

LETTER FROM PARIS
ANDRÉ GIDE AND HIS NEW ANTAGONIST

by WALTER BENJAMIN
translated from the German by CHARLES GELMAN

WALTER BENJAMIN
*(1892–1940) was a German
Jewish philosopher, cultural
critic and essayist. An eclectic
thinker, combining elements
of German idealism, Roman-
ticism, Marxism, and Jewish
mysticism, Benjamin made
enduring and influential
contributions to aesthetic
theory, literary criticism, and
historical materialism.*

A MEMORABLE SAYING of Renan's: "To be able to think freely, one must be certain that what one publishes will have no effect."¹ Thus quotes Gide. If what Renan says is true, then the author of the *Nouvelles pages de journal*² possesses the freedom of thought just as little as his antagonist, Thierry Maulnier,³ does. Both have a clear awareness of the effects of their writing, and both write in order to produce effects. If we grant to each the same attention, that is justified less by the importance of the younger of the two than by the decidedness with which he has taken his position in the face of a Gide and opposite him. As soon as Gide makes the communist cause his own, he has to deal with fascists.

It is not as if others would not already have beset Gide. His path has been attentively followed since 1897, when, in a celebrated article in *L'Hermitage*, he confronted Barrès, who with

1. [Ernest Renan, *Dialogues et fragments philosophiques* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1876), x. —Tr.]

2. André Gide, *Nouvelles pages de journal, 1932-1935* (Paris, 1936).

3. Thierry Maulnier, *Mythes socialistes* (Paris, 1936).

4. Today, Gide may refer back to that article. In the aforementioned volume of his diary it is said: "Was not Barrès the apologist of a certain opportune sort of justice, which today proves to be that advocated by Hitler? And was it not easy to foresee that those fine theories, as soon as they had been appropriated by someone else, might be turned against us?" [*Nouvelles pages*, 118. —Tr.]

5. The debates have been published under the title *André Gide et notre temps* (Paris, 1935).

his *Déracinés* even then was rendering services to nationalism.⁴ Later, the religious evolution of the Protestant Gide was followed in the literary world, and by no one more minutely than his friend, the Catholic critic Charles Du Bos. That Gide's *Corydon*—in which pederasty is presented according to its natural-historical conditions and analogies—caused an outcry is not hard to understand. So it came to be that Gide was accustomed to meeting with opposition when, in 1931, in the first volume of his diary, he described his path to communism.

The bourgeois commentariat reacted to that volume with a barrage of glosses and polemics. That the *Écho de Paris* (which is close to the Croix de Feu), under the pen of François Mauriac, returned three times to this one book may give an idea of the furor that Gide aroused. The debate was too diffuse, and too bitter, to remain at a consistent level. It had its intellectual highpoint in the "Union pour la Vérité," in which Gide fielded questions from a circle of significant writers.⁵ It had not yet subsided when, this year, there appeared the *Nouvelles pages de journal*.

To the extent that Gide himself was the subject of the discussion, it revolved in many instances around the question, in what mea-

sure he, with his new turn, was remaining true to himself, or else was consummating a rupture with the world of ideas that had been his in his prime. Gide was able to appeal—as he had appealed in the first volume of his diary—to the passion with which, since the beginning, he had made the cause of the individual his own: a cause that, he has acknowledged, today has in communism its appointed advocate. The latest volume of the diaries contains several notes that allow one to recognize a hidden, but not for that reason any less important, continuity in Gide’s evolution. Gide touches on this continuity when he recalls the “defense of neediness” (p. 167) that runs through his entire work. It has found the most diverse expressions and extends from the unforgettable early work *Le retour de l’enfant prodigue*⁶ to the most recent, *Les nouvelles nourritures*,⁷ in which we read: “Every exclusive possession has become repugnant to me; it is in giving that my happiness lies, and there is little that death will pry from my hands. What it will most deprive me of are goods that are scattered, natural, evading capture, and common to all. . . . As for the rest, I prefer a meal at an inn to the best laid table, a public garden to the most beautiful park enclosed by walls, a book that I have no fear of taking with me for a

6. Published by Insel in a German translation by Rilke.

7. André Gide, *Les nouvelles nourritures* (Paris, 1935).

walk to the rarest edition, and, had I to be alone in being able to contemplate a work of art, the more beautiful would it be, and the more would my dejection get the better of my joy" (p. 61).

Gide has found the most varied forms for his defense of neediness. Essentially, they all coincide with the manifestation of that need, to make which undisguisedly visible appeared to the young Marx (the author of *The Holy Family*) as the task of society: to Gide they all appear as so many varieties of the need that the human being has for the human being. If, in the course of his production, Gide has turned his attention to many forms of weakness, if he places weakness, as "a dissatisfaction of the flesh, an unease, an anomaly," at the center of his study of Dostoevsky,⁸ which is in certain respects a self-portrait, it is that he has concerned himself time and again with the one weakness that is worthy of the most extreme solicitude: that which consigns the human being to the human being.

Sometimes Gide chooses to exhibit such weakness himself. But it is not weakness that impels him to do so. It is rather expediency. He resorts to this incognito because it might teach him something about the world and about men. And so, in May 1935,⁹ he wrote: "Tolstoy's

8. [André Gide: "Dostoïevsky (VI)," *La Revue hebdomadaire* 32.7 (1923): 344. Cf. André Gide, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Arnold Bennett (New York: New Directions, 1961), 152.—Tr.]

9. [Actually, in July 1932.—Tr.]

withdrawal as an artist can be explained by the decline of his creative faculties. Had he still carried within himself some new *Anna Karenina*, then, there is reason to believe, he would have concerned himself less with the Doukhobors and would not have spoken disparagingly of art. But he sensed that his literary career was finished; his thought no longer swelled with the flux of poetry. . . . If today social questions occupy my mind, that too is because the creative demon is receding from it. Those questions occupy its place only because the other has already ceded it. Why seek to overestimate oneself? Why refuse to recognize in myself what appears to me in Tolstoy: an undeniable decline?" (*La Nouvelle Revue Française*, May 1935, p. 665.)

Here we have no wish to gainsay the author of these words—to raise the question, do the creative forces know no temporary slumbers, then? (Gide himself says in his *Nouvelles pages* that they do); is it not possible for them to go about their work in an entirely undemonic way? (*Les nouvelles nourritures* shows that it is); do they not come up against historical limitations? (Gide's *Faux monnayeurs* suggests as much in regard to the novel). We will let Gide make his way in his incognito to an instructive encounter. It is the encounter with Maulnier, who in *L'Action française* cites the sentences of Gide's quoted above and continues: "No commentary will be able to add anything to these extraordinary lines. That a creator should grant such a confession is, we believe, without precedent, and the lucidity, humility, and courage in the face of oneself that so pitiless a diagnosis demands deserve, we think, to be considered with

10. ["La sincérité giddienne," *L'Action française*, May 23, 1935. —Tr.]

respect. But we cannot content ourselves with showing respect. This tragic sincerity is rich in lessons about which we have no right to be silent."¹⁰

With these sentences Maulnier sets off on a comprehensive critique of Gide. It is a critique that casts a great deal of light on the fascist position, and particularly on fascism's concept of culture. To have betrayed "culture" and abandoned it to communism—that is the accusation that Maulnier levels against Gide's most recent work.

The development of the concept of culture appears to belong to an early stage of fascism. That was the case in Germany anyway. Unforgivably, prior to 1930, revolutionary criticism in Germany failed to give to the ideologies of a Gottfried Benn or an Arnolt Bronnen the attention that was necessary. As the latter are to be counted among the forerunners of German fascism, so Maulnier, if the "Front Populaire" did not exist, would already today be to be reckoned among the forerunners of a French fascism. It is certain that he will not escape a rapid fall into oblivion. For the stronger fascism becomes, the less use it can make, precisely in Maulnier's particular domain, of qualified minds. It is to subaltern natures that

it opens the widest prospects. It seeks out the stooges of a propaganda minister. That is why Benn and Bronnen were sent packing.

The reaction that Maulnier represents is a specifically fascist one, distinct from the Catholic reaction of a Claudel, from the bourgeois reaction of a Bordeaux, from the genteel reaction of a Morand, and from the provincial reaction of a Bedel. It finds its consociates predominantly among the younger generation.¹¹ In the older generation, committed fascists, such as Léon Daudet or Louis Bertrand, are sparse. What makes Maulnier a fascist is the insight that it is only by means of violence that the position of the privileged can still be asserted. To present the summation of their privileges as "culture": it is in this that he sees his special task. It thus goes without saying that a culture not founded on privileges is something unthinkable for him. And the principal aim of his essays is to prove that the fate of western culture is indissolubly bound up with that of the ruling class.

Maulnier is not a politician. He addresses himself to intellectuals, not to the masses. The customs prevailing among the former forbid (still, in France) calls for brute violence. Maulnier is obliged to take special precaution when

11. Cf. Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Socialisme fasciste* (Paris, 1934).

he appeals to brute violence. In fact, he is permitted only to prepare this appeal. That he does more or less adeptly when he declares that to force together internal and external reality is a matter of an "active synthesis," so long as a "dialectical synthesis" remains impossible (p. 19). He makes himself somewhat clearer with the reproach that he levels against capitalist civilization (which of course is always the object of the fascists' feigned hostility), that, faced with the material and spiritual problems that the age has set before it, it has not mustered the strength "to accept their insolubility" (p. 8).

The necessity of not furnishing any arguments against the privileged today places the writer, and especially the theoretician, before unaccustomed difficulties. Maulnier has the courage to make short shrift of those difficulties. They are, in part, of a moral sort. The advocate of fascism gains much by sweeping moral criteria out of the way. In doing so, he proves not to be very fastidious in his choice of means. It is a dirty job; the Concept cannot slip on gloves before it gets down to it. It goes perfunctorily to work—to wit, in the following terms: "Civilization . . . is the creation and ordering of the artifices and fictions that condition all relations among human beings, the system of salutary conventions, the artful, vitally necessary hierarchy in all of its greatness and all of its indispensability. Civilization is the lie. . . . Whoever is unwilling . . . to recognize in this lie the fundamental condition of all human progress and of all human greatness admits that he is an enemy of civilization. Between civilization and sincerity, one must choose" (p. 210). Thus Maulnier, in the chapter of his book that has Gide

for its target. There hangs about this dictum the same tatty luster that has already long distinguished the hackneyed paradoxes of Oscar Wilde, and one could easily trace Maulnier's words back to the latter's "Decay of Lying."¹²

One would then realize, in the first place, what dissimilar fruits the seeds of one and the same life sometimes bear. The same man whose aestheticism, the most putrescent portion of his production, is well received by fascism, at the moment that he set himself in opposition to the society that he had amused his whole life long, as one who had nothing but disdain for it, provided the young André Gide with a model that would determine the course of his later life.¹³ One would take account, secondly, of how deeply indebted fascist ideology is to decadence and aestheticism, and of why it is that, in France as much as in Germany or Italy, it finds pioneers among extreme artists.

What purpose can art be expected to have in a civilization built upon lies? It will give expression in its narrower sphere to that civilization's unresolved—and, so long as the system of private property is perpetuated, irresolvable—contradictions. The contradiction in fascist art, just like that in the fascist economy or that in the fascist state, is a contradiction be-

12. [See "The Decay of Lying," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. J. B. Foreman (London: Collins, 1966), 970–92. —Tr.]

13. Gide's *Oscar Wilde: In Memoriam*, of 1910, attests to the importance that Wilde had for him.

tween theory and practice. The fascist theory of art bears the traits of pure aestheticism: art is only one of the masks behind which there stands, in Maulnier's words, "nothing other than the animal nature of the human being, the naked and completely denuded human animal of Lucretius" (p. 209). This art is reserved for the knowledgeable, the elite, "the beneficiaries of the entirety of civilization, of which they," as Maulnier very illuminatingly says, "represent the parasites, the heirs, and the useless flowers" (p. 211). Thus do things appear in theory. Fascist practice presents a different image. Fascist art is an art of propaganda. Its consumers are not the knowledgeable but, on the contrary, the duped. Further, they are at present not the few but the many, or at least they are very numerous. It is evident, then, that the characteristics of this art do not at all coincide with those that a decadent aestheticism would exhibit. Decadence has never granted any interest to monumental art. To combine the decadent theory of art with its monumental practice is a task that has remained reserved for fascism. Nothing is more instructive than this, in itself contradictory, conjunction.

The monumental character of fascist art is related to its mass character. But by no means immediately. Not every mass art is a monumental art: neither Hebel's stories for the farmer's almanac nor Lehár's operettas are of a monumental character. If fascism's mass art is a monumental art—and it is, up to and including its style in literature—then that must have a particular significance.

Fascist art is propagandistic. Thus, it is executed for the masses. Fascist propaganda, moreover, must permeate social life in its entirety. Hence, fascist art is executed not only *for* but also *by* the masses. It might seem, then, that the masses have only to do with themselves in this art, that they come to terms with themselves in it, that they are master of the house: master of their theaters and stadiums, master of their film studios and publishing houses. Everyone knows that that is not the case. Here it is rather “the elite” who are in charge. And it is not any self-understanding on the part of the masses that they want. For if that were the case, then this art would have to be a proletarian class art, in which the reality of wage labor and exploitation would be given its due, that is, would be set on to the path toward its abolition. But the elite, in that case, would come to grief.

Fascism thus has an interest in restricting the functional character of art in such a way that no transformative effect on the class situation of the proletariat—whence comes the largest part of those whom fascist art reaches and a smaller part of the cadre responsible for executing it—is to be feared from it. It is this art-political interest that “monumental design” serves. And it does so in a twofold way. First, it glorifies the existing regime of economic peace in that it represents it according to its “eternal attributes,” that is, as insurmountable. The Third Reich reckons in millennia.—Second, it casts on those on the executing as much as on those on the receiving end of it a spell under which they cannot but appear to themselves monumentally, that is, as incapable of considered and independent

14. It is not only the fascist stylization of mass art, but just as much the framework of the various "associations" and "fronts" in which it is played out, that has a beguiling effect (compare the German festive processions with those in Russia).

actions.¹⁴ Art thus augments the suggestive energies of its effect at the expense of the intellectual and enlightening ones. The eternalization of existing relations is consummated in fascist art by the crippling of human beings (whether those who execute or those who receive it) who would otherwise be capable of altering those relations. Only with the comporment that the spell forces upon them can the masses—so fascism teaches—come into their own.

The material out of which fascism erects its monuments, which it takes to be ironclad, is above all so-called human material. In these monuments, the elite eternalize their dominance. And it is thanks to these monuments alone that the human material receives its configuration. Before the gaze of the fascist masters, which, as we saw, sweeps over millennia, the difference between the slaves who raised the pyramids out of blocks of stone and the proletarian masses who themselves, on the plazas and the drilling grounds, form blocks before the Führer is an evanescent one. Maulnier thus makes himself well understood when he lumps together "master-builders and soldiers" as representatives of the elite. (Better, of course, is Gide, when he perspicaciously characterizes the new monumental edifices in Rome as "architectural journalism" [*Nouvelles pages*, p. 85].)

Maulnier's aestheticism, as has been indicated, is not an improvised standpoint on which fascism draws only in debates over questions of art history. Fascism is led to that standpoint whenever it would come closer to appearances, but without letting itself get mixed up in reality. A way of seeing that casts aside the functional value of art recommends itself in other respects, too, whenever there is an interest in keeping the functional character of a phenomenon out of sight. That is eminently the case, as is clearly to be seen in Maulnier, with technology. It is easy to understand why. The development of the productive forces, which include, alongside the proletariat, technology, has brought about the crisis that presses toward the socialization of the means of production. This crisis is therefore a function principally of (along with the proletariat) technology. Whoever thinks to resolve it without regard for its objective causes, violently, and while leaving privileges intact, has every interest in rendering the functional character of technology as unrecognizable as possible.

There are two courses that can then be pursued. They lead in opposite directions, but they are determined by related ideas—namely, by aesthetic ideas, precisely. The first course we find in Georges Duhamel.¹⁵ It amounts to leaving the role

15. Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future* (Paris, 1930), and *L'humaniste et l'automate* (Paris, 1933).

of the machine in the production process resolutely out of account and linking the criticism of it to the various misgivings and insalubrities that for the independent producer are bound up with the employment of machines (whether his own or others'). Duhamel comes to a cautious assessment of the automobile, to a staunch repudiation of film, and to the half-facetiously, half-seriously meant proposal that all inventions be prohibited by edict of the state for a period of five years. The proletariat turns against the employer; the petty-bourgeois, against the machine. It is in the name of art that Duhamel sides against the machine. Evidently, things appear a bit differently to fascism. The big-bourgeois mentality of its bosses has left its mark on the intellectuals who placed themselves at its disposal. Marinetti was one of them. He sensed instinctively at first that a "futuristic" view of the machine would be of use to imperialism. Marinetti began as a Bruitist; he proclaimed noise—the unproductive activity of the machine—its most significant one. He ended as a member of the Royal Academy, who admitted to having found in the Ethiopian War the fulfillment of the futurist dreams of his youth.¹⁶ Maudslayer, without really knowing what he is doing, follows his lead when, against Gorki's "New Humanism," he states that what constitutes the

16. Cf. Marinetti's manifesto for the Ethiopian War. [F. T. Marinetti, "Invito alla guerra africana. Manifesto futurista agli scrittori e agli artisti d'Italia," *Gazetta del Popolo*, July 30, 1935; reprinted in *Stile futurista* 2.11–12 (1935). —Tr.]

principal value of discoveries in technology and science is “not so much their result, what they may eventually yield, . . . as . . . their poetic value” (p. 77). “Marinetti,” Maulnier writes, “was intoxicated with height, with movement, with steel, with precision, with noise, with speed—in short, with everything in the machine that can be contemplated as valuable in itself and that does not partake of its utilitarian character. . . . He deliberately restricted himself to turning to account only their unusable, that is, their aesthetic aspect” (p. 84).

Maulnier holds this position to be so well founded that he has no trepidation about citing as a curiosity the sentences in which Mayakovsky addresses Marinetti’s view of the machine. Mayakovsky speaks the language of sound common sense: “The era of the machine demands, not that hymns be sung in its praise, but, in the interest of humanity, to be mastered. Not that one lose oneself in aesthetic contemplation of the steel of skyscrapers, but that one organize the construction of apartment buildings. . . . Not that one seek out noise, but that one organize the use of silencers. . . . We poets need to be able to speak in automobiles” (p. 83f.).¹⁷ Mayakovsky’s worthy, because reserved and sober, attitude is incompatible with the

17. [Cf. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *My Discovery of America*, trans. Neil Cornwell (London: Hesperus, 2005), 103. —Tr.]

effort to take pleasure in a “monumental” aspect of technology. It testifies conclusively against Maulnier’s pronouncement that the collectivism of the Russians has made “the engineer into a spiritual ruler” (p. 79). That is to put a technocratic slant on things. It misrepresents the Soviet citizen’s polytechnic education as technocratically directed compulsory labor. And it is a technocratic interpretation in another sense as well: it is one that suggests itself precisely to technocrats.

Now, no one will reject more decidedly than Maulnier the accusation of thinking technocratically. That way of thinking would seem to him, rather, to be incompatible with the artistic one. His definition of art could, at first glance, make it seem as though he were right. It reads: “The very mission of art is to make objects and creatures unusable” (p. 86). Let us not leave things as they appear at first glance. Let us take a closer look! Of all the arts there is one that Maulnier’s definition satisfies with particular accuracy. It is the art of war. It embodies the fascist idea of art just as much in its monumental application of human material as in its application of technology absorbed in its entirety from every banal end. The poetic side of technology, which the fascist sets off against its prosaic side, about which the Russians make too much ado for his taste, is its homicidal side. Thus does the sentence, “Everything that is primitive, spontaneous, innocent is, for that reason alone, detestable” (p. 213), acquire its full meaning.

This sentence is to be found in the final section of the essay in which Maulnier has it out with Gide. Does not the capacity to elicit such telltale reactions merit gratitude? Has not

Gide come to embody the ideal figure that he evokes in his diary entry of March 28, 1935: the *inquiéteur*, someone who instills disquiet? In fact, he has made himself into the spokesman of those who disquiet the fascist author like nothing else.

Those are the masses, and, indeed, the reading masses. “Thanks to the gigantic efforts made in support of education at all levels, thanks to the removal of every barrier between different levels of education . . . , thanks to the astonishing reduction of the number of the illiterate . . . , thanks to the direct appeal to the capacity of all, children not excepted, for literary invention . . . , thanks to all of the above, you are giving”—so Jean-Richard Bloch addressed the representatives of the Soviet Union at the 1935 Paris Congress of Writers—“to the writer . . . the most marvelous gift that he could have dreamed of: you are giving him a public of 170 million readers.”¹⁸

For the fascist writer, that is a poisoned chalice. For the elite to whose aid Maulnier springs, an appreciation of art not protected on all sides against disturbing elements by the monopoly on education is something inconceivable. The abolition of the monopoly on education would in and of itself be nerve-rack-

18. [Benjamin in fact quotes from Bloch's address to the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, in Moscow: see Jean-Richard Bloch, “Paroles à un congrès soviétique,” *Europe* 141 (September 1934): 103. Apparently, he confuses it with Bloch's address in June of the following year to the International Congress of Writers, in Paris, for which see *Pour la défense de la culture. Les textes du Congrès international des écrivains, Paris, juin 1935*, ed. S. Teroni and W. Klein (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2005), 127–33. —Tr.]

ing enough for Maulnier. And now Gorki tells him that art, precisely, is called upon to help to bring it about. He tells him that in Soviet literature no fundamental distinction is made between an aesthetically valuable book and one valuable as a work of popular science. And faced with this proposition—long borne out by the most modern popularizers in western literature: a Frank, a de Greif, an Eddington, a Neurath—Maulnier can do nothing better than include it in his characterization of the “barbarism in the service of which Gorki has placed himself” (p. 78).

Here, too, Maulnier hardly deviates from his idea of presenting culture as the summation of privileges. Perhaps culture does not look so good in this light. But inasmuch as Maulnier seeks out imperialist culture’s confrontation with that of Soviet Russia, that is something that he has to take into the bargain. He cannot change the fact that the sumptuary character of the former stands out in relief against the productive character of the latter. The anxious emphasis on the creative, familiar to us from the culture debate, has the purpose above all of distracting from how little the “creatively” (in that sense) manufactured product, for its part, benefits the production process, from how exclusively it lapses into consumption. Imperialism has brought about a state of affairs in which the poem eulogized as “divine” rightfully shares such praise with pastries.

Maulnier cannot at any price do without the “creative.” “Man,” he writes, “fabricates something in order to use it; but he creates in order to create” (p. 86). Just how specious is the

lifeless and undialectical division between creation and fabrication on which the aesthetic of the creative is based, the Soviets' polytechnic education proves. This education is just as capable of leading the factory worker to a creative sort of labor—in the framework of a production plan that he oversees, of a collective of producers for which his life is vital, of a mode of production that he can improve—as it is of disposing the writer, thanks to the precision of the tasks that it assigns him, that is, thanks to the specific public that it affords him, to a sort of production that, thanks to the accountability that a maker can give to his procedure, can lay claim to the honorable title of fabrication. And precisely the writer ought to remember that the word “text”—from woven: *textum*—was at one time just such a term of honor. With the polytechnic education of the human being that is now developing before his eyes, he will be unmoved by the spokesman of the elite who tells him that “those all too fleeting moments in which man is able to withdraw from an existence that, as in primitive times, he must devote almost entirely to the material maintenance of life . . . will be seen by collectivistic society as so many desertions” (p. 80). Whom does the human being have to thank if such moments are so fleeting? The elite. Who has an interest in making work itself humanly worthy? The proletariat.

Its edification can readily do without what Maulnier calls the “privileges of the inner life” (p. 5), but it can never do without such as would feel and describe those privileges as Gide, on March 8, 1935, does: “I feel today, acutely, painfully, that *inferiority*—of never having had to earn my bread, of never having

had to work in straitened circumstances. But I have always had so great a love for work that presumably that would not have compromised my happiness. So that is not really what I mean. But a time will come when that will be considered a failing. There is in work something for which the richest imagination cannot compensate, a profound sort of instruction of which nothing, subsequently, can ever take the place. A time is coming when the bourgeois will sense his own inferiority in the face of a simple worker. For some, this time has already come" (*Nouvelles pages*, p. 164f.).

Still more disquieting than the fact that in the east there exists a public of 170 million readers is, for Maulnier, the fact that in France there live writers who think about it. André Gide has dedicated his latest book, *Les nouvelles nourritures*, to the young readers of the Soviet Union. Its first paragraph reads:

You who will come when I will no longer hear the noises of the earth and my lips will no longer drink its dew, you who, later, will read me, perhaps—it is for you that I write these pages; for to live perhaps does not astound you enough; you do not admire as it ought to be admired the astonishing miracle that your life is. It sometimes seems to me that it is with my thirst that you are going to drink, and that what inclines you toward that other being whom you caress is already my own desire. (*Les nouvelles nourritures*, p. 9)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The present essay was composed in 1936, when its author was living in Paris, having had by then, for obvious reasons, to flee Germany definitively. However, one will find in it none of the exilic—and utopian—pathos that one has generally been wont to detect in Benjamin's later writings, and against which he, for his own part, sought to inoculate himself, precisely, in his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Rather, we see him here at the height of his lucidity, and engaged in a very fine analysis, in part of the reasons behind the writer André Gide's espousal of communism in the early 1930s (in which he doubtless saw a reflection and, in a manner of speaking, a confirmation of his own), but principally of the ideology of the fascist intellectuals—and soi-disant upholders of "culture"—in whose side a communist Gide was an insufferable thorn. In a moment we will say a word as to why that was so.

The first question that ought to be asked, though, is, *To whom does Benjamin address these analyses?* "Letter from Paris: André Gide and His New Antagonist" appeared originally in *Das Wort*, a review responsible for publishing the writings of German intellectuals in exile. Its editors were Bertolt Brecht, Willi Bredel (a member of the Communist Party of Germany), and Lion Feuchtwanger (at the time a fellow traveler). But its contributors, like its readers, were not all of one stamp politically. They composed, rather, a relatively diverse group, on the left wing of which were the likes of Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, and on the right, Thomas Mann. In short, taken together they were united not by any common position so much as by a common *opposition*. It was this circumstance, no doubt, that led Brecht to reflect that the journal was, if anything, "not critical enough," and that he and his fellow editors were "not in agreement with all of the contributions,"

even if in the end they "printed them nonetheless." For they had, of course, to make shift with what they had, and what they had was not hewn from a single stone. "The literature of the [German] emigration," Brecht goes on to say, "is proceeding along an arduous, uneven, and tortuous path, like that portion of the German nation to which it is linked. Like the latter, it is ununified and held together mainly by a common enmity toward fascism. Its knowledge of politics is unevenly developed; a large part of it, those whom many would call the artistically qualified, were treated as political (and expelled on that account) before they were conscious of what political actions are. What this part has learned, it has learned from the experience of facts; but learning from facts, precisely, was not exactly its strongpoint."

Now, Benjamin—who here writes unambiguously as a Marxist, and indeed from the standpoint of the orthodox Marxism for which

he had advocated as early as 1929 (for example, in "A Communist Pedagogy")—surely had no need to preach to the choir. We may surmise, rather, that his "Letter from Paris" was addressed primarily to those in the middle and on the right of the spectrum of the journal's readership, and above all to the "artistically qualified": those least able, or least willing, to learn from facts.

Let us now address the question hinted at above. Why should a communist Gide have been something that fascist intellectuals were unable to stomach? In short, because Gide was, in the words of Thierry Maulnier (the "antagonist" of Benjamin's title), a "creator"—or, as we would say today, a "creative writer." It is for that reason that Gide's communism was felt to be a betrayal. For the fascist (or, if one prefers, proto-fascist) intellectuals grouped around *L'Action française* and other, likeminded organs fancied themselves the defenders of "culture," which for them was

defined entirely by the antithesis *creation–production*, modernity's version of the old, but hardly venerable, distinction between the "liberal" and the "mechanical" arts. That "fascism's concept of culture" is predicated on this "lifeless and undialectical division" is not the least of the insights to be found in Benjamin's "Letter," nor is the observation that behind the fascists' purported defense of culture was nothing other, in fact, than a defense of *privilege* pure and simple.

That is not to suggest that Maulnier and his ilk, in claiming the cause of "culture" as their own, were being disingenuous, simply. To suppose as much would be to fall into the error of "overestim[ing] the conscious elements in the formation of ideology." No, like most professional ideologists, they believed what they said. (And, as is often the case, it is those who least know what they are doing who do it best.) The problem in this instance, though, was that it was not *only*

the fascist intellectuals who were apt believe what they were saying. In exposing the fascist ideology of culture, Benjamin no doubt sought to hold up a mirror to those of his readers who, though anti-fascist, were also anti-communist, and whose antipathy to communism was premised on "aesthetic ideas"—which is to say, in the last instance, on the "lifeless and undialectical division" between mental and physical labor, and on the privilege accorded (whether consciously or not) to the former.

Indeed, one of the best moments in Benjamin's essay is the comparison that he draws between the petty-bourgeois position of a Georges Duhamel and the big-bourgeois, openly fascist ideology of a Marinetti. The comparison hinges precisely on the real point of contact between the two, that is, on the "ideas" that they held in common: "aesthetic ideas, precisely." Duhamel pronounces an indiscriminate, and generally

negative, assessment of technology, whereas Marinetti, no less indiscriminately, eulogizes it. In both cases, however, what is assessed is exclusively the “aesthetic aspect” (Maulnier) of technology—that is to say, its *appearance*, literally its *aesthesis*, as opposed to its *reality*. In neither case (and here is the important point) is the reality of technology—its “functional character,” i.e., its “role [...] in the production process”—taken into consideration. That, on the contrary, is left “resolutely out of account,” and for a reason, as Benjamin says, that is “easy to understand [...]” It is technology, namely, that, in conjunction with the development, both intensive and extensive, of the proletariat, “has brought about the crisis that presses toward the socialization of the means of production.” With *that* reality, neither Duhamel nor Marinetti was inclined to have anything to do. And for reasons that have to do, not with “the conscious elements in the formation of ideology”

(the dissemblance of interests, etc.), but rather with—what is in general much more decisive—the perspective imposed on the individuals who comprise a given class “unconsciously and as a result of that class’s position in the production process,” which specifically, in the cases in question, precluded any acknowledgment of the *determination of historical reality* by, in the last instance, the *relations of production*, and consequently of the fact that it is fundamentally the same—*economic, and therefore political*—crisis that fascism exploits, i.e., that accounts for its emergence.

(Of the position of the artist under capitalist relations of production, one will find a precise definition in Nicos Poulantzas’s *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. The labor “of painters, artists, and writers,” writes Poulantzas, “is concretized in a work of art or a book, i.e., in a commodity form, even though what is involved are services exchanged against revenue.

Marx himself notes that products can assume the 'price form' without thereby possessing value," i.e., "without producing surplus value for capital. [...] In other words, although all capitalist productive labor takes the commodity form, this does not mean that all commodities represent productive labor." Must it be recalled once again that the special "value" ascribed to works of art is believed to derive, more often than not, from their *unproductive* character? That it is for that reason, precisely, that there accrues to their possession, or simply to their "appreciation," such a great deal of "cultural capital"? That the "unproductive" character of works of art is simply a distorted reflection of the fact that they are commodities that, nevertheless, i.e., despite being commodities, do not contribute directly to the valorization of capital, and that, therefore, it is precisely *from the standpoint of capital* that they appear as unproductive? And, finally, that if the artist lets down

his guard he may easily fall prey to the same illusion that sustains the exorbitant revenues that, if he has a name, he can expect to realize from his work, viz., that an object bereft of use-value is intrinsically possessed of a greater worth than any merely utilitarian object, for the alleged reason that it answers to no *material* need, but exclusively to a "spiritual" one [or some such hocus-pocus], that a work of literature, for instance, is *intrinsically* more "valuable" than a work of popular science, etc.? It is for just that reason that fascism, as Benjamin observes, tends to find "pioneers among extreme artists.")

We are once again seeing the same thing today, all around us, in the U.S. as well as abroad. The petty-bourgeois intellectual can inveigh against fascism all he likes: it will be in vain, today as ever, so long as he continues to fantasize about some "third way" that would enable humanity to circumvent the alternative *socialism or fascism*. For

the latter will continue to rear its death's head periodically as long as capitalist relations of production (of which fascism is an excrescence) remain in place. It is on just that point that Benjamin sought to instruct his readers, in holding up to them a mirror in which they would see reflected their own ideological presuppositions and whither they led, and, in so doing, to whisper in their ears, as it were, a salutary ultimatum. For—and it is truly the least that one can say—there are times when one has no choice but to choose sides. *Sapienti sat* (or at least it should be).

—Charles Gelman

CHARLES GELMAN is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at New York University.

