

"Time and Tide"

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MEN AND BOOKS

The Last Volume

By ENID STARKIE

MR JUSTIN O'BRIEN has now completed his immense labour of translating in their entirety the Journals* of Gide. It is a task before which a more timid soul would have blanched and Mr O'Brien must be congratulated on his perseverance and his masterly editing.

In the previous volume we left Gide after his return from equatorial Africa when he was turning away from self-absorption to humanity. In this volume we find him searching for a new religion which will take the place of Christianity, which no longer satisfies him, and of the religion of individualism, which proved as disillusioning in its exaggeration and lack of spirituality. For a time he was to find satisfaction in Communism. He wrote then to Charles du Bos:

I would like not only to attain happiness for myself but to make others reach it as well. I consider that it consists in the surrender of self. That is why to feel happy is nothing; happiness consists in making others happy.

What he admired most in Russia, he said, was the abolition of the abominable formula, "Thou shalt earn my bread by the sweat of thy brow." There emerges now a new shade in Gide's conception of personal liberty, the belief that the happiness of man does not consist in mere liberty but in the acceptance of a duty. This is a marked difference from the individualistic and personal sense of liberty expressed thirty years before in *Les Nourritures Terrestres*. In his play, *Oedipus*, of 1931, he shows in the hero the final and utter destruction which comes to the individual when he accepts nothing greater than himself and values personal liberty above all else. After recognizing this bankruptcy Gide is forced to the realization that man without God is doomed to defeat and despair, unless he substitutes some other idea for God. Oedipus finally rejects God for man and Gide turns towards Communism. He thought that he would find there, with its ideal of service, its discipline, the completest expression of the individual and the sanest and total form of liberty. Hitherto he had had the reputation of someone who would not commit himself to any creed, who would not choose. Now he committed himself uncompromisingly to the Communist solution for the ills of the world and it was a religious conversion. His was the faith of a mystic. In his *Journal* he wrote:

My conversion is like a faith. My whole being is bent towards one single goal, all my thoughts—even involuntary—lead me back to it. And if my life were necessary to assure the success of the Soviet Union I would gladly give it immediately. I write this with a cool and calm head, in full sincerity, through great need to leave at least this testimony

in case death intervenes before I have time to express it better.

And again he wrote:

I would like to cry aloud my sympathy for the Soviet Union and hope that my cry might be heard and have effect. I would like to live long enough to witness the triumph of that tremendous effort which I hope from the bottom of my heart will succeed and for which I would like to work.

He was now ready to sacrifice the sanctity of his individuality, but he did not think that this should be necessary. He saw no reason why there should be contradiction between individualism and Communism. "I believe firmly that one can be—indeed must be—at the same time a Communist and an individualist, but this does not prevent one from condemning privileges". He was now ashamed of being a man of independent means, who had never been obliged to work with his hands and to earn his living. In 1936 he went on a visit to the Soviet Union. We have nothing of that visit actually in the *Journal* for, according to a frequent practice, he extracted that portion and published it separately in two little books called *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* and *Retouches à mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* It was not through Marx but through the Gospels that he had reached Communism and he found little of that spirit in Russia itself. He saw everywhere the gulf which separates the privileged and the underprivileged, the same enslavement of the mind against which he had preached elsewhere. He went to Russia in June 1936 full of high hopes which were soon disappointed and he said on his return:

There was something tragic in my Soviet adventure. I had gone there a convinced and enthusiastic follower in order to admire a new world and they offered me, to tempt me and to win me, all the prerogatives and privileges which I abhorred in the old world.

The following year, when he visited Fascist Italy, he could discover no difference between what he saw in huge letters on the walls and what he had noticed in Russia. There were the same slogans—"Believe, obey and fight"—identical in both creeds. These Italian inscriptions, he said, would have been equally in place on the walls of Moscow.

The following year his wife died and he wrote nothing in his *Journal* for some months, since it could have reflected nothing but disorder, distress and despair. "Since she has ceased to exist, I have merely pretended to live, without taking any further interest in anything or in myself, without appetite, without taste or curiosity or desire, in a disenchanted universe with no further hope than to leave it." Yet his life went on as if nothing had been changed. The volume ends with a line from *Le Cimetière Marin* of Valéry: "il faut tenter de vivre". We leave him at the end groping for a philosophy and realizing that if he could not attain serenity then his life would be bankrupt.

*The Journals of André Gide. Vol. III, 1928-1939: Translated by Justin O'Brien. Secker and Warburg, 30s.

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It is a pity that the later little volume of the *Journal* was not included in this volume, it would not have added much bulk and it would have shown in what direction he was moving after his disillusionment with Communism. We do not find in him the blank despair—albeit noble despair—of a Camus for whom life is an absurd and meaningless farce towards which the only logical attitude is one of stoic resignation and passive acceptance—what Camus calls “sainthood without God”. We get now a further development in Gide’s conception of individuality and liberty—different from the irresponsible liberty of his youth and also from the “*liberté serviable*” of his middle years. Now he believes that liberty destroys the individual and society unless it be closely linked with tradition and discipline. He shows us in *Theseus* how the hero could return safely only because he clung to the thread of tradition. In his Communist period he had said that one could only advance by thrusting aside the past. Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt, a pillar of frozen tears, because she had looked behind. Now he believes in the supreme importance of preserving our heritage—our Greco-Roman heritage based on Christian principles.

Now we have reached the end of this tremendous life work of Gide, of 1,400 pages, and what do we know of him? Far more through what we have felt and guessed ourselves than through what he has actually shown us. In *Les Nouvelles Nourritures Terrestres* he says—a strange saying for a man who has written so much on himself—“*Know thyself*, a maxim as pernicious as it is ugly. To observe oneself is to arrest one’s development.” After these half million words Gide remains as baffling a mystery as ever and he has only given us a tangled skein, which will one day have to be unravelled. However tangled the skein may be there is in everybody—despite all the contradictions—a common denominator to all the differences, one main thread which runs through everything and outlines the individual pattern. In Gide this will be found to be a spiritual thread. If we examine his thought, in the works written after the end of the *Journal*, we see that he did in fact attain once more that serenity without which he thought his life would have been a failure. He reached the final stage of Montaigne whom he so greatly loves, when, in one of the last things he has written—in *La Table Ronde* in 1948—he said: “*Prendre les choses pour ce qu’elles sont. Jouer avec les cartes qu’on a. S’exiger tel qu’on est*” and he added, “*Ce qui n’empêche pas non plus d’exiger de soi le meilleur, après avoir reconnu celui-ci pour tel. Car l’on ne se fait pas plus ressemblant en accordant le pas au moins bon.*”