

# Baldwin on Gide in The Male Prison

## A Christian Response

[S. J. BICKERSTETH]

I cannot help, being a Christian, but wince each time Baldwin makes mention of Protestantism in *The Male Prison*. Not, of course, because he is misrepresenting it, but because he is quite so painfully accurate in his appraisal. I have no intention of defending the beliefs that engendered the guilt which so hung over the head of André Gide throughout his life, whose tortures were borne clear on every page of autobiography, fiction, and epistle. There is something to be said – especially to this generation, whose sentiments toward Christianity are often those of resentment from past trauma – for the quite obviously malignant nature of certain popular teachings, of which Protestantism seems to have garnered a unfortunate number. The most reprehensible of them all, and most woefully influential, is the wretched Augustinian theologoumenon of original sin, whose prevalence across the annals of western theological history has brought more pain and compunction to believers than arguably any other doctrine. The notion that any individual could be, from the moment of their birth, culpable for a sin committed by some distant historical forebear is – aside from being patently logically impossible – morally repugnant, and almost certainly psychologically injurious

Perhaps our Anglo-American imaginations prevent us from grasping the sheer contingency of the doctrine, and how clearly possible it is to set forth the Christian narrative without it such as seen in the select theologies of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Yet, despite any doleful lamentations, we cannot change its incorrigibly widespread influence – so widespread in fact that in the twentieth century, Christianity and original sin are inherited by both Baldwin and Gide as one quite indivisible idea. The effects are omnipresent in the writing of both authors, primarily visible in the guilt conveyed through their characters, testimonies, and essays. This work of Baldwin's sees an encounter between this guilt and the

foremost social issues of modernity, with gender and sexuality serving as theaters hosting an internal struggle between self-acceptance and self-alienation.

However, I must insist that though gender and sexuality are undoubtedly important, they do not reach to the heart of this wound, and thus cannot serve as a thorough medicament. We cannot, after all, fool ourselves into believing that the identity of any human person can be exhaustively reduced to the cultural or epochal (or, more generally, factual) conditions of their existence. We may consider them vital aspects of our identities, yet we find ourselves repelled by any who would look to reduce our identity to them alone. To neglect them would be erasure, certainly, yet to prioritize them would be objectification. There always remains an “ever-more” to any discussion of what the self is; a declaration that no specific condition or characteristic of the individual could ever totally capture what it is *to be them*. The nature of the problem of guilt thus demands a solution which attends to this very excess.

With this in mind I might venture to declare that, for Gide, the question is not solely one of masculinity as Baldwin seems to portray it, but must always expand beyond the horizons of gender. The true, broader question at hand is thus: what does it mean to truly be oneself? It may certainly be formulated – and Gide has done precisely this – through the nomenclature of gender and sexuality, but ultimately these remain outward vestments cloaking a foundational conflict between the real and the ideal – that is, between the reality of what one presently is and the ideality of what one desires or feels obliged to become. Gide’s true aims were loftier, and his passions deeper than such concepts, I contend. One must advocate for his display of naturality *as such*, denuded of any conceptual content. Here is the native land of his brilliance, and why his lifelong project may be best understood not merely as a study of extrinsic attributes and characteristics, but, more broadly – in a manner truer to human nature – a hermeneutics of the soul.

Hence why I must disagree with Baldwin when he opines that “How to be natural does not seem to me to be a problem.”<sup>1</sup> At least, that is, I must disagree with his division of the natural and the “higher... state”<sup>2</sup> at which we must arrive. To treat the notion of becoming “a man” – that term which Baldwin uses when he speaks of the ideal – as though it would somehow redeem us, rather than recognizing the inherence of this redemption within, is dangerous. Baldwin here feeds into the tendency to exalt particular extrinsic aspects of being above oneself, identifying what one does not have and asserting that one is fundamentally incomplete without their possession. If only, we suppose, we should happen to acquire this or that particular thing, whether that be wealth, status, acceptance, a relationship, a legacy, *then* we shall be happy. Practically all great wisdom traditions warn against this very manner of thinking – the acquisition of any desideratum always coincides with the revelation of its insufficiency to appease the yearnings of the soul.

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1 James Baldwin, “The Male Prison,” in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 232.

2 Baldwin, “Prison,” 232.

All the same, Baldwin identifies masculinity as Gide's *ignis fatuus*, his perennially irretrievable Grail, and thereby accepts and ennobles the great drama of his failed pursuit. But this threaten misery: it ensures that Gide's natural selfhood is forever a stain which he hopes to wash; an original sin which can be cleansed only by some unattainable baptismal water. He is thus condemned to an insoluble self-alienation. In the reduction of an ontological self and to a set of factual attributes, he makes himself precisely that of which he hopes to rid himself. One becomes judged according to worldly features (and thus, in the Pauline language, the Law) rather than being saved and defined by the Spirit which in a sense *precedes* all particular conditions of one's being-in-the-world. That is not to say that the self is essential, of course, only that – to persist in the Heideggerian idiom – it should concern itself with the “ontological” rather than the “ontic,” the “existential” rather than the “existentiell;”<sup>3</sup> by which we are to mean with “Being” not in any particular manifestation (say, as a gender, sexuality, or the like) but in its unconditioned and universal mode. Failing to note this distinction, and forgetting “Being” by mistaking it for “a being,” we indeed render the latter – those particular facets of identity, such as Gide's masculinity – a “prison.”<sup>4</sup>

In the light of this forgetfulness does Gide see his wife, Madeleine. She, by his self-persecution, becomes collateral damage, a bystander who suffers under the slings and arrows of his irresolvable anguish. Baldwin quotes Gide as writing that “the spiritual force of my love [for Madeleine] inhibited all carnal desire” and himself remarks on how “he had entrusted, as it were, to her his purity.”<sup>5</sup> For Gide, womanhood was entirely foreign: it was wholly other, *tout autre*, utterly removed from his sense of self and desire, and for this very reason became sacred, and Madeleine – as the icon of all womanhood – likewise. Thus (in the form of the love letters he gave to her), he handed over all that was best of his identity, in some desperate hope to rid himself of himself, to finally become a man through the redemption of woman.

This is precisely because of the religious misunderstanding set upon western thought by original sin. To fail to have oneself *exceed* one's sexual proclivity, gender, or the like, and instead to limit one's identity to that alone, is to give oneself over to the belief of gracelessness-as-natural – something which can surely never be accepted by the good Christian, even in a fallen world. It is a belief, I maintain, which derives its source from any theology (with which I must accuse Baldwin of being complicit) which bifurcates grace and nature, and thereby tears asunder any hope of a natural goodness in humankind. The implication here is disastrous: what is natural cannot be what is good. Under this pretense, of course Madeleine becomes an image of what Gide should have loved in his entirety, and thus the ideal of which he fell damnably short due to his homosexuality.

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3 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 32-5.

4 Baldwin, “Prison,” 235.

5 Baldwin, “Prison,” 233.

Baldwin's insistence on Madeleine's sanctity is thus incorrigibly problematic. He writes:

Madeleine kept open for [Gide] a kind of door of hope, of possibility, the possibility of entering into communion with another sex. This door, which is the door to life and air and freedom from the tyranny of one's own personality, *must* be kept open, and none feel this more keenly than those on whom the door is perpetually threatening or has already seemed to close.<sup>6</sup>

We must surely oppose this rhetoric. If goodness only ever arrives from elsewhere (from the sacred feminine, from the extrinsic Madeleine) we shall be forever awaiting it. And if it ever were to make its presence known, we would be forced to respond to its call by eschewing not our sin, but our *very selves*. This we cannot do. We may be redeemed, transfigured, saved, but never may we be other than what we are. Only when one's truest interiority corresponds to one's utmost exteriority can the two at any point converge; only when what one naturally is *is* the very process of assuming one's higher state can Gide's sorrow finally conclude.

Thus, it cannot – it must not – be the case that Madeleine truly is the angelic ideal which the authors make her out to be. As Baldwin avers, for Gide, Madeleine and her womanhood were, more or less, Divine. It is precisely this exaltation which bears so heavily upon him, and thus it is an exaltation (better, an idolatry) which must undergo an iconoclasm for the sake of salvation. For she is no image of perfection. She, as Baldwin notes, shares in his compunction, and in her desperation ultimately rejects his pleas for forgiveness: the burning of his love letters is surely the most blatant repudiation of her role as messiah. The flames which consumed those letters should also have laid triumphant waste to the world of self-contempt and struggle in which Gide pictured so much of his life. Madeleine abdicates the throne of the ideal, and in so doing causes the dissolution of the tyrannical kingdom – but Gide seemed not to know what life there was to find in the ashes.

To be clear on a delicate point: the doctrinal struggle between homosexuality and Protestantism (and Christianity at large) is here not my concern. What I am arguing is that that debate is in fact animated by a more primordial sense of guilt associated with selfhood, as inflicted by original sin – a doctrine which does not pertain to any *particular* sin, but rather sinfulness as such, associated with the very self that always exceeds its attributes. As stated above, whether one thinks homosexuality sinful or not is a question preceded by a something far more insidious, a kind of psychological puppetry of which the language of “sin” and “healing” are only convenient veneers, concealing a certain *ressentiment* and lust for violence: a clear maliciousness on the part of the vindictive, and a consequent woundedness on the part of the victimized, both being emotional states antecedent to the actual terminology of the debate. It is to this that the modern Christian must most hastily attend, and within which guilt should have no place whatsoever.

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6 Baldwin, “Prison,” 235.

Gide himself never realized this, of course. The tortured spectacle of his marriage and inner life continued unto death, and now remains immortalized. But I believe that there is something here which was left unsaid, and remains pertinent for us who reflect on Gide's legacy. Baldwin's fear is that, with the burning of the letters, the collapse of Madeleine-as-divine, we do indeed risk the possibility of a genuine nihilism. The presence of God – the feminine *shekinah* – departs from the tabernacle, thus abandoning Israel to exile and ruin. If Gide no longer loves Madeleine as "Emanuele, God-with-us," then he would be "compelled to love her as a woman,"<sup>7</sup> a woman for whom his homosexuality held no passion. To avoid this, Gide sought the honor of resignation to the quest after an ideal which he may never attain, but which may forever ensure nobility in pursuit. Baldwin certainly seems to celebrate this impossible perfection, as he heralds Gide for having "endured this prison with such dignity."<sup>8</sup> Like Lancelot after the Grail, he insists we must fall short of something which perpetually allures and denies us, as unending penance for our past sins.

But I must counter with a more radically optimistic – that is, characteristically Christian – reading of the whole affair. Truthfully, the Gospel does not condemn us to a lofty ideal, but preaches the gracious condescension of the Ideal to our lowly reality. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the union of the natural and the supernatural, what we are and what we should become. We need not glorify Baldwin's interminable incarceration, only acknowledge the crucifixion which shook and collapsed its cage, which tore the tabernacle curtain asunder, thus eternally reopening the path of humanity's return to its primeval nature. Given by and returning to the Divine, the question of how we are to be authentic to God is fundamentally one and the same with the question of how we are to be authentic to ourselves.

In the eyes of many Church Fathers, God became human such that humanity might become godlike. In Christ, the paragons of divinity and humanity converge, and thus what one authentically is perfectly aligns with what one must forever strive to be. This is no longer a struggle of anguish, guilt, and sorrow, but a pilgrimage of delight, love, and peace. Baldwin's "great problem," having priorly instilled in us fear and trembling, now entices us, beckoning us forth to a quest of simultaneous self-discovery and praise. But I might suggest a slight adjustment to Baldwin's phrasing. In each moment of our being, we venture to respond to the question which has no final answer, but which through Christ has been opened to us forever: "How to be – in the best sense of that kaleidoscopic word"<sup>9</sup> – not a man, but a *self*.

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7 Baldwin, "Prison," 233.

8 Baldwin, "Prison," 235.

9 Baldwin, "Prison," 232.