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BOOK REVIEW: THE JOURNALS OF ANDRÉ GIDE by Alan Ross

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André Gide is one of the few public figures in the world of letters who has a reputation outside his own country - he is that rarest of beings, a creative artist who, without making concessions to his audience, establishes his personality with the same impact as he establishes his ideas. Art has become rather esoteric and solemn in our time - serious writing is weighed down with social obligations, is increasingly responsible and decreasingly entertaining. So despite the proletarian awareness of European art in the decade preceding the war, the gulf between the artist who is concerned with the creation of a masterpiece and the general intelligent public has widened. Society acknowledges only what keeps pace with it - the serious artist moves in sudden leaps; sometimes he spurts out of sight and years elapse before his public catches up with him. Sometimes, as now, he is bogged down by the weight of the social machine and overtaken by the rapidity of events. Rarely can he work in a vacuum and yet remain a public figure. He becomes either like James Joyce, a lonely fighter for his private vision; or like Thomas Mann, sagacious with a great public, but no private, voice. André Gide is the only living writer who is of his time greater than his works, and who exists towards his public only in the relation of an artist.

It is this integrity and refusal to be led away from the problems of the creative process which make Gide remarkable. He is what is called a 'great' man, yet his concern is not for the grandiloquent but for the essential; never for the public but for the private. E.M. Forster once said 'If I had the alternative of betraying my country or my friend, I hope I should

have the guts to betray my country'. In Gide's case, if the alternative was between betraying his public self and his private conflict with art, he would betray his public image - which makes it all the more remarkable that he is a widely acclaimed figure.

~~xxxx~~ His Journals make some of the reasons for this more obvious: for he is at once personally frank, disarmingly unsewn, and yet deadly serious. He never had any economic problems, so he could give his whole energy to the craft of writing. Yet, as he himself admits, an arresting person in the flesh, he had to create a world of the imagination sufficiently elastic to offer scope for the analysis of all possible emotions. ~~xx~~ Life, however, was to give him what he had thought only to find in literature - an opportunity to apply moral concepts to pleasurable actions. For Gide is an ascetic who came to sensuality, a puritan who lost his self-awareness in the pursuit of beauty, a deeply religious man who became an agnostic. His contradictory convictions - or rather lack of convictions - were essential to his struggle with the nature of art in its relation to truth. The Gide of novels is ruthless in his self-analysis; in his Journals, written as a discipline and an exercise, you see again this ruthlessness applied to his own private world of self-dissatisfaction; for the Journals are the records of an artist talking to himself, giving himself rules of conduct, creating unfulfillable projects, discarding philosophies like skins. They are in other ~~xxx~~ words the flexible arguments which the finished work of art completes and makes inflexible. Gide is first and foremost a flexible artist; a man whose confidence in the inviolability of the work of art is sufficient to allow him to change his own position completely under the influence of outside influences; so it is not surprising that the Journals are his greatest work, greatest because they show not the finished project but the flash that illuminated it and made it a problem. For, as with nearly all great artists, it is the nature of the

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conception, the skeleton, not the clothed body of ideas, that is interesting to Gide. The impulse, the generating force, the contradictory implications that the mere existence of a piece of prose sets up, these are of first importance to the writer who is more interested in the act of writing than the finished work, who is in fact more interested in life than death. It is the life-force held on a tight rein that is the vice to Gide, that prevents him ever from becoming either magnanimous or pompous; for through the technical equipment that Gide possesses in full measure, though he uses it only on his own terms, there are bursts of interspersed comment, sudden feelings of futility, which makes one realise that it is a man writing, not a writer, a human being who is above the range of self-deception, who has nothing to lose by giving the game of art away, because in art he has nothing to hide. Whether the cards are up or down, he holds a good enough hand.

The Journals prepare the way as for the novels, they build up their heroes through the tempering of ideas by experience. They are more moving because more informal, more expressive because more incomplete. That is a Gide paradox, but it serves to show that only by a refusal to dot the 'i's' can Gide really illuminate, in its true form, the actual moral conflict of his own life. In novels the conflict is adapted, the characterisation composite, the pattern completed. But life does not allow for the prepared ending - the individual has to bear the loose ends of his despair trailing round him like a constant companion; there is no cutting them off. So although the finished work of art may tidy up a phase of feeling, may even solve a technical problem, by the time it is written, life has created a fresh set of problems more absorbing, more urgent than the problems of art. From these uncomfortable facts, the facts that emerge too late and destroy a thesis that has already been set out for an audience's inspection, Gide never flinches. The most self-aware artist of his time, he also looks most honestly in his own mirror and if he does not like what he sees, he exchanges the paper smile of the crowd

for the stimulation of his own self-knowledge.

These are all, in a sense, generalisations - yet it is the generalisation about art that most expresses Wilde's own preoccupations. For although he is most fully, most humanly, the man of vulnerability, it is with art that he is concerned. For him art is life, exacting and exciting as only something highly disciplined can be - and it is the creative process that sets off that kind of inner excitement which only takes place when life is about to flow into new forms. In the novels one sees the new forms as 'faits accomplis', in the Journals one feels the excitement.

This excitement, at once intellectual, lyrical, sensuous, is the most fascinating quality of these Journals. It is the key to their importance and to their universality. But it is by no means all; for Wilde is a chronicler not only of his own self-research, of his research into the nature of art, but of the dominant characteristics of his age. Like the decor of a ballet, the scenery of his Journals shows off the milieux. Eventually his influence upon the French literary world of the XIXth Century grew analogous to that of a choreographer towards his dancers. That may be putting Wilderism too high, putting into the position of high priest a man who shuns dogmatism, but it is an analogy that shows the correct relationship. For Wildism became an atmosphere, an aura of moral appraisal allied to exultant, individualist concepts; it was like a benevolent but unseen symbol drawing together the strands of contemporary French writing. So in these pages the embryonic figures of men who were to become great names - Mallarmé, Valéry, Claudel, Wilde, Leon Blum, d'Annunzio - live in brief descriptions, pinned on to memory like dancers in arrested flight, with all the nostalgic glamour of a vanished age. These literary conversation pieces, unaffectedly revealing, are the spur for some of Wilde's most uncurbed comments. He reorganises himself in face of his own reactions, he learns what he thinks about life and art through growing conscious of his variance with the concepts of other people. Then gradually

His own attitude crystallises, an attitude towards life at once unrestrained and shy, inspired and calculating. For Gide is a poseur whose poses are his real self, they are his child-nature and his ultra-sophistication.

In these random notes, written sometimes from day to day, sometimes with enormous gaps in between, the range of Gide's tastes is revealed. In them he says with Rimbaud 'Je suis un autre'. For were he only a writer with an inflexible goal, with less appearance of choice, the moral dilemma, the act of decision would have been concluded separately in literature and personal emotion. But in Gide the two spheres overflowed into each other, with a hundred other temptations besides, until it seemed there were too many alternatives for him ever to choose. He writes early on, when he was only twenty four: 'Oh! If only my thought could simplify itself I sit here sometimes all morning, unable to do anything, tormented by the desire to do everything. The yearning to educate myself is the greatest temptation for me. I have twenty books before me, everyone begun. You will laugh when I tell you that I cannot read a single one of them simply because I want so much to read them all. I read three lines and think of everything else (in an hour I shall have to go and see Paul and Pierre; good Lord, I almost forgot Etienne; and he might have been hurt; on the way I ought to buy some cuffs; and Laure is expecting me to take her some flowers) Oh! my time, my time will be frittered away like this until death. If only I could live on some foreign shore where, the moment I stepped outdoors I could delight in the sun, the wind and the infinite horizon of the sea!

You've got in that short paragraph the diversity of desires that Gide the writer felt compelled to synthesise. That elemental all-ness, that gifted impulsiveness are the material of his artistic conscience. Impelled by the necessity of the creative impulse almost as if by a moral agent, he forces himself from life into literature - but always, through the dual and complicated threads of his novels, in which to some degree

he could loosen the tension of his personal conflicts. It is the idea of the sensuous fascination of Life, not politics, not art, not family, not romantic sensuality, but all these, that comes most forcefully through.

On one of the detached pages Gide writes 'I reread Pascal's admirable passage "The example of Alexander's chastity has not made so many continent men as that of his drunkenness has made intemperate ones". This is the thought that has inspired the frequent attempts to hide the feet of great men. But why should I care on what level their feet rest? Their feet are beautiful. And, indeed, that is not even the question; head and feet belong to the same man; there are secret relationships between them. Who can say whether I may not lose everything by trying to abstract the greatness alone - that is to say, by considering only the emotion or the thought and not the organ that produced them, the fruit without the tree that bore it

Moreover, this metaphor is deceptive. There are so many ways of being great; there are so many ways of being beautiful. There are so many ways of deserving men's interest'.

There are so many ways - there perhaps is the secret of Gide's enchantment, of his freshness, of his perpetually aware and open mind. For Gide, the famous European and writer of the closing chapters of the diary, never loses sight of the young unknown man of twenty who began them.

It is not possible to give the flavour of these Journals, because they cover so various a range of subjects and are written in so many manners - pieces of lyrical description, epigrams, philosophical reflections, literary and personal gossip all follow one another with the seeming inconsequentiality of cocktail party conversation - but instead of platitudes there are brilliant, many-sided observations coaxed out of hard thought and uttered with a velvety persuasiveness. The 'Kick' comes later, for in so far as it is possible, Gide tells all, and observes without any restraint; which in a Journal is entirely as it should be.