather, perplexed—for torment accompanies a state one longs to get away from, and I did not long to escape what brought into operation all the potentialities of my being. That state of dialogue which, for so many others, is almost intolerable became necessary to me. This is also because, for those others, it can only be injurious to action, whereas for me, far from leading to sterility, it invited me to the work of art and immediately preceded creation, led to equilibrium and harmony.

Gide’s Journals

1. The Huguenot Anti-Ethic of André Gide

The work of André Gide, and The Immoralist in particular, would seem to afford a strategic entry upon our subject. Indeed, this novel fits my categories almost too readily—so readily as to impugn its aesthetic quality as a uniquely constituted work of fictional art. We must remember, of course, that this is an early production whose many thematic overstatements and aesthetic weaknesses—its too great reliance on symbols rather than on action—all but override its values. But, frankly, it is too handy an opening wedge for me to overlook, although I should hope
that it has more serious advantages as well that will emerge as I proceed.

In its austerity of spirit and its alienating force, Gide's rebellion, for all its sensuality, is as fiercely Protestant as are the values against which it is directed. In embracing the flesh Gide must embrace also the dualism between flesh and spirit which underlies the tradition he tries to spurn even as it creates the only categories in terms of which he can spurn it. To have been born a Protestant in a devout home is an earnest beginning, and if the home is intruded into a Catholic country like France one is dead earnest in his movement toward isolation and alienation; further, to reply in scorn—directed later at his wife too as another representative of the pristine life—through an exaggerated sensuality is only to enforce the psychology of Protestantism even if the terms are but inverted; and if the sensuality itself becomes an object of rebellion by being forced, self-consciously and pridefully, to take a purely homosexual form, the retreat to the self is complete.

For Gide is enough of an artist to see both sides of the coin and to see that he could never keep it turned face down. He sees that he did not abandon but only more urgently proclaimed what Arnold termed "the dissidence of dissent" when he tried to abandon puritanism for the sensual life, indeed—from the standpoint of the world—for a perversion of (and thus, unconsciously, a revolution against?) the sensual life. He sees too that, held fast by its psychological forms, neither can he finally shake the hold of the substance of puritanism. Hence the devoutness that remains to mar—or must we not say to redeem?—the ecstasy of his most impious moments.

All this Gide sees, as Michel, his Immoralist, very largely does not. To this extent the novelist exceeds his protagonist even though, as he feared, his life and his journals clearly invite us to identify the two and to limit Gide as he has limited Michel.¹

¹ This identification ("I seemed indeed within an ace of being confounded with him") is precisely what Gide warned against in his preface:

If I had held my hero up as an example, it must be admitted that my
After all, we must remember that Michel's tale is not quite the whole of the novel, that the brief letter from the friend to his brother that encloses it creates for it an aesthetic frame, however frail and unsubstantial. The letter need not be more. It must in its attitude represent a man on the one hand normal, sensible, worldly, and thus properly shocked by the disclosures, and on the other hand suffering a sympathetic involvement with Michel so acute as to lead almost to spiritual identification with him, and yet necessarily falling crucially short of it. Beyond this general disposition there is a world of details that is largely unimportant. What is important is that, as fictional device, this frame sets Michel's first-person narration at a further remove, gives it a dramatic validity so that, though it comes to us directly, without being refracted through a sensibility, yet the few words at the opening and the close give us throughout the novel the sense of his having an intimate audience whose presence provides an echo for his every word. In short, the epistolary frame converts Michel's story into monologue. Is it too much to say that, thanks to the values this frame allows us to project upon Michel's devoted "comforters," it in effect converts the novel itself into dialogue?

Surely this is enough to separate novelist from protagonist and, despite the temptations of biography, to force us to concede that Gide sees beyond Michel, is outside as well as inside his creature—indeed may even share some of our objections to some of his tasteless effusions—even if he sees no equally "authentic" alternative to him or his way. And this is merely to acknowledge what Gide has told us about his need, as man and artist, for the "state of dialogue," a phrase that effectively sums up my earlier claim that the ethical and the tragic be delicately balanced by the author who would maintain the tragic vision both as demoniac and yet, however fearfully so, as authentic. It is Michel's

success would have been small. . . If I had intended this book to be an indictment of Michel, I should have succeeded as little . . . But I intended to make this book as little an indictment as an apology and took care to pass no judgment.
inability to move beyond monologue, to confront the self with the anti-self, that makes it necessary for a Gide to create him within a dialogistic context in order to place him for us. That Michel is a part of Gide is only proof that Gide's being is not, like Michel's, exhausted in the creation of a supposedly free, if surely wayward, self. And what is left can conduct the searching critique which, through the drama of dialogue, emerges as art.

The elements of critique arise to challenge the blatant anti-ethic in many ways. Perhaps the most admirable appears in the portions of the novel which approach Symboliste poetry, in places evoking quite literal Fleurs du Mal. The shock which shatters the "dry," complacent, duty-bound pedantry of our hero comes in the form of blood, the blood of sickness that betrays his deadness within. The hemorrhage is the lifeless man's futile answer to the healthy spurt of blood from the violent native boy. This blood is the turbulent sap of natural man: it wills life in contrast to the deadness of the scholar's history—"like plants in a herbarium, permanently dried, so that it was easy to forget they had once upon a time been juicy with sap and alive in the sun." The metaphor is an extended one, running the length of the novel. And as we see the pungent lushness of Michel's garden so indulge itself as finally to turn swamplike, almost fetid, we know that some counterstatement has been made.

Michel insists throughout that the moment of his tubercular seizure was critical for him. It is what made it impossible for him to "rise again the same as before and be able . . . to reknit [his] present to [his] past" (62). "After that touch from the wing of Death, what seemed important is so no longer" (64). "Inasmuch as I was a specialist, I appeared to myself senseless; inasmuch as I was a man, did I know myself at all? I had only just been born

2 From The Immoralist, by André Gide, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1930), p. 62. Copyright 1930, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Hereafter references to the novel will be to this edition, with the page numbers appearing in parentheses in the text after the quotation. Excerpts are reprinted with the permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
and could not as yet know what I had been born” (63–64). Thus, out of the ashes of a sickness well nigh unto death, “the authentic creature” is free to emerge. And his difference, his utter separateness from other people, is sanctioned by “the secret . . . of one who has known death,” who “moved a stranger among ordinary people, like a man who has risen from the grave” (118). Only in his brush with death does the scholar feel “along the blood,” as Wordsworth says, that he has never lived. It is surely the specific occasion of the hemorrhage that prompts and fosters the revelation. That night on the diligence it was as if the blood broke from him in its sickliness to remind him that as his life it has been contained within him all along, has been repressed and has turned foul. Now he must give way to it completely, must worship the life in it in order to keep himself from the death he has for so long been willing upon himself. The second hemorrhage, following as it does Bachir’s slight knife wound, allows Michel to compare blood with blood and to pledge himself utterly to the “beautiful, brilliant” blood of life.

The ethical, then, represented by the archaeologist’s disciplined and single-minded dedication to history’s remnants—“the terrifying fixity . . . the immobility of death”—has had to bury and keep buried the authentic which can alone answer what is demanded once the shock has struck. And so, in a distorted echo of the biblical—if not the Gidean—“If it die, death must die that life may live, death in the ethical for life in the aesthetic. Man, if he is not naturally primitive, must make himself over, must make himself into a physical work of art and, like art, must follow nature. At least Michel does, quite readily, even if he does not quite read all that nature sets before him as symbol. Nor, it must be added in passing, does he pause to distinguish between the aesthetic, pre-ethical life—that which he imitates in imitating the natural principle as it exists for the primitive—and the post-ethical, demoniac form it must take in his sophisticated perversion of it.

Michel is sometimes less aware than we of the extent to which the nature about him echoes his condition at crucial
moments, or rather the extent to which he finds and cherishes
that in nature which reflects his condition. Perhaps for this
reason he does not fully see its excesses as his own. There are
some idyllic scenes movingly described, scenes of classic balance
between freedom and restraint, without austerity as without
extravagance, neither static nor violent, and—to return to his
metaphor—compromising between dryness and wetness, between
thirst and satiety. At the start of Michel’s recovery, he discovers
an Eden that answers his first, still pure awakening of sense. It
is a fresh and yet subdued Apollonian vision that he comes upon
in his first visit to Lassif’s orchard. All is languor and yet there is
movement; there is ease and spontaneity and yet there is form
and guidance.

[The path] meanders indolently between two fairly high mud
walls; the shape of the gardens they enclose directs its leisurely
course; sometimes it winds; sometimes it is broken; a sudden
turning as you enter it and you lose your bearings; you cease
to know where you came from or where you are going. The
water of the river follows the path faithfully and runs along­
side one of the walls; the walls are made of the same earth as
the path—the same as that of the whole oasis—a pinkish or
soft gray clay, which is turned a little darker by the water,
which the burning sun crackles, which hardens in the heat and
softens with the first shower, so that it becomes a plastic soil
that keeps the imprint of every naked foot. (49-50)

To complete the idyll there is even the “almost naked” goatherd
playing his flute, who may remind us of the beautiful dreamy­
eyed boy Thomas Mann’s Hans Castorp so convincingly
dreamed of in the snow. Lassif humanizes the natural enchant­
ment his orchard holds for Michel.

I walked on in a sort of ecstasy, of silent joy, of elation of the
senses and the flesh. At that moment there came a gentle breath
of wind; all the palms waved and we saw the tallest of the trees
bending; then the whole air grew calm again, and I distinctly
heard, coming from behind the wall, the song of a flute. A breach in the wall; we went in.

It was a place full of light and shade; tranquil; it seemed beyond the touch of time; full of silence; full of rustlings—the soft noise of running water that feeds the palms and slips from tree to tree, the quiet call of the pigeons, the song of the flute the boy was playing. (50–51)

Michel learns from Lassif about the irrigation of the garden:

... [the canals] do not all run every day, he explained; the water, wisely and parsimoniously distributed, satisfies the thirst of the plants, and is then at once withdrawn. At the foot of each palm the ground is hollowed out into a small cup which holds water enough for the tree’s needs; an ingenious system of sluices, which the boy worked for me to see, controls the water, conducts it wherever the ground is thirstiest. (52)

In the weeks that follow, Michel moves toward the merely licentious and even the lawless. The key incident, in which he secretly sanctions Moktir’s theft of his scissors, occurs here. Outside, during the same interval, the rains have come, and after they conclude, Michel returns to Lassif’s garden to a very different scene:

... the stems of the plants looked heavy, sodden and swollen with water. This African land, whose thirsty season of waiting was not then known to me, had lain submerged for many long days and was now awaking from its winter sleep, drunken with water, bursting with the fresh rise of sap; throughout it rang the wild laughter of an exultant spring which found an echo, a double, as it were, in my own heart. (57–58)

Other aphrodisiac and watered lands wait upon his whetted appetites. And, perhaps surprisingly in Gide, he has ascribed to some of them the sexual properties of feminine receptivity. Michel says of Ravello, where he gave his body over to sun worship, “There, a keener air, the charm of the rocks, their
recesses, their surprises, the unexplored depths of the valleys, all contributed to my strength and enjoyment and gave impetus to my enthusiasm" (66–67). A bit later he adds:

In a hollow of the rocks I have mentioned, there flowed a spring of transparent water. At this very place it fell in a little cascade—not a very abundant one to be sure, but the fall had hollowed out a deeper basin at its foot in which the water lingered, exquisitely pure and clear. Three times already I had been there, leant over it, stretched myself along its bank, thirsty and longing . . . (70)

There too, as if in proof of the land’s sexuality, a secret, orgasmic moment comes upon him:

I turned my steps towards some mossy, grass-grown rocks, in a place far from any habitation, far from any road, where I knew no-one could see me. When I got there, I undressed slowly. The air was almost sharp, but the sun was burning. I exposed my whole body to its flame. I sat down, lay down, turned myself about. I felt the ground hard beneath me; the waving grass brushed me. Though I was sheltered from the wind, I shivered and thrilled at every breath. Soon a delicious burning enveloped me; my whole being surged up into my skin. (69–70)

But still Michel, as if heeding the lesson of Lassif’s orchard, resists the recklessness beyond all reason of utter indulgence. The arrival at his estate, La Morinière, seems for a while likely to maintain the balance of the powers at war in him. It is a land rich and luxuriant, but still mild. In this Norman country the coolness of shadows, in contrast to the African or Italian sun, offsets the symbolic significance of its incomparable wetness.

La Morinière is situated . . . in the shadiest, wettest country I know. . . . There is no horizon; some few copse-woods, filled with mysterious shade, some few fields of corn, but chiefly meadow land—softly sloping pastures, where the lush
Rebellion and the “State of Dialogue”

grass is mown twice a year, where the apple-trees, when the sun is low, join shadow to shadow, where flocks and herds graze untended; in every hollow there is water—pond or pool or river . . . (89)

 Appropriately, Michel reports that his will “seemed softened, as though by hearkening to the counsels of that temperate land” (91). They are like the counsels given by Lassif’s canals:

From this ordered abundance, this joyous acceptance of service imposed, this smiling cultivation, had arisen a harmony that was the result not of chance but of intention, a rhythm, a beauty, at once human and natural, in which the teeming fecundity of nature and the wise effort of man to regulate it, were combined in such perfect agreement, that one no longer knew which was most admirable. What would man’s effort be worth, thought I, without the savagery of the power it controls? What would the wild rush of these upwelling forces become without the intelligent effort that banks it, curbs it, leads it by such pleasant ways to its outcome of luxury? (92)

Michel, now largely under the domination of La Morinière and of its efficient representative—Charles—as well as of his love for Marceline, can well wonder, “Where had my rebelliousness vanished to?”

Of course, his rebelliousness betrays its continued presence in many underground ways. It shows itself especially in his attraction to the crude Gothic barbarism, so destructive of civilization, in defense of which he formulates his new historical thesis.

With a boldness, for which I was afterwards blamed, I took the line throughout my lectures of making the apology and

3 When we turn later to the work of Thomas Mann, we may sense echoes of this fine Goethean humanistic sentiment. There, as here, its promise is delusive, as what is hoped to be a sublimely balanced human end degenerates into a momentary meeting place for extremes that are moving apart to poles of mutual destruction.
eulogy of non-culture; but, at the same time, in my private life, I was laboriously doing all I could to control, if not to suppress, everything about me and within me that in any way suggested it. How far did I not push this wisdom—or this folly? (106)

In his life he has merely replaced his dependence on the dead past with a dependence on the alive future. He is positively and hopefully dedicated to the sap of life, celebrating fertility with a "hatred of fallow land" (98). But rebelliousness is to achieve full sway once more, and this time in a more degenerate form. His apprenticeship to Ménalque’s self-conscious demonism prepares the way. And his second major shock—the failure of his sap, the death of the fertility rite when his child dies while being born—delivers him to Ménalque’s doctrine for good. After this crisis nothing, either of past or of future, can be allowed to rob him of an authenticity always to be won anew, moment by moment.

But his reckless dedication this time—in this land of water and shadow—is perverse rather than healthy, filled with the stealth of night rather than the openness of the sun-baked day, drugged with "fumes of the abyss."

... I went back across the fields, through the dew-drenched grass, my head reeling with darkness, with lawlessness, with anarchy; dripping, muddy, covered with leaves. In the distance there shone from the sleeping house, guiding me like a peaceful beacon, the lamp I had left alight in my study, where Marceline thought I was working, or the lamp of Marceline’s own bedroom. (167)

The beckoning lamp, with all its promise of tranquillity, is the symbol of all that Michel is now shutting himself off from irrevocably, of the now totally rejected light of Marceline—and in its relation to her is appropriately religious in its connotation. It may remind us of Justin O’Brien’s enlightening suggestion that Gide’s Emmanuèle, who of course is in many ways Marceline too, may very well have borne her name because the Bible in-
terprets it as meaning "God with us." Hence it is clear that Marceline’s light must be extinguished for Michel’s complete freedom to be achieved, for the fearsome burden of his godless and thus “objectless liberty” to be assumed. Accordingly, the symbolism directs the action to its end just as it has in its development cast a crucial judgment upon the whole of that action.

There are other than metaphorical evidences of Gide’s unrelaxed ambivalence, his sustaining of the state of dialogue. The most obvious, perhaps, is the often warmly sympathetic portrait of Marceline that comes through despite Michel’s tormented distortions. But, lest we are misled by a conventional tenderheartedness, we must locate other less impressionistic clues. We find persuasive ones when we see how Michel’s attitudes and actions toward Marceline are related to his championing of “ Authenticity.”

The shock, in precipitating the creation of a thoroughly alive person, must precipitate the search for “the authentic creature,” “the old Adam” that lies hidden beneath all the counterfeit trappings of convention. The newly endowed scholar, Michel, turns, in revulsion against death, from the history of culture to the history of anti-culture as epitomized for him by his new idol, the debauched Athalaric. But he must finally reject even this portion of history since it too has already happened. Instead, he must search for what can be made to happen to himself alone:

But now the youthful Athalaric himself might have risen from the grave to speak to me, I should not have listened to him. How could the ancient past have answered my present question? — What can man do more? . . . Is there nothing in himself he has overlooked? Can he do nothing but repeat himself? (184–185)

The uniquely real, the sincere Michel must—to assert his Michel­ness—reject whatever he has in common with other people, and of course this means he must arbitrarily reject the universals of the ethical sphere, if only on principle. No price seems too great for Michel to pay for utter honesty, not even the price—at once so strangely austere and licentious—paid by his bizarre master, Ménalque.

And yet the inverted puritanism, the overrefinement of Ménalque’s demands upon him must lead us to ask how complete Michel’s liberation from the counterfeit has been or could be. For in the subversive ideal toward which Michel tries to move, the precious and the primitive are absurdly confused; and from this confusion must spring our doubts. We have seen that his embracing of the instinctual, the barbaric, and with these the lawless, is signaled by the crucial incident in which Moktir steals his scissors while Michel, thinking himself unobserved, condones the act, takes a profound joy in it. Indeed, this is the incident which later first binds him to Ménalque. And yet even at this outset of his new career, supposedly dedicated only to authenticity, there is a bewildering network of deceptions and counterdeceptions. His favorite from this time forward, Moktir is engaging in that most primitive deception, theft; Michel, in attempting to appear unaware of it, is trying to cheat the thief by not letting him know that the victim is a willing, even an anxious one; and, as we later learn from Ménalque, Moktir has given this perverse situation an even further turn by witnessing Michel’s complicity and yet concealing his awareness of it. These interrelations are echoed in the even more intricate pattern of deceptions—leading to the end of the episode at La Morinière and of all experiments with an orderly life—among Michel, Bute, Alcide, and old Bocage. This is the situation in which Michel gleefully if secretly succeeds in cheating himself several ways at once, in which, as the priggish Charles puts it, the master makes a fool of his well-intended, faithful servant. Finally, and significantly, it is the same Moktir who leads Michel out from
Marceline’s side to a final night of lawlessness as she lies dying.

From the earliest discovery of his new self, deception pervades his relations with Marceline also. Michel tells us that, as he enjoyed being unclothed in order, symbolically, to strip away his conventional self, so he had to shave off his beard as he would remove a mask, since he felt it to be utterly “false”: “... my mind had been stripped of all disguise ...” (73) Yet in the passage which immediately follows, he dwells at length and repetitiously on his need to “dissemble” to Marceline, to hide his new self so that every day he may become “falser and falser.” And seeing in this deception another aspect of lawlessness, he ends “by taking pleasure in [his] dissimulation itself, by protracting it, as if it afforded opportunity for the play of [his] undiscovered faculties” (75). It does not seem to occur to Michel—although the juxtaposition of his removal of one kind of falsehood with his assumption of another indicates that it does occur and seems significant to Gide—that there is manifest in his actions a continual irony arising from his counterfeiting his ethical relations in order to protect the development of a self whose only justification lies in its claim to validity, to sincerity.

Or is it, perhaps, that Michel has not been freed from the counterfeit at all? that he has merely substituted one form of counterfeiting for another? that immoralism demands sacrifices of authenticity as severe as those demanded by moralism? If in the earlier pages Michel speaks continually—as does Ménalque later—of the hidden wells of personality that moral man disguises, suppresses, with what sense of irony do we hear him, at the very end, after relating the death of Marceline, say, “Sometimes I am afraid that what I have suppressed will take vengeance on me” (213)? For here what he admits to suppressing is the sense of decency, the very sense that he earlier accused of suppressing the authentic creature, the creature that has now exercised its freedom as ruthlessly, and as austerely, in denying its antagonist. All of which is to suggest Gide’s awareness of the obvious fact that, while it is difficult to prove one’s utter freedom
except by breaking the law, this need to break the law—and the word need is perhaps indication enough—simply introduces another form of bondage. His asserted liberty is far too self-conscious and insistent, and of course consistent, to merit the name of caprice—of purely "gratuitous" action—which is after all what is ultimately being aimed at. But, as centuries of arguments about freedom of the will have evidenced, caprice is a pretty hard affair to establish; and an attempt to establish it will surely destroy any slightest remnant of it. Has not Michel acknowledged as much when, having asserted an unbridled freedom, he can cry, "No longer do I know what dark mysterious God I serve" (204)?

We would not, however, do justice to Gide's state of dialogue either if we merely reversed the coin; that is, if we failed to note continually that, in seeing the futilities of diabolism, he still sees, for him who would consecrate his person, no alternative to the nay-saying, to the violent upheavals diabolism requires. Yet occasionally even Michel is afforded some slight glimpse of the self-defeating, though perilous, nature of his venture, even if, to be sure, it is never a glimpse that is persuasive enough to veer him from his course. Perhaps nowhere does Michel come closer to recognizing not only the tragic but even the ineffectual nature of his choice than in the two identical moonlit scenes which just precede the two departures from Biskra. Separated by two years and, marking as they do the reversal in Michel's and Marceline's relation as invalid and nurse, these scenes help provide a structure for Michel's narrative. They return us to the very marked and even, perhaps, overaccentuated pattern of natural symbols which Gide imposes on his tale. We have seen that the enemy of sense has always been death, death in life—another term for asceticism—as well as literal death. In these scenes the new Michel almost traumatically, if rather unoriginally, realizes the limitations of his new self: that even he finally cannot deny death but can only postpone it—"... a day will come when I shall not even be strong enough to lift to my lips the very water I most thirst for" (60). This metaphor by now must be the one we would
expect to represent desire and satisfaction. And, appropriately for Gide, the diabolist turns to the New Testament, read in the moonlight, for the words of warning that confirm the ultimate inefficacy of physical, of sensual, reality.

Indeed, it is the moon—through the kind of light and shadow it creates—that is the bringer as it is the harbinger of death. It creates the two scenes that so profoundly shake Michel’s assurance. It is under its spell that “…nothing seemed asleep; everything seemed dead” (59). In recollection of the first scene he can speak of “the terrifying fixity of the nocturnal shadows in the little courtyard of Biskra—the immobility of death” (62). In the second of the scenes, with Marceline so close to death, the fatality of the moon is considerably heightened:

The moon has been up some time and is flooding the terrace. The brightness is almost terrifying. There is no hiding from it. The floor of my room is tiled with white, and there the light is brightest. It streams through the wide open window. (203–204)

And, recalling the night two years earlier, once again he echoes Christ’s words. Is it too fanciful to see the relentless moonlight as somehow akin to the “powerful beacon,” the projection of Marceline, which Michel, newly awakened to darkness, earlier rejected? After all, the austere spirituality of Marceline equally represented death to him. I have claimed that, once she is symbolized by the beckoning lamp, her extinction is thematically required, is indeed foreshadowed. And is it not to be this death, occurring very few days and very few pages after the second scene in the moonlight, that transfixes Michel in his waywardness, though it of course cannot return him from it—in effect killing his so carefully, if not cautiously, nurtured new self?

Surely, then, the inescapable moonlight does not so much forecast Marceline’s death as it does Michel’s envelopment by what is to him the deadness, the deadliness, of Marceline’s spirituality through the burden of guilt her death throws upon him. The insistent moon will follow the sun he has worshiped and end the day. From the moonlight, as from the “powerful
beacon,” “there is no hiding”: instead of extinguishing the "beacon," he has come to be bathed in it. Accordingly, having with her death achieved “objectless liberty,” he can only claim, “I cannot move of myself. Something in my will is broken” (212-213). No wonder the moonlight twice summoned up before the infidel the words of Christ. And when he beckons his three friends to hear his tale—the three who are bitterly and unjustly compared to Job’s comforters by one of them, the too scrupulous letter writer who is our narrator—Michel is doing more than allowing Gide to create a narrative frame for his novel. He is, perhaps unknowingly, carrying out the injunction implied in that utterance of Christ to Peter which the moonlight led him to read and enabled him to read:

When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands . . .

For the summons to the friends acknowledges that he is old and tired of willfulness. There is no hope in him and, surely, no real desire to return to the ethical community. He has come too far to re-enter the common stream of history. But, as has been foretold, he must make some gesture, in his desolation, toward human acceptance: with desperate trust in human loyalty and in a human sympathy that surpasses understanding, to friends whose receptiveness is indicated by our letter writer’s tone, Michel has indeed stretched forth his hands.

2. The State of Monologue in D. H. Lawrence

Those telling scenes in the moonlight may remind us of a far more brilliant and an even more obviously symbolic moon that would not be denied: the moon, mirrored in the water, which is stoned futilely by Rupert Birkin in D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love. And at the very end of the novel, as Gerald Crich wanders to his death in the endless waste of snow, the moon—it is surely
the same moon once again—makes another brief, if devastating, appearance:

To add to his difficulty, a small bright moon shone brilliantly just ahead, on the right, a painful brilliant thing that was always there, unremitting, from which there was no escape. He wanted so to come to the end—he had had enough. (527)  

But we should be well acquainted with the moon by the time it comes to preside over Gerald’s death march. In the earlier scene, even before Rupert’s stoning begins, Ursula Brangwen finds much the same meaning in the moon—and it is just about the meaning that Gide’s Michel found in it:

It was like a great presence, watching her, dodging her. She started violently. It was only the moon, risen through the thin trees. But it seemed so mysterious, with its white and deathly smile. And there was no avoiding it. Night or day, one could not escape the sinister face, triumphant and radiant like this moon, with a high smile. She hurried on, cowering from the white planet. . . . The moon was transcendent over the bare, open space, she suffered from being exposed to it. (272)

When she comes upon the moon reflected in the water she comes upon Rupert also, and the moon obviously has affected him the same way. In about two pages of breathtaking writing, Lawrence describes Birkin’s repeated attempts to stone the moon’s reflection off the pond. At first he merely disfigures it, forcing it to radiate fiery arms of light; but its center remains intact. Finally he seems for the moment to have destroyed “the heart of the moon,” to have fragmented it utterly. But of course the transformation of the coldly integral wholeness into a chaos of darting flames is momentary only. Inevitably the moon re-

---

5 From Women in Love, by D. H. Lawrence, privately printed, 1920. Copyright 1920 by D. H. Lawrence, 1948 by Frieda Lawrence. All page references are to the 1920 edition. Excerpts are reprinted with the permission of The Viking Press.
D. H. Lawrence

39

A. D. Lawrence gathers itself: "it was re-asserting itself, the inviolable moon" (274). And inevitably it is to the unbroken calm, to what Gide called "the terrifying fixity . . . the immobility of death" that the moon returns:

... a distorted, frayed moon was shaking upon the waters again, re-asserted, renewed, trying to recover from its convulsion, to get over the disfigurement and the agitation, to be whole and composed, at peace. (276)

The source of the deathliness of the moon—properly a feminine symbol—is revealed to us by Birkin early in the scene when he prefaces his attack upon the moon’s reflection with a curse upon the goddess Cybele. For he has spoken before of the cult of the Magna Mater as being all-destructive of life as it is the perverter of human sexual relations:

She wanted to have, to own, to control, to be dominant. Everything must be referred back to her, to Woman, the Great Mother of everything, out of whom proceeded everything and to whom everything must finally be rendered up. . . . Man was hers because she had borne him. . . . she now claimed him again, soul and body, sex, meaning, and all. He had a horror of the Magna Mater, she was detestable. . . . Hermione . . . in her subservience, claiming with horrible, insidious arrogance and female tyranny, her own again, claiming back the man she had borne in suffering. By her very suffering and humility she bound her son with chains, she held him her everlasting prisoner. (220)

This is even more devastatingly true of the willfully sensual Gudrun than it is of the willfully and perversely intellectual Hermione. And it is the Magna Mater in Gudrun that the panicky Gerald, stunned by his involvement with death and emptiness, needs: "And she, she was the great bath of life, he worshipped her. Mother and substance of all life she was. And he, child and man, received of her and was made whole" (384). Here is the fatality of their conjunction. How strikingly the
Rebellion and the “State of Dialogue”

consummation attained by that more fortunate couple, Rupert and Ursula, contrasts with this: “It was the daughters of men coming back to the sons of God, the strange inhuman sons of God who are in the beginning” (348, my italics). Nothing here of Woman as deity, as the source and receptacle of all. Or, to state the contrast less metaphorically, Rupert-Ursula: “She had her desire fulfilled, he had his desire fulfilled. For she was to him what he was to her, the inmemorial magnificence of mystic, palpable, real otherness” (356). And, on the other side, Gerald-Gudrun: “The terrible frictional violence of death filled her, and she received it in an ecstasy of subjection . . .” (383). “His passion was awful to her, tense and ghastly, and impersonal, like a destruction, ultimate. She felt it would kill her. She was being killed” (495). “They would never be together. Ah, this awful, inhuman distance which would always be interposed between her and the other being!” (385)

But from the beginning Gerald and Gudrun have been characterized—again in Gide-like metaphors—as “marsh-flowers,” “pure flowers of dark corruption,” as part of “the flowering mystery of the death-process,” of “dissolution” (189). Gerald, for all the power of manly life within him, is, like the Criches in general, associated with death throughout. He is discovered in the novel with the mark of Cain upon him, his sister also dies in a way that allows him to claim responsibility, and the only other death in the tale to occur before his own is his father’s. It is surely significant, incidentally, that in dying his sister strangles the young man, her would-be savior, thus in effect acting out the role of the Magna Mater. Gerald himself is driven continually—but especially as he senses death as the familial companion—by fear of “the void,” “the abyss . . . the same bottomless void, in which his heart swung perishing” (361, 375). It is this desperation which has led to the violent excesses of willfulness that characterize him. Hollow within, he has had to appropriate everything about him. Hence his role as all-dominant “industrial magnate.” When, with a surfeit of success, his keen sensibility can no longer be roused by so dull and conventional a stimulant,
nothingness challenges him and his mechanical sense of control: “He was suspended motionless, in an agony of inertia, like a machine that is without power” (296). When the brush of death nearby hastens him to panic, his will as an ultimate act seizes upon Gudrun—just the proper object—as both the enemy it must subdue and the Magna Mater in whom it must smother itself. Nor can he relinquish her and revert to the void: he dare not “stand by himself, in sheer nothingness” (496).

Gudrun has her own desperation. It also results from a mechanical acting out of her days that leaves her outside life, that allows her to think of herself as “a little, twelve-hour clock” (518). “... she lay with dark, wide eyes looking into the darkness. She could see so far, as far as eternity—yet she saw nothing” (385). So she also is an “infernal machine.” And her failure to create herself, to overcome her mechanical passivity, leads her too into defiance and to the violent exercise of willfulness. She is ready to do sexual combat to the death with Gerald, accepting him on his terms as both her master and her child. For this is the way to destroy him, to revenge herself upon him for transforming her person into instrument as they struggle on in their Sartrean way through the ruthless sexual use and abuse of each other. She succeeds, as Hermione barely fails with Rupert. Gudrun throws the gauntlet at Gerald in the wild early scene when with her unrestrained movements she maddens his bullocks, while she feels an avid sensual enjoyment of her peril and their physical nearness. She mocks Gerald’s warning that the bullocks can be deadly when they “rum” against her: “You think I’m afraid of you and your cattle, don’t you?” (186) And the identification between the bullocks and their master is furthered when she strikes him, completing the aggression she was practicing on his beasts. But it is not until the end that she maddens him to final violence, forces him to “rum” on her: “She was afraid, but confident. She knew her life trembled on the edge of an abyss. But she was curiously sure of her footing. She knew her cunning could outwit him” (515). As Magna Mater she has transformed Gerald, the would-be male principle in-
carnate, into one of his mutilated cattle—those bullocks before whose impotence she so daringly flaunted her femaleness. His death in the snow is only the official, if necessary, tribute to her victory.

It is fitting that Gerald die in the snow. He has much earlier been described for us by Birkin as "one of these strange white wonderful demons from the north, fulfilled in the destructive frost mystery," as possibly "an omen of the universal dissolution into whiteness and snow" (282). When we see his "race," with its "ice-destructive knowledge, snow-abstract annihilation" contrasted to the "sun-destruction" of the West Africans (282), we recall that this passage follows by very few pages that crucial scene in the moonlight by the pond and we understand that Gerald's "dissolution into whiteness and snow" could also be termed moon destruction. That the moon, as we have seen, supervises his death in the snow at the end satisfies our expectation that these symbols must join. Just before, during their snow-filled holiday, Gerald describes Gudrun in a way that unmistakably implicates her too in the snow imagery and its awesome meaning. In the midst of the eternity of snow, he tells the departing Birkin of his affair with Gudrun: "It blasts your soul's eye . . . and leaves you sightless. Yet you want to be sightless, you want to be blasted, you don't want it any different" (489). This is indeed "the blind valley, the great cul-de-sac of snow and mountain peaks" from which "there was no way out" (446).

No wonder the saved—if still imperfect—couple, Ursula and Rupert, feel the need to leave "the frozen eternity" (454) about which Rupert complains and which Ursula feels "slowly strangling her soul" (482).

Now suddenly, as by a miracle she remembered that away beyond, below her, lay the dark fruitful earth, that towards the south there were stretches of land dark with orange trees and cypress, grey with olives, that ilex trees lifted wonderful plumy tufts in shadow against a blue sky. (483)

But here it is worth remembering that Gide also introduces this contrast between the mountains and the south to serve a
similar symbolic purpose. Marceline's tuberculosis requires an Alpine cure while Michel's, which originally was the cause of her infection, vanished in the south. Even as Marceline begins to thrive in Switzerland, Michel, at whatever cost to her, feels the need to leave: "... my boredom became a kind of frenzy and my one thought was to fly ... so utterly sick was I of those mountain heights" (186-187). And after he persuades her and himself of the wisdom of leaving:

That descent into Italy gave me all the dizzy sensations of a fall. ... As we dropped into a warmer and denser air, the rigid trees of the highlands—the larches and symmetrical firs—gave way to the softness, the grace and ease of a luxuriant vegetation. I felt I was leaving abstraction for life ... My abstemiousness had gone to my head and I was drunk with thirst as others are with wine ... all my appetites broke out with sudden vehemence. (187-188)

In Italy Marceline deteriorates rapidly. Her lunar qualities, far more admirable in Gide than in Lawrence, cannot flourish in Michel's country. The very perfumes which the sense-worshiping Michel craved are too strong for her as, in her illness, her simple asceticism materializes in her being, or rather dematerializes—spiritualizes—her vanishing being. But Michel persists until her death.

By what aberration, what obstinate blindness, what deliberate folly did I persuade myself, did I above all try and persuade her that what she wanted was still more light and warmth? Why did I remind her of my convalescence at Biskra? (195)

In both novels the moon and the frost of a northern mountain appear to symbolize the major threat to life, except that Gide

6 This is apparently a favorite symbolic complex for modern novelists. It serves even more centrally for Thomas Mann, as, for example, in the "Snow" chapter of The Magic Mountain or in Death in Venice. And of course there is Melville's great chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" in his Moby Dick, whose title character has a "hump like a snow-hill."
is not unqualifiedly certain that the threatened vitality ought to be preserved. Michel fears possessions as Rupert fears possessiveness and as Gerald seeks both. Michel and Rupert shun the lunar and its feminine claims, fear absorption by it, and, were it only possible, would extinguish its cool, unchanging rays. But there is in it for Michel an acknowledged moral quality, however much it seeks to restrain his acknowledged licentiousness, while Rupert rather finds there only a ruthlessness of blind aggrandizement that profoundly intimidates his justly treasured freedom.

Lawrence, then, does not appear, like Gide, to have more than a single constellation of values in *Women in Love*. In the sense in which I have been speaking of Gide’s state of dialogue, Lawrence seems not to have gone beyond monologue. And, lacking the self-distrust that Gide so continually evidences, Lawrence does not here embody anything like a tragic vision. Not, I suppose, that he ever meant to or that the novel necessarily suffers for not having it. But to see, for all its similarities to Gide’s work, that it comes not to have this vision should for our purposes be instructive, though it may be irrelevant to the novel or to any judgment of it that ought to proceed from even so incomplete an analysis.

The grasp of nothingness lurks, ready for the final seizure, about all the characters in *Women in Love*, Rupert and Ursula as well as Gerald and Gudrun. Apart from occasions when, as undiscriminating “Salvator Mundi,” he is preaching his doctrine to bolster his hopes, Rupert is pretty well reconciled to universal dissolution. Before his union with Ursula there is only a single, naked, literally orgasmic moment in nature (115)—very much like Michel’s—in which he finds any meaning; and even this, we are told, demands his resignation from the race of man. Ursula herself, just before meeting Birkin in the moonlight, is deeply sunk in crisis: “One was a tiny little rock with the tide of nothingness rising higher and higher” (271). Yet Birkin, asked by Ursula whether they, like Gerald and Gudrun, are “flowers of dissolution—fleurs du mal,” replies with a forecast of their imperfect but not quite destructive union: “I don’t feel as if we
were, altogether" (189). Through the somewhat free and un-appropriating nature of their relation, Rupert and Ursula learn how, at least partially and momentarily, to keep free of the fear-some grasp. Gerald and Gudrun succumb.

It would seem, then, that despite all the ways in which Birkin’s beliefs and role in the novel are similar to Michel’s, it is rather Gerald who is the demoniac figure. And yet, oddly, it is Gerald who is the more conventional figure, who represents “solid” values, too much so for him to attain the spiritual dignity needed to render him a tragic figure. It is the Michel-like Birkin who speaks of a “life which belongs to death” and a “life which isn’t death,” of a need to be “born again” into “new air . . . that has never been breathed before” (204); who wants exceptional men, unlike Gerald, “to like the purely individual thing in themselves, which makes them act in singleness” (32). Yet Birkin’s more rigorously pursued way of rebellion is rather—despite his personal foolishness on occasion and Lawrence’s fun at his expense—in the direction of salvation. Lawrence refuses to attribute any ultimately demoniacal character to this way since it is the assumed source of values for the novel. Refusing Birkin’s rebelliousness, Gerald rather decides “he would accept the established order, in which he did not livingly believe, and then he would retreat to the underworld for his life” (393). Only one who like Gerald cannot, through organic self-creation, attain a kind of Schopenhauerian suspension of will and self-consciousness need enter the human community and then only, as an “underworld” device, to use it willfully—which is to say brutally—to control it as a mechanical sublimation for his failure. Thus Gerald and Gudrun are demoniacal because they are not rebellious enough—honestly and “livingly” rebellious—because they have not said “nay” single-mindedly enough to the way of the world. There is no aspect of life in community that can have any validity for Lawrence here: it is but the conventional mask for the sickness of willful self-assertion—also a “sickness unto death”—while there is validity, and life, only in the assertion of a mystically selfless self. Although Gide also
Rebellion and the "State of Dialogue"

corns all communal values, he does so only in constant aware­ness of the perils of defiance, the horrors it carves upon the
defier. Lawrence is surer of himself. His rebel can succeed in the
quest of his mysterious freedom to the extent that he rebels
purely, "livingly," as he rejects all shared values. There is not
even a slight moral aftertaste to bother him. . . .

"A land free from works of art; I despise those who cannot
recognize beauty until it has been transcribed and interpreted"
(The Immoralist, 199). Michel's statement is consistent with his
hatred of culture. We might expect it to reflect Gide's feelings
as well, in view of his own reaction against traditional values.
But in that we would be mistaken. We would have forgotten one
side of Gide's unyielding dualism and the austerity within him
which, at whatever cost to personal consistency, forced his self­
conscious devotion not only to art but to a rigidly classical ideal
of art. Lawrence, on the other hand, decries art as we would
expect—and in his work is true to his beliefs.

This difference between them may account for the differ­
ences between these novels. I began with a quotation from Gide
in which he cites the contradictory quality of his state of dia­
logue as a necessary condition for his art. He is holding out for
ideological self-distrust in the artist, for the doubling of his
voice. However it may mar the dramatic honesty of his report,
Lawrence is overconcerned with his one voice, trusts it too far
to allow it to share the stage with any other he would have us
hear sympathetically. If the state of dialogue is a requisite only
of the tragic vision, we can hardly insist upon it from Lawrence;
but if—through the double critique it furnishes—it is indeed a
requisite of fictional art in general, we dare be more demanding.
For is it not this state that allows The Immoralist, for all its
weaknesses, to qualify as both? . . .

But we must not push our contrast so far that we under­
estimate the imperfection of Ursula's relation to Birkin. Birkin
the talker was worthy of Hermione as Gerald is worthy of
Gudrun. And in the struggle for mastery between their wills, Birkin barely escapes Hermione with his life. His theories are better than he is, although they reveal that a part of him may be open for an alternative to dissolution. Instinctively he flees from Hermione to the soothing, orgasmic union with nature, a union that becomes a symbolic forecast of his union with Ursula, "one of the first most luminous daughters of men" (348). For Ursula, frequently spoken of as a "bud" awaiting the force that will allow her to flower, is also a daughter of nature—and of the future. Having (in *The Rainbow*) tasted the dissatisfactions of oppressively willful love and now finished with them, she is once more the youth that, in the spirit of Birkin's theories, rejuvenates him and keeps him safe from the dissolute attractions of Hermione. But as a fall from the idealized union we have seen celebrated in their first sexual act, Lawrence allows us a more honest glimpse of her later reticence:

She knew he loved her; she was sure of him. Yet she could not let go a certain hold over herself, she could not bear him to question her. She gave herself up in delight to being loved by him. She knew that, in spite of his joy when she abandoned herself, he was a little bit saddened too. She could give herself up to his activity. But she could not be herself, she *dared* not come forth quite nakedly to his nakedness, abandoning all adjustment, lapsing in pure faith with him. She abandoned herself to him, or she took hold of him and gathered her joy of him. And she enjoyed him fully. But they were never quite together, at the same moment, one was always a little left out. Nevertheless she was glad in hope, glorious and free, full of life and liberty. And he was still and soft and patient, for the time. (484)

Still, in "the quest of Rupert's Blessed Isles" (488) theirs remains, essentially, a way of hope and of life rather than a way of nothingness and of destruction. By contrast, just before his march into "snow-abstract annihilation," Gerald recognizes that in coming to the end of the line with Gudrun he must again face
the desperation out of which he originally seized upon her
demonism, clutching it to his own. So he accepts as a reflection
of himself the Gudrun-like frigidity, the nothingness of the
snow; and thus accepts death as well. Meanwhile Gudrun, turn­
ing mechanically to “the rock-bottom of all life” (474), to
“little, ultimate creatures like Loerke,” to “the final craftsman”
(503–504), has given up her life to the nothingness of snow also.

Anything might come to pass on the morrow. And to-day was
the white, snowy iridescent threshold of all possibility. All
possibility—that was the charm to her, the lovely, iridescent,
indefinite charm,—pure illusion. All possibility—because death
was inevitable, and nothing was possible but death. (521)

Gerald’s death recalls Rupert and Ursula from the warm
south to the snow that they tried to escape. And it reminds
Birkin of the dissolution theme that, thanks to Ursula, he has
almost shaken. Consequently, the novel ends in partial retreat.
Birkin muses about Gerald’s death and his own life:

Gerald might have found this rope. He might have hauled him­
self up to the crest. He might have heard the dogs in the
Marienhütte, and found shelter. He might have gone on, down
the steep, steep fall of the south-side, down into the dark
valley with its pines, on to the great Imperial road leading
south to Italy.

He might! And what then? The Imperial road! The south?
Italy? What then? Was it a way out?—It was only a way in
again. Birkin stood high in the painful air, looking at the peaks,
and the way south. Was it any good going south, to Italy?
Down the old, old Imperial road? (532–533)

It is as if Birkin remembers that, as an alternative to the way
of snow destruction, the way of the sun finally produces destruc­
tion also (282). We leave Rupert and Ursula arguing because
Rupert is unhappy over his failure to establish a complete mystic
brotherhood with Gerald. Here, perhaps, despite the dominantly
hopeful note, we almost approach dialogue and, with it, some-
thing like the tragic. As we witness Ursula's desire to monopolize Rupert, we are meant to wonder if one is ever totally free from the clutches of the Magna Mater. After all, at the crucial symbolic moment, Birkin, for all the fury of his stoning, could not keep the face of the moon from inevitably reasserting itself on the still surface of the pond.