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# Images and Ideas: Hart Crane's and André Gide's Readings of the Myth of Narcissus

When Hart Crane arrived in Paris in January 1929, he possessed two letters of introduction which were to facilitate his *entrée* into the milieu of Parisian literati. One of those letters was from the poet Laura Riding to Gertrude Stein; the other was from the critic Waldo Frank to André Gide, the famous French novelist and future Nobel Prize winner. As Crane's biographer Clive Fisher notes, Frank had written to Gide "in the hope of doing more than merely projecting his friend into serious French literary circles" (395). In fact, Crane's friend acted as a matchmaker, believing Gide, whose homosexual leanings were no secret, to be an ideal partner for the younger and undisciplined American poet. Eventually, however, nothing came of Frank's plans, which Fisher puts down to Crane's inability to speak French. Six months later, André Gide was among the French intellectuals who provided the Parisian police with character references after Crane had been arrested for starting a brawl at the famous Café Sélect (Fisher 406).

A year before his arrival in Paris, Crane read *The Counterfeiters*, a novel which Gide had published in 1926. In his biography of the American poet, Fisher does not elaborate on Crane's response to the novel, nor does he mention Crane's familiarity with any other work by Gide. From Crane's letter to Samuel Loveman, we do, however, learn that the American poet "immensely enjoyed" the English translation of the above-mentioned novel by Gide (Fisher 572). In another letter, this time to William Slater Brown, Crane used a Gidean analogy to comment on the wild ways of Los Angeles and Hollywood debauchery: "O Andre Gide! no Paris ever yielded such as this – away with all your counterfeiters!" (Fisher 573). Whatever other effect *The Counterfeiters* might have produced on the future author of *The Bridge*, the fact remains that circa 1924-27 – in what might be seen as his most fruitful period – Crane wrote a poem revolving around the same motif which had preoccupied Gide several decades earlier. The Crane poem in question is "Mirror of Narcissus," long unpublished and included for the first time in the Library of America 2006 edition of Crane's complete poems. The relevant text by Gide is his 1891 *Le Traité du Narcisse*. Both offer revealing interpretations of the ancient

myth, simultaneously transcending it and turning it into a starting point for philosophical, ontological and aesthetic reflections. The two texts are meditations on art and literature, whose relationship with reality is opposed to their connection with the realm of the ideal. Gide and Crane also reflect on the role of the artist, author and thinker. At the same time, Gide's essay helps to unravel a rather cryptic work by Crane, a famously difficult American poet.

The affinity between Crane and the French symbolists is frequently pointed out. Commonly referred to as "the American Rimbaud," the author of *Voyages* is known to have read – or at least been aware of – the work of other symbolist poets as well: Baudelaire, Laforgue, Mallarmé and Valéry. His scarce command of the French language did not preclude Crane from translating three Laforgue poems into English, an obviously painstaking task, performed with the help of a dictionary. Though associated mostly with prose, André Gide, one of the key figures of European modernism, also went through a symbolist phase in the early stages of his literary career (Rogoziński ix; Lagarde and Michard 259). As a very young man, "Ami de Pierre Louÿs et de Paul Valéry, patronné par Mallarmé, il entre de plain-pied dans le monde du symbolisme" ("A friend of Pierre Louÿs and Paul Valéry, under the auspices of Mallarmé, he naturally enters the world of symbolism") (Lagarde and Michard 259). The subtitle of *Le Traité du Narcisse*, one of the first works with which Gide made his name on the French literary scene (Rogoziński xi), informs the reader that the treatise is a "theory of the symbol." It is, to borrow Alan Sheridan's phrase, "arguably Gide's most Symbolist work" (73). It is also – apart from being an aesthetic and philosophical essay – a beautiful example of poetic prose. The analogies between Crane's "Mirror of Narcissus" and Gide's essay as well as the way the latter illuminates the former might thus be put down to the symbolist background common to both authors, and perhaps also to a certain spiritual and intellectual kinship between Crane and Gide.

"Mirror of Narcissus" is a poem consisting of sixteen lines of varying length. Its rhyme scheme is also irregular. It is based on the recurrence – in lines 6-9, 12, 13 and 16 – of the diphthong /ei/ followed by the consonant sound /n/ in words such as *pain*, which is repeated three times, as well as *vain*, *wane*, *gain* and *rain*. The poem's other formal features include the frequent use of alliteration and ambiguous syntax, which are both typical of Crane's poetic *œuvre*. The lyric situation in the poem is largely uncontextualized, and the mythological references are only mildly helpful in deciphering the poem's meanings. Although the layout does not suggest so, "Mirror of Narcissus" seems to be divided into two parts. Each of them is rounded off by a generalization in the form of – respectively – a rhetorical question and an elliptical statement. What might thus be regarded as the poem's first half reads as follows:

They judge, whose strictures of their sight
Preclude the evidence I speak. And how
Shall I of their dead conscience build the proof
Unto themselves, whereof their birth was God?
Who will but laugh, and lengthily defer
Their heritage, and sneer down all the pain,
And vomit back the incense breathed in vain!
– O minute elegy, pantouffle pain,
O mirror of Narcissus, when is you wane? (125)

The connection with the mythic Narcissus, signaled in the title and the last of the lines quoted above, is given more prominence in the poem's latter half:

His perfect image dies upon the stage
Or gains, it is no matter for the gods.
The water flows, divides its gain –
Loving the Styx, he sees the rain
Speak otherwise in his own tones
Upon the land he lends such dirges to.

Thy repetition freezes thus my pain… (126)

The use of personal pronouns – especially the *they* of the first part – with no clear referents, the discursive, prophetic and almost biblical tone of the first half, the rather abstract and vague nature of the notions the speaker feels so strongly about, the apparent lack or weakness of connection between the two parts of the poem – all these elements might confuse and discourage the reader, in particular one unaccustomed to the meanders and pitfalls of Cranean poetics. The relationship between the speaker, whose identity remains mysterious, the *they* and the *he* of the second half – who might presumably be identified with Narcissus himself – is unclear. The use of vocables such as *pantouffle*, untraceable in most dictionaries, does not help. Even the analogy to the myth of Narcissus fails to adequately tease out the poem's meanings. The enigmatic, elliptical and complex character of Crane's verse exemplified in the work in question leaves the reader frustrated and resigned to complying with one anthologist's view of Crane's poetry as "dependent on a personal, sometimes inaccessible trains of thought" (Baym 2:1648). Such interpretational capitulation should, however, be preceded by attempts to place "Mirror of Narcissus" in a larger, intertextual context, which might offer clues the poet




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himself failed to provide or at least sketch out some possible directions. One way to do this is perhaps to look at Gide's *Le Traité du Narcisse.*

Given Crane's and Gide's sexual preferences and the fact that their works may often be classified as instances of the homosexual text, it seems tempting to see the former's poem and latter's essay in the light of the homoerotic dimension of Narcissus's myth. Such a dimension is frequently exploited in both popular and high culture. Indeed, the archetypal story of the beautiful young man who rejects femininity personified by the beautiful nymph Echo to fall in love with his own reflection – and thus with a masculine image – easily lends itself to such a sexual interpretation. It is equally tempting to refer to psychoanalysis and the psychological concept of narcissism first identified by Sigmund Freud, who defined it as obsessive preoccupation and fascination with one's own body. In the present essay, however, I would like to focus on purely literary, aesthetic and philosophical considerations, with particular emphasis on symbolist poetics and its Platonic roots.

The ancient myth constitutes the point of departure for Gide's *Le Traité du Narcisse*, which is dedicated to the author's friend and symbolist poet Paul Valéry, who gave expression to his own fascination with Narcissus in several poems. Among the qualities of Narcissus which Gide emphasizes are – apart from the obvious, that is the youth's beauty – his perfection and purity. In the introduction to his treatise, Gide inevitably refers to the themes of self-love and contemplation of one's own reflection. Importantly, he also points out the hieroglyphic nature of myths, as well as reminds the reader of their religious dimension. Looking at the role of myths in the distant past, the French writer distinguishes between common people who were delighted with the mythical stories but failed to understand them and the priests who pondered on the image to grasp its hidden meaning. It is this process of interpretation that Gide perceives as the origin of all literature.

Gide's Narcissus is presented as self-absorbed and detached from his surroundings, which appear to be shapeless and colorless. Bored, lonely and confused, Narcissus longs to see his own face and look into his own soul. In Gide's essay, Narcissus is also time-bound: the river in which he is about to see a reflection is the "fleuve du temps" ("the river of time") (6) and the inexorability of the passage of time as well as the transience of all things is stressed by the author. When Narcissus leans over the surface of the water, he sees reflected in it all the elements of the surrounding landscape. It is only then, it seems, that the sky, mountains, trees and flowers start existing for him: in a peculiar solipsism, they acquire shape and color thanks to Narcissus's act of looking. He asks himself whether it is his own soul that moves the images or whether it is the images that move his soul. His admiration for what he sees soon, however, gives way to the realiza-

tion that the forms he sees are transient and therefore imperfect, and to consequent disappointment with their multiplicity and sameness.

Narcissus's dissatisfaction allows Gide to introduce the motif of paradise, thereby pointing to the Platonic origins of literary symbolism. In Gide's version of the myth, which intersperses ancient Greek and Christian motifs, Narcissus begins to dream of the Garden of Eden, which is at the same time the " Jardin des Idées" ("the Garden of Ideas") (7), the realm of perfect, individual, unique forms. Enchanting, colorful and pure, Gide's beautiful garden, where appearances are never deceptive, is composed of essences, immobile, immutable and timeless. The absolute perfection of the place is at once mathematical and musical, the latter bringing to mind the musicality which rose to prominence in French symbolist poetry. The focal point of the garden is the logarithmic tree, which is the reservoir of truth, mystery and hieroglyphs. The harmonious symmetry of this Gidean Eden, which is complete in itself, reveals an obvious parallel with Plato's philosophy. Narcissus leaning over the surface of the water is thus akin to the prisoners in Plato's cave, who, with their backs to the source of light, can only see shadows rather than the real objects which cast them. As long as they are enslaved by their senses, the prisoners take the shadows of real things for the things themselves. Gide's treatise is rooted in Plato's theory of ideas, which are spiritual, eternal and immutable. They are also endowed with a true, autonomous existence in a higher ideal world, superior to the material world, which is merely its imperfect reflection, composed of individual, changeable things. It is the contemplation of permanent, timeless ideas which is, according to Plato, the aim of philosophy.

The Gidean paradise of primary forms is, of course, lost. Its one-time inhabitant, Adam, a unique and sexless being, becomes bored with the perfection of the place and impatient to dissociate himself from the realm of things. He wishes to see, for once, himself rather than just the ideal forms which surround him, existing for him and through him. Succumbing to temptation, he breaks one branch of what may presumably be referred to as the Tree of Knowledge, though Gide does not call it so. The act results in Adam being split into two sexual beings, incomplete, tormented by fear and consumed by desire for each other. It is thus that time comes into being, and the sad history of mankind begins. From now on, disintegration sets in and it is the task of prophets and poets to strive for wholeness in an impossible attempt to regain paradise.

The fact that in his essay Gide shifts from the figure of Narcissus to that of the biblical Adam, and then back to Narcissus, is suggestive of the analogy he notices between the mythological protagonist and his Christian counterpart. Narcissus's desire to stop the passage of time symbolized by the flow of the river is expressive of the vain human attempt to regain the lost garden of ideal forms and the timeless, archetypal harmony they





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embody. Gide wishes Narcissus looked back to see the actual landscape rather than its mere reflection, unstable and constantly changed by the movement of the water. If the river stopped flowing, the reflections in the now immobile mirror of the water would finally correspond to the more static shapes which are reflected. The story of Narcissus thus becomes a metaphor for the human yearning to return to Eden, and for each thing's dramatic struggle to recover its lost, divine, eternal shape. It also becomes Gide's *point d'appui* for a historiosophical conclusion. There are moments in history, Gide claims, when time seems to slow down and silence follows. It is, however, an apocalyptic silence, marking the dawn of new eras. Inevitably, however, such new, promising thresholds are ruined by sin, which time and time again rules out the possibility of regaining paradise. In *Le Traité du Narcisse*, it is the Crucifixion that exemplifies Gide's theory. What is left is religious worship, which, Gide concludes, would be superfluous – or, as the French writer puts it, "*une* messe suffirait" ("*one* mass would suffice") (14) – if we really knew how to look attentively at what we see.

In the conclusion of his treatise, Gide identifies the poet as the one whose task it is to recreate paradise, to cast the imperfect, distorted appearances beneath which true, ideal forms are concealed, waiting to reappear. The poet's task resembles that of the scholar: both search for archetypal, primary forms, but the former is bolder, more creative and more inclined to guess rather than look for axioms. The archetype is to be found beneath the symbol, the transient, temporal appearance which clothes it and which the layman fails to transcend. The symbol, which Gide defines as "*tout ce qui paraît*" ("everything that appears") (13), is the object of the poet's contemplation and meditation aimed at reaching the essence of the thing, which is the Idea, capitalized in the text of *Le Traité du Narcisse*. Gide also describes the work of art as crystalline, like the idea itself: it is in fact a kind of "paradis partiel" ("partial paradise") (14), a new Eden, where ideas flourish harmoniously and symmetrically, and where words and thoughts coexist, the former never endangering the latter and being "transparentes et révélatrices"! ("transparent and revealing") (14). Able to rise above time, immersed in silence and light, the artist is able to capture the idea, which – like paradise itself – exists out of time. In the final paragraphs of Gide's essay, the figure of the artist gives way to that of the lonely Narcissus, contemplating his face reflected in the water and consumed with self-love and a desire which cannot be fulfilled, since its object is his own image, bound to vanish the moment he tries to approach it. The conclusion, Gide tells us, is that one must not desire an image, because desire is precisely what destroys it. That is why Narcissus can only contemplate the image, which is a mere appearance, becoming himself a symbol and feeling, as Gide puts it, "résorbées, les générations humaines qui passent" ("the passing human generations he has absorbed") (15).

Filtered through the lens of the ideas expressed by Gide in *Le Traité du Narcisse*, Crane's "Mirror of Narcissus" acquires new dimensions, or rather reveals those "undercurrents of meaning" – to borrow Edgar Allan Poe's term – which do not necessarily strike the reader upon a cursory acquaintance with the poem. The speaker's situation suddenly becomes clearer, and its dramatic nature fully graspable. The clash between the poetic persona and the mysterious "They" evoked in the poem's first line suddenly turns out to result from the insurmountable barrier separating the isolated individual whose prophetic gift enables him to see further and transcend the immediate reality from a majority limited by the "here and now." It is, in other words, the opposition between the Gidean poet – or, indeed, the artist in general – and the Gidean Narcissus, whose limitations are those of the poor human race. The "strictures of their sight" – the moral or spiritual limits which bind people – "Preclude the evidence I speak," thus limiting the poet's self-expression. Of course, he is not "precluded" – or prevented – from expressing himself in the literal, physical sense, but what he has to say is met by a wall of incomprehension or derision:

> Who will but laugh, and lengthily defer
> Their heritage, and sneer down all the pain,
> And vomit back the incense breathed in vain!

The somewhat solecistic structure of Crane's poem makes it hard to determine whether the derisory laughter, followed by contempt and rejection, actually comes from the poet's fellow human beings and results from their failure to understand him, or whether the reaction evoked in the passage quoted above is that of some indifferent, vaguely divine power, as the preceding lines might suggest: "And how," the speaker asks, "Shall I of their dead conscience build the proof / Unto themselves, whereof their birth was God?" Whatever the answer, the fact remains that the speaker seems to be on a mission to reveal some spiritual truth to which solely he has access and which, sadly, no-one wants to hear. It seems that Crane's poet is at pains to reestablish the lost connection between the human race and its spiritual origins, that – in other words – his is a struggle to allow mankind to at least catch a glimpse of the lost paradise evoked in Gide's essay. Like the French writer, Crane refers to some failed religious ritual – hence "the incense breathed in vain" – and the masses who are no longer able to bridge the gap between their present and their spiritual heritage, the distance being such that even a prophetic intermediary who brings vital "evidence" or "proof" cannot help them.

Pain, a motif which recurs in Crane's poem, appears to be inscribed in the speaker's situation. It is the pain which is "sneered down," the pain referred to in the exclamatory





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lines closing the first part of the poem, and the pain evoked in the final line. The second and third of these references associate the pain with the figure of Narcissus, though the one suffering seems to be mainly the poet-speaker. When he exclaims "– O minute elegy, pantouffle pain, / O mirror of Narcissus, when is your wane?" we realize that the speaker's suffering is caused by his failure to get his message across, to communicate his vision to his fellow human beings. It is so because the latter suffer from what might be called Narcissus's syndrome: they are self-centered, bound by time and thus imprisoned in their own mortality, which is why theirs is a "dead conscience." The aim of the speaker's painful struggle is to bring back the realm of the ideal, the timeless and the absolute, to revive mankind's memory of paradise. The poet-speaker longs for the decline or "wane" of the "mirror of Narcissus" because it would be tantamount to his own mission being accomplished. As it is, the condition of men seems similar to that of Narcissus as he is depicted in the second part of Crane's poem. Crane's Narcissus bears a strong resemblance to his Gidean counterpart: "His perfect image dies upon the stage / Or gains" and "The water flows." As in Gide's essay, Narcissus's reflection alternately appears and disappears, depending, presumably, on whether the beautiful youth approaches or moves away from the surface of the water, whose flow – like the passage of time – cannot be stopped. The fact that Gide's Narcissus and, consequently, humankind are time-bound also finds its analogy in Crane's poem. The realm in which Narcissus exists is marked by death:

> Loving the Styx, he sees the rain
> Speak otherwise in his own tones
> Upon the land he lends such dirges to.

In "Mirror of Narcissus," the passage quoted above is followed by the poem's closing line, which, however, comes after a double space. It seems that Crane wants to emphasize the distance between the figure of Narcissus and that of the poet-speaker, who somewhat resignedly concludes "Thy repetition freezes thus my pain…" If one takes a closer look at the word "repetition," one realizes that it may mean "copy" or "imitation," thus referring to the image or reflection which so absorbs Narcissus that it leads to his downfall: the Narcissus of the Greek legend, it must be remembered, pined away or, in other versions of the myth, committed suicide, knowing his love could never be fulfilled. In Crane's poem, however, it seems that Narcissus's complete absorption in what he sees is detrimental to the speaker's condition as well. Though it is said to "freeze" the speaker's "pain" – and thus, as if, relieve the speaker's suffering – we soon come to understand that the meaning of the verb "freeze" is by no means positive. The verb might in

fact be synonymous with "kill," "make motionless, fixed or stiff," "remove sensation from" or "frighten or discourage by unfriendly behavior." "Freezing" might also be synonymous with "being made speechless." Lexical analysis, backed by a reading of *Le Traité du Narcisse*, lends a new meaning to the poem's final line. It is possible that the poet-speaker is in fact disheartened by the incomprehension he faces, by the Narcissus-like attitudes he witnesses. He wishes to bring the ideal and the absolute closer to other people, but his efforts are hampered by the time-bound and death-tainted realm in which he exists. Thus interpreted, "Mirror of Narcissus" turns out to be a work dealing with the poet's fate, with the clash between his absolutist aspirations and the limitations to which most people are subject; a poem about the struggle to make one's own poetic voice heard and understood, but also a struggle with one's own weakness and discouragement, with the self-doubt resulting from doubt on the part of those whom the poet addresses and who fail to share his vision.

In a note made in 1890, while work on *Le Traité du Narcisse* was in progress, Gide expounds on some of the views expressed in his treatise. Central to this note is the notion of truth, which is to be found behind each phenomenon. All phenomena are symbols, and the artist's duty is to disclose the truths they stand for. According to Gide scholar Alain Goulet, the author of an article published in a special issue of *Le Magazine Littéraire* devoted to Gide as "the most modern of all classic authors," among the factors determining Gide's modernity is his belief that a true artist is one with a sense of mission and responsibility, driven by moral imperatives (74). In Gide's eyes, an artist who fails to reveal the truth is immoral, and his art useless. On no condition should self-respecting artists – or, for that matter, scientists – put themselves before the truth they are to express. An aesthetic dimension corresponds to the moral one: language should never obscure or overshadow the truth – or, as Gide puts it, the Idea – and thus should never come before it. It is a precept to which Gide was to remain faithful, creating a literary style which encourages a comparison between the language of his prose and crystal (Rogoziński 15). Gide's approach, though expressed in "moral" terms, is by no means moralistic. Nor is it utilitarian: the fact that art which fails to evoke an Idea is useless does not mean that the Idea which is to be evoked has to be useful in the conventional sense of the term. Gide hastens to add that the truth the artist reveals may in fact be immoral, it may shock and offend the general public. Artistic integrity, however, consists in being moral to the point of incurring indignation, disapproval and accusations of immorality. Artists are, in other words, immoral moralists or moral immoralists, and must be prepared to pay a price for it. They must be ready for self-sacrifice and self-denial. In this light, Gide's allusion to the Crucifixion in the treatise acquires a new dimension: one is almost tempted to draw a parallel





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between the artist and Christ, based on their shared selflessness and their readiness to suffer and sacrifice themselves.

The concerns voiced by Gide in the note may be similar to those that cause the speaker of Crane's "Mirror of Narcissus" to speak of his pain being "freezed" with what I read as regret. Perhaps it is so because, like Gide, Crane sees suffering and sacrifice as inevitably inscribed in the poet's fate. A reading of what is arguably Crane's most important prose text, the essay entitled "General Aims and Theories," reveals other interesting analogies to *Le Traité du Narcisse*, and seems to support my interpretation of "Mirror of Narcissus." In his essay, Crane gives voice to the belief that "there are few common terms, general denominators of speech that are solid enough or that ring with any vibration or spiritual conviction" (161). Crane's statement that "The great mythologies of the past (including the Church) are deprived of enough façade to even launch good raillery against" (161) seems to echo the skepticism with which Gide speaks of the multitude of masses celebrated in vain. He also refers to the question of artistic integrity when he observes that "a poet will accidentally define his time well enough simply by reacting honestly and to the full extent of his sensibilities to the state of passion, experience and rumination that fate forces on him, first hand" (161).

In "General Aims and Theories," Crane claims that "certain as yet undefined spiritual quantities, perhaps a new hierarchy of faith not to be developed so completely elsewhere" are "to be discovered" in America (161). He also adds, "in this process I like to feel myself as a potential factor" (161). The above quotations confirm the commonly held view according to which "Crane believed that poets had access to a higher state of consciousness than others" (Baym 2:1648). In the essay, Crane goes on to agree with those who call him "an 'absolutist' in poetry" (162) and defines this poetic absolutism by contrasting it with "the impressionistic method" (162), that is the method adopted by the poet who "creates only with the eye and for the readiest surface of the consciousness" (162- 63). To this, Crane opposes his concept of a poem which is

> at least a stab at a *truth*, and to such an extent may be differentiated from other kinds of poetry and called 'absolute.' Its evocation will not be toward decoration or amusement, but rather toward a state of consciousness, an 'innocence' (Blake) or absolute beauty. In this condition there may be discoverable under new forms certain spiritual illuminations, shining with a *morality* essentialized from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or preconceptions. (163, italics mine)

In "General Aims and Theories," Crane pays considerable attention to the formal and linguistic aspects of poetry, namely to his celebrated concept of the logic of metaphor.

Nevertheless, he perceives the poet as a visionary and a prophet whose main task is to communicate some deeper truths. Crane realizes that contenting oneself with a surface created by language or preconceived notions would be tantamount to remaining a Narcissus, one who is so overwhelmed by appearances that he is incapable of transcending them. Crane's poet – like Gide's artist – is in fact an anti-Narcissus, because he does not let images limit him, because he is determined to unveil the ideas behind the images. Therein lies his integrity, his morality which obliges him to reveal the truth and spread the word rather than be content with merely arranging words. Only thus understood can art and poetry transcend the temporal and approach the timeless, of which Narcissus – self-centered and steeped in time – may dream, but which he will never reach. Such a view of the role of artists and poets is a romantic one, as is the belief that artists and poets are by definition self-sacrificing and unselfish sufferers. In his study of Hart Crane, Gordon A. Tapper interprets Crane's refusal to create poetry which is merely "impressionistic" as proof that his poetics is "rooted in the concept of what Frank Kermode calls the 'Romantic Image': 'a means to truth, a truth unrelated to, and more exalted than, that of positivist science, or any observation depending upon the discursive reason'" (42). Tapper places his observation in the context of Crane's Imagist leanings, arguing that the poet of *The Bridge* "sets himself apart from poets who adopted the stylistic precepts of Imagism to the exclusion of its more conceptual implications" (42-43). It is precisely such "conceptual implications" that Sheridan identifies as the basis of the conviction around which Gide's essay revolves. As has already been mentioned, *Le Traité du Narcisse* is a symbolist treatise. However, Sheridan argues that it also contains a critique of symbolism. Thus, the essay, and particularly the note which accompanies it, might be seen as Gide's

> departure from dominant Symbolist thinking in the name of that Gidean constant, *sincerity*. Most of the Symbolists took little account of some putative Truth behind the Symbol – the Symbol was an end in itself, was encouraged to prefer itself. For them, the Symbol might manifest the Truth, but the Truth must remain forever veiled within it: once the Symbol was there, any concern for Truth became superfluous, indeed a kind of unSymbolist vulgarity. (Sheridan 74)

In modernist literature, the focus often shifts from content to form, and from the reality referred to by language to language itself. Despite being modernists, Crane and Gide refuse to content themselves with literature which is merely "impressionistic" or decorative, or in which "the primacy of Truth over the Symbol" (Sheridan 74) becomes the primacy of the symbol over the truth. Their refusal to do so might be motivated by the





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fear that literature and art separated from the essential ideas they are to express will be reduced to the condition of the image admired by Narcissus, and will become – like him – self-absorbed and self-loving, but ultimately as perishable and doomed to failure as the image devoid of the idea behind it, and as Narcissus himself.

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