An Approach to "The Counterfeiters"

Si le Grain ne Meurt. By André Gide. Paris: Editions la Nouvelle Revue Française.

"THE COUNTERFEITERS" appears in English just as we learn that M. Gide has withdrawn the original edition of his memoirs, "Si le Grain ne Meurt," to be reissued later perhaps in a revised form. Whatever light these memoirs throw on the intelligence that created "The Counterfeiters," now is the moment for the illumination. The connection between the two is close, as the Journal of "The Counterfeiters" testifies. M. Gide was working on them concurrently, turning to the memoirs when the difficulties of the novel held him up, turning back to the novel when he was impressed by the fact that intimacy, penetration, psychological probing could in certain respects be pushed further in the novel than in "confessions." This he observes after noting that he had just completed one of the most important chapters in the memoirs, the account of the Algerian interlude in his early manhood, when he and Paul Laurens set forth to "normalize" themselves. It is precisely this part of the memoirs that M. Souday, in his recent study of Gide, calls repugnant, yet almost insignificant. Nobody was asking about M. Gide's private life; why display its least defensible caprices? But if everything he has chosen to say about his private life, as he traces the stages of his self-discovery, reveals the pattern of "The Counterfeiters" as a clear product of the temperament analyzed in the memoirs, how can that be insignificant?

Every artist sees life in his own peculiar way. Why? Those who like this question answered will understand M. Gide's delight as a child in experimenting with the mechanism of his kaleidoscope, rearranging the parts, and discovering that even when the resulting effects were not so beautiful and surprising as the original ones, it was fascinating to comprehend the "why of pleasure." It is fascinating to comprehend the "why" of M. Gide's highly individual viewpoint when we are trying to relate it to all the other viewpoints contributed by the novelists who subtly influence our interpretations of human experience. The reading of many novels calls for an effort of reconstruction similar to that M. Gide asks of us in "The Counterfeiters": "I wish," he says in the Journal, "to have its events related from different angles by the actors on whom the events have some influence; I wish these events, as they tell them, to appear slightly distorted; a certain interest results for the reader from the sole fact that he has to reestablish; the story requires his collaboration." Memoirs like M. Gide's decrease our bewilderment in the face of all the slightly distorted accounts of life that significant novels offer us.

"Si le Grain ne Meurt" is one of the most troubling autobiographies since Rousseau. "To disquiet," to quote the Journal again, "is my role. The public always prefers to be reassured. There are those whose business that is. There are only too many of them." This book is enlightening, but not reassuring. M. Souday would not have called essential parts of it insignificant if he had felt really comfortable about it. It offers the usual interest of any good autobiography: scenes, people, vividly and variously realized. It has also the interest belonging to the memoirs of a writer—that of tracing back to his personal experience episodes, characters, emotions later transmuted into fiction. There is no doubt that M. Gide possesses the gift of cashing in on his own experience. But the deepest interest is in the man himself. When he went to Algeria he left his Bible behind because it had become indispensable to him, and he always felt the secret need to defy his own nature. "I am a being of dialogue; everything in me combats and contradicts itself." His belief in the moral code by which he had lived up to that time had been gradually yielding to a vision of life that was more iridescent. Perhaps God himself had a horror of that uniformity against which Nature protested, but toward which the Christian ideal tended, in aiming to subdue nature. He persuaded himself that each being—or at least each elected one—had a role to play resembling no other; and to submit himself to the common rule was the unforgivable sin by which he lost his precise, irreplaceable significance, his "salt," which could not be restored to him. (Of his Huguenot ancestors, Gide says that each one thought it was said to him personally: "You are the salt of the earth.") Forcing himself into the mold of the puritanism which he had been taught had secured only a profound disorganization of his whole being. Perhaps this discordant dualism could be resolved into harmony. To seek that, he embarked for Algeria in 1893, and there he found his "normal." But it seems as if he did not like to abandon the possibility that the Evil One might be laughing at him from the shadows; as if he were at once urged by the desire to justify his own tendencies, and to get the utmost possible thrill out of transgression. His answer to that would be that there is "no way of looking at the moral and religious question or of behaving in the face of it which at some moment of my life I have not known and made mine." He would like to reconcile all, even the most diverse points of view, excluding nothing and "ready to intrust to Christ the solution of the case between Dionysus and Apollo."

"Memoirs are never more than half sincere, however great the concern for truth. Everything is always more complex than one says it is. . . . Perhaps one approaches nearer the truth in the novel." To approach "The Counterfeiters" by way of the memoirs may be to approach the complex truth of André Gide.

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