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André Gide: *A Study*

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The whole history of literature may be scanned, and in vain, to yield a figure in whom is so harmoniously integrated the vast gamut of passions, of thoughts, of spiritualities, as in André Gide. Only the French love of clarity and reason could have given birth to so unenslaved, to so Ariel-pure a nature; no other than a Hellenic breath, perhaps, could blow so sweetly and purely and evenly into a soul and animate a Gide, and fill him with a coexistent consciousness which is his great attribute. This consciousness is not the harassed probing of an Ivan Karamazoff for truth, nor the singular revelation of a St. Augustine in the desert, but an ever-existing and ever-growing recognition and acceptance of the world, of God, and their relationship, beautiful and abiding, with the soul.

Yet it is the coexistent nature of this consciousness that makes it difficult to treat Gide. Where shall one begin with this Protean figure who in all his divers manifestations remains essentially himself? Like the Hebraic Leviathan encircling the earth with his tail fastened in his mouth, Gide has neither beginning, middle, nor end. And in discussing Gide in relation to God, Gide the man, and Gide the artist, one finds the interweaving and reciprocal ebb and flow of the vast Franckian symphony.

The inevitable result of open-mindedness pushed to its grand conclusion, Gide has so far outstripped his contemporaries that even in the most liberal of circles "a great conspiracy of silence" seems to reign at mention of his name. Is it fear of the trumpet he has put into the mouth of Nathaniel, whom he bids blow a joyous blast and shout "There is no Virtue"? Is it Gide's pervasive sympathy with the devil, with the acceptedly immoral, with the justifiably oppressed, with the "poor beggars" of ideas and individuals? Is it Gide's growing influence with the younger generation, a host of disciples arising from the four corners of the earth with the scattering of his seeds, like the Cadmus soldiers? Is it for a presumably negligent attitude toward God and an unworthy interest in the human being and things mundane?

Gide, imbued with the Evangelistic concepts, must deny Virtue if he hopes ever to find it; it is the ever-present antimony in his soul which predicates it. "He who loves his life, his soul, shall lose it," he insists; therefore, he does not even seek Virtue, knowing full well that he who seeks has already passed it by. His love of the sinister side of life is an embracing of the Manichean view of life, and for him a sublime proof of the existence of God. That he seems to stress it unduly is merely his expression of a satiric amusement with an artistic device he learned from Wilde, which he uses with the same chivalrous, Quixotic purpose as Chesterton,—to upset the Philistines. And in Gide and Chesterton there is a gentleness of raillery which was foreign to the sanguine natures of Wilde, and Baudelaire, and Verlaine, and Beardsley. At Gide's growing influence none is more disturbed than himself, who wishes to affect none, and flees the worshipper. He would have each man bear his own cross: "Whoever does not take up his cross, and follows me, is not worthy of me." If Gide desired his deification, where then is his temple, whither may imbued readers direct their holy pilgrimage? His intimates may seek him in Paris, to learn he is in Africa, and seek him in Africa to learn he is in China, and pursue him to China, to hear he is now in Paris. Gide has not permitted himself to stay anywhere long enough to take root, and the only possible homage the reader can pay him is to grapple with his ideas and acknowledge their worth.

Gide may appear to be evading God and losing all hope of salvation, but Gide is with his God every minute of the day,—not through the Church and religion (which he believes have betrayed Christ) but through his personal morality and in his contact with men and na-

ture, and in his both trivial and pleasurable experiences on this earth, where real salvation lies. "Wherever you may go," he says in his *Les Nourritures Terrestres,* "you will find only God." Each manifestation of life is an additional proof of God laving his soul, and his enjoyment of the senses, far from being a coarse sybaritism, is a desire to know better his soul, the mirror of the infinite, and to love more profoundly his God. In the *Cahiers d'André Walter* we find this passage: "Life is only a means, not an end; I shall not seek it for itself." And despite his indulgent appetite and his avid curiosity, if there is any penchant, any inclination in his remarkably well equilibrated nature, certainly it is rather toward abnegation than toward seizure,— a voluptuous sort of abnegation, true, and which does not forfend a pleasure or flee it, but which rather refuses to choose any one for fear of denying the others, and hovers with loving hands over one, then increases its span to embrace all.

Here is the astounding manifestation of Gide, the moralist, the man, and the artist: he leaves himself suspended with huge soft wings in space, never electing, never being defined. Curious mixture of Hamlet, Traherne, and Proteus, his soul remains ever desirous, hesitant, grateful, and amorphous, choosing nothing and enjoying everything, always conscious of itself and of God. Essentially, we affirm God either through pleasure or through pain. The Abbess of Jouarre said to her lover, "Your kisses have made me more Christian"; and the medieval monks, through self-flagellation, obtained their desired communion with God. But Gide affirms Him, not through either, but through his own peculiar distillation of spirit, which he calls "joy", and which for him consists, not in a particular combination of events which produce happiness or unhappiness, from which particular combination it is divorced, but rather in an embrace of *all things,* which constitutes a well-being of the soul.

So it is that Gide's soul must know Michael and Mephistopheles, good and evil, so that, in Blake's terms, it may arrange a marriage between heaven and hell. But the soul may not choose, nor define, nor limit, lest it *become,* and therefore cease to be, lest it take one path, and lose the others, lest it know the taste of one, and exclude the taste of the rest. And it is because Gide is essentially a moralist rather than a logician that he can carry about in him thesis and antithesis, without forcing either to deny the other. In his declaration, "I have carried all my possessions in me, as the pale women of the Orient wear on their persons their entire fortune", it is this host of presumable contradictions he means, which he wistfully compares elsewhere to servants who have gradually crowded about his dinner table and ended by usurping even his place. There is no attempt to resolve, to subdue these "servants", that he may maintain an arrogance over them; it is they who are the superiors, with their sly, insinuating ways, their furtive cupidities, and in his acceptance of them, one fears for Gide's personal identity. But he is modest, humble, unpretentious, and as he explains in discussing his art, "I submit willingly to having no well defined existence of my own, if the beings I create and extract out of me have one."

The validity Gide gives his characters in art is a significant explanation of artistic creation; both writer and reader will often feel about a literary character a reality of existence even surpassing the flesh-and-blood, nor can any quantity of materialistic avowals dissipate this impression. Balzac somewhere described touchingly his personal life with his own characters, attributed distinct qualities and idiosyncrasies to them he had not before written about, and believed they were enriching his happiness far more than the so-called real people, whom in comparison he must consider phantasmagorical. And Unamuno, of a race which he himself so aptly described to be concerned, not with ideas, but with man,—not even humanity, or the human, but *man* of flesh-and-blood, —writes at some length of his perturbations with his literary creations, how they have conversed with him and in no uncertain terms indicated their resentment at his high-handed treatment, and desired of him that he permit them to lead their own lives. It is an amusing bit of evidence that these people of the printed page whom in common parlance we so readily dismiss as unreal, have in themselves so profound a truth for the human being as to live longer and more vitally than man.

Realizing that any articulation of his thoughts must of necessity be narrow, mutable,

true only for a moment, Gide reserves for himself the right to say, to repeat, and to contradict himself; in thus weaving and reweaving his professions he maintains for them a flux which he believes necessary for all living things,—a Heraclitean sentiment. He will therefore refuse to attach himself to a particular tenet or action, give it his belief or his desire, knowing that only in the all is truth to be found, while in *each* only error lies; and he believes the ordinary mortal must be gifted with a propensity for precipitating himself into error, so often does he accept the particular, the blind, rather than the general, the all-knowing. He pities Jules Renard his cherished limits, his incomprehensions, his myopia, and for himself wishes limitlessness, perfect understanding and vision.

Perhaps most natures are so small that they can encase themselves in an action, in a gesture, which will fall about them like a protective cloak and cover their unimportance; perhaps most natures love absorption in one thing or another for that reason: love to read because the turning of the pages constitutes an affirmation of self-importance, love to teach because a sonorousness of voice then becomes manifest, love to work at an office desk because they can pick up a telephone with an air, you understand, of being significantly the right man. (The Beggar on Horseback, dreaming, visualized the telephone grossly larger than the man holding it.) And it is plausible that a good deal of life is gesture, when we observe more and more the eagerness of precipitation which people manifest, and as often there is no real absorption in the action, but rather a hidden cupidity for things-that-happen, a desire to be able to relate them proudly to others, and to keep them in remembrance, like rose-petals pressed between the leaves of a book.

There, Gide is to be envied his humility, his disdain for action. But where the nature is greater than the action, and preponderates in importance over it?—Even there Gide shakes his head, and more vehemently. He feels our acts catch us up, and absorb us, and that we do not exist except in them,—where we should, to be living divinely, exist in ourselves. Yet what of the warning "He that cherishes his soul (who protects his personality) shall lose it"? Is not Gide, in refraining from giving himself to any one thing, any one act, any one idea, any one form, is he not risking life? If the particular is false, why not the general? Valéry could conceive the entire world as "A great blemish in the purity of Non-Being." And perhaps salvation lies in the particular rather than in the general, in doing one thing *to the exclusion of* others, in loving one person *as against* other people; perhaps Eternity is affirmed in time, and Infinity in space, and Perfectness in form, and the Many in the one, and the Everywhere in east *or* west *or* north *or* south,—and Life, in being this *or* that?

In *Palude,* Gide satirizes all realization of life: in realizing itself, life becomes fixed, in taking form it dies. But he has himself explained, "If the seed does not die, it will not bear fruit." And if acting be error, and taking form be death, in error we shall glimpse perfection, in death we shall give birth to life. Gunner O'Grady, of Van Vechten's *Firecrackers,* who pursued at various stages the occupations of plumber, window-cleaner, insurance agent, steeple-jack,—withal, a humanist and well-versed in Greek: seems to have sensed this truth, and not content with one salvation, sought many times his death, to rise anew like the phoenix. He, too, not content with the one, he, too, preferring the "imprudent moveable to the prudent fixture," submitted himself to successive fixations or realizations, and loved not coexistent pleasures, but successive pleasures. And where Gide cannot, professedly, affirm his own existence, O'Grady can.

Even the characters of his writings, in whom Gide breathes his personal breath, have this delicate, uncertain, hesitating movement, this fearful trembling before the definite, the decisive, the determinative. His Edward, and Jerome, and Saul, all reach forth to touch, to seize, but they find they cannot retain. His Michael muses thus: "Really, everything dissolves around me; of all that my hand seizes, naught can my hand retain." This lack of prehensility, is it a volition, or an inability, an ineptitude? The joy of Traherne, who is the quintessence of the poetic mind, lay in prehensility, in the eternal wonder of being able to touch, to retouch, to seize with all his senses the beauty of life. How is it with Gide? He has himself confessed that from an early age he lacked a *savoir-vivre,* that each moment he

felt nature demand of him a gesture, he was at a loss which of many to offer her. It appears, then, that he is utterly devoid of the selective property; but he does not understand that any one of the gestures would likely suffice, that often nature wishes man to offer her just a pretext, of whatever kind, that she demands a countersign of which she herself is not certain, and that "Abracadabra" or "Open, Sesame" will do as well, gracefully executed, as any other. If Gide would only understand for living what he seems to understand for art,—that our main concern should be with style, for thought naturally follows it, and is not endangered,—if he would attend to the *manner* of a gesture rather than its matter, if he would ponder over the *how* rather than the *which,* he need not stand mute and stricken before Nature. It is curious how much of human energy is, I think, not properly directed, but instead dissipated, in choosing the *which* in life; and a good deal of analysis is today given over to this question, whether perhaps one thing does not, in the end, matter as little as another, the significant attribute being the warmth of breath we blow into it, to infuse it and bring it into life and truth. Valéry, for example, indicated himself indifferent to *subject* in his *Varietés,* and the themes which he so admirably expanded there he asked friends to suggest haphazardly to him. Perhaps this is the great trouble with the modern artist, as with Gide,—that he is too free, that he is left to his own choice; the Renaissance artist, chained (happily) to his trade, often, as Elie Faure indicates, had his subjects definitely assigned him: a sculptured Pieta, a painted Jochanaan, a silver cast of a Perseus or a Mercury; and all his resources went into the manner of execution,—with the results we of today find so inimitable.

In *La Porte étroite,* however, Gide successfully rationalizes for himself this incompetency, explaining life and joy to consist in the awaiting of things, never in the realization,—strongly reminiscent of de Gourmont, —and moves Alissa to find more pleasure in denying herself than in gratifying her desire. The touch of this delicious hesitancy in his soul was already manifest in his *Cahiers,* when he wrote: "O, the emotion on perceiving oneself close to happiness, when one has only to reach out and touch,—and yet one passes on." The ever-present consciousness of Gide manifests itself again here, in its struggle against time, whose passing nothing more poignantly proves than the recovery from an action, a temporary absorption; he would slow down time, he would defeat it by refraining from participation, by allying his senses with the eternal rather than the momentary. But the pleasure he has gained in the eternal, he has stolen it from the momentary; the delight he finds in negation, this he has lost from possession,—it is a sacrifice, a tremendous sacrifice for the philtre of distilled "joy" he prizes. Kierkegaard would consider the price egregious, and the purcahase a bad one,—Kierkegaard, of the consciousness only next to Gide in its fullness, and in sharpness the superior,—Kierkegaard who too could pause and gloat before a happiness, yet who sensed so keenly in his *Anguish and the Instant* that only in grappling with life and in suffering,—a suffering either from high pleasure or pain,—could we know life.

Gide, at an earlier age, cannot have perceived the immensity of the sacrifice; perhaps he did not even admit it to himself as such. But the later Gide was without doubt aware, and keenly, and impatiently,—the Gide that hastened eagerly to the Congo, the Gide clandestinely eloped as man to escape Gide the moralist, the winged creature hovering in the void between sky and earth come to try his legs on grass and in mud. Even Gide the artist became aware, and his characters, in whom Dostoievsky had precipitated an ardor, sweat and grime and fire, became tragically impatient with themselves, questioned this futile freedom permitted them in the void, struggled with it. Michael, after breaking his ties, pondered his new situation thus: "I am delivered, true enough, but what does it matter? I am suffering from this unharnessed liberty!" Saul tried to act, act with a demoniac furor, sought to forget the thousand-and-one reasons for behaving otherwise, launched himself into the world of action, of time, of error, of forgetfulness, but his soul re-seized him with the inexorability of a Nemesis.

Thus the purity of soul which Gide desires for himself, which he calls "joy", and against which his characters struggle, ends with burning out their vitals; and as they succeed in de-

feating for a moment this Hamlet "joy", in that moment, and then only, do his characters live for us.

Gide claims he has resort to art to resolve the contradictions inherent in life,—which may be true for whatever characters he permits pursue a definite development; but his art, as a whole, is an art patterned on life, "an art on the scale of man". In vain did Wilde preach to him the purpose of art: the creation of what does *not* exist, for of that which exists, what need have we to write? And the lovely fable Wilde related to him in support of this precept, that, too, is vain?:—

> "Once there was a man beloved by all his village because he could tell stories. Every morning he left the village, and when in the evening he returned, the workers, after having labored all day, made a circle about him and spoke thus to him: 'Come now, tell us,—what have you seen today?' This is what he told them. 'In the forest I saw a fawn playing on a flute, about whom danced a circle of little dryads.' 'Go on, what else did you see?' the men asked. 'When I reached the edge of the sea, I saw three sirens on the tops of the waves, and they were combing with a golden comb their green hair.' And the men were fond of him because he told them pretty tales. One morning he left his village as usual, but when he reached the edge of the sea, behold! he saw three sirens on the crest of the waves, and they were combing with a golden comb their green hair. And as he went further he saw, coming near the woods, a faun who played on a flute, and about him a circle of dryads. That evening, when he reentered his village, and the men asked him, as they had done every other evening: 'Come now, tell us! What have you seen?' he replied, 'I SAW NOTHING.'"

In art, as Keats in his *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (and Conrad in a brief preface) has indicated, there must be a fixation for eternity of some beautiful fleeting moment. Gide, in thorough disregard of this precept, has fashioned himself a plastic art, a mobile art, comparable perhaps to a musical masterpiece, but an art so flagrantly violative in literature as to require several decades before I believe it will be found quite acceptable. The desire for the general and the obviously true deprives him even of a sense of color with which to imbue his landscapes,—unless that color be white. It is amusing to note how Gaugin's little daughter showed herself equal to the artistic demands of the imagination when she asked her father to take her with him to Tahiti, since she meant to paint pictures of the green pine trees he had glowingly described to her. "And what color would you paint the green pine trees?" Gaugin asked her with good-humored interest. She replied swiftly, "I would paint them in *all* colors, daddy, so they would look like they was aflame."

Although his style is exquisitely classical, founded, as he says, on a "bridled romanticism", this silencing of the imaginative quality, (Wilde would call it the unreal) this refusal to exclude sufficiently, to compress the form lest he omit something that is part of life,—most flagrantly indicated in his *Faux-monnayeurs,* —deprives him of a great artistic heritage. He has contributed invaluably in fidelity to life, but it has been a fidelity to ideas rather than to man. Essentially, he represents the French contrasted with the Spanish,—the French with its high premium on knowledge, on balance, on expression, as against the mystical inchoate love only for life and death that is Spanish.

In his pursuit of knowledge, however, he has opened to the human being a wider field of life. Honesty is not a common virtue, and while there can be a viciousness in overmuch honesty almost tantamount to hypocrisy, it is a priceless antidote often against the Rousseaus, the Chateaubriands, even the Wildes. Gide's age must be grateful for him and his integral sincerity, grateful for his incorruptibility in whatever he says, whatever he does, whatever he feels, for his tenderness and peacefulness, for his humility and unassertiveness,—and for his credo, "l'Homme peut tout".