PLAY AND CRIME IN L’IMMORALISTE AND LES CAVES DU VATICAN
BY ANDRÉ GIDE

by

Kathryn Joan Rowswell

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Abstract

For this Master’s thesis, the initial problematic asks how André Gide reconciles the concepts of ethics and authenticity in two of his early twentieth century works: *L’Immoraliste* (1902) and *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914). In a letter dated the 6th of June 1911, Gide wrote to his friend Jean Schlumberger “Si quelque jour je peux raconter ce passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime, ce sera mon plus beau livre.” Play and crime are recurring themes in Gide’s works and serve a role that on a thematic and structural plane are both ethical and aesthetic. In addition to this ethico-aesthetic interaction, the idea of a *passage quasi insensible* constitutes an important aspect of my argument. This passage between game and crime represents an act of ethical transgression implicit in the aesthetic construction of the work of art.

Returning to my initial problematic, Michel (*L’Immoraliste*) and Lafcadio (*Les Caves du Vatican*) attempt to cultivate a play-mood representative of the endeavor to cultivate one’s être authentique in the face of the dominating social ethic. In short, Lafcadio and Michel believe themselves capable of affirming their true selves simply by transgressing this socio-ethic. This desire to transgress the collective ethic results in a state of impasse experienced by the protagonists at the end of each text.

There is a discursive structure implicit in the two texts: the ethical space regulated by what Michel Foucault terms the “juridico-discursive” model of power and the ludic space governed by the desire to affirm one’s authentic self. These two spheres overlap to create a third space – that of transgression or crime. It is precisely this transgressive passage from the play sphere towards that of collective ethics that constitutes this *passage quasi insensible* that Gide mentions in his correspondence and what in this thesis is termed a poetics of transgression.
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Dedication

To Trudy
**Introduction**

Free, dost thou call thyself? Thy ruling thought would I hear of, and not that thou hast escaped from a yoke.

Art thou one entitled to escape from a yoke? Many a one hath cast away his final worth when he hath cast away his servitude.

Free from what? What doth that matter to Zarathustra! Clearly, however, shall thine eye show unto me: free for what?

Canst thou give unto thyself thy bad and thy good, and set up thy will as a law over thee? Canst thou be judge for thyself, and avenger of thy law?

Terrible is aloneness with the judge and avenger of one's own law. Thus is a star projected into desert space, and into the icy breath of aloneness.

To-day sufferest thou still from the multitude, thou individual; to-day hast thou still thy courage unabated, and thy hopes.

But one day will the solitude weary thee; one day will thy pride yield, and thy courage quail. Thou wilt one day cry: "I am alone!"

One day wilt thou see no longer thy loftiness, and see too closely thy lowliness; thy sublimity itself will frighten thee as a phantom. Thou wilt one day cry: "All is false!"

There are feelings which seek to slay the lonesome one; if they do not succeed, then must they themselves die! But art thou capable of it- to be a murderer?

This quote from Nietzsche’s 1883 work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (44), aptly emphasizes the philosophical tension preoccupying Gide in two of his early twentieth-century works: *L’Immoraliste* (1902) and *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914). The problem revolves around the seeming impossibility of reconciling the urge for authentic expression with the ethical constraints imposed upon the individual by society. Both *L’Immoraliste*, a récit, and *Les Caves du Vatican*, a sotie, allude to the problematic equation of liberty and authenticity. In the quote above, Zarathustra warns of the limitations of such a pursuit, foreshadowing in many ways the moral destitution of the ‘immoralists’ at the end of Gide’s works.

The protagonists of these respective works, Michel and Lafcadio, fashion a personal doctrine built upon the belief that liberty from the social ethic renders one’s discourse authentic. It is precisely this Nietzschean dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic with which Gide was personally preoccupied at this time (late 1890s into the 1900s).¹ In a *Journal* entry dated the 11th of January 1892, Gide writes that he “[s]’agite dans ce dilemme: être moral; être sincere.” He goes on to explain that this societal “morale” consists in supplanting “l’être naturel” which he terms the “vieil homme” with “un être factice préféré.” It

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¹ The French translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was published in 1898, a few years before *L’Immoraliste* and over a decade before *Les Caves du Vatican*. From his *Journal* we know that Gide was reading Nietzsche in the late 1890s.

² Michel uses the term “volonté” as does Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* and again in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.
is the vieil homme who is sincere (“le vieil homme, c’est l’homme sincère”), and it is society that demands the cultivation of a false persona (*Journal 29*). For Gide, this falsifying power is equated with the notion of crime, appropriately termed “la contrefaçon” or the counterfeiting force of society.

In this study, I address the manifestation of the tension between ethics and authenticity that I address, specifically the idea of crime as a space of transgression created by the overlap of the discourse on authenticity and the discourse on societal ethic. My inspiration for this perspective comes from a comment made by Gide in a letter written to Jean Schlumberger on June 6, 1911. In response to Schlumberger’s story regarding a boy accused and later found innocent of stealing Suzanne Schlumberger’s purse, Gide replied: “Quant à l’histoire du petit voleur, elle me bouleverse absolument. Si quelque jour je peux raconter ce passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime, ce sera mon plus beau livre” (*Correspondance Gide-Schlumberger* 389). This comment is central to my study, for the idea of this “passage quasi insensible”, is very much present in both *L’Immoraliste*, and in *Les Caves du Vatican*. Gide had originally intended to publish a preface to the sotie in which he explains the concurrence in his mind of the work with *L’Immoraliste* and *La Porte Étroite*. In a letter to a critic he explains the contents on this preface:

> J’y apprenais au lecteur que les *Caves du Vatican* habitaient depuis plus de quinze ans dans ma tête, comme aussi j’y avais porté plus de quinze ans *La Porte Étroite* et à peine un peu moins *L’Immoraliste*, premier sorti. Tous ces sujets se sont développés parallèlement, concurremment – et si j’ai écrit un tel livre avant tel autre c’est que le sujet me paraissait plus “at hand”, comme dit l’Anglais. Si j’avais pu, c’est l’ensemble que je les aurais écrits. Je n’aurais pas pu écrire *L’Immoraliste* si je n’avais pas su que j’écrirais aussi *La Porte Étroite*, et j’avais besoin d’avoir écrit l’un et l’autre pour pouvoir me permettre les *Caves*. (*Journal 437*)

These remarks justify the choice of the two texts in my corpus. Furthermore, while the concept of crime has been extensively examined by Gidian scholars, the interaction between play and crime has been explored only briefly. I shall analyse the ludic qualities of play that I analyse which, I believe, represent the original aspect of my study.

In the Gidian universe, as described in these two works, play becomes symbolic of the attempt to cultivate the authentic self via an aesthetic mould in rejection of the falsifying societal ethic. Inevitably, both Michel and Lafcadio find themselves in a state of impasse at the end of the works as their attempts at reconciling the authentic and the ethical lead to this stale mate. This impasse is reached in the attempt to bring the play sphere into the ethical sphere of society. It is the mechanism of transgression between play and crime that provides the basis to my research.

The study is divided into two chapters, each of which focuses on a single novel. In each chapter I examine the cultivation of the game model before moving on to examine the poetics of transgression that leads to play becoming a crime. In Chapter 1, I study the *L’Immoraliste*. The second chapter examines the
specificities of transgression in *Les Caves du Vatican*. Any underlining in quotations indicates my emphasis of the text, whereas italics in quotations are indicative of the author’s own emphasis.

For the theoretical framework of this study, I rely on Johann Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938) for definitions and characteristics of play. I also refer to Roger Caillois’ book *Les Jeux et les hommes* (1957), predominantly using his idea of “contamination” in my analysis of the transition between play and crime. Huizinga was a contemporary of Gide and as such provides perspective on the idea of game in the early twentieth century, whereas Caillois wrote predominantly in the latter half of the twentieth century (1950s through to the 1970s), making him a contemporary of Michel Foucault to whom I also refer. By using Foucault’s concept of the discourse on power as described in *La Volonté de Savoir* (1976), I hope to illustrate the modernity of Gide’s work and show to what extent he is still pertinent to the reader of the twenty-first century. While I refer to Nietzsche and Bakhtin at times in this paper, it is not my intention to focus on the Nietzschean or Bakhtinian aspects of Gide’s literary philosophy.

By examining the discursive spaces of authenticity and societal ethics as represented by the spheres of play and the ‘real,’ I highlight the transgressive ethic that is ultimately created when those two spheres come into contact with one another. My study rests on the hypothesis that Michel and Lafcadio fail to acknowledge that by simply transgressing the laws and norms promulgated by the societal ethic, they come no closer to discovering or asserting their authentic free self. Rather, they only succeed in legitimising the power of that ethical system. The failure to differentiate the discourse of self from the discourse of society results in a state of impasse that I believe becomes Gide’s answer to the problematic initially posed: How does Gide reconcile ethics and authenticity? Simply put, he does not. He is far more interested in the act of transgression, the “passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime” as a primarily aesthetic question, for which perhaps only the work of art can provide the sufficient answer.

Just as authenticity and inauthenticity form a binary of good (authentic) and bad (inauthentic) within the world of Gidian heroes, immorality (authentic) and morality (inauthentic) fall into the same reductionist dichotomy. It logically follows in the protagonists’ minds that authenticity and freedom can exist only by transgressing those limits laid out by the societal ethic of the ‘real’, that is to say, by creating a space of transgression. I propose analysing what I term the poetics of transgression, or more specifically, the space of transgression as created by the confrontation of the play sphere and the space of the ‘real’ regulated by what Foucault termed the juridico-discursive model of power. I examine this poetics of transgression in Gide’s treatment of two separate but overlapping spaces: play (at times game) and the socio-ethic (the ethic of the discourse on power, termed by Foucault as the juridico-discursive model of power). This overlap of two spaces resembles a Venn Diagram:
The essence of play, explains Johann Huizinga, is “profoundly aesthetic” (2) and not necessarily logical: Huizinga notes that “[s]ince the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life, it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus” (3). He goes on to qualify that

[…] in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else is Play it is not matter […]. Play only becomes possible, thinkable, understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of Play continually confirms the supra logical nature of the human situation. (3-4)

Given the aesthetic bias, Huizinga emphasizes that play is non-material: “Play is not matter.” Furthermore, he asserts that it exists outside of the “determinism” of the “cosmos” and of “ordinary life”:

[Play is a] free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (13)

Later Huizinga provides this definition:

[Play is] an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow. (132)

As the play sphere exists outside of the logic of “ordinary” life and as such outside of the ‘enjeux de pouvoir’ regulated by societal ethics, this space carries no ‘moral’ function. Huizinga comments, “The
valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here” (6). Huizinga thus stresses the outsidedness of game. There is indeed a space of game, and it is to be viewed as separate from that of the material, ‘real world.’ In this same vein of thought, it generates no material interest, “no profit can be gained by it” (13) meaning that there is material consequence outside of the play space. There are, however, rules that govern how the game “proceeds within its own proper boundaries” (13).

Gide, through the concept of play, creates a literary space in which the “aesthetics of existence is a mode of ethical self-formation” (Simon 72). To tie this back to Nietzschian philosophy, the aesthetic-ethical nature of play correlates to the desire of the individual to become master over himself. However, while this gaming sphere is set up in opposition to the societal ethic, the space of transgression is not created until the two spaces (unlimitedness and limitedness) come into contact with one another.

Foucault remarks in La Volonté de savoir that the traditional model of power is characterised as being negative, repressive, and generally one-sided. He adds that it takes the form of a law, limiting conduct by imposing rules, and preventing certain behaviour deemed unethical by society. Foucault suggests that it is in our interest to perceive power as one-sidedly oppressive as this allows us to believe that power is something that acts upon us. Therefore, the individual sees himself as separate from this model and as such free to resist it. If we were to acknowledge that power manifests itself not just in control, but also in the individual’s ability to resist such control, we would no longer be able to think of ourselves as free (123-33).

If liberty therefore requires revolting against what Foucault terms the juridico-discursive model of power, that is to say the domain that forms relations of power, in L’Immoraliste and Les Caves du Vatican, Michel and Lafcadio conclude that it is necessary to transgress that power in order to express their free, authentic self. In transgressing the tenets laid out by the law or morality, Michel and Lafcadio believe they can rediscover their authentic self. But this revolt serves not, as the characters hope, to destabilise the power structure, but rather to consolidate it:

Juridico-discourse is comprised of both the discourse of power and that of resistance. The protagonists, nonetheless, attempt to create their own spaces of power in which they can exercise a will to power (to use the Nietzschian term) and in which they seek to discover the possibilities of man. It is worth noting
that the use of the verb *pouvoir* stands in juxtaposition to the representation of *pouvoir* in the juridico-discourse. Michel and Lafcadio’s *pouvoir* exists in their ability to declare themselves subject of their existence – that is to say, in exploring what can be (the verb: *pouvoir*). The *pouvoir* of the juridico-discursive realm is precisely that relation of power that objectifies the two characters, preventing them from exploring the possibilities of man. The juridico-discourse functions as a negative force, able only to indicate “la forme générale de la limite” (110). Power, explains Foucault, should be seen as “pure limite tracée à la liberté” (114).
Chapter 1: *L’Immoraliste*

*L’Immoraliste* begins with a Preface written by Gide, in which the author apologises to his contemporary reader for a story he compares to a “fruit plein de cendre amère” (9) similar to a coloquinte that you will hope will quench your thirst, but leaves only “une plus atroce brûlure” (9). He hints that future readers will appreciate the plot more and understand that for some problems, perhaps only the work of art can he the sufficient solution.

The text of the récit itself is fairly straightforward, save the various dimensions of the framed narrative. It begins with a letter written by Michel’s friend to his brother Monsieur D.R – the President of the Council – imploring him to find a government position for Michel in Paris. In this letter, the friend recounts to his addressee the story that Michel told him and two other friends at Michel’s home near “Sidi b. M,” Algeria. The way in which Michel tells his story resembles a confession, with the protagonist pleading with his friends: “Je ne veux d’autre secours que celui-là : vous parler. – Car je suis à tel point de ma vie que je ne peux plus dépasser” (17).

After a brief explanation as to why he gathered his friends together (“vous parler”), Michel begins his confession which details his life since his marriage to Marceline, a woman whom he neither loved nor knew very well at the time of their engagement. Corroborating Lawrence Schehr’s assertion that Michel’s narrative starts under the aegis of heterosexuality, Michel’s confession begins with the line: “La dernière fois que nous nous vîmes, c’était […] dans la petite église de campagne où mon mariage se célébrait” (Gide 17-8). In this way, Michel’s narrative establishes the heteronormative standard against which he proceeds to revolt in the proceeding pages. Following the ceremony, the couple leaves on their honeymoon to North Africa, where Michel falls ill with tuberculosis. During his recovery, he adopts a philosophy reminiscent of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* mentality, thinking, as Lafcadio does in *Les Caves du Vatican*, that he is an *être d’inconséquence* (90). Michel’s mantra becomes the question, “Qu’est-ce que l’homme peut encore?” (*L’Immoraliste* 158). He views life as play, a source of amusement through which he seeks to affirm his authentic self.

Over the course of their sojourn in Biskra, Marceline introduces Michel to some of the village children, most notably Bachir and Moktir. He learns their games and becomes obsessed with their ‘health,’ which at this point in the récit is juxtaposed with the illness of the protagonist and his Apollonian ‘bourgeois’ mentality.

Even before falling ill, the couple’s relationship was never consummated. Within this white marriage, Michel admires the boys from afar – not acting on his urges until later in the story. The “homoerotic gaze”, as Lawrence Schehr terms it, culminates with Michel’s observation of Moktir’s theft of Marceline’s scissors. Instead of reprimanding the boy, or taking the scissors away from him, Michel
lies to his wife about the disappearance of the scissors. After this incident, Michel refers to Moktir as his “préféré” (55). The event becomes representative of Michel’s desire to revolt against the norms of a society that he deems false and counterfeiting.

On the couple’s return to France via Italy, Michel has a fight with a drunken carriage-driver and that night, for the first time, consummates his marriage. Arriving in France, Marceline finds that she is pregnant. Upon this news, Michel at first attempts to conform to the expectations of married life: he and Marceline acquire an upscale apartment in Paris, and Michel assumes responsibility of the farm at La Morinière, the family’s Normandy property. In the time following their return from Algeria, they divide their time between the two homes. This period of marital bliss is short-lived, however, as Michel grows increasingly unhappy with the routine of everyday bourgeois life:

Pourant je n’aurais pas su dire ni ce que j’entendais par vivre, ni si le goût que j’avais pris d’une vie plus spacieuse et aérée, moins contrainte et moins soucieuse d’autrui, n’était pas le secret de ma gêne ; ce secret me semblait bien plus mystérieux : un secret de ressuscité, pensais-je ; car je restais un étranger parmi les autres, comme quelqu’un qui revient de chez les morts. Et d’abord je ne ressentis qu’un assez douloureux désarroi […]. (105)

Michel begins teaching a course on counter-culture at the Collège de France where he meets Ménalque. Similarly to Michel, Ménalque is disaffected with society and openly rejects those same norms against which Michel had begun to revolt. Ménalque has a profound influence on Michel’s cultivation of what he believes to be the discovery of his authentic self. Ménalque acts as the voice of temptation, encouraging the protagonist to transgress the restrictive norms of society.

On his final night in Paris, Ménalque tells Michel that he must choose the kind of life he wants, and that he should keep “le bonheur calme du foyer” (123). Michel returns home that night to discover that Marceline has had a miscarriage. Over the ensuing months, Marceline falls increasingly ill with tuberculosis which she no doubt contracted from Michel during their honeymoon. The abyss opens up before Michel. He remarks to his listeners, “Ah ! subit avenir ! Le terrain cédait brusquement sous mon pas ; devant moi n’était plus qu’un trou vide où je trébuchais tout entier” (127). It is not long before Michel reverts back to his prior moral rebellion inspired by the play-spirit of the children in Biskra. In his desperation, however, this rebellious play-mood converts into an ethics of transgression, culminating with Michel poaching on his own land at La Morinière. His attitude becomes ever more “vagabond” and “debauched” (165), Michel resolves to take Marceline to North Africa for her recovery, knowing full well that her health only falters the farther south they go. Upon arriving in Biskra, Michel abandons the ailing Marceline in her bedroom to go to a brothel with Moktir.

Michel’s friends appear to have been gathered together at this point, as Michel languishes in the house he bought in Algeria. He lives there with his mistress and her brother, whom he confesses to prefer to the young girl:
L’enfant, que vous avez fait fuir en entrant, me l’apporte [a little food] soir et matin, en échange de quelques sous et de caresses. Cet enfant qui, devant les étrangers, se fait sauvage, est avec moi tendre et fidèle comme un chien. Sa soeur est une Ouled-Naïl qui, chaque hiver, regagne Constantine où elle vend son corps […]. Mais, un matin, son frère, le petit Ali, nous a surpris couchés ensemble […] moitié par ennui, moitié par peur de perdre Ali, depuis cette aventure je n’ai plus retenu cette fille. Elle ne s’en est pas fâchée; mais chaque fois que je la rencontre, elle rit et plaisante de ce que je lui préfère l’enfant. Elle pretend que c’est lui qui surtout me retient ici. Peut-être a-t-elle un peu raison… (181-2)

The homosexuality of Michel constitutes the final transgression in his tale. The concepts of virility and power become entwined in Michel’s mind with an esprit de jeu transmitted by the children. This transition marks his adoption of a play-aesthetic and comes to characterise the mechanics of transgression in the récit. Play exists within an aesthetic sphere where the system of ethics is determined by the individual. When Michel applies the gaming ethic to the material world governed by reason, norms and codes, the social/collective ethic is thus disrupted. With this new perspective, he rejects the values of his Protestant upbringing. The trip to North Africa also coincides with Michel’s discovery of his homoerotic tendencies aroused in him by the health and vitality that he perceives in the Arab boys.

This aspect of the text is particularly important if one considers the line with which Michel begins his confession: “La dernière fois que nous nous vîmes, c’était […] dans la petite église de campagne où mon mariage se célébrait” (17-8). Where the first line of the confession inscribes the text in the heteronormative model promulgated by the juridico-discursive structure of power, the last line decentres this approach, suggesting that Michel’s revolt, while it leads to him to a state of impasse vis-à-vis society, does provide him with a certain freedom or escape. This escape is mirrored by Gide’s ellipsis at the end of the récit, which leave the text open to the interpretation of both Michel’s audience (Daniel, Denis and the anonymous narrator) and to the reader who wonders if Michel will return to France and the heteronormative structure of society, or if he stays in Algeria with Ali and attempt to cultivate his authentic, homosexual self.

In French Gay Modernism, Schehr distinguishes between the homosexual and homoerotic in the text. He quotes Naomi Segal who specifies that “homosexual desire is not absent but repressed to about an inch beneath the surface, from where it shapes everything in the text.” It is the narrator’s homoerotic gaze, translated via the narrative “I” of Michel that brings this “latent homoeroticism,” as Schehr terms it, to the forefront (86-8). It is important to emphasise that in turn-of-the-century France, homosexuality, while not a crime in the judicial sense, was not socially accepted. Paradoxically, this facet of L’Immoraliste represents the authentic expression of Michel; in denying his sexual desires, he is committing a crime against himself: “vivre contrefait” as some of the characters in both Les Caves du Vatican and L’Immoraliste underline. These (homo)sexual underpinnings of the text are crucial to an understanding of the aesthetic, and consequently ethical expression of authentic affirmation in the face of a repressive social ethics which denies sincerity on the part of the subject.
The first part of this chapter will address the cultivation of the play aesthetic inspired by the children Michel whom meets in Biskra during his honeymoon. In the second part, I shall examine the socio-ethical aspects of the act of transgression, that “passage quasi insensible” between game and crime (*Correspondance* 389). From the relative innocence of the children’s games played in Algeria, Michel moves into the criminal, ‘immoral’ sphere with his complicity in Moktir’s theft, poaching at La Morinière, and his negligence that contributes to his wife’s death. Since Michel believes that he is beyond the ethical code dictated by the juridico-discursive space of the Law, he continues to apply his play aesthetic. The extension of the play-mood outside the dimension of the game ties into Michel’s belief in his absolute freedom. Michel confuses the pursuit of freedom with the pursuit of authenticity, believing he can find his authentic expression by freeing himself from the constraints of collective ethics. Confounding his efforts, Michel does not succeed in liberating himself, for he directly reacts to the taboos proscribed by the juridico-discursive model, thereby assenting to the legitimacy of the system. In transgressing social and moral norms, Michel inserts himself into a pre-existing, inauthentic model that he unconsciously adopts as absolute. Consequently, having failed to do any critical introspection, Michel is neither free nor authentic.

1.1 Play

Michel’s rhetoric of recovery is very much centred on a discourse of the self and of what man is capable. In an episode befitting the Nietzschian *Übermensch*, Michel asks himself:

Qu’est-ce que l’homme peut encore ? Voilà ce qu’il m’importait de savoir. Ce que l’homme a dit jusqu’ici, est-ce tout ce qu’il pouvait dire ? N’a-t-il rien ignoré de lui ? Ne lui reste-t-il qu’à redire ?... Et chaque jour croissait en moi le confus sentiment de richesses intactes que couvraient, cachèrent, étouffèrent les cultures, les décences, les morales. (158)

Similar to Nietzsche’s dichotomised vision of the world, Michel’s situation presents a series of binaries: the self and society, health and illness, innocence and corruption, instinct and culture. Such a binary vision betrays a reductive take on life, which, far from opening up the field of possibilities as Michel claims to do, serves in reality to restrict that freedom he seeks to acquire.

Michel’s recovery takes place in El Kantara, Algeria, which establishes a further, physical, dichotomy between the North (France) and the South (Algeria), where the “instinct of life” (Gide 28) invades Michel’s sense of being. The instinct of life is anchored in Michel’s conceptualisation of his body; as such, from the perspective of both Nietzsche’s philosophy and Michel’s existence, this sense of self is wholly concentrated on the body and its vitality. Corporal vitality becomes symbolic of the inner
ability to exercise one’s own desires and is consequently indicative of the degree of joie that body can attain (Drain 76). Furthermore, the focus on Michel’s body as the object of vitality and joie reflects the protagonists desire to convert his body into another surface for homoerotic gaze.

The Algerian space is further characterised by a desire to return to a prior innocence, like that of a child’s before cultural morals imbue the psyche with principles of right and wrong. Nietzsche writes in So Spake Zarathustra that it is necessary to rediscover the innocence of one’s senses, and to “redevenir enfant, et sans honte” (quoted by Drain 42). Gide ensures the symbolic union via the introduction of Michel to the local village children. Just as in Nietzsche’s model, the children in L’Immoraliste come to symbolise this innocence of the senses, uncorrupted by “les cultures, les décences, et les morales” (Gide 158). From this space of vitality and innocence, Michel cultivates an esprit de jeu or play-mood that allows him to put into effect his newfound doctrine in an effort to uncover that “être authentique qui se cachait” (62).

To illustrate how play ties into the Gide’s concept of authenticity, I divide the first part of this chapter into three sections in which I examine the principal characteristics of this play aesthetic as it appears in the text. First I explore the cultivation of the play-spirit via the assertion on the part of Michel of a sense of freedom and inconsequence. Second, I explore the features of what Huizinga terms the play-mood, and third I conclude by reasserting the existence of a separate discursive sphere of play via which the hidden authentic self may, according to Michel, be uncovered.

Cultivation of the esprit de jeu: freedom and inconsequence

Michel’s recovery from tuberculosis and his subsequent cult of the healthy body are inscribed in what both Nietzsche and Michel term the “instinct” (Gide 28) of life. The assertion of life becomes “une affaire de volonté” (37), whereby Michel reappropriates control over his self and asserts the primacy of his free will (“volonté). Just as Nietzsche views the body as the source of the true self, Michel similarly focuses his new identity on his physical body and its vitality as he recovers from tuberculosis at he beginning of the récit (Drain 140):

Pour un temps, seule ma guérison devait devenir mon étude ; mon devoir c’était ma santé ; il fallait juger bon, nommer Bien, tout ce qui m’était salutaire, oublier, repousser tout ce qui ne guérissait pas […]. Je repassais ma volonté comme une leçon ; apprenais mon hostilité, la dirigeais sur toutes choses ; je devais lutter contre tout : mon salut dépendait de moi seul. (37-8)

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2 Michel uses the term “volonté” as does Nietzsche in The Will to Power and again in On the Genealogy of Morals: (“the will to power”) (559).
This emphasis on the body orients Michel’s discourse towards a conceptualisation of the autonomy of the self. Michel stresses the association of his health with his sense of self, thereby opposing his physical self to his old moral, Christian self. In this way, he clearly draws up a distinction between what is good for him, “salutaire” et “Bien,” (which Gide puts in italics) and that which is harmful, “repousser tout ce qui ne me guérisait pas” (37). Michel’s vocabulary reinforces the dichotomisation between what is beneficial and harmful but takes it a step farther, insinuating another dichotomy between instruction and instinct. This secondary binary corresponds to the initial opposition whereby “devoir,” “étude” and “leçon” fall into this ‘harmful’ category and those factors that promote his health fall into the ‘beneficial’ category. Interestingly, the former themes, “devoir” “étude” and “leçon” all hearken back to his Protestant upbringing. Michel explains:

Le grave enseignement huguenot de ma mère s’était, avec sa belle image, lentement effacé en mon cœur, vous savez que je la perdis jeune. Je ne soupçonnais pas encore combien cette première morale d’enfant nous maîtrise, ni quels plis elle laisse à l’esprit. Cette sorte d’austérité dont ma mère m’avait laissé le goût en m’inculquant les principes, je la reportai toute à l’étude. (19)

In this way, the self is set up in opposition to society, just as the play sphere opposes that of the ‘real’ ³ which relies on an “affaire de volonté” (37) and the boundaries and rules which the players have set up. It is the subjectification of the self that is crucial in the cultivation of a play aesthetic. In the real world, where power is determined by an apparently arbitrary juridico-discursive model of power, the realm of game seems to allow the individual to assert his will. Such individual assertion parallels Michel’s newfound lust for life, centred on his body and the will to recover. Nietzsche’s term for this is the will to power (volonté de puissance) which, he asserts, constitutes the essence of life.⁴ Within the play sphere it is the body, the self, which gains control of the power structure, for in this realm the individual creates the limits: specifically what is permitted and what is not.

Michel projects the source of claustrophobic morality onto the figure of his mother, but in the context of the récit it is Michel’s wife, Marceline, who subsequently inherits the role. The dichotomy between self and other recalls the series of dichotomies already laid out by Michel. Binary oppositions that are governed by the overarching opposition between sickness and health. When Michel declares on page thirty-eight, “je devais lutter contre tout; mon salut dépendait de moi seul”, he speaks both of the

³ By society, or socio-ethnic I refer to the society in which Michel was raised: that is, the Christian (Protestant and Catholic) and largely academic environment to which he was accustomed.

⁴ “Thus the essence of life, its will to power, is ignored; one overlooks the essential priority of the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces that give new interpretations and directions, although ‘adaptation’ follows only after this; the dominant role of the highest functionaries within the organism itself in which the will to life appears active and form-giving is denied.” (On the Genealogy of Morals 515).
need to fight literally against tuberculosis and to counteract figuratively an inauthentic, infectious, falsifying society.

The body therefore becomes the locus for struggle between the individual and society. If one succeeds in shedding the “surcharges” placed upon the body, one can uncover what Michel terms “l’être authentique, le vieil homme”:

Ce fut dès lors celui que je prétendis découvrir : l’être authentique, ‘le vieil homme’, celui dont ne voulait plus l’Évangile ; celui que, tout autour de moi, livres, maîtres, parents, et que moi-même avions tâché d’abord de supprimer. Et il m’apparaissait déjà, grâce aux surcharges, plus fruste et difficile à découvrir mais d’autant plus utile à découvrir et valeureux. Je méprisai dès lors cet être secondaire, appris, que l’instruction avait dessiné par-dessus. Il fallait secouer ces surcharges. (62-3)

Authenticity is set up in opposition to all the itemised negative forces in Michel’s life. These aspects of his figurative sickness conspire in his mind to “annihilate” his true self, buried beneath “les surcharges” of the “être secondaire.” The idea of the “counterfeited” self (115), as the quasi diabolical Ménalque terms the inauthentic man, is further elaborated in metaphors of a “masque,” “un fard” that reveals only here and there “la chair même, l’être authentique qui se cachait” (62-3). The cult of the body is the cult of the true self, free to assert the individual’s free will (“volonté”) and free from the “surcharges” of a sick culture symbolised by religion, “livres, maîtres [and] parents” (62). In sum, all those symbols of power and control manifest themselves within the power structure of the societal ethic.

It is important to emphasise that in addition to the assertion of free will and authenticity, Michel’s perspective on freedom also demands a certain gratuity, a desire for inconsequence. Huizinga defines play as “an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (13). The stipulation of “no profit” and “no material interest” takes on a sinister dimension in the latter part of the récit. During the cultivation of his play-spirit, however, such gratuity remains more or less harmless. A fitting illustration of this aspiration for inconsequence occurs when Michel learns that Marceline has been praying for his recovery:

“Il ne faut pas prier pour moi, Marceline.
-- Pourquoi ? dit-elle un peu troublée.
-- Je n’aime pas les protections.
-- Tu repousses l’aide de Dieu ?
-- Après, il aurait droit à ma reconnaissance. Cela crée des obligations ; je n’en veux pas.”
Nous avions l’air de plaisanter, mais ne nous mènions nullement sur l’importance de nos paroles. (39)
Michel clearly emphasises his rejection of obligation and, to a certain extent, responsibility towards the other. The reflection, “nous avions l’air de plaisanter, mais ne nous méprissions nullement sur l’importance de nos paroles” hints at the sinister underpinnings of the game that Michel believes he is playing. He is quite aware that this volonté de puissance and instinct de vivre (Gide 28) have become a game, remarking,

Je m’étonnais parfois que ma santé revînt si vite. J’en arrivais à […] rire de mon sang craché, à regretter que ma guérison ne fût pas demeurée plus ardue […] je m’y amusai comme à un jeu. (66)

The amusement that Michel derives from the exercise of his own will upon his body and from the discovery of a hidden, authentic self under the layers of counterfeiting morals, inspires a feeling of joy and exaltation – characteristics that Huizinga defines as intrinsic to the “play-mood.”

The play-mood – the ethico-aesthetic of authenticity

The orientation of Michel’s play-spirit towards his body and the exaltation he experiences in exercising his volonté place Michel’s game within a highly aesthetised vision of the world:

Que parlé-je d’unique effort ? Pouvais-je m’intéresser à moi, sinon comme à un être perfectible ? Cette perfection inconnue et que j’imaginais confusément, jamais ma volonté n’avait été plus exaltée que pour y tendre ; j’employais cette volonté tout entière à fortifier mon corps, à le bronzer. (64)

Michel describes his body as if it were a canvas on which he can create his work of art, the elusive “être perfectible.” This pursuit engenders a feeling of exaltation in Michel. It is important to highlight the use of the verb imaginer in the above passage, as it is juxtaposed with the very physical manifestation of what Michel sees as his will to power. While he fortifies his physical, material body, he can only imagine this perfected state of being. This recalls Huizinga’s insistence that games are not associated with material interest and can only exist when “an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra logical nature of the human situation” (10). The perfection that Michel envisions corresponds to an aesthetised dream of the possible. Huizinga again asserts, “into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life, [play] brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (10). It is this possibility for perfection, the ability to create order and form according to one’s will, that makes play highly aesthetic.

Part of the reason Michel experiences such pleasure in cultivating this playful spirit is because he is able to create and then explore the space he created. He sets the rules; he is now subject of his own ethic.
The play impulse is as much ethical as it is aesthetic for him. As such, the other source of pleasure is derived from the “tension” implicit in play: “Though Play […] is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player’s prowess” (11). The tension in play mirrors Michel’s desire to assert his volonté and the prowess of his self, symbolised by his body as he stands nude, admiring his ‘reborn’ self: “Je me regardai longuement sans plus de honte aucune, avec joie. Je me trouvais, non pas robuste encore, mais pouvant l’être, harmonieux, sensuel, presque beau” (Gide 63).

It is the possibility of prowess that intrigues Michel. Having broken through the bonds of instruction and morality (belonging to the socio-ethic) in his newfound ‘freedom,’ Michel echoes the question of Nietzsche’s Übermensch: “Of what is man capable?” (quoted by Holdheim 544): “Qu’est-ce que l’homme peut encore?” As the verb “imaginer” on page 64 signifies the non-material world, the verb pouvoir serves as a motor to Michel’s aesthetised ethics of discovering the possibilities and truth of man. Michel asserts himself as the subject of his own body, perceiving all of the possibilities of what ‘can’ (pouvoir) open before him. Michel’s aesthetic is innately self-reflective, hence the constant refocailisation on the body and the phenomenological effect the outside world has on his material and non-material self. The word exaltation is liberally employed in such descriptions:

Les cassies, dont les fleurs viennent très tôt avant les feuilles, embaumaient – à moins que ne vint de partout cette sorte d’odeur légère inconnue qui me semblait entrer en moi par plusieurs sens et m’exaltait […]. Je marchais dans une sorte d’extase, d’allégresse silencieuse, d’exaltation des sens et de la chair. (46-50)

This phenomenological exaltation is repeated some twenty pages later:

L’âpreté chaude de la roche, l’abondance de l’air, les senteurs, la limpidité, tout m’emplissait du charme adorable de vivre et me suffisait à ce point que rien d’autre qu’une joie légère ne semblait habiter en moi […]. O joie physique ! m’écriais-je; rythme sûr de mes muscles ! santé !… (72)

Having been deprived of play as a child and raised according to his mother’s Protestant principles, Michel “report[a] toute à l’étude” (19). He continues, “Ainsi j’atteignis 25 ans n’ayant presque rien regardé que des ruines ou des livres, et je ne connaissais rien de la vie” (20). Life and play are again conflated, recalling Michel’s later assertion that his recovery, life itself, amused him “comme à un jeu” (66).

5 “[…] j’eus comme un confus sentiment de tout ce que la vie pouvait être, de son amour à elle, la vague vision de si pathétiques beautés […]” (Gide 29).
The children with whom Michel surrounds himself during his recovery become projections of his ‘lost childhood.’ Michel describes these children as firmly inscribed in the gaming aesthetic/ethic, almost constantly involved in one game or another. Michel notes,

Je restais auprès des enfants. Bientôt j’en connus un grand nombre ; je causais avec eux longuement ; j’apprenais leurs jeux, leur en indiquais d’autres, perdais au bouchon tous mes sous […] parfois ils me suivaient, toujours jouant, jusqu’à ma porte ; parfois enfin ils la passèrent. (53)

This passage on the children’s playing spirit comes shortly before Michel explicitly states that he views his recovery and revendication of life as forms of play. His exposure to the play-spirit most certainly plays a pivotal role in his adoption of the play-mood. Huizinga writes that “child-life” performances “are full of imagination” (13). When s/he plays, the child is “making an image of something different, something more beautiful, or more sublime” than what that thing actually is. This is not the cultivation of a “sham” reality, but rather “a realization in appearance,” that is, imagination in the original sense of the word (14). The suspension of belief and the emphasis on the non-material recall Michel’s search for the perfectible being that he could only imagine confusingly. “[C]hild-life” performance elevates play to the aesthetic field just as Michel seeks to do via his play-mood.

The exaltation and joy that Michel experiences represent the instinctual aspect of life. Any ‘truth’ that can be determined may only be surmised by the effect outside objects have in one’s “monde d’appétits et de passion.” In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche writes:

Suppose nothing else were “given” as real except out world of desires and passions, and we could not get down, or up, to any other “reality” besides the reality of our drives – for thinking is merely a relation of these drives to each other: is it not permitted to make the experiment and to ask the question whether this “given” would not be sufficient for also understanding on the basis of this kind of thing the so-called mechanistic (or “material”) world? (237)

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Michel recalls his childhood as if it were a buried treasure, buried, like his authentic self, beneath “les surcharges” of decency and morality (158)– in sum, beneath “les surcharges” of the socio-ethic: “[…] du fond du passé de ma première enfance se réveillaient enfin mille lueurs, de mille sensations égarées. La conscience que je prenais à nouveau de mes sens m’en permettait l’inquiète reconnaissance. Oui, mes sens, réveillés désormais, se retrouvaient toute une histoire, se récompensaient un passé. Ils vivaient ! n’avaient jamais cessé de vivre, se découvraient, même à travers mes ans d’étude, une vie latente et rusée” (47). It is also worth noting the similarity of this metaphor with the hidden nature of the authentic self, buried beneath layers of excess text, like a palimpsest: “Et je me comparais aux palimpsestes ; je goûtait la joie du savant, qui, sous les écritures plus récentes, découvrait sur un même papier un texte très ancien infiniment plus précieux. Quel était-il, ce texte occulte ? Pour le lire, ne fallait-il pas tout d’abord effacer les textes récents ?” (63).
The pleasure one takes from an action or experience becomes indicative of its authentic nature. The pleasure one derives from an object or experience becomes the very reason for pursuing such behaviour. Michel’s ethico-aesthetic has become an end in itself, which is after all one of the founding characteristics of the play sphere: pleasure. The player plays precisely because he derives pleasure from the act. This act thus transforms into what Lafcadio in *Les Caves du Vatican* will term an *acte gratuit*: an act for which there is no incentive or motive other than the simple desire to commit the act itself.

**Play and authenticity as a separate space**

One can find in the structure of *L’Immoraliste* the delineation of two play spaces: the geographic locations of North Africa and La Morinière (Michel’s farm in Normandy), and Michel’s own confession which takes the form of the récit itself and constitutes Michel’s own discourse as differentiated from the juridico-discourse of the real world. The outsidedness of play corresponds with Huizinga’s criterion that it “is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within fixed limits of time and space” (28), standing “quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” (132).

Gide viewed travelling as a diversion from the ‘torpeur’ of everyday life (Journal 145). Such a break from ‘ordinary life’ permits the individual to rediscover himself, or more pertinently for Michel, to discover the authentic self. Upon leaving Paris and arriving in Tunisia, he remarks:

> Pourtant Tunis me surprît fort. Au toucher de nouvelles sensations s’émouvaient telles parties de moi, des facultés endormies qui, n’ayant pas encore servi, avaient gardé toute leur mystérieuse jeunesse. (24)

After arriving in El Kantara from Tunis, Michel’s descriptions of the countryside are steeped in pastoral imagery reminiscent of Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Michel details the “bruit léger de l’eau qui s’écoule” and the “chant de flûte dont un enfant jouait” (50-1). The scene fulfils its intertextual bucolic potential with the appearance of a shepherd boy, “presque nu, sur le tronc d’un palmier abattu” (50). This romanticised vision of the countryside resembles the idyllic Arcadia of the *Eclogues* more than the on-the-ground reality of colonised turn-of-the-century Algeria. Such a depiction illustrates to what extent Gide’s aesthetic model is based on classical allusions that filter Michel’s perception of the world around him. It

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7 Huizinga focuses predominantly upon the “fun” in *Homo Ludens*: pp. 1, 2, 3, 23, 24, 33, 86, 89, 195

8 Of Damon and Alphesiboeus now,
Those shepherd-singers at whose rival strains
The heifer wondering forgot to graze,
The lynx stood awe-struck, and the flowing streams,
Unwonted loiterers, stayed their course to hear-
How Damon and Alphesiboeus sang
Their pastoral ditties, will I tell the tale. (*Eclogue VIII*)
also clearly places North Africa in a space entirely separate from Michel’s reality symbolised by the Northern cosmopolitan city of Paris where he lives and works. As his honeymoon to Africa is only intended as a short holiday, it becomes clear how the parameters of play also conform to the temporal limits of travel; just as a game, as distinguished from play, has a beginning and an end, so does the holiday, which ends with Michel’s return to Paris.

La Morinière likewise represents a separate space, as distinguished from the space of the real wherein the socio-ethic predominates. While there, it is Michel who makes the rules. The ability to create the form and structure of this space hearkens back to Huizinga’s other characteristic of play, whereby games proceed “according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (13). This also elevates play to the aesthetic field as it is precisely the ability to create “rhythm and harmony” (159). Michel’s description of La Morinière corresponds to this definition of play:

De cette abondance ordonnée, de cet asservissement joyeux, de ces souriantes cultures, une harmonie s’établissait, non plus fortuite, mais dictée, un rythme, une beauté tout à la fois humaine et naturelle, où l’on ne savait plus ce que l’on admirait, tant étaient confondus en une très parfaite entente l’éclatement fécond de la libre nature, l’effort savant de l’homme pour la régler. Que serait cet effort, pensais-je, sans la puissante sauvagerie qu’il domine ? Que serait le sauvage élan de cette sève débordante sans l’intelligent effort qui l’endigue et l’amène en riant au luxe? – Et je me laissais rêver à telles terres où toutes forces fussent si bien réglées, toutes dépenses si compensées, tous échanges si stricts, que le moindre déchet devînt sensible ; puis, appliquant mon rêve à la vie, je me construisais une éthique qui devenait une science de la parfaite utilisation de soi par une intelligente contrainte. (83-4)

Adding to this sense of a privileged space set apart, Roger Caillois refers to the play sphere as a “réalité seconde” (43) in which one proceeds at times in a dream-like state. Michel’s “dream” to create an ethics of the perfect utilisation of oneself corresponds to the game-quality of order and form. It also underlines the impossibility of applying the play aesthetic to the real world. Just as with the play-mood, there is clearly an ethical dimension to the aesthetic of play. This is not to say that play has a moral code, but there is an order, a set of rules to which one must adhere. The ethicisation of something predominantly

‘Yet will ye sing, Arcadians, of my woes
Upon your mountains,’ sadly he replied-
‘Arcadians, that alone have skill to sing.
O then how softly would my ashes rest,
If of my love, one day, your flutes should tell!
And would that I, of your own fellowship,
Or dresser of the ripening grape had been,
Or guardian of the flock! …’ (Eclogue X)

9 It also corresponds to another Nietzschean attribute: that of Apollonian responsibility. This desire for order and utility and the aesthetic almost artistic qualities of “rhythm” and “harmony”, all represent qualities of the Apollonian (Birth of Tragedy 40). Coincidentally, the opposite in the dichotomy, Dionysian ivresse, corresponds to Michel’s almost perpetual state of exaltation in North Africa. Furthermore, this dichotomization mirrors that of North and South, for the Apollonian is associated with the North and the Dionysian with the South.
aesthetic is important as it underscores the urge on the part of Michel to articulate a set of norms in line with what he deems to be issued from his authentic self and not derivative of the socio-ethic.

La Morinière, while still belonging to a sphere set apart from the everyday reality of Parisian convention, is nonetheless part of Michel and Marceline’s ‘real life.’ The farm is what generates the family’s income and as such is implicated directly in the structure of society – its economic system, its laws and its norms. As Huizinga warns, when the domain of play comes into contact with the ‘rules’ of society, the “umpire’s whistle breaks the spell and sets ‘real’ life going again” (11).

Finally, Michel’s adoption of the play aesthetic bears within it something seemingly disjointed, innately disturbing. More than his distaste for the weak, his penchant for young boys and his disregard for the wellbeing of those around him born from a perverted sense of narcissism, Michel’s gaming ethico-aesthetic simply does not make sense. Michel promulgates the Nietzschian binary vision of the world, where vitality and sickness are dichotomized to equate the inauthenticity of modern culture with the sickness of the falsified individual. Michel’s pursuit of the Übermensch takes on many of the aesthetic characteristics of this pursuit, but in placing the discovery of his vieil homme so firmly in the play aesthetic, Michel also places himself in the realm of art and fiction, the realm of the false and, for all intents and purposes, in a ‘non-space.’

Huizinga recognises this deceiving aspect of play. For him art, like play, is innately gratuitous and as such constitutes a separate sphere from the material world:

Now it can hardly be denied that these qualities [of play] are also proper to poetic creation. In fact, the definition we have just given of play might serve as a definition of poetry. The rhythmical or symmetrical arrangement of language, the hitting of the mark or assonance, the deliberate disguising of the sense, the artificial and artful construction of phrases — all might be so many utterances of the play-spirit. To call poetry, as Paul Valéry has done, a playing with words and language is no metaphor: it is the precise and literal truth. (132).

Michel inscribes his narration into the poetic creation of a Bildungsroman, recounted in the form of a confession which is then transcribed by an anonymous friend in the form of a letter. The suggestion that Michel feels the need to have his story put into writing unites the idea of game and fiction within the non-material sphere of the play-mood.

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10 It could be argued that without his own illness, Michel would not have undertaken his physical and philosophical journey to become an être authentique. Even when Marceline falls ill the following year, he sees only weakness in his wife, still preoccupied as he is by his own transformation which, after all, would be made easier if she were not there to impede his progress: “Je repense souvent à ces larmes et je crois maintenant que, déjà se sentant condamnée, c’est du regret d’autres printemps qu’elle pleurait. – Je pense aussi qu’il est de fortes joies pour les forts, et de faibles joies pour les faibles que les fortes joies blesseraient. Elle, un rien de plaisir la soûlait ; un peu d’éclat de plus, et elle ne le pouvait plus supporter. Ce qu’elle appelait le bonheur, c’est ce que j’appelais le repos, et moi je ne voulais ni ne pouvais me reposer” (164).
The creative emphasis of the play aesthetic also suggests differing philosophical approaches of Nietzsche and Gide: While the former rejects the recourse to artistic aesthetic, the latter takes art as the only means by which such philosophical problems can be presented. Gide ties this privileged role of art as the ‘truth bearer’ to the role of game in literature: “pour moi toujours et par contre, je suis enclin à considérer l’Art lui-même comme un jeu ; et comme un jeu de Dieu, le Cosmos” (Journal 964).

In L’Univers ludique de Gide, Bertrand Fillaudeau reinforces the role of game in literature, referring to literature as “le jeu des jeux.” He explains that “écriture est jeu, évasion, création libre, elle devient alors le jeu des jeux en assumant son caractère artificiel, elle met en lumière les limites d’où ressort sa grandeur” (286).

It is precisely the idea of limits that Michel is unwilling to accept. By inscribing his tale into a literary mode, Michel escapes the bounds imposed by the material world, much as he sought to do in adopting what Friedrich Schiller terms a Spieltrieb philosophy.11 It is within this space that the question of ethics and authenticity, freedom and individuality can be explored freely without the fear of repercussions in the ‘real’ world. This artistic gratuity or inconsequence shares a ludic commonality with that of play: the hermeneutic complicity, between author and reader, suggests the instigation of the literary game of interpretation. The framed narrative structure of the récit functions partially as a mise à nu of the literary model, paralleling the invitation to interpretative play and revealing Michel’s discourse as the récit in which the reader/listener is engaged:

Michel resta longtemps silencieux. Nous nous taisions aussi, pris chacun d’un étrange malaise. Il nous semblait, hélas! qu’à nous la raconter, Michel avait rendu son action plus légitime. De ne savoir où la désapprouver, dans la lente explication qu’il en donna, nous en faisait presque complices [of a crime]. Nous y étions comme engagés.

Beginning with the transcription of Michel’s discourse in letterform, the reader simultaneously assumes the role as reader of the letter (destinataire) and as member of the audience listening to Michel’s monologue. In this way, the reader’s reaction to Michel’s tale is conflated with the collective “nous”

11 For Friedrich Schiller, play is synonymous with artistic beauty: “But what is meant by a mere j, when we know that in all conditions of humanity that very thing is play, and only that is play which makes man complete and develops simultaneously his twofold nature? What you style limitation, according to your representation of the matter, according to my views, which I have justified by proofs, I name enlargement. Consequently, I should have said exactly the reverse: man is serious only with the agreeable, with the good, and with the perfect, but he plays with beauty. In saying this we must not indeed think of the plays that are in vogue in real life, and which commonly refer only to his material state. But in real life we should also seek in vain for the beauty of which we are here speaking. The actually present beauty is worthy of the really, of the actually, present play-impulse; but by the ideal of beauty, which is set up by the reason, an ideal of the play-instinct is also presented, which man ought to have before his eyes in all his plays.” (79).
designating his three friends. It is curious how Michel’s play-spirit elicits such a strong reaction in both his textual audience and us the readers. The anonymous narrator of the framing narrative notes that the cause of this malaise could in fact find its root not only in Michel’s lack of emotion, but also in the realisation that we too see ourselves in Michel’s récit:

D’ailleurs qu’en pensé-je moi-même?...[…]. Le réprouverons-nous simplement, niant qu’on puisse tourner à bien des facultés qui se manifestent si cruelles? – Mais il en est plus d’un aujourd’hui, je le crains, qui oserait en ce récit se reconnaître. (12)

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Just as Michel fashions an aesthetic of life based on the cult of the body, the children with whom he surrounds himself also represent virility and prowess: the health of an individual free from “les décences” and “les moral"es” which “couveraient, cachaiennent, étouffaient” the true expression of the self (158). The children are also outside of Michel’s source culture, their exoticism lending itself to the play aesthetic and creating the illusion of an escape or freedom from the social mores of French society. Furthermore, children, regardless of origin, do not often participate in the socio-ethic in the same way in which adults are expected to. Children act according to the play aesthetic much as Michel aspires to, seeking pleasure as the signifier of the ‘right’ or ‘sincere’ action. There is an understanding that the moral ethic does not yet apply to them on account of their inability to understand the causality, or ethical repercussions, of such ‘morally reprehensible’ or ‘immoral’ actions. They become some of the only true “être[s] d’inconséquence” as Gide notes in Les Caves du Vatican (90). Michel add’s, “[d]epuis le début de mon mal, j’avais vécu sans examen, sans loi, m’appliquant à vivre, comme fait l’animal ou l’enfant” (L’Immoraliste 60). In this way, children become the perfect symbol for Michel’s aspirations as a free, authentic man. The “world of […] the child” writes Huizinga, is the “world of play” (26).  

12 This highly aestheticised vision is clearly illustrated in the description of the first child whom Marceline brings to play with Michel:

Le lendemain Bachir revint. Il s’assit comme l’avant-veille, sortit son couteau, voulut tailler un bois trop dur, et fit si bien qu’il s’enfonça la lame dans le pouce. J’eus un frisson d’horreur; il en rit, montra la coupure brillante et s’amusa de voir couler son sang. Quand il riait, il découvrait des dents très blanches; il lécha plaisamment sa blessure; sa langue était rose comme celle d’un chat. Ah ! qu’il se portait bien. C’était là ce dont je m’éprenais de lui: la santé. La santé de ce petit corps était belle. (34)

Word choice in this excerpt privileges the concepts of amusement and pleasure. It is also clear that the pleasure principle has taken on an overt homoerotic dimension. Certainly, this excerpt is rife with sexual innuendo and could be interpreted as a symbolic sexual act. This same designation of children as the locus of pleasure is reflected in the criminal relationship Michel fosters with Moktir and Alcide, the younger brother of the Apollonian Charles. Moreover, homosexuality is offered as another possibility of what man is capable, recalling once again Michel’s question: “que peut l’homme ?” Just as it represents another possibility for authentic expression (which for Michel
In *The Shock of Men*, Lawrence Schehr specifies that such latent homosexuality as Michel exhibits finds its base in an ethico-aesthetic valorisation of one’s sexual orientation, which hearkens back to Michel’s ethico-aesthetic of existence wherein *volonté* and the cult of the body take prominence (35). In sum, all that corresponds to the sublimation of Michel’s desires, all that *pleases* Michel is anchored in this separate space of play and his newfound sense of authenticity.  

1.2 Crime

Roger Caillois posits that when contact is established between play and the real world, the play aesthetic becomes “contaminated” (103). He elaborates:

Si le jeu consiste à fournir à ses puissants instincts une satisfaction formelle, idéale, limitée, maintenue à l’écart de la vie courante, qu’en advient-il donc quand toute convention est rejetée. Quand l’univers du jeu n’est plus étanche ? […] L’empire de l’instinct redevenant absolu, la tendance que parvenait à abuser l’activité isolée, abritée et en quelque sorte neutralisée du jeu, se répand dans la vie courante et tend à la subordonner autant qu’elle peut à ses exigences propres. Ce qui était plaisir devient idée fixe ; ce qui était évasion devient obligation ; ce qui était divertissement devient passion, obsession et source d’angoisse. (103)

The contamination of the play-mood with the rules of the real world recalls Gide’s question in his correspondence with Schlumberger: What determines this “passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime” (*Correspondance Gide-Schlumberger* 389)? More specifically to *L’Immoraliste*, at what point does Michel’s game, this ethico-aesthetic valorisation of existence, become a crime?

For Michel, what was an idée fixe became a source of pleasure with the adoption of the ethico-aesthetic of game. This anguish is born from this inverted schema. His pleasure driven ethic has been corrupted, contaminated by coming into contact with the limits imposed by the socio-ethic. The certainly seems to be the case), it also represents an additional aspect of the game into which he has entered. Mirroring the orgasm metaphor, the description of Bachir is a culmination, a cathartic expression of all of the life-factors thus far set out by the protagonist: health (la santé), pleasure (*plaisamment* and Michel’s voyeurist pleasure: “je m’éprenais de lui”) and finally, the aesthetic valorisation of the body (“le sang” and “la santé de ce petit corps était belle”). In other descriptions of Bachir, his nudity takes the thematic forefront:

L’enfant […] se retourne vers Marceline, et, avec un mouvement de grâce animale et câline, se bottit contre elle, lui prend la main, l’embrasse avec un geste qui découvre ses bras nus. Je remarque qu’il est tout nus sous sa mince gandourah blanche […]. (32-33)

13 Freud explains that “what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle” – or that which provides pleasure. In order to protect oneself from suffering, the individual creates the reality principle which perceives and locks off displeasures coming from the outside (40-53).
imposition of Michel’s play aesthetic/ethic creates a space of transgression; it has become what D.A Steel terms a “jeu interdit” (560).

Michel confesses to a series of crimes throughout the work. Beginning with his complicity in Moktir’s theft to trapping rabbits with Alcide and Bocage at La Mori nière, the récit culminates with the death of Marceline that Michel himself terms a crime: “Ce n’est pas, croyez-moi, que je sois fatigué de mon crime, s’il vous plaît de l’appeler ainsi,— mais je dois me prouver à moi-même que je n’ai pas outrepassé mon droit”14 (180). In transgressing the limits set out by the juridico-discursive model of power, Michel has committed what is tantamount to a crime. Delving into the etymology of the word crime we find two Latin roots: cernō, "I decide, I give judgement," which in turn is derived from the original Latin crīmen, "charge" or “cry of distress.” Caillois’ description of the source of anguish elicited by the act of play transgressing the norms of society finds an explanation in this etymological root of the word. The cry of desperation is echoed in Michel’s various lamentations. As Caillois warns, the loss of gratuity can become a source of anguish. This precise sentiment is articulated by Michel in a moment of despair: “C’est à ma taille aussi que j’avais taillé mon bonheur, m’écriai-je ; mais j’ai grandi, à présent mon bonheur me serre ; parfois, j’en suis presque étranglé…” to which Ménalque with exaggerated gravity replies, “on croit que l’on possède, et l’on est possédé…” (Gide 123). Michel repeats this same lamentation at the end of the récit, telling his friends that he wishes to “recommencer de neuf. Je voudrais me débarasser de ce qui me reste de ma fortune; voyez ces murs en sont encore couverts…” (181). Gide’s ellipses after each statement suggest the ineffable, the anguish for which Michel is unable to find the right words.

From the use of the verb s’écrier, to the cathartic cri of exaltation in North Africa, “tout cri” explains Michel, has become “appel” (144). Michel’s entire discourse ought to be viewed as a “cri” – a cry for help, indicative of a man teetering on the edge of the existential abyss:

Arrachez-moi d’ici à present, et donnez-moi des raisons d’être. Moi je ne sais plus en trouver. Je me suis délivré, c’est possible, mais qu’importe ? Je souffre de cette liberté sans emploi. (180)

The play sphere represents a space in which subjectification may take place; in the juridico-discursive sphere, however, the individual is relegated to an object status whereby the discourse no longer belongs to him, but rather to the ‘powers that be.’ Bringing his play ethic and his newfound sense of freedom and empowerment back to his ‘ordinary’ life in France, Michel’s passage between game and crime results from his desire to maintain a sense of self. In this way, play morphs into a challenge to the ‘system.’ Specifically, Michel attempts to edify his authentic self through the direct confrontation with what he deems the falsifying, ‘counterfeiting’ forces of culture and morality. The ethico-aesthetic characteristics

14 This corresponds to the Nietzschean assertion that it is the right of the extraordinary man to make his own ethics and norms in the face of the false, socially constructed ones (The Will to Power 382-418)
of the play realm becomes what Foucault terms an *ethics of transgression*, which maintains nonetheless its highly aesthetized core due to the self-reflective nature of the ethic.

Given the interaction of power between society and the individual, I turn now to the articulation of this space of transgression. I will look specifically at the aesthetic and ethical interplay that manifests in this *passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime* by analysing three different *criminal* episodes in the text. First I propose examining what I term the aesthetized crime of Moktir’s theft. Second I will analyse the theme of alienation in the ‘poaching incident’ followed by a third section in which I illustrate the counterfeiting role of society vis-à-vis one’s sexuality. I conclude with a brief discussion on Michel’s moral impasse which culminates with Marceline’s death.

The aesthetized crime: the game/crime hybrid

It is important to emphasize first that Moktir’s theft and Michel’s complicity represent the ideal example of what Gide termed “ce passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime” (*Correspondance Gide-Schlumberger* 389). Committed in North Africa, a space Michel deems ‘separate’ from his ‘ordinary’ bourgeois life in France, the scene is pivotal to understanding the mechanism of transgression at work. While Marceline is out one morning, Moktir stops by to play with Michel. While the latter is reading, he notices in the mirror the young boy slip Marceline’s scissors into his burnous:

Un matin, j’eus une curieuse révélation sur moi-même : Moktir, le seul des protégés de ma femme qui ne m’irritât point (peut-être parce qu’il était beau), était seul avec moi dans ma chambre ; jusqu’alors je l’aimais médiocrement, mais son regard brillant et sombre m’intriguait. Une curiosité que je ne m’expliquais pas bien me faisait surveiller ses gestes. J’étais debout auprès du feu, les deux coudes sur la cheminée, devant un livre, et je paraissais absorbé, mais pouvais voir se refléter dans la glace les mouvements de l’enfant à qui je tournais le dos. Moktir ne se savait pas observé et me croyait plongé dans la lecture. Je le vis s’approcher sans bruit d’une table où Marceline avait posé, près d’un ouvrage, une paire de petits ciseaux, s’en emparer furtivement, et d’un coup les engouffrer dans son burnous. Mon cœur battit avec force un instant, mais les plus sages raisonnements ne purent faire […] révolte. Bien plus ! je ne parvins pas à me prouver que le sentiment qui m’emplit alors fut autre chose que de la joie […]. À partir de ce jour, Moktir devint mon préféré. (54)

The play ethic is reinforced by the fact that it is Moktir, a child, who commits the crime. The child’s world as Huizinga underlines is the “world of play” (26). A child has little notion of the moral and legal repercussions of an immoral act such as petty theft. Deprived of moral intent, criminality is neutralized by the innocent motive. Moktir seeks nothing more than a reaction from Michel; as such it is the tension and excitement of the ‘will-I-be-caught-or-not’ that provides the basis of the game. It is important to underscore that this scene does not play out directly in front of Michel. He observes the theft through the reflection in the mirror. This along with the presumed ‘innocence’ of the crime places the act outside of
the sphere of the real. Furthermore, as in the episode with Bachir, the scene hints at undercurrents of latent homoeroticism. Moktir is described as “beau” which curiously provides the sole justification in Michel’s eyes for not being irritated. Michel also describes how he was intrigued by the boy’s sombre yet gleaming gaze. As such Moktir’s willingness to counter the ‘system’ suggests strong sexual underpinnings insofar as Michel’s voyeuristic act conjures up a physical reaction tantamount to “joie.”

The testing of the figure of authority parallels Michel’s own defiance of the juridico-discursive model of power. It becomes evident how this moment déclencheur provides the psychological framework for Michel’s ensuing ethics of transgression. The joy that he experiences hearkens back to the exaltation of the play-mood; moreover, “joie” is placed in juxtaposition with “raisonnément” recalls the same binaries established between self/society and play/law. As an adult and a figure of authority, Michel is expected by Moktir to react and punish him, but it is this complicity, this act of transgressing the expectation of ethical limits that elicits this feeling of joy in Michel. Transgression has become part of the pleasure principle, now associated with the will to live and the will to assert one’s free authentic self. The ‘révolte’ that Michel undertakes represents not a revolt against the moral infraction of the theft, as in the reaction expected by Moktir, but rather an inverted revolt against “les sages raisonnements” proscribed by the socio-ethic. Ultimately this passage serves to illustrate the mechanics of the transgressive act, specifically, the aesthetization of an ethical taboo.

Foucault states in The Order of Things that modern ethics has become the act of transgression itself (quoted by Rajchman 17). In his Journal, Gide echoes this same philosophy, quoting a critic who had remarked: “M. Gide veut être un pécheur, il desire des lois pour goûter le plaisir de les transgresser, il réclame des actions défendues”. In brackets, Gide adds: “qu’il est délicieux de les accomplir!” (Journal 298). Likewise, in L’Immoraliste, Michel expresses the pleasure of taboo shortly after the description of Moktir’s theft:

[…] mais j’arrivai vite à comprendre que les choses réputées les pires (le mensonge pour ne citer que celle-là) ne sont difficiles à faire que tant qu’on ne les a jamais faites ; mais qu’elles deviennent chacune, et très vite, aiséees, plaisantes, douces à refaire, et bientôt comme naturelles. Ainsi donc, comme à chaque chose pour laquelle un premier dégoût est vaincu, je finis par trouver plaisir à cette dissimulation meme, à m’y attarder, comme au jeu de mes facultés inconnues. (71)

The act of transgression allows Michel to participate “au jeu de [ses] facultés inconnues” as if la morale into which he was inducted as a child is preventing him from accessing his authentic self, “l’inconnu” buried within him. The pleasure that Michel takes from transgressing the normative moral order of

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15 Michel later learns that Moktir had been aware that Michel was watching him; so thinking he is doing the boy a favour and letting him off the hook, Michel has in reality been duped. This theme of a player being played, a sort of mise en abyme of the game, occurs in both L’Immoraliste and Les Caves du Vatican.
society serves to justify the belief that it is these morals that falsify his sincere or ‘natural’ self. It extends the *esprit de jeu* into the ‘revolt’ against the juridico-discursive sphere and, in so doing, creates an ethics of transgression. Transgressing societal norms becomes Michel’s method for affirming his authentic self.

**Alienation and the space of transgression: the poaching incident**

Before embarking on a series of pseudo-crimes, Michel notes the consequences of legal infraction. In wrestling his wife’s carriage driver to the floor, he remarks, “l’étrangler paraissait légitime – et peut-être l’eusse-je fait…du moins je m’en sentis capable ; et je crois bien que la seule idée de la police m’arrêta” (73), but as the plot progresses his pursuit of his authentic, free self pushes him to continue transgressing these limits set up by the societal ethic.

The movement of transgression is the same movement that causes the *passage imperceptible* between play and crime. The poaching incident represents another step in this transition between those two spaces. Michel is poaching on his own land at La Morinière and he assures that his crime will avoid any serious legal repercussions, the fear of which is echoed in the declaration: “la seule idée de la police m’arrêta” (73). The absurdity of these pseudo-crime is articulated in Michel’s wish for gratuity. La Morinière represents a sphere that Michel believes to be somewhat separate from the space of ‘ordinary life.’ It is Michel’s intent (that is, his intent to revolt or transgress the socio-ethic), however, that qualifies the act as a crime.

Marceline’s miscarriage acts as a catalyst to the transition between play and crime. Prior to this event, there seemed to be an indication that Michel wished to establish a balance between societal ethics and his sense of authenticity: “Je me penchais vers l’avenir où déjà je voyais mon petit enfant me sourire ; pour lui reformait et se fortifiait ma morale…Décidément je marchais d’un pas ferme” (126). This sure footing gives way, however, upon his return home when he discovers that his wife has miscarried: “Ah ! subit avenir ! Le terrain cédait brusquement sous mon pas ; devant moi n’était plus qu’un trou vide où je trébuchais tout entier” (127).

From this moment on, Michel explains, “tout se confond en un ténébreux souvenir” (127). Marceline falls increasingly ill and Michel admits that his “occupations et [ses] goûts n’étaient plus les mêmes que ceux de l’année dernière.” His préféré at La Morinière from the last year, Charles, begins to irritate him since, as Michel explains, “il était bien trop raisonnable et se faisait trop respecter” (136). Michel begins searching out, the *Moktirs* of the North: “Je feignais de surveiller le travail, mais en vérité ne voyais que les travailleurs” (138).

Such a voyeuristic tendancy corresponds to Schehr’s concept of the homoerotic gaze by which the bodies of the adolescent boys with whom Michel surrounds himself become the surfaces for a projected latent homosexuality. Michel spots the young Bute, describing his body which, Michel informs us, “allait
à la merveille” (138). Michel also adds that the army had sent him back “pourri”--presumably in the moral sense and not for any physical shortcoming. By now, such perversion appeals to the increasingly alienated Michel. Much to the protagonist’s delight, he discovers that Bute’s entire family conforms to society’s definition of immorality: the father, Heurtevent “un vagabond fieffé” (139), was rumoured to have fathered two children by his eldest daughter and to have raped a young servant with the help of his eldest son. Considering Michel’s ephebophilic tendencies, it is without surprise that he finds himself most drawn to Heurtevent’s youngest son:

[...] il chantait ou plutôt gueulait une espèce de chant bizarre et tel que je n’en avais ouï dans le pays [...]. Je ne puis dire l’effet que ce chant produisait sur moi ; car je n’en avais entendu de pareil qu’en Afrique…Le petit exalté, paraissait ivre [...]. (139)

Soon Michel joins Bute and Bocage’s youngest son, Alcide, in their poaching excursions, the narration of which, much like the description of Moktir’s crime, incorporates a ludic lexicon: Michel remarks: “j’eus l’amusement de trouver deux lapins pris aux pièges” (143) and later, “allais-je donc ainsi pénétrer plus avant dans cette famille farouche ? Avec quelle passion je braconnai !” (144).

The “passion” with which Michel poaches alongside his accomplices corresponds to the idea of exaltation and mirth that Huizinga mentions as intrinsic to the play-mood. But something more sinister permeates these descriptions with allusions to “les chroniques des Goths” and “une trouble vapeur d’abîme qui déjà me montait à la tête et qu’inquiètement je humais” (140). Michel explicitly likens himself to a criminal, boasting that “quand la nuit tombait […] c’était notre heure, dont je ne soupçonnais pas jusqu’alors la beauté ; et je sortais comme entrent les voleurs” (144). Curiously, Michel seems incapable of considering himself a criminal – or at least as the kind of criminal that he is, which in this case would be a braconneur rather than, as he metaphorically claims, a “voleur.” Displacing his acts via a simile, Michel clearly views these acts of transgression as part of his elaborate play aesthetic/ethic for which there are no material consequences. This lack of consequence on the outside world is suggested when Michel declares: “[…] et si je fais ce qui me plaît c’est que cela ne nuit qu’a moi” (150).

Michel creates a new ethical gratuity based on the desire to express his authentic self, free from the constraints of the judicial definition of morality. Pleasure exists separately from responsibility. He appears to forget that not everyone is privy to his game, and play requires the voluntary acceptance of all players. Only Michel is playing Michel’s game. Charles and Bocage, two of Michel’s farmhands and relatives of Alcide, were working to stop the poaching at their master’s request; meanwhile, the men whom Michel believes to be his fellow players are in fact playing him to further their poaching ‘game.’

16 Ephebophilia is a variety of male homosexuality that refers specifically to a sexual preference for post-pubescent, “sexually mature” teens (Primoratz 133).
This episode recalls Moktir’s act of stealing the scissors. Michel did not think that Moktir was aware of his voyeurism, but in reality, that was the whole purpose of Moktir’s game. In both instances, the game that Michel believes he is playing is not, in fact, the game that is taking place. Where Michel thought he was the agent controlling the events, he was in fact the object of the game. The problem of relative subjective perspective is what Gide called *la part du diable*. Not only is Michel unaware of the reality exterior to his internal universe (now dictated by the ethico-aesthetic play principle), he also seems unclear as to the mechanisms and limitations of this internal reality when it comes into contact with the outside world. Michel has become, in the very sense of the word, alienated from the outside world, society, and his own internal world. Consequently, he is unable to recognize the incompatibility of the ethico-aesthetic regulating his inner world and the societal ethic of the external world, governed by the juridico-discursive model of power—the transition between which has created a third space, that of transgression.

*La contrefaçon: criminality and sexuality*

Michel has not in fact succeeded in finding his true, authentic self. Instead, he only falsifies himself further, inscribing himself as Ménalque explains, into an already formed image: “C’est à soi-même que chacun pretend le moins ressembler. Chacun se propose un patron, puis l’imite […]” (115). This ‘counterfeiting’ drive possesses in and of itself some traits that hearken back to the play model.

The theatrical undertone of playing a role in society is evident in descriptions of Michel and Marceline’s life in Passy:

Dès les premières causeries que nous eûmes, je me vis comme contraint par eux de jouer un faux personnage, de ressembler à celui qu’ils croyaient que j’étais resté, sous peine de paraître feindre ; et, pour plus de commodité, je feignis donc d’avoir les pensées et les goûts qu’on me prêtait. On ne peut à la fois être sincère et le paraître. (103)

The opposition *être/paraître* is reflected in his description of the Parisian artistic community in which he circulates:

Tout d’abord je pus espérer trouver une compréhension un peu plus directe de la vie chez quelques romanciers et chez quelques poètes ; mais s’ils l’avaient, cette compréhension, il faut avouer qu’ils ne le montraient guère ; il me parut que la plupart ne vivaient point, se contentaient de paraître vivre et, pour un peu, eussent considéré la vie comme un fâcheux empêchement d’écrire. (103)

The authentic “vieil homme” (62) whom Michel seeks is nothing more than another role, another game of mimicry that Michel attempts to play out in the real world. Going farther than Huizinga in the
implications of transgressing the play sphere, Caillois provides an account that explains Michel’s increasingly pathological behaviour:

La précision des limites empêche l’aliénation. Celle-ci survient au terme d’un travail souterrain et continu. Elle se produit quand il n’y a pas eu franc départ entre la féeerie et la réalité, quand le sujet, lentement, a pu revêtir à ses propres yeux une personnalité seconde, chimérique, envahissante, qui revendique des droits exorbitants à l’égard d’une réalité nécessairement incompatible avec elle. Le moment vient où l’aliéné – le devenu autre – s’acharne désespérément à nier, à soumettre ou à détruire ce décor trop resistant et, pour lui, inconcevable, provocant. (112)

Caillois emphasises the consequences of the dual self: “Le moment vient où l’aliéné – le devenu autre – s’acharne désespérément à nier, à soumettre ou à détruire ce décor trop resistant.” As we have already seen, Michel has established a series of oppositions, claiming to exist within one side of the dichotomy but in reality existing within neither camp. Likewise, believing he has successfully brought the play sphere into the realm of social morality, Michel exists within a space of transgression over which he bears no control.

The metaphorical abyss or nothingness of this (non-)space in which Michel finds himself is expressed by such word choices as “vapeur d’abîme” (140); “[c]ette descente en Italie eut […] les vertiges d’une chute” (160) and: “Le terrain cédait brusquement sous mon pas ; devant moi n’était plus qu’un trou vide où je trébuchais tout entier” (127). As the story progresses, the sense of alienation evolves into a more destructive sentiment. Before turning on himself, Michel first strikes out at the external, counterfeiting power, symbolised by erudite culture:

À propos de l’extrême civilisation latine, je peignais la culture artistique, montant à fleur de peuple, à la manière d’une sécrétion, qui d’abord indique pléthore, surabondance de santé, puis aussitôt se fige, se durcit, s’oppose à tout parfait contact de l’esprit avec la nature, cache sous l’apparence persistante de la vie la diminution de la vie, forme gaine où l’esprit gêné languit et bientôt s’étiole, puis meurt. Enfin, poussant à bout ma pensée, je disais la Culture, née de la vie, tuant la vie. (106)

This opposition between nature and culture is important, as what is ‘natural’ in Michel’s eyes is also precisely that which is authentic and therefore ‘beneficial.’ Likewise, Michel’s interest in Latin civilization wanes as his academic work begins to revolve increasingly around the tantalizing “savagery” of the Goths. Huizinga emphasises the ‘natural’ quality of play. He asserts that the play sphere “is older than culture and pervades all life” (173). Play is undertaken by both children and animals (4-5), and as such exists as a natural, primitive phenomenon. This attraction to the natural and ‘untainted’ also explains Michel’s obsession with children and North Africa:
Terre en vacances d’œuvres d’art. Je méprise ceux qui ne savent reconnaître la beauté que transcrite déjà et toute interprétée. Le peuple arabe a ceci d’admirable que, son art, il le vit, il le chante et le dissipe au jour le jour; il ne le fixe point et ne l’embaume en aucune œuvre. C’est la cause et l’effet de l’absence de grands artistes … J’ai toujours cru les grands artistes ceux qui osent donner droit de beauté à des choses si naturelles qu’elles font dire après, à qui les voit : ‘Comment n’avais-je pas compris jusqu’alors que cela aussi était beau…’. (170)

This description juxtaposed with the following depiction of a sterile Switzerland through which he travels with his wife highlights Michel’s culture/nature distinction and the sinister moral deductions he draws:

[…] j’ai les honnêtes gens en horreur. Si je n’ai rien à craindre d’eux, je n’ai non plus rien à apprendre. Et eux d’ailleurs n’ont rien à dire…Honnête peuple suisse ! Se porter bien ne lui vaut rien… sans crimes, sans histoire, sans littérature, sans art… un robuste rosier, sans épines ni fleurs… (159)

From these two passages, it is clear that the notions of crime, literature and art have become conflated in Michel's mind. Since his authentic homosexual self is forced to live counterfeit as dictated by the norms of society (represented by the above description of Switzerland), the “vieil home” as Michel refers to the authentic self is forced to exist as a ludic component in the protagonist’s life. As the récit progresses, Michel’s game aesthetic gradually takes on more of an ethical dimension—the rules of his personal game soon rivalling the rules of the Law. Michel explicitly draws pleasure from acts of transgression. This delight in the criminal is most clearly exposed in the sexuality of Michel.

Michel portrays the male children whom he encounters under a highly sexualised guise. The emphasis on the sexual dimension corresponds to a pre-existing urge in Michel associated with the Freudian pleasure principle. Michel’s voyeuristic contemplation of the nudity and vitality of the young boys (and the pleasure derived from watching) places the protagonist’s homoeroticism within the bounds of play. Acting upon this urge constitutes, in his mind, a criminal act, as the moral conventions regulating sexuality have placed heterosexuality as the only accepted norm and homosexuality as transgressive.

Upon returning to El Kantara with his ailing wife, Michel revisits his old préférés. Of all the boys, only Moktir still appeals to him. The criminal element is clearly subsumed in this homoerotic attraction:

Et Moktir? – Ah! celui-là sort de prison […]. Il était le plus beau d’eux tous; va-t-il me décevoir aussi?… On le retrouve. On me l’amène. Non! Celui-là n’a pas failli. Même mon souvenir ne me le représentait pas si superbe. Sa force et sa beauté sont parfaites…(172-3)
The criminal dimension stands in opposition to the innocence of the children that first appealed to Michel during his recovery. The carefree attitude and the lack of consequence characterise the play sphere that Michel then tries to extend into the space of the juridico-discourse. Subsuming the criminal in with the aesthetic valorisation of Moktir’s appearance (“le plus beau,” “force,” “beauté”) suggests that in Michel’s mind the two concepts have been fused.

The poaching episode is likewise imbued with what Schehr terms the ethico-aesthetisation of homosexuality, achieved by placing sexual desire within the play sphere. Bute and Alcide are continually described as both “beau[x]” and “vagabond[s]”; moreover, Michel derives the same exaltation from his pseudo-criminal acts as he did from asserting his play-like ethic. Interestingly, Michel uses the same simile to describe this penchant for debauchery, noting, just as he did in reference to his escape from La Morinière, that he slipped away from his hotel suite in Naples “comme un voleur” (165). What follows is the same rhetoric of exaltation and “passion” as articulated by Michel during the cultivation of his play-mood in North Africa. This time, however, it directly references the exaltation of criminal activity:

Dehors! oh! j’aurais crié d’allégresse. Qu’allais-je faire? Je ne sais pas. Le ciel, obscur le jour, s’était délivré des nuages; la lune presque pleine luisait. Je marchais au hasard, sans but, sans désir, sans contrainte. Je regardais d’un œil neuf; j’épiais chaque bruit, d’une oreille plus attentive; je humais l’humidité de la nuit; je posais ma main sur des choses [...]. Le dernier soir que nous restions à Naples je prolongeai jusqu’au matin cette débauche vagabonde. (165)

Michel’s original search for innocence on his initial trip to Algeria has become the search for a quasi-criminal form of debauchery. This could be interpreted in the Nietzschian sense of freeing oneself from the “contrainte[s]” of society by seeking an indulgence of sensual pleasure. The innocence therein necessitates re-communing with one’s ‘true’ desires, which recalls the desire for the free articulation of one’s authentic expression.

An example of such authentic expression follows shortly thereafter with Michel’s description of his driver, “un petit Sicilien de Catane, beau comme un vers de Théocrite, éclatant, odorant, savoureux comme un fruit” (166). Michel informs the young man that he finds him “bello” and, unable to resist the urge, pulls the boy towards him and kisses him: “je n’y pus tenir et, bientôt, l’attirant contre moi, l’embrassai” (166). Not a page later the sensualist rhetoric is juxtaposed with a description of the criminal underbelly of Syracuse:

Ô petit port de Syracuse! odeurs de vin suri, ruelles boueuses, puante échoppe où roulaient débardeurs, vagabonds, mariniers avinés. La société des pires gens m’était compagnie délectable. Et qu’avais-je besoin de comprendre bien leur langage, quand toute ma chair le goûtait. La brutalité de la passion y prenait encore à mes yeux un hypocrite aspect de santé, de vigueur. Et j’avais beau me dire que leur vie misérable ne pouvait avoir pour eux le goût qu’elle prenait pour moi…Ah! j’eusse voulu rouler avec eux sous la table […]. (167)
Michel conflates the débauche with his sexual desire, expressed by his fantasy “rouler avec eux sous la table.” Gide plays here with an idiom that in common language simply means to get drunk; however, in the context of Michel’s narrative, it hints at a more literal and explicit meaning. Moreover, Michel also links his attraction to “les pires gens” as symptomatic of his new health and the “aspects de santé” of “vigueur” which these men represent.

The excess of pleasure that Michel extends into all facets of his life constitutes a series of transgressions. The belief inscribed in this ethics of transgression carries with it the concept that in rejecting the system and its counterfeiting tenets, the true authentic self can be found. Despite the fact that Michel has conflated the idea of authenticity and freedom, he is touching on an element of individual truth with his attraction to men. Michel’s transgressive aesthetic of play leads him to the recognition of pleasure in his (homo)sexuality with all its transgressive associations.

One could argue it is Michel’s sexual orientation that comprises the transgressive ethics which characterises most of the narrative. In his article “Narrative Structure and Authenticity in L’Immoraliste” Roger Pensom proposes that an analysis of the ‘criminal’ theme of the text may cast some light on its “sexual structure” (836). He explains that the theft of the scissors and the poaching incident reveal “isomorphic features” which he diagrams in the following image:

**Figure 2 Isomorphic features**

![Figure 2 Isomorphic features](image)

Pensom explains:

In both these set-ups Michel achieves a short-lived sense of synthesis between the dialectical opposites of his personality, (a) the law-abiding adult and authority figure, governed by the Reality principle, and (b) the infantile accomplice, guided by the Pleasure principle. Moktir's stealth in stealing the scissors identifies Michel as the authority-figure, while Michel's complicity in the theft reveals him simultaneously to himself as the Other, the object of a desire which involves a cathected narcissistic identification with Moktir: ‘A partir de ce jour, Moktir devint mon préféré’ (73). In his relationship with Alcide he is similarly both thief and victim. Michel 'sees' his problem,
as perhaps Gide saw his, as that of discovering a strategy which would enable him to realize his contradictory aspects simultaneously. (837)

Pensom proposes that it is precisely this dual status as criminal (subject) and victim (the duped) that makes Michel believe that he can straddle both the play and real sphere (Pensom uses the Freudian terms *pleasure* and *reality principle*). Pensom highlights the existence of “operators” which govern the set of relations characterising the above encounters. In the triangle involving Alcide, the operators are the poached rabbits that are given to/stolen from Michel. Likewise, in the case of Moktir’s theft it is the scissors that constitute the operator. Just as the rabbits pass into the possession of Alcide, the scissors passed into the burnous of Moktir. In both instances, Michel lets the ‘other’ get away with his crimes, taking joy in his own complicity of such criminal acts. The scissors and rabbits become metonymic elements and symbolic means to realising Michel’s alterity. Moreover, they become symbolic of Michel’s poetics of transgression. The scissors at first belonged in the play sphere of North Africa during Michel’s initial recovery. They then reappear in Ménalque’s hands in Paris:

Ménalque cependant s’était levé et avait sorti d’un tiroir une petite boîte qu’il ouvrit. ‘Ces ciseaux étaient-ils à vous? dit-il en me tendant quelque chose d’informe, de rouillé, d’épointé, de faussé; je n’eus pas grand-peine pourtant à reconnaître là les petits ciseaux qu’avait escamotés Moktir. (110)

Likewise the rabbits, from which Michel derived such ‘amusement’ during the poaching incident, reappear during Michel’s return to North Africa at the end of the récit. In this episode, Moktir takes Michel to a brothel where in an example of what Pensom calls “latent homosexual sharing” Michel sleeps with Moktir’s mistress:

Une d’elles me prend par la main; je la suis; c’est la maitresse de Moktir […] Nous entrons tous les trois dans l’étroite et profonde chambre où l’unique meuble est un lit; un lit très bas, sur lequel on s’assied. Un lapin blanc, enfermé dans la chambre, s’effarouche, d’abord puis s’apprivoise et vient manger dans la main de Moktir. […] Puis, tandis que Moktir joue avec le lapin, cette femme m’attire à elle, et je me laisse aller à elle comme on s’abandonne au sommeil…(177)

In each instance, these operators function as displacements of homosexual desire on the part of Michel. Just as they represent his dual criminal and victim status, they also represent his seemingly contradictory heterosexual/homosexual tendencies. Just as Michel gave the scissors to Moktir in the theft, Moktir gives his mistress to Michel. Pensom emphasises the fact that Moktir strokes the rabbit at the same time as Michel makes love to the woman; the rabbit and the woman, like the scissors and women, are given
metaphorical equivalence as displacements of homosexual desire.¹⁷ Not only do such operators signal the transgression of the narrative spaces constructed within the book, but they also signal sexual transgression, from the normative heterosexual desire to a valorisation of homosexual desire as the space of the authentic self. The corollary for Michel, of course, is that according to the juridico-discursive model, such a desire is deemed a taboo, denying Michel the ability to be and act sincere. It is precisely this impossibility to be oneself, given the constraints of societal mores that incites Michel to transgress continually the norms set up by the system. It is such an urge that leads Michel to the state of destitution described at the end of the récit. Ironically, it is Marceline who foresees this sinister turn of events, remarking to her husband: “‘Je vois bien, me dit-elle un jour, je comprends bien votre doctrine – car c’est une doctrine à présent. Elle est belle peut-être – […] mais elle supprime les faibles’” (162).

* 

As a symbol of a counterfeiting Huguenot upbringing, Marceline becomes another target for Michel’s ethics of transgression. After she falls ill with tuberculosis, Michel seizes his chance to do away with what he sees as the last impediment to the free expression of his authentic self. Despite her worsening condition, he resolves to bring Marceline back to North Africa where he himself was cured. But this environment is not at all conducive to Marceline’s health, a fact of which Michel is only too well aware. The “guérison” of which Michel speaks during this perverted pilgrimage refers rather to the continuation of his own recovery, not to the recovery of his ailing wife:

[…] je marchais vers la guérison, de semaine en semaine à mesure que nous avancions vers le sud, l’état de Marceline empirait […]. Par quelle aberration, quel aveuglement obstiné, quelle volontaire folie, me persuadais-je, et surtout tâchai-je de lui persuader qu’il lui fallait plus de lumière encore et de chaleur […]. (166-7)

Regardless, Michel continues south until the couple arrives in Touggurt where Marceline dies having spent the night alone in a pool of her own blood (the same night that Michel spends with Moktir and his mistress).

The tragedy of this ultimate “crime” (181) lies in the fact that Marceline does not enter freely into Michel’s game. Michel believes, moreover, that his wife is unaware of the extent to which Michel had adopted the play ethic/aesthetic. In order to hide his new self from his wife, he maintains his old image while around her:

¹⁷ Gide also engages in some word play: la pine (slang for penis) and lapin (rabbit), suggesting the latent homoeroticism also present in the poaching affair.
Aussi bien celui que Marceline aimait, celui qu’elle avait épousé, ce n’était pas “mon nouvel être” et je me redisaïs cela pour m’exciter à le cacher. Ainsi ne lui livrai-je de moi qu’une image qui, pour être constante et fidèle au passé, devenait de jour en jour plus fausse. (71)

In attempting to assert his freedom this way, Michel deprives Marceline of her own freedom, much as he did with Bocage and Charles. Huizinga stresses that “play is voluntary” and insofar as it is free, it requires a consensus on the part of all players for it to be initiated. This highlights the incompatibility of Michel’s *ethico-play aesthetic* with the space of the real regulated by the socio-ethic of the juridico-discourse. What Michel believes to be part of his play aesthetic has merely become a recurring ethic of transgression, which in coming into contact with the space of the real constitutes a crime. With the death of Marceline, Michel’s actions (or lack thereof) become a question of negligence in the eyes of the law, but in the eyes of Michel’s *destinataires*, the panel of three and by proxy the reader, this act constitutes a moral transgression – the gratuity of which makes Michel’s actions all the more disturbing.

It is crucial to emphasise that at the end of the récit Michel’s situation has degraded to the point that he is neither free nor authentic. Michel’s state of destitution is symbolic of the impossibility to assert the kind of freedom that he sought. His very resistance to the norms laid out by the socio-ethic only serve to fortify the power that he thought he was transgressing. The very form of his own confessional discourse inscribes him more deeply in the system from which he seeks to liberate himself. In placing his own discourse in a confessional model, Michel imposes upon himself what Foucault calls the “joug millénaire de l’aveu.” While the nature of the confession promises the articulation of Truth, (indeed, the liberation of the truth and as such the truth of the authentic self), in reality it serves to inscribe Michel ever more deeply into the ethical system of society. Foucault explains, “le pouvoir est du côté de celui qui écoute non du côté de celui qui parle” (83).

In gathering his friends together to listen to his ‘confession,’ whether in an attempt to justify his immoralism, to articulate as Michel claims, the truth of his story, or to rid himself of the guilt for his wife’s death, Michel ultimately succeeds only in proving that he has neither liberated himself nor has he discovered his authentic self. He looks in this instance for affirmation in the reaction of his friends who stand as representatives of the juridico-discourse against which Michel claimed to revolt. His discourse proves to what extent it is impossible to escape the system – a concept that is core to the next chapter and the concepts of play and crime in *Les Caves du Vatican.*
Chapter 2 : Les Caves du Vatican

Gide took great care to distinguish his early works from the traditional novel of the nineteenth century. Just as L’Immoraliste is called a récit, Gide terms Les Caves du Vatican a sotie. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a sotie was a satirical play put on by law students and clerks at the Paris law courts. One of the main themes was the appointment of a Pope of fools. Indeed, the chief action in Les Caves revolves around the rumour that Freemasons have kidnapped the Pope, Léon XIII, replacing him with one of their own. In the authentic soties of the Middle Ages, the world was portrayed in chaos and led by fools. In Les Caves, likewise, events mirror this world à l’envers: the freethinker Anthime converts to Catholicism after his sciatica is miraculously cured, and such philosophical problems as the gratuitous act, authenticity and human freedom are dealt with via the characters of Protos and his protégé, Lafcadio.

Narrated by an omniscient narrator prone to addressing the characters of the sotie directly, the text is divided into five chapters or “books.” Each book details the philosophical belief and predicament of the five main characters: the first book tells the story of Anthime Armand-Dubois, a freethinking scientist whose experiments involve starving and blinding rats before putting them through a series of labyrinths.

The second book sets up the character of Julius de Baraglioul, brother-in-law to Anthime and Amédée Fleurissoire to whom the reader is introduced in a later chapter. Julius is the quintessential bourgeois salaud. He lives via a “morale provisoire” (74), upholding the various religious and moral conventions of his social status when it is convenient for him. As a novelist of the Balzacian school, Julius’ main ambition is to be admitted to the Académie française. After meeting Lafcadio and encountering criticism for his last novel, L’Air des Cimes, Julius abandons the traditional novel for a modern ‘anti-novel,’ the plot of which mirrors Les Caves du Vatican. In this chapter, Lafcadio learns that he and Julius are half-brothers. In a scene that mirrors a confession, Lafcadio recounts to Julius his unorthodox upbringing at the hands of his mother’s various lovers. He omits Juste-Agénon de Baraglioul’s (Julius’ father) sojourn in Bucharest nine months prior to Lafcadio’s birth. Moreover, at Juste-Agénon’s request, he never tells Julius about the inheritance his father leaves him upon his death.

The third book introduces the reader to Amédée Fleurissoire. After the Chanoine de Virmontal informs his sister-in-law, the Comtesse Guy de Saint-Prix, that the Freemasons have kidnapped the Pope, Amédée resolves to go to Rome himself to aid in the Croisade pour la Délivrance du Pape. The narrator informs the reader that the Chanoine de Virmontal is in reality Protos in disguise. He and his gang of crooks, the Mille-Pattes, formulated this scheme in order to swindle rich Catholics out of their money:

Sous le nom pompeux de Croisade pour la délivrance du Pape, l'entreprise d'escroquerie étendait
sur plus d'une département français ses ramifications ténébreuses; Protos, le faux chanoine de Virmontal, n'en était pas le seul agent, non plus que la comtesse de Saint-Prix n'en était la seule victime. Et toutes les victimes ne présentaient pas une égale complaisance, si bien encore tous les agents eussent fait preuve d'une égale dextérité. Même Protos, l'ancien ami de Lafcadio, après opération, devait garder à carreau; il vivait dans une continuelle appréhension que le clergé, le vrai, ne devint instruit de l'affaire, et dépensait à protéger ses derrières autant d'ingéniosité qu'à pousser de l'avant; mais il était divers, et, de plus, admirablement secondé; d'un bout à l'autre de la bande (elle avait nom le Mille-Pattes) régnaient une entente et une discipline merveilleuse.

Upon arriving in Rome, Amédée unwittingly takes up residence at a brothel, where he meets and sleeps with Carola, a prostitute and the ex-mistress of both Lafcadio and Protos. She gives Amédée a set of cufflinks, originally a gift from Lafcadio.

The fourth book, entitled “Le Mille-Pattes”, elaborates upon Amédée’s adventures in Rome where he meets the head crook of the Mille-Pattes and Lafcadio’s childhood friend, Protos, who presents himself to Amédée as l’Abbé Cave, inviting him to dine in Naples with fellow swindler Ciro, disguised as the Cardinal Bardolotti. Before leaving for Naples, Amédée receives notice from his wife that Julius is in town to clear up Anthime’s financial woes with the Church. Julius attempts to meet with Léon XIII but is prevented from making eye-contact with him by the clergy in attendance. Amédée takes this news as proof that the Pope has been kidnapped and confesses his reasons for being in Rome to Julius. More concerned with his new novel, Julius dismisses Amédée’s story, giving the old man his carnet Cook and six-thousand francs for Amédée’s trip. Upon arriving in Naples, Amédée joins l’Abbé Cave and the Cardinal Barolotti for a feast in which Amédée features as the dindon de la farce. In this carnivalesque scene, Protos encourages Amédée to make puns and drink with them. They eventually ask the pèlerin, as Amédée is nicknamed, to deposit a cheque at Julius’ bank in Rome for them; in so doing the swindlers, disguised as clergymen, explain that Amédée might atone for his sins at the brothel.

The fifth book, entitled “Lafcadio,” begins with Amédée’s journey back to Rome. He makes his way to a second-class compartment, where he finds Lafcadio. Drawn to the “jeune grâce” of the boy, he takes a seat opposite his brother-in-law’s half-brother. Lafcadio is somewhat irked by the presence of the old man. He asks himself: “Entre ce sale magot et moi, quoi de commun? […] Qu’a-t-il à me sourire ainsi? Pense-t-il que je vais l’embrasser! Se peut-il qu’il y ait des femmes pour caresser encore les vieillards!…” (189). Unaware of the irony of his statement, Lafcadio resolves to play a game with Amédée’s life. After recalling a childhood memory where he and his Uncle Baldi sneak downstairs for a midnight feast, Lafcadio proposes that he will count to twelve; if a light appears while he is counting, Lafcadio will throw the old man out of the carriage door. At ten, he sees a light in the distance. After a brief scuffle, Amédée falls into the valley below, taking Lafcadio’s beaver hat with him. Unbeknownst to Lafcadio, Protos had decided to follow Amédée to Rome in order to ensure that the cheque was deposited safely. He witnesses the murder and at the next stop disembarks in order to cut the tags out of Lafcadio’s
hat. At about the same time, Lafcadio searches through the pockets of Amédée’s jacket where he discovers Julius’ travel book, six-thousand francs and a letter from the old man’s wife explaining that Julius was in Rome. He exclaims to himself “‘Diable! diable! J’ai peut-être fait du gâchis : ces vieillards sont mieux ramiﬁés qu’on ne croit’” (199) and resolves to go see Julius once he arrives in Rome.

Julius, despite having just learned of the death of his brother-in-law, is in a good mood. During his conversation with Lafcadio, the text transforms into a dramatic dialogue recalling the traditional form of the medieval sotie as a play. The two discuss the plot of Julius’ next book which is to involve a young man bent on committing a crime gratuit. Julius then mentions that his brother-in-law was found murdered that morning; he dismisses the possibility, however, that his murder was truly gratuitous as Julius believes the six thousand francs with which Amédée was travelling to have been stolen. Lafcadio re-reads the newspaper article, informing his half-brother that the money was found in his jacket. At this moment, Julius recalls Amédée’s claims that he had come to Rome to save the Pope: grappling with the same consequential reasoning that dictated L’Air des Cimes, he automatically assumes that Amédée died for having “pénétré les coulisses” (234), dismissing therefore the possibility that Amédée’s murder could have been the product of an acte gratuit:

-- D'abord il n'y a pas de crime sans motif. On s'est débarrassé de lui parce qu'il détenait un secret... qu'il m'avait conﬁé, un secret considérable; et d'ailleurs beaucoup trop important pour lui. On avait peur de lui, comprenez-vous? Voilà... Oh! cela vous est facile de rire, à vous qui n'entendez rien aux choses de la foi. -- Puis tout pâle et se redressant: -- Le secret, c'est moi qui l'hérite. (211)

Lafcadio agrees to go to Naples to recover Amédée’s body for the funeral. Before leaving, he places Julius’ travel book on the table, “en evidence,” in the first of two actes manqués. The second acte manqué occurs over a glass of champagne with the mysterious Dr. Defouqueblize, in reality Protos in disguise. While Lafcadio is distracted, Protos leaves Amédée’s cufflinks on his classmate’s plate (the two had attended school in Paris together). Lafcadio snatches them off his plate after turning back to face Protos/Defouqueblize, immediately regretting his action for fear of betraying his guilt to anybody watching. Protos then reveals his true identity and reprimands the young boy for his criminal shortcomings. He explains to Lafcadio, that he must choose a system, either that of the crustacés (bourgeois society) or the subtils (outsiders such as Protos and his gang of escrocs). He then proceeds to blackmail Lafcadio, threatening to turn him into the police using the labels he cut from Lafcadio’s hat as evidence if the boy does not give Protos part of the de Baraglioneul inheritance. Lafcadio refuses to do so and returns to Rome.
On learning that Carola turned him in to the police for the murder of Fleurissoire, Protos strangles his ex-mistress. The police rush to the scene of the crime upon hearing her screams. They arrest Protos for her murder and also for the murder of Amédée having found the labels from Lafcadio’s castor on him.

Lafcadio returns to Julius’ apartment, where he confesses his crime to his half-brother who suggests Lafcadio confess to the Church and in keeping with his “morale provisoire,” he sees little problem with Protos taking responsibility for the crime Lafcadio committed. Geneviève later enters the room and explains to him that she too understands what it is like to live “dans un rêve” – the two sleep together and the novel ends with Lafcadio wondering if he should turn himself in to the police or escape, free, into the dawn:

Il sera bientôt temps que Geneviève le quitte; mais il attend encore; il écoute, penché sur elle, à travers son souffle léger, la vague rumeur de la ville qui déjà secoue sa torpeur. Au loin, dans les casernes, le clairon chante. Quoi! va-t-il renoncer à vivre? et pour l'estime de Geneviève, qu'il estime un peu moins depuis qu'elle l'aime un peu plus, songe-t-il encore à se livrer? (250)

Much like Michel of L’Immoraliste, Lafcadio seeks to surpass himself in an attempt to assert l'être authentique, but, as Protos later reminds him, he ultimately fails in this pursuit due to his misunderstanding of the limitations the ‘system’ has imposed upon him. This marks a departure from L’Immoraliste, in which Gide sought an art that would liberate the unknown within us. Les Caves du Vatican emphasises an art that would liberate the self from the unknown.

In this chapter, I focus on the character of Lafcadio who in many ways echoes the ludic tendencies of his textual predecessor, Michel. The latent homoeroticism central to L’Immoraliste and its conflation with the ultimate criminality of Michel is likewise reflected in Lafcadio’s sexuality as he too pushes the boundaries set out by the socio-ethic in an attempt to assert his free, authentic self. In French Gay Modernism, Schehr notes that the boys whom Michel encounters in North Africa should be viewed as “a constellation of figures of homoeroticism” (86). Where Michel sees in the children of El Kantara the homoerotic embodiment of desire, Lafcadio represents the model of health and virility desired by Michel.18 Men and women alike fawn after the protagonist, a ‘child’ of nineteen years. This emphasis on the child-like nature of Lafcadio is crucial to an understanding of the text. As Alain Goulet notes, childhood is the object of a double gaze for Gide crossed with a double existential truth: that of the Self and his own childhood and that of his desire for other children, founded on the truth of his own sexuality (“Regards gidiens sur l’enfance” 121).

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18 Schehr elaborates upon this idea, writing in relation to the descriptions of Bachir in L’Immoraliste: “[…] the eroticism is replaced with health […]. Nevertheless, that health is immediately considered ‘beautiful’; it is remarked as erotic” (French Gay Modernism 94). He continues, asserting that “[e]ven Michel will attempt to make himself into an object of his own homoerotic glances as he tries to convert his own body into that set of surfaces […]. Becoming healthy means constructing the self based on the model of the other […].” (95)
Lafcadio possesses all the qualities of the children whom Michel so admired in his entourage: health, a play-spirit and a certain innocence or naïveté vis-à-vis his own freedom, all of which are attributes of the esprit enfantin that defines the domain of play. Via the adoption or retention of this esprit enfantin, both characters simultaneously seek to confront and circumvent those limits designated by the Law. Foucault underscores that these limits constitute nothing more than the word “no” uttered as a “pure limite tracée à la liberté” (114) – it is for this reason that Lafcadio and Michel feel it is within their individual rights to transgress the illusionary boundaries set up by the societal ethic as nothing more than a set of rules constituting another game: that of society.

In this chapter, I divide my analysis similarly to the structure of chapter one: first examining the cultivation of the play aesthetic as it slowly takes on an ethical dimension rivalling that of the socio-ethic that predominates in the space of the real. I then examine the subtle transition between the domain of play and that of the real in an attempt to pinpoint that moment when Lafcadio breaches the boundaries of play and transgresses the limits laid out by societal discourse on authority which, as Foucault writes, traces a pure limit to one’s individual freedom.

2.1 Play

With Huizinga’s assertion that game “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (13), he suggests an autonomy, a freedom or as Foucault terms it, a “subjectification” of the individual within the gaming sphere. Gide’s discourse on authenticity, freedom and ethics ultimately becomes a discourse on limits. In Foucault and the Political, Jon Simons writes that the space of transgression “is the precarious space between […] absolute unlimitedness and complete limitation” (70). The impasse created by the recognition of such limits within the space of the real necessitates a “mode of subjectification” whereby the ethical relation to one’s self becomes aesthetic. As we saw in the previous chapter, play constitutes this space of “absolute unlimitedness” where one is able to create an “imagination of reality” (Huizinga 4) in which the individual becomes the subject and is able to impose his own set of rules.

Lafcadio fashions his authentic self on the Nietzschian tenets of the Übermensch; however, unlike the more sombre tone of L’Immoraliste, Les Caves du Vatican has a more farcical tone reminiscent of the sotie. Echoes of Rabelais and what Bakhtin terms the carnivalesque permeate the poetics of transgression in Les Caves du Vatican. Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque in the following manner:

During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants [...]. The tradition of the Saturnalia remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed
this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life. (*Rabelais and his World* 7-8)

For Lafcadio and other adherents of the play aesthetic (Protos and briefly Julius), the emphasis on freedom and the desire to escape into a separate space where one’s actions no longer have any material impact in the space of the real all characterise aspects of the play aesthetic. In *Les Caves du Vatican*, it is the theme of gratuity that best articulates the drive to act freely from the constraints of the socio-ethic – or as Bakhtin terms it above, from the “usual official way of life.” It is imperative to note that the carnivalesque cannot be transposed onto the functioning of the real world. The laws of the carnival cannot co-exist with those of the real world. Not only does this “temporary” suspension recall the gratuity or freedom of play, but it also highlights many aspects of the play-mood to be analysed in the following pages. The cultivation of the play aesthetic in *Les Caves du Vatican* bears many similarities to Michel’s endeavour in *L’Immoraliste*. But, as previously mentioned, the crucial difference lies in the development of the play aesthetic itself. Where Michel attempts to adopt the play model projected by the children whom he meets in Biskra, Lafcadio is himself still a child, albeit on the verge of adulthood. His play aesthetic has already solidified a more ethical dimension due to his upbringing in the hands of his “uncles.” These men instilled in the young boy values based on the ludic aspects of life rather than on the rational, consequential norms taught in the bourgeois educational system. His revolt against these bourgeois values only takes precedence once he is confronted with the limits imposed by the laws of the real world.

In this section, I propose examining the same facets of play as detailed in the first chapter. I first explore the cultivation of the play-spirit via the assertion on the part of Lafcadio of a sense of freedom and inconsequence. Second, I explore the features of what Huizinga terms the play-mood, and third I conclude by reasserting the existence of a separate sphere of play in which the authentic self can be expressed.

**L’acte gratuit: play as freedom and inconsequence**

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga stresses that play is a “voluntary activity.” He emphasises the “freedom” innate to the pursuit, a point he returns to, specifying: “It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task, it is done at leisure, during ‘free time’” (7-8).

Lafcadio, much like Michel, expresses his revulsion at the idea of having to act out of duty – declaring himself an *être d’inconséquence* (90) and pursuing an ethic based upon the aesthetic of play manifest in the cultivation of the free act (*l’acte gratuit*). Lafcadio goes about this endeavour in a way reminiscent of the Nietzschian *Übermensch*. Seeking freedom and self-mastery, this endeavour manifests as a sort of existential narcissism. In this way, Lafcadio attempts to establish an individualist doctrine
based on the “supreme virtue” of truthfulness that in the Gidian universe is translated to the supreme virtue of personal authenticity. Such existential narcissism recalls another element of Nietzschean philosophy wherein the supreme virtue likewise rests on the idea of sincerity and truthfulness:

Zarathustra is more truthful than any other thinker. His doctrine, and his alone, posits truthfulness as the highest virtue […] To speak the truth […] the self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness […] that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth. (Ecce Homo 784)

It is after a trip to El Kantara that this personal moral appears to have inspired Lafcadio. Julius reads Lafcadio’s words, written in Lafcadio’s diary: “QUI INCOMINCIA IL LIBRO DELLA NOVA ESIGENZA E DELLA SUPREMA VIRTU” (55). The journal entries highlight the key role of the city in the cultivation of free self-expression and its ethical undertones. It is revealed later in the sotie that Lafcadio had a sexual relationship with his uncle Lord Faby while on this trip. This mirrors Michel’s sexual self-discovery while in North Africa and Gide’s own experiences as a young man in the 1890s with the young Athman (Sheridan 121).

The ethical dimension of Lafcadio’s attitude is made clear by his specific wording, including the imperative of “truthfulness” as a “teaching” and a “virtue.” As in L’Immoraliste, however, this ethic is highly anesthetised, reinforced by Nietzschean allusions to the importance of the physical body and “turn[ing] oneself into a work of art” (cited by Came).

The narrator’s descriptions of Lafcadio are very much centred on his physical appearance, specifically his agility and beauty as exemplary of a sense of self. He is described as “une anguille” (64), “souple” (232), and “beau” (56). His physical prowess is perhaps most evident in the first of his actes gratuits, when the budding Übermensch races to the rescue of children trapped in a burning apartment:

Lafcadio n’en écoute pas plus long. Posant sa canne et son chapeau aux pieds de la jeune fille, il s’élança. Pour agripper le sommet du mur il n'eut recours à l'aide de personne; une traction le rétablit; à présent, tout debout, il avançait sur cette crête, évitant les tessons qui la hérissaient par endroits. Mais l'ébahissement de la foule redoubla lorsque, saissant le conduit vertical, on le vit s'élever à la force des bras, prenant à peine appui, de-ci, de-là, du bout des pieds aux pitons de support. Le voici qui touche au balcon, dont il empoigne d'une main la grille; la foule admire et ne tremble plus, car vraiment son aisance est parfaite. D'un coup d'épaule, il fait voler en éclats les carreaux; il disparaît dans la pièce... Moment d'attente et d'angoisse indicible... Puis on le voit reparaître, tenant un marmot pleurant dans ses bras. D'un drap de lit qu'il a déchiré et dont il a noué bout à bout les deux lés, il a fait une sorte de corde; il attache l'enfant, le descend jusqu'aux bras de sa mère éperdue. Le second a le même sort... (65)

19 The entry in El Kantara is dated October 5th. Julius notes that the journal “[reprend] de neuf” a few pages later with the declaration cited above. El Kantara also figures in the L’Immoraliste as the location where Michel undergoes his self-discovery.
Implicit in this “libre disposition” (62) of his physical self is that sense of superiority over the masses which one finds associated with the Übermensch. Before committing his first acte gratuit, he remarks:

-- Marchons un peu, d'abord, ou je vais m'envoler, pensait-il. Et gardons le milieu de la chaussée; si je m'approche d'eux, ces passants vont s'apercevoir que je les dépasse énormément de la tête. Une supériorité de plus à cacher. On n'a jamais fini de parfaire un apprentissage. (63-4)

And again, following the murder of Fleurissoire (the fourth free act), \(^{20}\) he comments:

—Quel ennui règne dans ces lieux ! se disait Lafcadio, dont le regard indifférent glissait au-dessus des convives sans trouver figure où se poser. — Tout ce bétail s'acquitte comme d'une corvée monotone de ce divertissement qu'est la vie, à la bien prendre... Qu’ils sont donc mal vêtus ! Mais, nus, qu’ils seraient laids ! Je meurs avant le dessert si je ne commande pas du champagne. (219)

Lafcadio clearly distinguishes himself from others. Firstly, he sees himself as quite literally above them (“je les dépasse énormément de la tête” (63-4); “le regard indifférent glissait au-dessus des convives” (219)). Secondly, he sees himself as more human (“ce bétail” (219)), or, in the very least, as a more perfect specimen (suggested by comparing the musings: “Une supériorité de plus à cacher. On n'a jamais fini de parfaire un apprentissage” (63-4) and “Qu’ils sont donc mal vêtus ! Mais, nus, qu’ils seraient laids ! Je meurs avant le dessert si je ne commande pas du champagne” (219)). Thirdly, the reference to the “divertissement qu’est la vie” (219) suggests the emphasis that Lafcadio places on the ludic aspect of life as opposed to the bourgeois masses who focus on the “corvée montone” of ordinary, day-to-day life as dictated by the norms of the socio-ethic.

Lafcadio often refers to his body as a shell in which he is trapped, both by his flesh and his clothing. The narrator describes Lafcadio’s body as a “vêtement de chair” that is “décidément solide, imperméable” (62) and later refers to the boy’s clothing as a “prison molle” (186). While the symbol of the prison is consistent throughout the sotie, the adjectives used to describe the encasement of the self evolve over the course of the work. In the first quotation, Lafcadio’s body is solid and impermeable. In the second statement, however, the narrator describes the shell of the body as soft. As the story progresses, Lafcadio appears to grow more comfortable with his sense of self, viewing his body not as a shell imprisoning his authentic self but rather as an intrinsic part of his self. This idea is corroborated by Lafcadio’s thoughts that the narrator conveys:

\(^{20}\) The four actes gratuits are as follows:
1) Lafcadio saves the children from the housefire.
2) He recalls helping an old woman with her bag.
3) Stealing letters from the post office.
4) The murder of Fleurissoire.
Il se sentait bien dans sa peau, bien dans ses vêtements, bien dans ses bottes -- de souples mocassins taillés dans le même daim que ses gants; dans cette prison molle, son pied se tendait, se cambrait, se sentait vivre. Son chapeau de castor, rabattu devant ses yeux, le séparait du paysage; il fumait une pipette de genièvre et abandonnait ses pensées à leur mouvement naturel. Il pensait: ‘— [...] D'où me venait cette intense joie quand, après et encore en sueur, à l'ombre de ce grand châtaignier, et pourtant sans fumer, je me suis étendu sur la mousse? Je me sentais d'étreinte assez large pour embrasser l'entièr...
involves a breaking away from conventions and an attempt at asserting a personal ethic based on the
tenets of absolute liberty, free from the determinism of the opposing collective ethic of the ‘real’ world.

In addition to the desire to move freely in a world void of limits, Lafcadio also seeks to exist free
of responsibility—something only possible in the unlimited world of play. Huizinga explains that play “is
an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (13). This stipulation of
“no profit” and “no material interest” takes on a more sinister dimension later in the sotie with
Fleurissoire’s murder—the final acte gratuit. Nonetheless, during the cultivation of his play-spirit, such
gratuity remains more or less harmless; indeed, as mentioned above, the character’s first free act serves a
beneficial role: saving the children trapped in the burning apartment building. Whether he is saving a life
or taking a life, embracing or strangling humanity, the moral impetus for action is lacking in Lafcadio. He
has traded the societal ethic for his own personal ‘morality’ founded on the tenets of individualism and
authentic self-expression, thereby rejecting any notions of causal determinism that reject the power of
one’s free will and as such the ability to cultivate the authentic self on one’s own terms.

Lafcadio’s motivation for this personal morality appears to lie in the desire to be inconsequential.
Returning to his act of heroics at the apartment complex, Lafcadio refuses any material gain from the act,
embarrassed even at the attention he receives for saving the children:

-- On me prend pour un clown, pensa-t-il, exaspéré de se sentir rougir, et repoussant l'ovation
avec une mauvaise grâce brutale. Pourtant, lorsque la jeune fille, de laquelle il s'était de nouveau
rapproché, lui tendit confusément, avec sa canne et son chapeau, cette bourse qu'elle avait
promise, il la prit en souriant, et, l'ayant vidée des soixante francs qu'elle contenait, tendit l'argent
tà la pauvre mère qui maintenant étouffait ses fils de baisers. (65-6)

[...] sur une plage de sable, une femme, non plus très jeune, mais étrangement belle, penchée au bras d'un
homme de type anglais très accusé, élégant et svelte, en costume de sport; à leurs pieds, assis sur une
périoisse renversée, un robuste enfant d'une quinzaine d'années, aux épais cheveux clairs en désordre, l'air
effronté, rieur, et complètement nu. (53)

The narrative voyeurism hints at a subtle fetichisation of the young boy’s body, thereby placing the Nietzschean
emphasis on the corporal into a discourse on latent homoeroticism. This description recalls the passage describing
Bachir in L’Immoraliste, who is likewise described as completely naked underneath his burnous. Moreover, the
adjective robuste recalls the cult of the body promulgated by Michel à l’instar de Nietzsche.

The cult of the body also plays a role in the medieval carnivalesque, which as Bakhtin notes is also a core
characteristic of the medieval sotie:

This image of the body acquired a considerable and substantial development in the popular, festive, and
spectacle forms of the Middle Ages: in the feast of the fool, in charivari and carnival, in the popular side
show of Corpus Christi, in the diableries of the mystery plays, the soties, and farces. (27)
Commenting on his penchant for spending money shortly thereafter, the narrator notes that “[par horreur du devoir Lafcadio payait toujours comptant” (66). Further solidifying this gratuitous aspect of the play-mood, Lafcadio tells Julius during his ‘confession’ that he is an “être d’inconséquence”:

Le souci de le maintenir [the father in Julius’ novel], partout, toujours conséquent avec vous et avec soi-même fidèle à ses devoirs à ses principes c’est-à-dire à vos théories…vous jugez ce que moi précisément j’en puis en dire….mais, acceptez que ceci est vrai : je suis un être d’inconséquence et voyez combien je viens de parler ! moi qui hier me considérais comme le plus silencieux […]. (90)

Julius later elaborates upon this aspect of play, emphasising the key ludic elements intrinsic to that search for free, authentic expression:

Mon cher ami, vous prendrez comme vous voudrez cette aventure: moi je la tiens pour une farce qualifiée; mais sans laquelle je ne verrais peut-être pas aussi clair dans ce qui nous occupe aujourd'hui, et dont je suis pressé de vous entretenir. Voici: un être d'inconséquence! c'est beaucoup dire... et sans doute cette apparente inconséquence cache-t-elle une séquence plus subtile et cachée; l'important c'est que ce qui le fasse agir, ce ne soit plus une simple raison d'intérêt ou, comme vous dites ordinairement: qu'il n'obéisse plus à des motifs intéressés. (175)

Julius links the free act, described as an adventure and a farce, to the concept of play. Reflecting on Lafcadio’s behaviour, Julius also emphasises the “apparent inconstancy” of the act as being devoid of any reason or interest – that is, it does not correspond to any “interested motives” (175).

Huizinga likewise underscores the quality of freedom and inconstancy that characterises the play sphere:

Obviously freedom must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism. […] Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom, […] Here then we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. (7-8)

Huizinga asserts that play is innately free. He goes so far as to claim that it is freedom. In order to maintain a lifestyle characterised by such liberty, Lafcadio continues to cultivate his childhood play-spirit, refusing to cross into adulthood.24

24 This ought to be differentiated from Michel’s cultivation of the play-mood that was inspired by the children whom he met in El Kantara. In Lafcadio’s case, it could be argued that the refusal to breach the limits of childhood into adulthood contributes to the sense of impasse permeating the text. This is suggested by Lafcadio’s address in Paris: Impasse Claude-Bernard and his comment to Julius that he is “prêt à rien”:
Ludic conditioning: the cultivation of the play aesthetic

Huizinga specifies that play is an activity that “proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility.” He cites the key emotional reactions implicit in what he terms the “play-mood.” These reactions include “rapture and enthusiasm” and “exaltation [...] mirth and relaxation”(132). These emotions are encapsulated by what Huizinga terms “fun” and what in French is translated as amusement. This noun along with the verb (s’)amuser occur thirty-four times in the sotie. Of these instances, twenty-four are associated with Lafcadio, referring either to his state of mind or to the word he uses to describe a particular idea, sentiment, or action. Given the fact that there are more than five characters described in detail throughout the work, the correlation of the word amuser/amusement with the character of Lafcadio indicates to what extent his perspective is inscribed in the play-mood, suggesting that, above all else, Lafcadio seeks amusement in all his pursuits. Enquiring about Julius’ career as a novelist, he asks: “Cela vous amuse beaucoup d'écrire?” to which Julius, not yet inscribed in the play ethic/aesthetic, replies “nobly” that he does not write in order to have fun: “Je n'écris pas pour m'amuser, dit-il noblement. Les joies que je goûte en écrivant sont supérieures à celles que je pourrais trouver à vivre” (79). This contrasts with the comic nature of the sotie which posits si on s'amuse rien n'est sérieux.

Bringing together the concept of freedom with this quest for constant amusement, the narrator later remarks of Lafcadio:

[...] comme il trouvait égal plaisir à lutter contre l'appétit, à céder à la gourmandise, maintenant que ne le pressait plus le besoin, sa résistance se relâchait. Parlons sans images: d'aristocratique nature, il n'avait permis à la nécessité de lui imposer aucun geste -- qu'il se fût permis à présent, par malice, par jeu, et par l'amusement de préférer à son intérêt son plaisir. (185)

Nevertheless the play aesthetic possesses an ethical dimension. The pleasure one takes from an action or experience becomes indicative of its authentic nature and the pleasure one derives from an object or

-- Il est heureux, dit solennellement Julius, il est heureux, Lafcadio, qu'il vous revienne aujourd'hui quelque argent: sans métier, sans instruction, condamné à vivre d'expédients... tel que je vous connais à présent, vous étiez prêt à tout.
-- Prêt à rien, au contraire, reprit Lafcadio en regardant Julius gravement. Malgré tout ce que je vous ai dit, je vois que vous me connaissiez mal encore. Rien ne m'empêche autant que le besoin; je n'ai jamais recherché que ce qui ne peut pas me servir. (89-90)

25 The word “exaltation” is likewise used to describe Lafcadio’s state of being: “Il n'était pas midi. Lafcadio, qu'une exaltation fantasque emploissait, ne se sentait point d'appétit encore” (63).
26 Occurences of “fun” in Homo Ludens: pp. 1, 2, 3, 23, 24, 33, 86, 89, 195.
27 The use of malice foreshadows the criminal aspect of the ludic spirit that manifests itself later in the sotie. It also recalls Gide’s comment to Schlumberger, “Si quelque jour je peux raconter ce passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime, ce sera mon plus beau livre” (Correspondance Gide-Schlumberger 389).
experience becomes the very reason for pursuing such behaviour. Lafcadio’s ethico-aesthetic has become an end in itself, which is, after all, one of the founding characteristics of the play sphere: pleasure. The player plays precisely because he derives pleasure from the act. Such pleasure for pleasure’s sake recalls Huizinga’s earlier remark that the child plays because he enjoys the act of playing; this, concludes Huizinga, is the crux of his “freedom” (8). Indeed, the pursuit of play is innately gratuitous – in Lafcadio’s mind, therefore, the act of playing ensures that the pleasure principle stays intact. Moreover, it ensures that he stays in the realm of childhood, where he is free from responsibility and the burden of consequence that characterise the adult, ‘real’ world which in the Gidian universe is the world of cheat and fakery. Bertrand Fillaudeau terms Lafcadio’s perspective “l’expérience du seuil” (219), meaning that Lafcadio refuses to breach that limit between childhood and adulthood, preferring to stay within the universe of play innate to the child.

The ethical dimension of Lafcadio’s play-spirit is engrained in him from a young age, having been inculcated in him by the “aristocratic natures” of his “uncles” : le baron Heldenbruch, Wladimir Bielkowski, Ardengo Baldi, Lord Fabian Taylor and the Marquis de Gesvres. In a scene that takes the form of a confession, Lafcadio relates to his half-brother his untraditional upbringing. Lafcadio suggests that it was this conditioning that engrained in him the novella esigenze or suprema vertu of his être d’inconséquence. In “Regards gidiens sur l’enfance” Alain Goulet asserts the primacy in Gide’s works of a topos designating childhood as the origin of the self (123).

Lafcadio’s early conditioning juxtaposed with his brief experience with the French school system in his late teens serves to establish a series of oppositions similar to those outlined in the L’Immoraliste: the world of childhood is the world of play, freedom and authenticity. The adult world is one in which one must learn how to behave in accordance with the laws of society, and as such where one must renounce the personal freedom and authentic expression cultivated in the space of play. The French school system therefore serves as a training ground for life in the ‘real’ world. Since Lafcadio grew up largely without this education, his perspective remains highly influenced by the ludic apprenticeship that he received from his uncles.

The Baron Heldenbruck teaches Lafcadio math and instills in the young boy the necessity of tracking one’s spending. When Lafcadio was twelve, Heldenbruck was called to America on business, at which point Wladimir Bielkowski and Ardengo Baldi became his mother’s lovers. Of Bielkowski, Lafcadio first notes that “il cédait toujours à sa pente” (83) and of their already less than “ordinaire life” (Huizinga 13), Bielkowski transformed their lives into “une sorte de fête éperdue.” He adds, “Non, il ne suffit pas de dire qu’il s’abandonnait à sa pente: il s’y précipitait, s’y ruait; il apportait à son plaisir une espèce de frénésie” (Gide, Les Caves 84). The language as well as the behaviour recalls a concept central
to Gidian philosophy: following one’s “pente.” In *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, Edouard replies to Bernard’s question, “Comment vivre?” with the answer, “[i]l est bon de suivre sa pente, pourvu que ce soit en montant” (400). Such an ethical imperative hearkens back to the idea of authenticity that in this particular case is linked to that free expression implicit in the play aesthetic.

The ludic dimension is developed through his “complementary” apprenticeship with his other uncle, Baldi. As Lafcadio notes, the two uncles made “bon ménage.” As a “[j]ongleur, escamoteur, prestidigitateur, acrobate,” Baldi was constantly inventing new games, engaging, much like Bielkowski, in some farce (*Les Caves* 84). Lafcadio adds that while living with Baldi things seemed to lose their reality and all utility.

In all his relationships with his uncles, Lafcadio remarks on the need for these men to court him in order to win over his mother. The subtle homoeroticism is made clear in Lafcadio’s relationship with Faby, who, as the protagonist explains, had locked up the boy’s clothing, underwear included, under the pretext that he needed to tan more:

Là, sous les pins, parmi les roches, au fond des criques, ou dans la mer nageant et pagayant, je vivais en sauvage tout le jour. C'est de cette époque que date la photographie que vous avez vue; que j'ai brulée aussi.28
-- Il me semble, dit Julius, que, pour la circonstance, vous auriez bien pu vous présenter plus décernement.
-- Précisément, je ne le pouvais pas, reprit en riant Lafcadio; sous prétexte de me bronzer, Faby gardait sous clef tous mes costumes, mon linge même...
-- Et Madame votre mère, que disait-elle?
-- Elle s'en amusait beaucoup; elle disait que si nos invités se scandalisaient, ils n'avaient qu'à partir; mais cela n'empêchait de rester aucun de ceux que nous recevions. (86)

Later in the sotie, Lafcadio alludes to a sexual rapport having occurred between the two not long after the photo mentioned above was taken: “Faby, les premiers temps, était confus de se sentir épris de moi; il a bien fait de s'en confesser à ma mère: après quoi son coeur s'est senti plus léger. Mais combien sa retenue m'agaçait!...” (188). One assumes this liaison took place during the holiday in El Kantara that the two took when Lafcadio was fifteen years old. This recalls Michel’s own sexual revelation/renaissance in the Algerian town. As an aside, Lafcadio adds that his trip, made before he was sent to boarding school in Paris, was one of the best times in his life:

28 The photo features Lafcadio sitting nude upon a *périssoire*. In *périssoire* one can find the verb *périr*. With the morbid forshadowing suggested by the verb, Fleurissoire presumably becomes another ‘*périssoire*’ for Lafcadio.
The opposition between the real world and Lafcadio’s world of play is once again evident. The “merveilleux voyage” during which the young boy has his first homosexual experience belongs to the realm of freedom and authentic expression as opposed to the “gèôlier imperméable” of his studies, representative of that constrictive adult world of Law and hetero-normative conventions. The use of the word “imperméable” recalls Lafcadio’s initial description of his body as a “vêtement de chair […] solide et imperméable” indicating to what extent in the first part of the sotie Lafcadio seeks to liberate himself from those restrictions and prolong his ludic conditioning from childhood.

Before his mother passed away, she took one last lover, le Marquis de Gesvre. In stark contrast to Heldenbruch, Gesvre paid little heed to his expenses. Shopping at all the finest stores in Paris, the Marquis eventually fled the country to escape his creditors. Of Gesvres, Lafcadio comments that he wore his elegance naturally, “comme une seconde sincérité” (88).

In addition to the ludic training provided by his uncles, another quality of play is expressed in the recurring laughter of several of the characters. According to Bakhtin, laughter heralds a victory: a “victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death, it also means the defeat of power […] of all that oppresses and restricts” (92). The laughter portrayed in the text appears to transcend those boundaries revealed by the over extension of the play sphere. Julius refers to this same idea while talking to Fleurissoire during the former’s temporary conversion to the play ethic:

Comment! J’arrive, et à grand-peine, à me purger l'esprit de tout cela; je me convaincs qu'il n'y a rien à attendre de là, rien à espérer, rien à admettre; qu'Anthime a été joué, que tous nous sommes joués, que ce sont là des pharmacies! et qu'il ne reste plus qu'à en rire... Eh quoi! je me libère; et je n'en suis pas plus tôt consolé que vous venez me dire: Halte là! Il y a maldonne: Recommezence! Ah! non, par exemple! Ah! ça: non jamais! Je m'en tiens là. Si celui-là [the Pope] n'est pas le vrai: Tant pis! (177-8)

Julius brings together the idea of freedom and play. Given that we are all “played,” all that remains is to laugh and enjoy the liberation that play provides. It is laughter that expresses the amusement and exaltation engendered by the self once liberated from the constraints of the societal ethic. Lafcadio’s name carries within it this topos of transcendence: LAF (laugh) ca/ DIO (god).29 One must laugh because

29 Fillaudeau elaborates upon this analysis of Lafcadio’s name in an earlier chapter, asserting that the names in the sotie almost all contribute to the creation of ludic universe, just as in the sotie of the Middle Ages: “Cadio est le surnom attribué par Protos à Lafcadio, il peut suggérer un autre nom Cadiou, qui en langue d’oë était attribué à tous ceux qui blasphémaient, Cap diou devenant Cadiou puis Cadio ; or celui-ci viole tous les commandements divins, il tue, commet l’inceste, a sans doute été homosexuel” (157).
of and despite these conventions that serve to cushion the nothingness, the true unlimitedness lurking below the imposed structure of society (Fillaudeau 223). In this way, laughter becomes deliverance through purgation and takes on an ethical dimension, a facet of the play sphere on which Lafcadio seeks to capitalise.

**Farce and text: the outsidedness of play**

The “voyage merveilleux” that Lafcadio took with Faby highlights a third characteristic of play. As Huizinga explains, the play sphere exists “quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life.” He continues by explaining:

> It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (13)

This description of play recalls Protos’ criteria for making a “rogue” out of an honest man:

> -- Voici ma thèse: Savez-vous ce qu'il faut pour faire de l'honnête homme un gredin? Il suffit d'un dépaysement, d'un oubli! Oui, Monsieur, un trou dans la mémoire, et la sincérité se fait jour!... La cessation d'une continuité; une simple interruption de courant. Naturellement je ne dis pas cela dans mes cours... Mais, entre nous, quel avantage pour le bâtard! Songez donc: celui dont l'être même est le produit d'une incartade, d'un crochet dans la droite ligne. (226)

Much of the plot of *Les Caves du Vatican* plays out during a “dépaysage.” Julius and Amédée leave their respective homes in Paris and Pau and Lafcadio embarks on a trip to Java, but makes it no farther than Italy after encountering Amédée on the train to Naples. Travel interrupts the “current” of “ordinary” life. As Protos explains, it is this gap (“trou”) that permits sincerity to appear. The voyage necessary to escape the humdrum of everyday life is also referred to as an “aventure” by Gide – Lafcadio uses this word in reference to both play and crime. The ideas of a *dépaysagement/voyage* and adventure are thus linked in Gidian philosophy to the ethico-aesthetic. In *Si le grain ne meurt*, Gide writes

> […] je ne puis consentir à suivre une route toute tracée. J'aime le jeu, l'inconnu, l'aventure : j'aime à n'être pas, où l'on me croit ; c'est aussi pour être où il me plaît, et que l'on m'y laisse tranquille. Il importe avant tout de pouvoir penser librement. (quoted by Fernandez)

Just as the sphere of play must exist apart from the rigours of day-to-day life, Gide emphasises here the necessity of escaping one’s ordinary life in order to “pouvoir penser librement.” By listing “le jeu”

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30 The idea of the bastard features in many Gidian texts. In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* he writes, “Seul le bâtard a droit au naturel” (44). Free from the restraints of familial bourgeois conventions, the illegitimate child is free to form new values and champion his own destiny.
alongside “l’inconnu” and “l’aventure” Gide explicitly associates the concept with the same outsidedness of travel suggested by Protos.

Of particular interest is the space of play as defined by the parameters of the sotie itself. Mirroring the dépayssagement of the characters, the text deviates from the norms of the traditional novel, inscribing itself in the aesthetic of the medieval carnivalesque. Fillaudau reinforces the role of play in literature, referring to literature as “le jeu des jeux.” He adds that “l’écriture est jeu, évasion, création libre, elle devient alors le jeu des jeux en assumant son caractère artificiel, elle met en lumière les limites d’où ressurgit sa grandeur” (286). Art possesses an innately gratuitous nature in so far as it aims for nothing more than its own expression. We enter into a discourse, therefore, on art for art’s sake that reflects Lafcadio’s own pursuit of play in the name of pleasure for pleasure’s sake.

The self-reflective nature of the text achieves this feeling of gratuity permeating the sotie. Themes and characters in the Gidian universe are subordinated to the overarching structure of the work, creating the sense that the entire text is nothing more than a series of mises en abyme, reflecting the ultimate nothingness into the real world of the reader. The structure represents the centrally subversive idea driving the work which for Gide lay in the necessity of dismantling suppositions of truth and traditional myths buried deep within the construct of society (Brée 233-5). The structural space of Les Caves reflects the textual preoccupations of the sotie through the very approach Gide took to writing. The concept of décentrement is reflected in the non-linear progression of the novel which resembles a labyrinth. It also echoes Protos’ definition of the bastard as a “crochet dans la droite ligne” (Gide 226) of family lineage and the need for a dépayssagement to reveal the authentic self (“un dépaysagement […] et la sincérité se fait jour!”). Seen as an institution, the family can be perceived as another false value propagated by society. Indeed, one could see therein a parallel between the institution of the family and the institution of the novel (as symbolised by the Académie in the novel) due to their socially constructed natures and their role in falsifying “le meilleur” (204). Julius underscores such institutions’ role in cultivating an inauthentic persona, which he terms “fausser le meilleur”: “Nous vivons contrefaits, plutôt que de ne pas ressembler au portrait que nous avons tracé de nous d’abord: c’est absurde; ce faisant nous risquons de fausser le meilleur” (204). The original “portrait” here refers to the ideal as defined by such institutions. It is, as Protos explains, “une image […] de laquelle nous ne sommes qu’à demi responsables […] mais qu’il est indécent […] de déborder” (225).

While at dinner with Protos (disguised as a priest) and Ciro (disguised as the false cardinal), Amédée “en vain cherchait […] quelque phrase qui pût à la fois ne rien dire et tout signifier” (160). This problem of limited consciousness can be represented by the concept of the arbitrary nature of language. Such word play demands the engagement of the reader in a game of deciphering. It also mirrors the decentring of the novel, with the syntax being invaded by gaps and turns that break up the fluidity of the text, causing the reader to question his expectations of the literary work. Does enjoyment of the text come
from fulfilment of one’s expectations, or from the surprise and subversion of these expectations?

Fillaudeau advances that it is the subversion of these norms that engages the reader. The subversive nature of the sotie thus founds the basis, along with the innate gratuity of the artistic endeavour, of the play-like nature of literature. In this way, Gide invites the reader to a game for the initiated, leaving to the reader “des pistes qui nous permettent d’avancer des hypothèses, de participer au déchiffrement du texte” (Fillaudeau 143).

The construction “délivrance de,” for example, may be interpreted in two ways: it could be interpreted both as freeing the Pope (from the Freemasons) and as freeing ourselves from the (belief system of the) Pope (Broome, 111). It is ironic when Protos laments, “Quoi vous avez l’insigne honneur de tenir entre vos mains sa délivrance et vous tardez!” (105) The other most notable example of this playful duplicity is found in the title: the word “cave” permeates the work and, as Broome points out, represents an “explosion” of falsity (34), the shards of which are found scattered throughout the novel: Cave can mean “dupe” or allude to the Latin caveat emptor meaning beware (Goulet, “Les Caves du Vatican”: étude méthodologique, 39-40) and as such represents a mise en abyme of the duped characters and of the false nature of the sotie itself.

Word-play in the text is seemingly inexhaustive. In addition to the main examples listed above, Gide plays with the double meanings of a variety of other words. The following table outlines only a handful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word</th>
<th>literal meaning</th>
<th>secondary, tertiary etc. meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>foulard</td>
<td>scarf</td>
<td>fou + (de) + l’art (mise à nu of the artistic premise of text).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cave(s)</td>
<td>cellar</td>
<td>1) cave : dupe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) caveat emptor : beware.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3) cave: subterranean room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deliverance du pape</td>
<td>free the Pope</td>
<td>free (oneself) from the Pope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tropisms/tropist</td>
<td>The turning of all or part of an organism in a particular direction in response to an external stimulus, as in Anthime’s scientific experiments with his rats</td>
<td>tropist: a heretic sect (Fillaudeau 140).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>melon/cantaloupe</td>
<td>The large round fruit of a plant of the gourd family, with sweet pulpy flesh and many seeds.</td>
<td>Comune di Cantalupo: the papal villa (141).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protos</td>
<td>proper noun</td>
<td>“first” as he was in Greek, and master of disguise like his Greek namesake Proteus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word</th>
<th>literal meaning</th>
<th>secondary, tertiary etc. meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Carola Venitequa</em></td>
<td>proper noun</td>
<td>Befitting of her job as a prostitute, in Italian ventiqua means “come here” (157).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| *Amédée Fleurissoire*| proper noun     | 1) Amédée obeys the words implicit in his name: “ama deo” : Amédée.  
|                      |                 | 2) Fillaudeau suggests that his last name refers to the insect bites and abscesses that “fleurissent” (Fleurissoire) on his body (155). |
| *Anthime Armand-Dubois* | proper noun | 1) “Anti-” : the suffix refers to his refusal first of science than of religion.  
|                      |                 | 2) The reference to wood likewise suggests his stubbornness “têtu comme du bois” (156). |
| *Lafcadio*           | proper noun     | 1) Laf/dio : to laugh at God.  
|                      |                 | 2) Cadiou: name attributed to those who commit blasphemy (157).                                |

Fillaudeau notes “l’utilisation carnavalesque” that applies in such word-play, citing Bakhtin who asserts that the concept ties into this sort of “recréation des mots et des choses, lâches en liberté, délivrés de l’étroitesse du sens, de la logique, de la hiérarchie verbale” (quoted by Fillaudeau 134) that characterises the sotie. Such freedom from logic and verbal hierarchy helps create the ludic universe of the sotie, making the game in which the reader must engage more “souterrain” and more “subtil” (157).

As suggested in the above table, *Caves* can be taken to mean “cellars” which in the context of the title refers to the underground passageways linking the Vatican and Hadrian’s Castle where the “real” Pope is supposedly imprisoned. This image of winding passageways is significant within the thematic space of the work in which the labyrinth metaphor reappears repeatedly. Anthime’s apartment in Rome and the brothel where Amédée unwittingly takes up residence are all described as a system of convoluted passageways, with closed doors blocking the way or open doors leading to further corridors. Julius describes his attempt to meet with the Pope and the confusion he encountered on the way:

> Bref c’est à notre Saint-Père lui-même que je résolus d’adresser la supplique […]. Je la gardais en main […] mais, dès la seconde antichambre (ou la troisième je ne m’en souviens plus bien), un grand gaillard, costume de noir et de rouge, me l’a poliment enlevée […]. Dans l’antichambre suivante on m’a débarrassé de mon chapeau […]. Dans la cinquième ou la sixième […] une sorte de chambellan est venu me chercher et m’a introduit dans la salle voisine où sitôt en face du Saint-Père […] il m’a invite à me prosterner, ce que j’ai fait; de sorte que j’ai cessé de voir. (176)

This passage is particularly important as it not only highlights the recurring thematic of the labyrinth, but it also emphasises the unsettling textual *décentrement* of the sotie. The supposed centre of the plot, the character around whom the text revolves – the Pope is never seen. As God’s representative on Earth, a false or missing Pope in Rome has dire implications for the existence of God in heaven. Gide suggests
here the impossibility of attaining “Truth”: we return thus to Gide’s concept of the Devil’s Share, that which we can never know by the very limitation of our subjective perspective.

The best example of labyrinthine limitations comes from the image of Anthime’s lab rats. The narrator describes Anthime’s experiments as “prétendant simplement réduire en ‘tropismes’ toute l’activité des animaux qu’il observait.” For Anthime the structure that gives his life meaning is a positivist law. “Pour servir à ses fins,” Anthime constructed “un compliqué système de boîtes à couloirs, à trappes, à labyrinths, à compartiments contenant les uns la nourriture, les autres rien.” The narrator describes it as the “diabolical” instrument of the new “psycho-physiological” school of thought and its endeavour “à faire un pas de plus dans l’incrédulité” (13). Unable as they are to liberate themselves from the “diabolical” system in which they find themselves, Gides’s characters are, like Anthime’s rats, unconscious victims of the Devil’s Share, a game of the cosmos to which they are not privy.

Gide spirals the false plots through the many dimensions of Les Caves.31 There is the “complot” of the false Pope, which, despite not being true even within the context of the novel, also challenges another reality as false (that is, the spiritual world). Secondly, there is Julius’ novel L’Air des Cimes and his proposed new novel that would tell the story of a crime without motive. The novel that he describes is of course Les Caves du Vatican and its attack on conventional realist narrative.

Illustrating this anti-novel aspect, Gide creates an atmosphere of textual disponibilty by appearing several times throughout the novel, at times giving his opinion on certain characters, at other times speaking directly to the characters whom he has created: “Lafcadio, mon ami, vous donnez dans un fait divers et ma plume vous abondonne” (64).

Perhaps one of the more poignant examples of textual disponibility in the work is illustrated by the interior monologue of Lafcadio as he deliberates over his unmotivated crime: “Tel se croit capable de tout, qui devant que d’agir recule … Qu’il y a loin entre l’imagination et le fait!” (195) George Strauss describes the pursuit of an individual law as the revolt against collective, universal law and necessary in the cultivation of authentic experience. Interestingly, to manifest this “vérité intime” he writes “ce que nous faisons doit être gratuit et spontané” (La Part du Diable 14-15). Cultivation of individual law is central to Lafcadio’s pursuit of the sensualist doctrine; the acte gratuit represents a way of achieving this freedom and also of proving his existence as an “être d’inconséquence.” His downfall lies, however, in this last supposition and his ultimate indifference to human life. The crime does have consequences and coincidently its repercussions reveal how deeply entrenched Lafcadio is in the societal system in place. Furthermore, it brings into question his self-proclaimed freedom. Since he set out to prove his independence from the “system,” one could postulate that his attempt at the gratuitous act failed. The

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31 The word faux also appears throughout the sotie, used in reference to Protos’ disguises as le faux prêtre, le faux chanoine, and in reference to the recurring leitmotif of the “faux col” that many of the characters wear.
introspective control that Lafcadio wields over himself to ensure spontaneity negates that spontaneity and thus negates the *acte gratuit* (Strauss 133). As Protos points out to Lafcadio, one is never “lawless” (Gide 230). Gide suggests here that it is perhaps only within the domain of art that gratuity can truly be achieved, for art “ne vise rien que l’art. Il est gratuit, n’ayant ni passé ni avenir” (Strauss 127).

By inscribing his tale into the literary model, Lafcadio escapes the bounds imposed by the material world, much as he sought to do in adopting his *Spieltrieb*-esque philosophy. Within this space, the question of ethics and authentic, freedom and individuality can be explored freely without the fear of repercussions in the ‘real’ world. This artistic gratuity or inconsequence also shares in the qualities of play: the inherent complicity demanded by the hermeneutic relationship between author and reader suggests that Gide is trying to engage his reader in a literary game of interpretation. The decentred, self-reflective structure of the sotie functions partially as a *mise à nu* of the written work, paralleling the invitation to interpretative play and revealing the polyphonic discourse as the *literary work* in which the reader participates.

* 

While the play sphere may exist as a “separate” and “non-material” space, it cannot co-exist simultaneously with the space of the real. More accurately, one cannot both play and go about “ordinary life.” In *Les Jeux et les hommes* Roger Caillois asks:

[…], qu'en advient-il […] quand l'univers du jeu n'est plus étanche? Quand il y a contamination avec le monde réel? […] ce qui était plaisir devient idée fixe; ce qui était évasion devient obligation; ce qui était divertissement devient passion, obsession et source d'angoisse. (103)

Once play comes into contact with the real, the gaming aesthetic becomes contaminated. One’s actions are no longer suspended in the gratuity of game. What were once pleasure and evasion become fixed ideas, locked into the determinism of the ‘real’ world, where freedom from consequences and responsibility is no longer a possibility. More sinisterly, Caillois warns that this loss of gratuity can become a source of anguish. It is this transition between play and crime that I address in the second part of this chapter.

2.2 Crime

The murder that Lafcadio commits becomes symbolic of his shedding the “prison molle” of his clothing (*Les Caves* 186). It also represents Lafcadio’s desire to expand the gaming aesthetic beyond the realm of pleasure and imagination. Reminiscent of Michel’s criminal behaviour, the crime in the sotie is
inextricably linked to the desire for authentic expression, or as Lafcadio and Protos term it, the act of “passer outre” (56). Like Michel, Lafcadio confuses the pursuit for authentic expression with one for freedom. What Lafcadio fails to realise is that one cannot hope to affirm the authentic self by simply transgressing norms prescribed by the collective ethic. In so doing, he only inscribes himself further in the same poetics of control regulated by the juridico-discursive model (Schehr, Shock 6). The affirmation of the authentic self cannot be solely in reaction to the “éthique erronnée” (204) of the social ethic that is in itself inauthentic.

The play aspect of the sotie culminates with the crime gratuit. Lafcadio’s and Protos’ attitude towards the crime, much like Michel’s attitude towards his own transgressions, is characterised by a ludic lexicon. Even Julius betrays a certain amusement at the idea of the crime as the narrator ironically points out:

 [...] je ne suis pas bien sûr que Julius à qui l’amusement manquait dans le trantran de sa vie bourgeoise, ne se fit pas un jeu de tourner autour du scandale et de s’y brûler le bout des doigts. (233)

The act of transgression becomes a part of the play ethic. Transgressing societal norms not only becomes a means to assert one’s individual freedom, but the act also becomes inscribed in the pleasure principle. Amusement is derived from knowingly flaunting those limits erected by society. The conflation of individual freedom and the search for authentic and ludic expression is a crucial point in the passage from play to crime. For Lafcadio, saving and taking a life have been reduced to the same moral plane.32 It is thus a natural progression to extend the ludism of the play domain into the space of the reality. In the ludic universe, the concept of crime does not exist. Hence Lafcadio’s refusal to name the act as a criminal act. For him it was an adventure tantamount to play:

Son intention était de n’aborder Julius qu’après que les journaux auraient parlé du ‘crime’. Le crime! Ce mot lui semblait plutôt bizarre; et tout à fait impropre, s’adressant à lui, celui de criminel. Il préférait celui d’aventurier, mot aussi souple que son castor, et dont il pouvait relever les bords à son gré. Les journaux du matin ne parlaient pas encore de l’aventure. Il attendait impatiemment ceux du soir, pressé de revoir Julius et de sentir s’engager la partie; comme l’enfant à cligne-musette, qui certes ne veut pas qu’on le trouve, mais qui veut du moins qu’on le cherche, en attendant il s’ennuyait. (200)

32 Lafcadio and Michel derive amusement from transgressing the norms and laws of society which strive to ensure the collective wellbeing. The protagonists’ actions represent a rejection of the collective in favour of individualism and personal freedom. As such, amusement is exemplary of the existential narcissism discussed in the first part of the chapter.
In this way, play and crime are one in the same. Crime and adventure are used interchangeably by Lafcadio as synonyms designating words of equal weight and meaning. The total lack of seriousness for the act committed and the juxtaposition of the adventure with the simile “comme l'enfant à cligne-musette” also shows to what extent Lafcadio’s crime, in his mind, has been conflated with his perception of self and the ethico-aesthetic of play.

Lafcadio’s transition between play and crime results from his desire to maintain a sense of self. In this way, play morphs into a challenge of the ‘system.’ Specifically, Lafcadio attempts to edify his authentic self via the direct confrontation with what he deems the falsifying, ‘counterfeiting’ forces of culture and morality. The ethico-aesthetic characteristics of the play realm become what Foucault terms an ethics of transgression, which maintains nonetheless its highly aesthetised core due to the self-reflective nature of the ethic.

Let us now consider the aesthetic and ethical interplay that manifests in this passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime by analysing first the idea of the counterfeit self before examining the ludic elements of the swindle and Fleurissoire’s murder.

Counterfeiting the authentic: l'éthique erronée

According to Julius, an “éthique erronée” dictating social norms and conventions prevents the free development of one’s authentic self (204). If by chance the illusory nature of these systems is revealed to the individual, he succumbs to the incapacitating effects of doubt – the reaction experienced by the three most institutionally entrenched characters in the sotie: Anthime, Amédée and Julius.

Gide emphasised the ‘artificial’ nature of such erroneous ethical beliefs in a diary entry dated the 20th of October 1927:

Je ne puis me satisfaire du nihilisme absolu […] je ne m'en écoute pas, ne le repousse pas, mais prétend passer outre, le traverser. C'est par delà que je veux reconstruire . Il me paraît monstrueux que l'homme ait besoin de l'idée de Dieu pour sentir d'aplomb sur terre: qu'il soit forcé de consentir à des absurdités pour édifier quoi que ce soit de solide; qu'il se reconnaîsse incapable d'exiger de lui-même ce qu'obtenaient artificiellement de lui des convictions religieuses, de sorte qu'il laisse aller tout au néant sitôt qu'on dépeuple son ciel. (Journal 854).

The schema Gide lays out mirrors the bout of existential angst endured by Amédée, Anthime and Julius. When cracks appear in their respective convictions, each character suffers an episode of paralysing doubt. While only Amédée “laisse tout aller au néant” (854), the episodes serve to highlight the illusory nature of institutional belief systems.
Bertrand Fillaudeau refers to these systems as *gardes fous* erected against the nothingness (unlimitedness) lurking beneath the limitations established by institutions and conventions. He explains that in the adult world,

La recherche du plaisir et du jeu perd beaucoup de son importance ou même disparaît dans un monde [...] voué au principe de réalité [...] [C’est le respect de certaines conventions grâce auxquelles l’individu s’efface pour, en contrepartie, être protégé [...] (237)

Self-effacement is brought to the forefront in descriptions of Amédée. Upon learning that a Freemason has replaced Léon XIII on the Papal throne, Amédée’s entire conceptualisation of his existence begins to crumble:

La vie devenait décidément trop compliquée pour Amédée. Au surplus il se sentait les pieds gelés, le front brûlant, et les idées fort mal en place. Comment s'y reconnaître à présent, si l'abbé Cave lui-même n'était qu'un farceur?... Alors, le cardinal aussi, peut-être?... Mais ce chèque, pourtant! Il sortit le papier de sa poche, le palpa, rassura sa réalité. Non! non, ce n'était pas possible! Carola se trompait. Et puis, que savait-elle des intérêts mystérieux qui forçaient ce pauvre Cave à jouer double jeu? [...] A qui se fier, sinon au pape? et dès que cette pierre angulaire cédait, sur laquelle posait l'Église, rien ne méritait plus d'être vrai. (170-1)

Amédée highlights the opposing spheres of the real and of play, alluding to the playful mannerisms of Protos and his gang of *escrocs* and the reality in which he believes to exist. It is important to note that what corroborates this reality for Amédée is a cheque. The circulation of *bien*, especially money, serves as a counterweight to the play-mood in *Les Caves*. Likewise money is the excrement of spirituality just as “les caves” are opposed to heaven. Material gain, as Huizinga underscores, is excluded from the play aesthetic, serving in Caillois’ terms to contaminate the “innocence” of play (103). The existence of the cheque has little to do with the reality or irreality of the Pope and even less to do with the symbolic idea of a false Pope. If the Pope is the representative of God on Earth, the logical implication of a false Pope suggests that there is a false God in Heaven. As Anthime concludes at the end of the sotie: “Et qui me dira si Fleurissoire en arrivant au paradis n'y découvre pas tout de même que son bon Dieu non plus n'est pas le vrai?” (238). Amédée likewise concludes that if one cannot trust the existence of the Pope, “rien ne méritait plus d'être vrai.” The prospect of “cette pierre angulaire” (170) giving way beneath him, calls into doubt the entirety of Amédée’s sense of self.33 Upon meeting with Julius in Rome, he remarks to his brother-in-law his suspicion that it is not with the “true” Julius that he is speaking, but rather with “quelque contrefaçon” of himself (181).34 The *double game* in which Amédée is embroiled, unbeknownst

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33 It is *l’abîme* that is revealed to Michel in *L’Immoraliste*: “une trouble vapeur d’abîme qui déjà me montait à la tête et qu’inquiètement je humais” (139).

34 Amédée explains, “et que tout cela n’existât que dans mon cerveau. Mais que voulez-vous ? Quand le faux prend la place du vrai, le vrai doit se dissimuler. [...] Et devant cette moquerie que vous opposiez à ma peine, j’ai pu douter si c’était au vrai Julius que je parlais, ou plutôt à quelque contrefaçon de vous-même… […] ce matin j’ai pu douter de ma propre réalité, douter d’être moi-même ici à Rome, ou plutôt je rêvais simplement d’y être” (180-1).
to himself, reveals to what extent the character has become alienated from his authentic sense of self. Substituting the framework of the church for his true sense of self, Amédée substitutes his subject status for an object status, which in the realm of play relegates him to the level of a toy. Such tragic irony recalls the transgressive nature of comedy especially in the farcical work of the sotie.

The erroneous ethic of social convention is also termed a “morale provisoire” by the narrator. Used specifically with regards to Julius, the self-serving nature of such conventions are underscored by the narrator:

Julius de Baraggioul vivait sous le régime prolongé d’une morale provisoire cette même morale à laquelle se soumettait Descartes en attendant d’avoir bien établi les règles d’après lesquelles vivre et dépenser désormais. Mais ni le tempérament de Julius ne parlait avec une telle intransigeance ni sa pensée avec une telle autorité qu’il eût jusqu’à présent beaucoup géné pour se régler aux convenances. Il n’exigeait tout compte fait que du confort dont ses succès d’homme de lettres faisaient partie. Au décri de son dernier livre pour la première fois il ressentit de la piqûre. (74)

It is with this “piqûre” that Julius, like Amédée, begins to doubt. This time we see the concept of authenticity explicitly presented as the source of this anguish:

Une interrogation affreuse pour la première fois de sa vie, se soulevait en lui – en lui qui n’avait jamais rencontré jusqu’alors qu’approbation et sourires – un doute sur la sincérité de ces sourires sur la valeur de cette approbation sur la valeur de ses ouvrages sur la réalité de ses pensées, sur l’authenticité de sa vie. (47)

As Caillois reminds us, the contamination of the play domain with reality elicits a feeling of anguish. Julius here undergoes this “interrogation affreuse” once faced with the true nature of his belief system. As he has never had to think for himself, having only obeyed the rules of the social game played out in the real world, Julius’ thoughts, his very sense of self, are brought into question. It is doubtless this inability to think for himself that explains Julius’ temporary adoption of Lafcadio’s sensualist doctrine in the latter half of the novel.

After meeting Lafcadio, Julius abandons the traditional novel form of L’Air des Cimes, opting for a more modern novel, in keeping with his half-brother’s sensualist doctrine. The narrator suggests early on in the sotie that Julius’ former style inhibited any free creative expression; he implies the crucial distinction between the inauthentic Balzacian novel and the modern, authentic novel as written by Gide and his contemporaries:
La distinction foncière de sa nature et cette sorte d’élégance morale qui respirait dans ses moindres écrits avaient toujours empêché ses désirs sur la pente où sa curiosité de romancier leur eût sans doute lâché bride. (20-1)

The distinction is further solidified by Lafcadio. As the textual representative of the free authentic self, Lafcadio, in his remarks, reveals the difference proposed by Gide between the traditional bourgeois novel and the modern anti-novel. Lafcadio rejects the “ragoût de logique” that characterises Julius’ novels (90); taking this advice to heart, Julius rejects the erroneous ethic and aesthetic on which L’Air des Cimes is based and subsequently adopts the new ethic of “inconséquence” (90) proposed here by Lafcadio. His new novel, never named, seems to follow a plot very similar to that of Les Caves du Vatican, involving a gratuitous crime and a protagonist based on Lafcadio’s character. It is during his temporary conversion that Julius utters the lines: “Nous vivons contrefaits, plutôt que de ne pas ressembler au portrait que nous avons tracé de nous d’abord : c’est absurde ; ce faisant, nous risquons de fausser le meilleur” (204). The “meilleur” here signifies the authentic self, which for Gide is the best in all of us.

The same idea is reiterated by Protos, while disguised as the law professor Defouqueblize:

Ah ! Monsieur, reprit l’autre aussitôt, tout ce qu’on ferait dans cette vie, si seulement on pouvait être bien certain que cela ne tire pas à conséquence, comme vous dites si justement ! Si seulement on était assuré que cela n’engage à rien... Tenez ; rien que ça, que je vous dis là, maintenant, et qui n’est pourtant qu’une pensée bien naturelle, croyez-vous que je l’oserais exprimer sans plus de détours, si seulement nous étions à Bordeaux ? Je dis Bordeaux, parce que c’est Bordeaux que j’habite. J’y suis connu, respecté ; bien que pas marié, j’y mène une petite vie tranquille, j’y exerce une profession considérée : professeur à la faculté de droit ; oui : criminologie comparée, une chaire nouvelle... Vous comprenez que, là, je n’ai pas la permission, ce qui s’appelle : la permission de m’enivrer, fût-ce un jour par hasard. Ma vie doit être respectable. Songez donc : un de mes élèves me rencontrerai saoul dans la rue !... Respectable ; et sans que ça ait l’air contraint ; c’est là le hic ; il ne faut pas donner à penser : Monsieur Defouqueblize (c’est mon nom) fait rudement bien de se retenir !... Il faut non seulement ne rien faire d’insolite, mais encore persuader autrui qu’on ne ferait rien d’insolite, même avec toute licence ; qu’on a rien d’insolite en soi, qui demanderait à sortir. Reste-t-il encore un peu de vin ? Quelques gouttes seulement, mon cher complice, quelques gouttes... Une pareille occasion ne se retrouve pas deux fois dans la vie. Demain, à Rome, à ce congrès qui nous rassemble, je retrouverai quantité de collègues, graves, apprivoisés, retenus, aussi compassés que je le redeviendrai moi-même dès que j’aurais recouvré ma livrée. Des gens de la société, comme vous ou moi, se doivent de vivre contrefaits. (224-5)

Protos disguises himself almost exclusively as different men in positions of authority. The subtle transgression constitutes much of Protos’ game of mimicry that serves the double function of subverting the normative order of the juridico-discursive model of power. The drive to transgress those norms prescribed by the societal ethic is clearly inscribed in Protos’ play. This ethic of transgression shares the same ludic aesthetic as exhibited by the play-mood. This same aesthetisation of an ethical imperative is shared by Lafcadio and Michel in L’Immoraliste. The two characters believe that the aesthetic nature of
pursuits renders their consequences benign, much as it would in the play sphere. Free from the consequences of their acts, these characters seek to express their authentic selves, uninhibited by the constraints of societal regulations. Professor Defouqueblize alludes to this in the above quote, outlining characteristics of the erroneous ethic that force us to live “contrefaits.” Words such as permission, respect, constraint, licence, apprivoisés, retenus, compassé all indicate the restrictive nature of the discourse on control. The conclusion that Protos draws is crucial: that such a “poetics of control” counterfeits one's true self (Schehr, *Shock* 6).

**Protos and the swindle: play, material profit, and impasse**

In the Gidian universe, the game that has transgressed the boundaries of play and entered into the space of the real becomes the forbidden game (Steel 560). If the rules of the game impinge upon the rules of the socio-ethic, the play act becomes a criminal act. Owing to this dual nature of play, in Gide’s works the theme also seems to suggest a certain cruelty, which supposes that a “quidam” will appear, unwittingly designated as a toy or a tool to the individual playing the game. Cazentre notes that it is in this way that the duped (the victim) is “réduit à la nature d’un simple objet” (173). This negates the quality of play that Huizinga outlines, whereby all play is entered into by one’s own volition.

As previously mentioned, Protos takes pleasure in the ability to seamlessly transition between the play sphere and the space of the “real.” The costumes that permit him to do so allow the character to play at different personas, transgressing taboos and norms to further his criminal exploits. Protos can play at different social identities, particularly those representing positions of authority. Assuming their identity, he attempts to subvert the code of the real world. In addition to the professor of law Defouqueblize,

Protos dresses up as “le faux chanoine”, “le faux prêtre” and “l’abbé Cave”—all with the express purpose of swindling rich Catholics out of their money.

While Protos certainly exhibits traits characteristic of the play aesthetic, his discourse and behaviour are very much informed by the juridico-discursive model of power—namely that of the capitalist system. Protos’ play-spirit thus straddles both spheres, putting him directly in the non-space of transgression—that of crime. The relation between capitalism and faith suggests that religion is nothing more than a framework for one’s spiritual deposits, just as capitalism provides an economic framework for the circulation of money in society. They are thus part of that external, false structure that serves to undermine the cultivation of the authentic self.

Protos’ approach to his play-crime hybrid is strictly regulated, suggesting that it is less a question of play than it is of a game (which obeys a strict order). The narrator suggests this distinction when he explains that among the *Mille Pattes* “régnaient une entente et une discipline merveilleuses” (141). Protos elaborates upon this order by listing the “axioms” of his ludic game/crime: “Nos copains tenaient
pour admis ces axiomes: 1° Les subtils se reconnaissent entre eux. 2° Les crustacés ne reconnaissent pas les subtils.” At these rules, Lafcadio smiles, remembering that Protos is “de ces natures qui se prétent à tous les jeux” (228).

Perhaps the most crucial piece of advice Protos passes on to his protégé occurs when the swindler explains to Lafcadio the problem of trying to transpose the laws of play with the laws of society:

Ainsi, de ces cadres sociaux qui nous enserrent, un adolescent a voulu s'échapper […]. Mais ce qui m'étonne, moi, c'est que, intelligent comme vous êtes, vous ayez cru, Cadio, qu'on pouvait si simplement que ça sortir d'une société, et sans tomber du même coup dans une autre; ou qu'une société pouvait se passer de lois. "Lawless", vous vous souvenez; nous avions lu cela quelque part: ‘Two hawks in the air, two fishes swimming in the sea not more lawless than we...’ Que c'est beau la littérature! Lafcadio! mon ami, apprenez la loi des subtils. (230)

Quoting Walt Whitman’s “From Pent-up Aching Rivers,” Protos emphasises that there are limits to one’s freedom. The idea of limits is one that Lafcadio only recognises upon transgressing that fine line between game and crime when he murders Fleurissoire. Having confused freedom and authenticity, Lafcadio believes that in simply transgressing those limits laid out by the Law, he can assert his freedom and in so doing affirm his authentic self. But as soon as one leaves the sphere of play and confronts the pre-existing system of ethics put in place by the juridico-discursive model of power, the play model breaks down.

Protos likewise seems to overlook his own fatal error vis-à-vis his transgressive ethic. On the one hand he wishes to differentiate himself from the system by actively going against those norms promulgated by the system; but, on the other hand, he also actively inscribes himself in the system: “Où la police échoue, nous réussissons quelquefois […]. Je suis un peu la police mon garçon. J’ai l’oeil. J’aide au bon ordre. Je n’agis pas. Je fais agir” (231). This double axis is replicated in the Mille Pattes’ swindle. In engaging in the monetary exchange regulated by the capitalist economic system, Protos cannot hope to maintain the purely ludic approach of the play sphere. In addition to treating his victims as toys or objects, he also violates another tenet of play: that one should not gain any “material profit” from the endeavor.

The murder: playing at crime

The ludism of the sotie functions as a subversive tool of the realist code and of the moral order that it translates. The subversion culminates in the gratuitous crime committed by Lafcadio. Cazentre points out that this particular crime harbours characteristics of both play and game, explaining “[le crime gratuit] est à la fois play, divertissement inventé pour meubler le temps désœuvré, tromper l’ennui d’un long voyage en train, et game, geste soumis à une règle arbitraire, à une soumission délibérée au hasard,
donc sans motivation antérieure ou prospective […]” (170-1). The murder scene in the novel clearly illustrates that “quasi insensible” transition between play and crime that Gide mentions in his correspondence with Schlumberger (389). The poetics of transgression traces the same ethic of transgression that characterises the game/crime hybrid of both the swindle and Fleurissoire’s murder. Lafcadio’s gratuitous crime carries many of the key characteristics of play developed during his ludic conditioning as a child.

Lafcadio’s victim, Amédée, is representative of the counterfeiting ethic of bourgeois convention. The fact that he falls victim to the representative of the sensualist Übermensch doctrine suggests that the crustacés are no competition for those who defy the mould of conventional, counterfeited thinking. Sitting in a second-class train carriage on the way to Naples, Lafcadio resolves to make a game out of taking Fleurissoire’s life. In the following excerpt, the separate space is clearly designated by the reference to the lit up “compartiment[s],” of which only the one with Lafcadio and Amédée is occupied (“les autres carrés étaient vides” (194)). The second paragraph makes the reader privy to Lafcadio’s thoughts as he plans the murder that takes place seconds afterwards:

Le train longeait alors un talus, qu’on voyait à travers la vitre, éclairé par cette lumière de chaque compartiment projetée ; cela formait une suite de carrés clairs qui dansaient le long de la voie et se déformaient tour à tour selon chaque accident du terrain. On apercevait au milieu de l’un d’eux, danser l’ombre falote de Fleurissoire ; les autres carrés étaient vides.

- Qui le verrait ? pensait Lafcadio. Là, tout près de ma main, sous ma main, cette double fermeture, que je peux faire jouer aisément ; cette porte qui, cédant tout à coup, le laisserait crouler en avant ; une petite poussée suffirait ; il tomberait dans la nuit comme une masse ; même on n’entendrait pas un cri... Et demain, en route pour les îles !... Qui le saurait ? […] Là, sous la main, cette double fermeture — tandis qu’il est distrait et regarde au loin devant lui — joue, ma foi ! plus aisément encore qu’on eût cru. Si je puis compter jusqu’à douze, sans me presser, avant de voir dans la campagne quelque feu, le tapir est sauvé. Je commence : Une ; deux ; trois ; quatre ; (lentement ! lentement) cinq ; six ; sept ; huit ; neuf... Dix, un feu...

Fleurissoire ne poussa pas un cri. Sous la poussée de Lafcadio et en face du gouffre brusquement ouvert devant lui […]. (194-5)

The act of pushing Fleurissoire into the “gouffre” below recalls Gide’s comment made in his Journal almost fifteen years later, “[il] laisse aller tout au néant sitôt qu’on dépeuple son ciel.” Indeed, this is quite literally the fate of Amédée. Having had his faith rattled by the supposed kidnapping off the Pope, Amédée falls into the nothingness below.

Lafcadio’s apparently ‘unmotivated’ crime has for at least partial motive the idea of transgression for transgression’s sake. The gratuity of the act betrays itself with Lafcadio’s comment: “Un crime immotivé: quel embarras pour la police!” (194). This comment also demonstrates the excitement underlying the prospect. The concept of committing a crime that goes against the norms and ethics
regulating the space of the real is a source of pleasure or amusement for the protagonist. It is this possibility of encountering an impasse that intrigues Lafcadio:

Ce n’est pas tant des événements que j’ai curiosité, que de moi-même. Tel se croit capable de tout, qui, devant que d’agir, recule... Qu’il y a loin, entre l’imagination et le fait !... Et pas plus le droit de reprendre son coup qu’aux échecs. Bah ! qui prévoirait tous les risques, le jeu perdrait tout intérêt !... (194)

The question of why Lafcadio chooses Amédée as his “victim” (or jouet as Goulet maintains) remains. In Fleurissoire, Lafcadio sees the symbol of a society that prevents him from attaining his true, authentic self. In killing the old man, Lafcadio hopes to assert his freedom:

Sans attention pour la valise de Lafcadio, Fleurissoire, occupé à son nouveau faux col, avait mis bas sa veste pour pouvoir le boutonner plus aisément; mais le madapolam empesé, dur comme du carton, résistait à tous ses efforts. -- Il n’a pas l’air heureux, reprenait à part soi Lafcadio. Il doit souffrir d’une fistule, ou de quelque affection cachée. L’aiderai-je! Il n’y parviendra pas tout seul...Si pourtant! le col enfin admit le bouton. (193-4)

The faux col is a recurring image in the sotie. As it is primarily les crustacés who wear this particular fashion item, the false collar represents the imposed shell of bourgeois convention. The narrator alludes to this idea of a hardened shell with the simile “le madapolam [est...] dur comme du carton” which in turn recalls Amédée’s work with religious statues: le Carton Romain Plastique. The sight of Fleurissoire appears to conjure up the differences that, Lafcadio believes, lead to inhibiting his authentic self.

Besides Lafcadio’s choice of victim, the murder bears another characteristic of the play-mood. Before committing his crime, Lafcadio begins to day dream (he terms it a “faux sommeil”) about an incident that took play during his childhood. The analeptic sequence returns Lafcadio to the child sphere and firmly engrains the play aesthetic in the run up to the crime. Interestingly, the memory that he recalls represents a game made to seem criminal:

Dans la salle à manger, de quel air il tourne la clef du buffet ! L’enfant sait bien que ce n’est là qu’un jeu, mais l’oncle y semble pris lui-même. Il renifle comme pour flairer où cela sent le meilleur ; s’empare d’une bouteille de tokay ; en verse deux petits verres où tremper des biscuits ;

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35 The use of “carré” anticipates the chess metaphor (“échecs”) used by Lafcadio, thereby further inscribing the episode into the play aesthetic.

36 In a footnote, the narrator explains: “Le Carton-Romain-Plastique, annonçait le catalogue, d’invention relativement récente, de fabrication spéciale, dont la maison Blafaphas Fleurissoire et Lévichon garde le secret, remplace fort avantageusement le carton-pierre, le papier-stuc et autres compositions analogues, dont l’usage n’a que trop bien établi toute la défectuosité. (Suivaient les descriptions des différents modèles.)” (114-5).
il invite à trinquer, un doigt sur les lèvres ; le cristal sonne imperceptiblement... La collation nocturne terminée, Wladi s’occupe à tout remettre en ordre, il va rincer avec Cadio les verres dans le baquet de l’office, les essuie, rebouche la bouteille, referme la boîte à biscuits, époussette méticuleusement les miettes, regarde une dernière fois le tout bien à sa place dans l’armoire... Ni vu, ni connu.

Wladi réaccompagne Cadio jusqu’à sa chambre et le quitte avec un profond salut. Cadio reprend son somme où il l’avait laissé, et se demandera le lendemain s’il n’a pas rêvé tout cela.

Drôle de jeu pour un enfant ! Qu’eût pensé de cela Julius ? (191-2)

The murder that ensues is a crime made to seem playful. Where the above incident is clearly a game invented by Wladi to amuse his mistress’ son, Amédée’s murder is a crime refracted through the play aesthetic. As Goulet notes, it is the mother figure in Gide’s works who represents the Law and the father figure who embodies play:

La mere, pour Gide, c’est l’incarnation de la Loi, la censure morale, une presence généralement contrariante et agaçante pour l’enfant; tandis que le père, c’est le compagnon de jeu révéré et aimé, qui manifeste à son égard une “extreme douceur” et une bienveillante bonté, celui qui l’introduit à la littérature ainsi qu’à l’observation des curiosités de la nature […] (“Regards” 127)

The pleasure Baldi and Lafcadio derive from the game is created by the danger of being caught by Wanda, Lafcadio’s mother. Fleurissoire’s murder functions according to the same logic. However, in the adult ‘real’ world, it is the police who function as safe guards of the law and moral censure. In committing his crime, Lafadio is forced to cross the limit into adulthood. Realising that his crime has been retouched and facing the prospect of having to turn himself in, Lafcadio finally encounters the limit he has sought throughout his life. Moreover, in committing a crime for the sole reason that it is considered a crime by a particular ethical system, Lafcadio only succeeds in giving legitimacy to a system from which he seeks to escape and as such cannot hope to liberate himself by simply reacting against the structure.

Protos likewise meets his limit after he is arrested for both Carola’s and Fleurissoire’s murder. Cazentre explains that while Lafcadio fell from one game, his own, into another game, that of Protos, the master crook himself has essentially ceased playing. Far from being a farceur or joueur, he has become a murderer. Unlike Lafcadio, Protos seeks material gain from his exploits, swindling rich Catholics out of their money and attempting to blackmail Lafcadio in order to conceal Fleurissoire’s murder. Protos, like

37 Following the murder, while Lafcadio is in the washroom, Protos enters the compartment. He picks up Carola’s cufflink from underneath the seat before disembarking at the next stop where he runs back to Amédée’s body and cuts out the labels from Lafcadio’s beaver-fur hat, thus preventing the police from being able to trace the crime to Lafcadio.
Lafcadio, therefore, only succeeds in legitimising the structure of the ethical system put in place and in so doing indirectly inscribes himself in the power structure regulated by society.  

Transgressing the bounds or limits established by the juridico-discursive model of power, results in the characters reaching a state of impasse, similar to that of Michel at the end of *L’Immoraliste*. By his transgressive acts, Lafcadio (and in many ways Protos) attempts to impose a counter discourse to affirm his freedom from the system; however, he fails to comprehend that authenticity cannot be affirmed by simply committing a crime. Unable to transcend the system from which he sought to escape, Lafcadio finds himself at a loss, no longer free and no closer to attaining that authentic expression of which he thought himself capable.

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Prior to murdering Amédée Fleurissoire, Lafcadio’s actions are play-orientated. Having grown up surrounded by “uncles” who cultivated a focus on the aesthetic dimensions of life, namely those having to do with play, Lafcadio fashions a personal ethic based on the pursuit of pleasure. It is precisely his lack of formal education growing up that instilled the play-spirit in Lafcadio. Indeed, what interests Lafcadio beyond all else is establishing where that limit, if any, lies. In the pages leading up to the murder of Fleurissoire, Lafcadio scoffs: “Qu’il y a loin entre l’imagination et le fait! […] Bah! Qui prévoirait tous les risques, le jeu perdrait tout intérêt!” (194). This recalls Michel’s question in *L’Immoraliste*: “Qu’est-ce que l’homme peut encore?” (158). It also addresses the problematic relation between play and crime and the notion of ethics as it pertains to both society and the individual. Whereas play constitutes the space of individuality and freedom wherein one may explore the possibilities of the self, society is regulated by an exterior collective ethic that negates the individual ethic that Lafcadio attempts to cultivate through play. Crime therefore represents the act of transgression, constituting the moment when the individual ethic predominates over compliance with the collective ethic of society.

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38 “[Protos] prétend jouer et gagner sur les deux tableaux, celui de l’ordre et celui de la transgression, celui de la loi et du crime; en ayant démasqué la nature ludique de l’ordre social, il croit maîtriser, et utiliser à son profit, la vraie règle du jeu. Or, dans ce fantasme de maîtrise absolue, il oublie la part d’*alea*. Là est son erreur essentielle: si les lois sociales sont aussi arbitraires que celles d’un jeu, nul ne peut prétendre les instrumentaliser à son profit. […] Protos, lui, avait un mobile; et la prevue matérielle qu’il conservait pour faire chanter Lafcadio se retourne contre lui” (Cazentre 174).

39 In Lafcadio’s descriptions of what education he did receive, it is clear that lessons in ethics, literature and history were lacking. Due to the ‘education’ provided by his *oncles*, Lafcadio succeeds in languages, arithmetic and physical training – all of which are juvenile pursuits.

40 Nevertheless, Lafcadio’s “puntas” system, which involves the young man thrusting a small knife into his thigh when others have in some way ‘bettered’ him, appears to be an attempt at setting limits – or more accurately, an attempt at punishing himself for letting others transgress *his individual limits*. 


This décentrement of mores and expectations is reflected in the structure of Les Caves du Vatican itself. A sotie and not a récit like L’Immoraliste, the ludic elements of the plot and the narrative structure are characterised by a carnivalesque reduction of the Romanesque universe (Cazentre 170). Indeed, the definition of a sotie supports this idea of apparent chaos permeating the text. In Rabelais and His World Bakhtin notes that along with the miracle and morality plays, the sotie, traditionally a play as well, shares many of the characteristics of the carnivalesque aesthetic (15). Early in the introduction, Bakhtin defines part of this aesthetic as “filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.” He continues:

We find here a characteristic logic […] of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. (11)

Bearing in mind that such characteristics are present in the Gidian sotie, it becomes evident to what extent the décentrement issued from Lafcadio and Protos’ transgressive ethic bears much in common with the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque – a world à l’envers. This notion, moreover, shares an array of qualities with the play-mood explored by Huizinga. Just as the carnivalesque seeks to legitimise the reversal of norms for a temporary period (during Carnival), play likewise establishes a set of norms free and quite separate from the “prevailing truths and authorities” found in the real world.

Goulet relates the gratuity of art to the concept of “art for art’s sake,” describing Les Caves as a discourse “qui vise au néant” (Étude 33). Given the impossibility of depicting this nothingness, however, this discourse can only indicate the way. It is a “voyage de rien” (33), taking the reader to the edge of spiritual vertigo as it mirrors the dismantlement of convention by the deconstruction of the novel itself. Rejecting the traditional closed form of the novel, which corresponds to the closed institutions of the family, the church and societal myths (20-1), Gide aims to open up the structure, revealing his text for the piece of art that is and as such necessitating the engagement of the reader to transcend the néant and reconstruct from there. Cazentre underscores that it is the playfulness innate in this endeavour that serves as an “instrument de subversion du code réaliste et de l’ordre moral qu’il traduit” (170).

What Gide emphasises, however, is that freedom to subvert the normal order can only play out successfully in the work of art. Lafcadio’s attempts fail precisely because he transgressed the laws and norms of society for the express purpose of countering the structure of power that he saw as restricting the expression of his authentic self. This is revealed by Lafcadio’s proclivity for confessing his life and crimes to the bourgeois figure of authority, Julius. Moreover, Lafcadio and Proto’s crimes infringe upon the freedom of others in society. The concept of responsibility is therefore core to the problem of reconciling ethics and authenticity. In both the domains of play and of society one must respect the freedom of others – if play, as Huizinga asserts, is “freedom” all players must be initiated of their own
volition. Likewise, in society, one must respect the rights of others: For this reason, Lafcadio’s actions result from a perverted narcissism that relies on the restriction of other’s freedom for the expansion of his own freedom. There are limits to freedom and the extent to which one may exercise it. Moreover, authenticity and freedom ought not to be confused as the same endeavour. Killing Amédée and swindling rich Catholics did nothing to help Lafcadio and Protos determine their true selves. To Protos’ credit, however, this criminal never makes any claims that his crimes assure his freedom. As he explains to Lafcadio: “‘Two hawks in the air, two fishes in the sea not more lawless than we.’ Que c’est beau la littérature!” (230).
Conclusion

At the beginning of this study I posed the question: how does Gide reconcile ethics and authenticity? I hypothesised that the way Gide explores this central concept in his works is through the metaphors of play and crime and a poetics of transgression. As Michel in *L’Immoraliste* and Lafcadio and Protos in *Les Caves du Vatican* transition between the domain of play and the real world, they confront what I termed a “non-space” of transgression, which in these works manifests as crime and ensuing impasse. This impasse is clearly engendered by three corresponding processes in the two works: the inscription of both texts in a confessional model; the transgression of the juridico-discursive model of power; and homosexual subtexts.

Gide told his friend Jean Schlumberger that if one day he were able to recount the “passage quasi insensible du jeu au crime” it would be his “plus beau livre” (*Correspondence* 389). In the quasi insensible transition between play and crime, the act of transgression constitutes the locus of pleasure. The notion of the poetics of transgression, as outlined by Gide in this remark, is replicated in the plot of both *L’Immoraliste* and *Les Caves du Vatican*. In transgressing the norms/laws of society, Michel and Lafcadio are certainly committing crimes; however, of particular interest is the fact that the protagonists’ criminal behavior bears unsettling similarities to their practiced ludic exploits. Not only do the two characters derive pleasure from the act of transgression, but their crimes are also marked by characteristics of play, as is suggested by the idea of *playing at crime*. In this way, the conflation of the two concepts makes it difficult to distinguish the limits designating where play ends and crime begins. What begins with the cultivation of a play aesthetic ultimately becomes an ethical imperative rivaling the system of laws, and thus the system of ethics, already imposed in the real world. As both Huizinga and Caillois posit, play cannot be sustained once it comes into contact with the rules of the real world. One’s sense of freedom and authentic self must undergo some sort of compromise in order to comply with the rigours of the collective system of ethics (as informed by the Judeo-Christian model of the Western world).

On the 22nd of June, 1914, the critic Henri Massis wrote in *L’Éclair* that the story of Lafcadio represents the sequel to *L’Immoraliste*, implying that the two protagonists are textual brothers, both possessed by the same desire to discover their limits (quoted in *Gidiana*). In this way, the two characters complement one another on a thematic level. Where Michel is concerned with his own internal limitations, Lafcadio extends his pursuit to the limitations imposed by the external world. Both characters confront internal and external limits when they commit crimes that infract on both the judicial and moral bounds of society.
The impasse in which they find themselves is inscribed in the very form of each protagonist’s discourse: the confession. In *L’Immoraliste*, the framed confessional form of the monologue relayed by the friend is crucial to the structure of the text since it immediately inscribes the story into Foucault’s juridico-discursive set of norms. The President of the Council and the panel of three friends who gather to hear Michel’s confession represent normative heterosexuality which, in turn, represents the mores of mainstream society. Likewise, the way in which Lafcadio chooses to relate his ludic apprenticeship at the hands of his uncles is of marked importance. He confesses, much like Michel, to an upstanding member and adherent of bourgeois conventions: Julius. This confession clearly illustrates the desire on the part of Lafcadio to assert a personal truth different from the norms dictated by the juridico-discursive model of power that Julius represents. Lafcadio duplicates this act later in the novel when he confesses once again to Julius, this time for the murder of Fleurissoire. At this point, Julius suggests that Lafcadio confess to the Church as only God can save his soul. In keeping with the farcical tone of the text, this confession-topos also serves the dual purpose of poking fun at a society which maintains the absurd notion that a singular and absolute truth exist, thereby rejecting the possibility for multiple and relative truths.

Michel Foucault noted that in the Western tradition the confession serves to identify a singular truth that does not come from the subject, but rather from the interlocutor, conventionally a priest who is representative of societal norms. Truth is produced by the confession; however, because it is produced by the other, it can never be personal and thus never authentic. In the West, man has become “une bête d’aveu” – constrained by a form of power that he does not recognise as such (Foucault 79-80).

Despite their attempts to free themselves from this yoke of discipline, in committing and later confessing their respective crimes, Michel and Lafcadio reveal to what extent they are entrenched in the juridico-discursive model of power. As Foucault emphasises, resistance is never external to power, but rather it is *in* power; therefore, one can never escape that system of power precisely because one is in it. He goes on to specify:

[Power relations] ne peuvent exister qu’en fonction d’une multiplicité de points de résistance: ceux-ci jouent, dans les relations de pouvoir, le rôle d’adversaire, de cible, d’appui, de saillie pour une prise. Ces points de résistance sont présents partout dans le réseau de pouvoir. (125-6)

Neither Lafcadio nor Michel acknowledges that the power of societal ethics requires such points of power to consolidate its mandate. Thus, in transgressing these points, the two characters only legitimise the power structure from which they sought to emancipate themselves. Reinforcing the system in this way indicates the underlying fallacy of their pursuit. Both Lafcadio and Michel conflate the notions of authenticity and freedom. They hope that the act of transgression not only will free them, but also will affirm their authentic selves, since they believe that this *être authentique* is and can only be the product of a counter-discourse.
In Gide’s view, the morally “criminal” status of homosexuality at the time demands this counter-discourse and the ethics of transgression to which Michel and Lafcadio ascribe. If the characters’ sexuality is deemed criminal or *counter* to the heteronormative discourse regulating the societal ethic, the inscription into the counter-criminal model of resistance constitutes a logical continuation of the protagonists’ pursuit of their free, authentic selves.

It is this attempt at reconciling the authentic and the ethical that results in a feeling of alienation for the characters and ultimately leads to their respective states of impasse: Michel, morally destitute, living with a prostitute and her brother, and Lafcadio without family or friends. The attempt to reconcile their authentic selves with the ethics of mainstream society also mirrors the “contamination” of the play-spirit described by Roger Caillois (103). Michel and Lafcadio try to make the cultivation of their authentic selves an ethical imperative. But such rules cannot co-exist alongside the rules of society without a disruption to one’s personal “game”: the pursuit of truthful self-expression. A compromise must be reached if this state of impasse is to be avoided. The ethics, rules, norms of society exist and, as Foucault said above, resistance is virtually futile as such a counter-discourse, or ethics of transgression, since it only serves to consolidate that power structure further. Gide is suggesting that it is only in problematising the givens of mainstream mores that a reconciliation or compromise can be achieved, the ideal forum for which is the literary work.

From the belief that a good trans-historical aesthetics can replace the rejected definition of what is “good” or “normal”, Gide is led to an ethical imperative – this mirrors the ethicisation of the play aesthetic explored in the preceding chapters. As mentioned above, the homoerotic undertones decentre the Gidian discourse from dominant “white”, “male”, “heterosexual”, “bourgeois” discourse: homosexuality is a “fulcrum” that moves textuality off its mark. In Gide’s works, homosexuality is used as a genuine core element in his artistic ethics of transgression in order to displace systems from their “comfortable niches” (Schehr, Shock 11).

The ethical necessity of the aesthetic endeavor requires a return to its aesthetic roots: as Gide noted in a journal entry years later, "le point de vue esthétique est le seul ou il faille se placer pour parler de mon oeuvre sainement" (652). The way in which Gide approaches writing suggests that literature is, for him, a game. This represents one of the most crucial aspects of the Gidian oeuvre – that literature is the only game that one can extend to the real world and, moreover, it is the only space in which the problem of reconciling ethics and authenticity can be played out satisfactorily. This game becomes one of hermeneutics or interpretation. The narrator in each work is playing a game. For him, the insight into the inherently ludic quality of literature and the act of writing about the insight itself, is also a game. It is a creative game that not only serves to produce playfulness by deconstructing norms and conventions in society but also serves to produce the game of art. The truth and freedom that Gide seeks to discover and define through *Les Caves* and *L’Immoraliste* are not the truth and freedom, or lack thereof, of Michel and
Lafcadio, but rather the truth and freedom of Gide himself as a literary creator and the truth and freedom of the reader as interpreter.

This ethical role of the aesthetic endeavour carries an element of responsibility. Gide not only seeks to revolutionise the role of the author; he also seeks to reshape the role of the reader. A desire to go beyond limits permeates both Les Caves du Vatican and L’Immoraliste. Where Julius fails to interpret Lafcadio’s journal entry: “Comprends-tu ce qu’il y a dans ces mots : PASSER OUTRE?” (56) and where Michel’s friends perhaps miss the importance of the narrator’s passing words "je dois me prouver à moi-même que je n’ai pas outrepassé mon droit” (180), Gide challenges the reader to recognise the significance of the expression “passer outre.” Given the context of the works and the ultimate failings of all the characters to doubt sufficiently the status quo and their particular reality, Gide asks the reader to transcend such limitations, the structures, the “shells” in which they are ensnared and which blind them. It is necessary to interpret the text within the text as one would the symbol of Michel’s rabbits or the Vatican cellars and project this doubt onto one’s external reality.

In his Journal, Gide specifies his desire to awaken “joie, courage, défiance et perspicacité” in his readers. It is not his goal to give them directions, as they should be able to find such qualities by or in themselves: “je me garde surtout de leur donner des directions, estimant qu'ils ne peuvent et ne doivent trouver celles-ci que par eux-mêmes (j’allais dire : qu'en eux-mêmes)” (785). Where the other characters fail to recognise the culture of falsehood in which they find themselves, the reality-cum-simulacra, readers must become subtils themselves, realising the abyss of pure existence and the necessity of transcending societal myths. With this end in mind, the structure of Les Caves and of L’Immoraliste is intentionally left open, there is no dénouement -- neither between chapters nor at the end of the novel. Les Caves ends with a question mark and L’Immoraliste with a set of ellipses, suggesting that only the reader can provide the dénouement.

There is no absolute truth in these works. There is a “truth” for Gide. It lies in the cultivation of the authentic experience by creating an individual system of ethics and avoiding the imposition of “essence” which is the negation of the self. It is “la prise sur le néant” and the necessity to transcend this nothingness from which a certain freedom is issued (Goulet, Étude 37). For Gide, the role of writing is to liberate oneself from the unknown, which brings us back to the title of Protos’ swindle: “la Croisade pour la délivrance du pape.” We must deliver ourselves from the erroneous ethic of absolute values that risks in turn falsifying le meilleur: the authentic self. At the end of the works, Lafcadio must choose either to turn himself in, and thus stay imprisoned within the novel, or escape into the dawn and thus perpetuate the possibilities, the openness of the novel and the self. Likewise Michel must either stay in Algeria with Ali, thereby escaping the bounds of the framed narrative that also constitute the frame of the confessional model in which Michel’s narrative is confined or return to a government position in France, thereby returning to his past ‘inauthentic’ life.
In Foucault’s view, an aesthetics of existence must favour the ethics of the individual which can only be fashioned by knowing one’s own personal conditions of existence. Like the Delphic oracle, one is urged to: “know thyself.” Just as literature is a hermeneutic game between author and reader, the pursuit of authenticity (to “know thyself), is also a game. Literature for Gide constitutes the expression of this underlying game of truth. As he wrote in the preface to L’Immoraliste: “À vrai dire, en art, il n’y a pas de problèmes – dont l’oeuvre d’art ne soit la suffisante solution” (11).
Bibliography


