

Guided by Gide: travelling to



Nobel laureate André Gide as a young man: detail from a portrait by Jacques-Émile Blanche.

The enigmatic French writer André Gide was the inspiration for Robert Dessaix's new travel memoir, **Gia Metherell** writes

A journalist once suggested Robert Dessaix would make the ideal travelling companion. Reading his new travel memoir it's easy to imagine why. He's certainly great company for the reader who likes an armchair passage to exotic destinations with a literary and intellectual guide of the first order.

In the distinctive discursive style that he has made his own, Dessaix repays the reader who accompanies him on the journey with a seamless blend of reminiscence, travel writing, biography and meditations on literary and personal preoccupations – all shaped into a coherent whole by an overarching fascination with the great French writer and intellectual André Gide.

Arabesques: A Tale of Double Lives is by turns anecdotal, profound, moving, challenging, funny, intellectually probing, informative – as readers have come to expect from this accomplished translator, broadcaster, essayist and novelist.

Robert Dessaix was a teenager working in a Sydney bookstore in his Christmas holidays when he first encountered Gide. Or more accurately the writings of Gide. Dusting the G's in the paperback section, he took from the shelf and began reading Gide's *If It Die*. For Dessaix, a suburban child of the 1950s, the autobiography proved "a pivotal moment".

In *Arabesques* the French writer is a constant companion, shadowing the book's author and, as Dessaix writes in his introduction, "giving shape to my own thoughts on religion, love, ageing and why we travel (he was passionate about the same places I keep going back to)".

Religion, love, ageing and why we travel – all grand themes in this book, which is a thing of beauty, not just for Dessaix's writing, but to look at: handsomely illustrated, well laid out and on fine stock.

Just as in his previous book, *Twilight of Love*, Dessaix used his travels as a springboard for a discussion of the life of Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, in *Arabesques* his thoughts on Gide are threaded through the account of his travels. Now in his mid-60s, the one-time ANU lecturer examines Gide's ideas about love, sexuality, marriage and religion, and reflects on his own life and the congruities and divergences in their experiences.

Dessaix says the English-speaking world has half-forgotten the "man who was once the incarnation of French thought and letters". Gide, who died in 1951 aged 81, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947. From a middle-class Parisian family, he was homosexual but married his cousin Madeleine Rondeaux – a marriage that lasted 43 years but remained unconsummated. In his 50s he fathered a daughter in a brief liaison with a younger woman, but was essentially attracted to adolescent males all his life; the reason he was drawn to North Africa.

Dessaix circles the Mediterranean – Algiers, France, Morocco, Tunisia, Portugal and Italy – in search of what he calls, variously, conversation, an escape from banality, to discover things about his relationship with the world, or, as he writes in *Arabesques*, "both to forget and to remember – the very same thing sometimes".

On the phone from Hobart, where he lives with his partner, the writer Peter Timms, he explains, "At home you are one or possibly two kinds of people but you know that there are other possibilities and you can really explore them away; the book is partly about the difference between home and away. That's why I use the Ogden Nash epigraph about 'Home is heaven and orgies are vile. But you need an orgy, once in a while.'"

He goes on to make a distinction between travel and holidaying. "I'm not talking about holidays in Bali, I'm not talking about vacations – I'm talking about *travel*. I think you travel to discover things about your relationship with the world, about how you think about the world and about really basically who you are if you are anyone at all, and to experiment with yourself, to try out selves that have to remain hidden at home for very good practical reasons."

And he's refreshingly non-prescriptive about sights that one might feel obliged to see. "I admire travellers who refuse to be stampeded into gazing at things . . . that won't *thicken* their experience of being alive," he writes in *Arabesques*. "Just because everyone else feels obliged to climb the Eiffel Tower or mill around gawking in St Peter's in Rome doesn't mean that we should."

The alternative to that sort of stampede is captured in a wonderful chapter titled "The Small Epiphany in Oporto", where Dessaix writes that "the

'Up here silence and a rose window glowing like the eye of heaven itself; down there bustling squalor, cats fighting, roosters crowing, women screeching, fish frying'

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cathedral in Oporto is sublimely situated on a crag above the old red-roofed quarter of the city, which topples and slides down the hill in a maze of crooked, scabby lanes to the river. Up here flying buttresses and soaring towers with cupolas; down there tumult, crumbling tenements and then water; up here silence and a rose window glowing like the eye of heaven itself; down there bustling squalor, cats fighting, roosters crowing, women screeching, fish frying – and then the water.”

Dessaix laughs when he’s reminded that a few years ago he had said his readers generally were women of a certain age, whom he described as the country’s unsung intellectual heartland. When it’s put to him whether in a book which focuses on the questions of sexuality, especially in relation to Gide and homosexuality, there was slight risk of that readership being turned off, he asks, “Pursing its lips?” Well, no, but not necessarily finding the issue all that engaging.

“Well, my aim wasn’t really to talk about homosexuality as such,” he says. “It was about how people adjust their desires to the world and in Gide I found a man about whose desires it is quite difficult nowadays to even talk and so I thought I would like to try.

“I don’t think the point is whether it’s a same-sex attraction or an attraction to the opposite sex; the point I’m trying to make is that in the present climate we have become hysterical about the question about the age of the younger partner and I don’t think that the age is the problem. What is important is that there be no abuse, no exploitation, no cruelty – either mental or physical – and that you take into account the effect of your liaison on others, not just the young person.

“I think what’s going on at the moment is that we are endowing young people with an innocence that we ourselves have lost and we are becoming hysterical at the thought that even they may not be innocent . . . I live just down the street from a boys’ school and they walk past talking very loudly, I can hear them almost in the back yard; one thing they are not, is innocent. I think it’s a fetish that we have foisted on the young and I think it’s causing distress both to them and to us and I think that it is unrealistic.

“I’m sympathetic to Gide in a way that his critics are not. I say this as someone who actually, for whatever reason, genetic reasons or the way I was brought up, has no sexual interest in anyone really much younger than about 45, and so I feel that I can say this perhaps more safely than some.”

What interests Dessaix more than discussing homosexuality is Gide’s marriage. “It interests me because I was



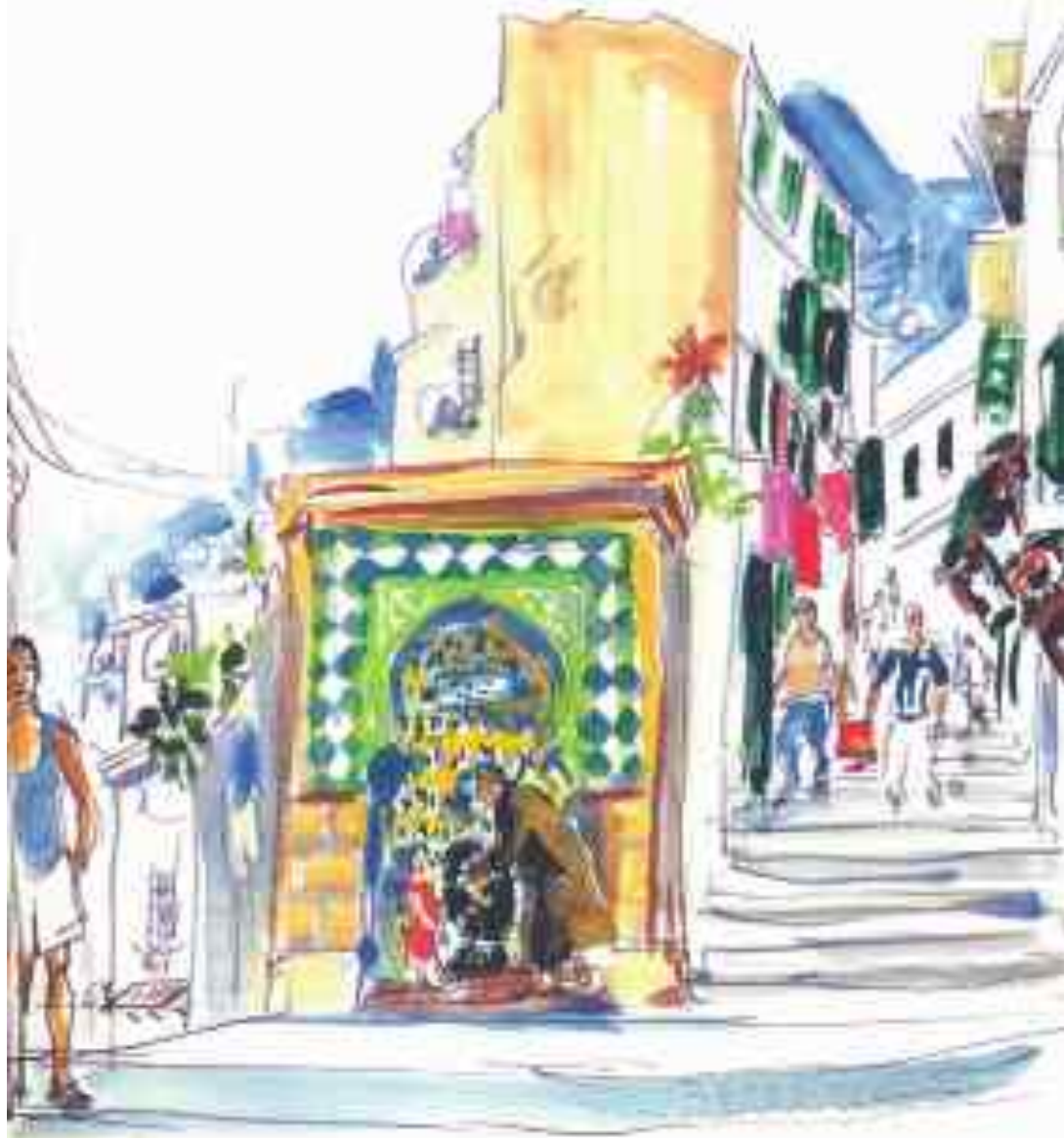
Robert Dessaix: detail from a 1998 portrait by Robert Hannaford.

also married for quite a long time, in Canberra as a matter of fact, and I’m interested to know how men like Gide or like me cope with this situation.

“Nowadays it’s much easier to say, ‘I will not get married’, but in his day, and even when I was young, it was much more difficult actually. There wasn’t very much option because although you could *not* get married, if you didn’t get married it was very difficult for you to have a loving relationship with someone of your own sex that was publicly acknowledged.”

Dessaix’s reacquaintance with Gide began a couple of years ago when he stopped on a back road in Normandy and found himself, quite by chance, at the gate of La Roque-Baignard, the chateau where Gide had lived as a boy. This was where Gide “became aware of leading a double life as his childhood fell apart”. He would later assert in his books that people should find their own true nature by experimenting with who they were, even in the face of disapproval; a powerful message for the young Dessaix when he first read Gide. “At fourteen, just as you’re learning to conceal your own burgeoning double life, it’s thrilling to read about a young man ten years further down the track taking the first step towards laying his bare. Even at fourteen I knew a pivotal moment when I came across one,” he recalls in *Arabesques*.

Even though Dessaix’s life was far removed from that of the son of a Roman law professor and a mother with a castle in Normandy, there were parallels: “Swimming alone upstream, as we both knew we would be all our lives, we adopted surprisingly similar manoeuvres



Rue Sidi Driss Hamidouche in the casbah in Algiers, a painting by Elsie Herberstein.

to save ourselves from drowning . . .”: the travel in their 20s to North Africa; marriage after the death of their mothers; a passion for Russia, literature and travel, among them.

Another point of identification with Gide is Dessaix’s interest in what he calls the Protestant mentality. It was in the cathedral in Oporto that “for the first time in my life I thought to myself: I’m a Protestant. With the church bells angrily calling after me, I strode out of the cathedral and down into the Catholic morass of Oporto towards the river,” he writes in *Arabesques*.

“I’m very interested in the Protestant mentality and this always interested me about Gide,” he explains. “It has its root in religion but it’s a certain way of being human and it counts for so many things in your life, for your loves and your affinities. I think we live differently . . . and I just feel the Catholics have had all

the storytelling in our literature; it seems to lead to narrative in a way that Protestantism doesn’t. I wanted to explore it a bit and I thought, well, Gide’s a good place to start because he was under great pressure to convert . . . but he resisted and said, “I refuse to be gassed.” Gassed! And this took quite a lot of courage.”

What does it mean to be a Protestant? “You cannot bargain your way out of what you have done or who you are; you can only see the truth; that’s all you can do, and so you must be content with a sufficiency, content with what you are given . . . that is really the way I was brought up, I suppose, that we are grateful for what we have.”

Arabesques: A Tale of Double Lives. Picador. 310pp. \$49.99.

Join Robert Dessaix for a *Canberra Times* literary lunch – see Page 15.

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