Gide et son œuvre -

Current Literature

R. Martinier -

BOOKS IN GENERAL

Gide has never been a popular writer. Unlike Barrès and Wells, he has been the voice of no faith to which groups could rally. Yet his influence on individuals not only in France but in Germany, the smaller countries and both the Americas has been incalculable. In England he is still a neglected author. A few of his books have been admirably translated by Dorothy Bussy, and he has made his mark upon a few writers now in their forties—Aldous Huxley, for instance, who has, however, been more ready to learn from him than to praise him. I count my first happening, during the last war, upon *Les Nourritures Terrestres* as a crucial experience: it is discreditable that so potent a book has not yet been published in England; and, ever since, I have read and reread Gide with continuous interest. He seems to me the most distinguished writer alive. His genius is nourished by a fervour alike of the brain and of the senses: a scientifically trained intellect serves his devotion to truth, while an elastic, pellucid and melodious style reflects every tremor of his sensibility. He is a poet, a humourist and a logician. But he has always refused to be rhetorical or explicit, requiring the reader to meet him at least half way. He belongs, in fact, to the clan not of Voltaire or Hugo, but of Racine and Stendhal. He does not want his tower to be of ivory, he tells us—rather is it of glass, a vulnerable observatory. Outside of it, he adds, he is worth nothing; but there have been bold sorties. In *Corydon* he tried to popularise his opinion that homosexuality was not necessarily either unnatural or antisocial; then he became a Communist, proclaimed his faith, went to Russia, and proclaimed his disillusionment. (This was the more courageous, because his Communism had brought him for the first time a wide public.) It was not Communism but the Soviet Government in which he had lost his faith. In any case the effect of these excursions has been to antagonise in turn almost every province of opinion. How indeed could a man make himself more generally disliked than by believing in the Gospels, disbelieving in private property, and practising pederasty?

But if it is impossible to agree with Gide, it seems to me difficult not to be fascinated by him. And he has now published the *Journal* that he has kept for fifty years (N.R.F., 130 francs). It contains over a half a million words, and is of unique interest, for no other writer of Gide's importance has confided to us any comparable document. It contains many enlightening, often malicious, details about a variety of personages, Mallarmé, Degas, Claudel, Valéry, Jammes, Charles-Louis Philippe, Roger Martin du Gard, Schlumberger, Copeau, Blum; and a wealth of comment upon literature and music. (Gide is a pianist who could have been a virtuoso.) But the superlatively fascinating subject is Gide himself. The portrait he paints of himself is in many ways unprepossessing, for if he is often unkind about his friends, he does not spare himself. Moreover, he takes to his journal chiefly when depressed—and in gloom one inevitably resorts to inelegant self-pity and self-justification. It is surprising to find him complaining about the failure of his books (in 1922, when he already enjoyed a European reputation); and it is ironical that fourteen years later he is groaning over their success; "Ah! l'heureux temps où je n'étais pas écouté! Et que l'on parle bien, tant qu'on parle dans le désert!" The diary of the last few years becomes less interesting, his decision to publish it in his lifetime making him, unintentionally, more discreet.

Gide has always been enigmatic, his enemies would say tortuous. He seems to find no difficulty in reconciling contrary emotions. With equal ardour he preaches the spirit and the senses, abnegation and incontinence: he pores over the logia of Christ, to whom his devotion is profound, and he finds in debauchery not merely pleasure but deep, untroubled happiness. The Journal illuminates, far better than any critic could, this double thread. "Je ne suis qu'un petit garçon qui s'amuse—doublé d'un pasteur protestant qui l'ennuie." (Note that the pastor is not bored but boring—I first read the word, most misleadingly, as "*s'ennuie.*") The cause he discovers in his heredity, which crosses in him two very different systems of life. In consequence:

> Rien ne se tient, rien n'est constant ni sûr, dans ma vie. Tour à tour je ressemble et diffère; il n'y a pas de créature si étrangère que je ne puisse jurer d'approcher. Je ne sais encore, à 36 ans, si je suis avare ou prodigue, sobre ou glouton . . . ou plutôt, me sentant porté soudain de l'un à l'autre extrême, dans ce balancement même je sens que ma fatalité s'accomplit. Pourquoi formerais-je, en m'imitant factícement moi-même, la factice unité de ma vie? C'est dans le mouvement que je peux trouver équilibre.

A passage written twenty years later continues the explanation—it is attributed to "T," but we cannot doubt that Gide is speaking of himself:

> Je n'ai jamais rien su renoncer; et protégeant en moi à la fois le meilleur et le pire, c'est en écartelé que j'ai vécu. Mais comment expliquer que cette cohabitation en moi des extrêmes n'amenât point tant d'inquiétude et de souffrance, qu'une intensification pathétique du sentiment de l'existence, de la vie? Les tendances les plus opposées n'ont jamais réussi à faire de moi un être tourmenté; mais perplexe—car le tourment accompagne un état dont on souhaite de sortir, et je ne souhaitais point d'échapper à ce qui mettait en vigueur toutes les virtualités de mon être; cet *état de dialogue* qui, pour tant d'autres, est à peu pres intolérable, devenait pour moi nécessaire.

To suppress the dialogue within oneself, he writes again, is to arrest the development of life; "Je ne sais plus bien qui je suis; ou, si l'on préfère: je ne suis jamais; je deviens."

The explanation of this duality, one may suggest, is more likely to be found in Gide's childhood than in his heredity. A more obvious instance of the Oedipus situation could hardly be found. Unfortunately, he has excised from his Journal almost all the references to his wife—which, he admits, results in his self-portrait being mutilated and incomprehensible. One can only guess at the influence upon his life of this saintly Protestant lady. We see that he loved her deeply, and while hating and fearing to wound her, forced himself continually to do so. One can further deduce that in her he rediscovered his mother. (Like Alissa in *La Porte Etroite* she was a cousin, older than himself; and Alissa—Gide emphasises the fact—resembled Jérôme's mother.) Upon this hypothesis we understand why for Gide love and desire have, as he tells us, always been separated. And this dichotomy in turn seems the source of the perpetual dialogue within him. On the one hand, in his country house in Normandy, the enveloping gentleness of domesticity, days at the writing-table, evenings of reading aloud in the lamplight, unruffled nights. On the other hand, travel, unfamiliar places, the desert and the waterfront, new faces, young bodies, the intoxication of the chase. For him both types of experience are fruitful, and the fact that the two cannot be enjoyed simultaneously does not diminish the validity of either. It is not Gide but his critics to whom this alternation is disquieting. The trouble is that he sometimes persuades himself that the Gospels authorise his libertinage; the boy amusing himself borrows the voice of the Protestant pastor.

As a novelist Gide (like Mauriac) benefits vastly from feeling the violent fascination of both the spirit and the senses. And his refusal to opt (as Mauriac does) for one party to this contest is a further aesthetic advantage. He defines his ideal of the novel as "a crossroads—a meeting-place of problems." Personally I prefer *L'Immoraliste* and *Les Caves du Vatican* to *La Porte Etroite*, in which the exquisiteness of the writing cannot conceal a certain *niaiserie*, a flavour at once sweet and insipid, like that of sago—even in *Les Faux Monnayeurs* Edouard seems to me a touch too high-minded. The little boy may be bored by the pastor, but he keeps looking for his approval. Few writers have been so persistently autobiographical as Gide, but his work not only reflects but modifies him. He tells us:

> que le livre, sitôt conçu, dispose de moi tout entier, et que, pour lui, tout en moi, jusqu'au plus profond de moi s'instrumente. Je n'ai plus d'autre personnalité que celle qui convient à cette œuvre—objective? subjective? Ces mots perdent ici tout leur sens; car s'il m'arrive de peindre d'après moi (et parfois il me paraît qu'il ne se peut d'autre exacte peinture,) c'est que d'abord j'ai commencé par devenir celui-là même que je voulais portraiturer.

I do not know what other novelist has made this admission, or should one say this boast? In Gide's case one feels it to be particularly true. He has been not only Ménalque, Michel, the Prodigal Son, Lafcadio and Edouard, but Marcelline, Alissa, the pastor in *La Symphonie Pastorale* and Robert. Perhaps indeed it is the novelist's vocation that has obliged him to cultivate that duplicity (in no pejorative sense) which has baffled many of his readers. With a more integrated personality, the novelist would have been less richly equipped. "Chacun de mes livres a été jusqu'à présent" (he notes in 1932) "la mise en valeur d'une incertitude": and if his poetic powers are declining, it is because his perplexities decrease. These remarks can be commended to critics of the novel. There are others beside Gide, whose art may be the fruit and the

reward of an unintegrated personality—Henry James, I suggest, and Proust and perhaps even Tolstoy.

The most constant emotion in Gide—the thread that joins the Christian and the pagan—is his hatred of conventions, of comfort, of worldly bonds. "M'a toujours tourmenté le souci du moindre bagage," and his love of denudation extends to style: "Je souhaite une éloquence cachée." The result has sometimes been a certain colourlessness.

> Moins peintre que musicien, il est certain que c'est le mouvement, de préférence à la couleur, que je souhaitais à ma phrase. Je voulais qu'elle suivît fidèlement les palpitations de mon coeur.

Gide commenced author among the Symbolists and for a long while he allowed himself a preciosity, particularly in the syntax and placing of the words. In the Journal he quotes twice a phrase that lingers in his memory from an early poem of which he has no copy; "Froide à mes mains mais pour elles tiède, je sens, ah! dans cette eau brunie, ces vivantes racines heureuses." Affected, musical deliciously, accurate, this line reveals in Gide the scientist as well as the poet—the imagination of a Barrès would never have considered what was the temperature natural to a water-plant! Gide has been indefatigable in his pursuit of truth, and so exacting in regard to his own sincerity, that his candour has been called narcissism and exhibitionism. He refused in 1931 to write about the heroic anti-fascist de Bosis, despite his admiration, because he himself lacked faith in liberty: approving, as he then did, of the absence of liberty in Russia, he would not condemn a similar absence in Italy, different as he considered the purposes of the two states to be. And he makes his own the words of a Jansenist, words that every intellectual should have by heart: "Whatever your station or country," I translate as best I can, "you should believe only what is true, and what you would be disposed to believe if you were of another country, another station, another profession." Indeed the human quality dearest to Gide is disinterestedness, and his judgment on characters, whether in life or in his novels, depends upon the extent to which this quality obtains in them. This is the explanation of the famous *acte gratuit*, which has been so much misinterpreted, in *Les Caves du Vatican*—the murder of a stranger in a train. The act is unmotivated—or, it would be more accurate to say, it can be of no conceivable advantage to the murderer. Gide wished, he explains, to show that disinterestedness is not necessarily charitable; and, I think it fair to add, so fascinated is he by the beauty of disinterestedness, that he admires it even in the form of a crime.

The writer to whom Gide is closest is certainly Blake (whose *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he has translated). His reserve, his dislike of the explicit, his obliqueness often remind me of Mr. E. M. Forster, though Gide is more adventurous and incomparably more lyrical. But imagine what the interest would be of a diary kept by Mr. Forster throughout his life, and you have a notion of the enjoyment to be derived from the Gide Journal. It is, I suppose, unreasonable to expect a publisher to give us an English translation of so vast a work. But it seems to me not only the most illuminating of Gide's works, but one of the salient books of our time.

RAYMOND MORTIMER

THE FRIENDLY NORTH

North Cape. By F. D. OMMANNEY. *Longmans.* 10s. 6d.

I Went to the Soviet Arctic. By RUTH GRUBER. *Gollancz.* 10s. 6d.

Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic. By VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON. *Harrap.* 10s 6d

Like backing horses, deep-sea trawling is known to the initiate as a mug's game; and in the literature of work the mug's games are the best subjects. The steady job or the shock worker's competitive grind has, one must admit, its virtue and perhaps with a capital V; but it is only human to welcome a touch of sabotage to relieve the tedious hosannas of the Ten-Year Planners, and to have a special feeling for work which is a gamble. A good many writers on the dangerous trades nevertheless concentrate on the injustices and ardours suffered by men in mines and ships and pervert the case by overlooking the curious satisfactions which the chancey nature of a job provides. Stoicism and fatalism are not necessarily vices because they happen to irritate reformers and revolutionaries.

Mr. Ommanney's story of his voyage with a Grimsby trawler to the North Sea and Iceland has a proper appreciation of these points. The result is not merely a vivid sea book, of which there are plenty, but something more resonant with human character. The skipper and crew of the *Lincoln Star* went out on their regular expeditions, inured to a hard trade and with only one passion, which was to get back to Grimsby for another thirty-six hours and blow a good part of their earnings on beer and tarts, before the filthy job got them once more; and they were a pretty dour, dull lot of men on the surface. One gapes at their capacity for physical suffering; they seem to have the incomprehensible stamp of those who, for some reason, just have to be knocked about—a kind of stupor. The obvious thing is to label them fools, heroes or victims. But in Mr. Ommanney's pages these men gradually cease to be types and cases, and become individuals, held together by a sort of ritual. The *Lincoln Star* was full of ritual. Friday night, filling in the football coupons; Saturday, eating the cook's special iced cake; and there were things like the impenetrability of the fo'castle occupied by the "deckies" and the sacredness of the cook's tea kettle. Monotony is the great creator of eccentrics, and the sea turns out an extraordinary collection. Mr. Ommanney does not do the easy thing and wr[illegible] them up. He reveals each man, skin by skin, with the care of o[illegible] peeling the subtle if common and pungent onion. There is t[illegible] engineer, for example, with his preoccupation with death, repe[illegible]ing not out of obsession but with a kind of scientific artistry, t[illegible] story of the death of his mother. There is the ship's gambl[illegible] There is the ship's boy, a half-caste, who seems to be merely melancholy, gazing enigma until one day he puts his head i[illegible] the saloon and casually announces he has knocked out the co[illegible] The skipper, unexpectedly dapper and more like one's picture[illegible] an expert salesman than the ordinary meditative and omnisci[illegible] nautical wisehead, has his moment of revelation. It is refre[illegible]ing and unexpected. The catch is heavy and he is seen in [illegible] cabin shadow-boxing in his delight.

Mr. Ommanney has shown his power of giving simple men th[illegible] due of life before; he is also an effective descriptive wri[illegible] quietly getting it across because he never overdoes it. The st[illegible] of going into the ruined town of Blyth to coal and the account the evening ashore in the dismal Tyneside pubs is admirab[illegible] It is a picture of half industrial England and, incidentally, conta[illegible] a reflection which is worth quoting. Cinemas, tarts, pools [illegible] drink are not the only escapes. There are foreign politics:

> "Tell you what it will be next," he was saying, "—our colon[illegible] That's what it'll be. 'E wants Tanganyika and South-West Afr[illegible] and the Cameroons. You see! But we shan't give 'em back. Can't do. Sacred duty to the natives. And look at Japan. She wants 'Ong Kong. Directly there's trouble here she'll pinch it. And look at Mussolini, he's got his eye on our interests in the Mediterranean . . ."
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> Who, I wondered, had an eye on our interests in Blyth?

North Cape is an excellent and living document.

I don't feel the same warmth about Miss Gruber's lively and enthusiastic piece of reporting. Somehow the note is too high, personal and insistent. She went to the Soviet Arctic to discover how the status of women had been affected by the North. She had learned, as we all have, from Stefansson that the Arctic is or ought to be friendly, and that nevertheless "north of the tree line" in Alaska there are not more than a dozen or so European women; as a feminist she was therefore jubilant to discover that Russia's new timber port, Igarka, has the normal supply. And even a rather forbidding woman leader. Miss Gruber is too much the emphatic stunt journalist ("the youngest Doctor of Philosophy in the world") to be very readable, but the non-feminist material i.e. the picture of Soviet colonisation in the North, is interesting and specially to those who followed Stefansson's theory of the northward course of empire.

His book of unsolved Arctic mysteries is more than a popular retelling of the dramatic disappearances of the Arctic: the vanished Franklin expedition, the story of Andrée, the peculiar detective tale of the murders associated with Thomas Simpson, who put the final touches to the discovery of the North-West passage; it is a re-examination of the problems these mysteries raise, in the light of the enormously increased knowledge of the Arctic which people like Stefansson have given us. The most illuminating essay concerns the fate of the Soviet flyers who were lost not so very long ago, and in it Stefansson gives a fascinating account of what—by the "friendly Arctic" school—would be called the amenities of Polar flying. Up to the Russian tragedy (Stefansson gives any Arctic disaster six years to confirm itself) there had been no air losses in the Polar sea. V. S. PRITCHETT