PARIS LETTER

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ANDRE GIDE has brought back from his journey in equatorial Africa two books, one of which, the Voyage au Congo, appeared this summer. We could not imagine a better traveller than Gide. Untiring curiosity, quick perception, humour, and scientific knowledge, all conspire to give character to his itineraries. "Better be imprudent movables than prudent fixtures," he quotes from Keats as the device for his work. Excellent health also enables him at fifty to tramp through the brush beneath a terrific sun, eight hours a day and feel bright and fresh the following morning, even after a troubled night. When the party was not advancing he made use of the opportunity to question the planters, chat with the blacks, play football with the young negroes, and also to reread the French classics, giving us some excellent pages of literary criticism into the bargain; for there is fine artistic effect in these notes as we pass suddenly on the same page from the highly coloured description of a barbaric ritual in Central Africa to judicious and original reflections on Racine or Bossuet. The Voyage au Congo is valuable by reason of its naturalness and its good faith. To be sure, Gide had already been in contact with the natives (in L'Immoraliste, for instance); but the Arabs of course belong to the white race even though they are not Aryans. Yet he was unprepared—he the most subtle, the most acute and lucid writer of Europe—to encounter the negro of the Congo, who is the most primitive of them all. Gide's work has already given us ample proof that his sympathies are with the extremes. Has he not written, "It is not what resembles me, but what differs from me, that attracts me"? And apropos of this, one could have wished perhaps that his book contained a greater number of personal opinions and more views of his own on the black question. Will the second volume, announced under the title of Voyage au Tchad, reward our impatience? Or is his reticence due to the fact that Gide hates discussing subjects with which he is unfamiliar? A voyage, however, which lasted more than a year, would surely enable him to widen

his knowledge of the subject, and more especially ours. We can see, however, that Gide is a negrophile; not that he has fallen into the error of many of the whites who, on coming among coloured people for the first time, follow the romantic tradition of the eighteenth century and look upon the natives as "good savages" perverted by civilization; but a great intelligence always makes for kindliness. The Congo is certainly one of the regions where the blacks are most thoroughly exploited and Gide has been sensitive to their great handicap. The defects in the system of roadways whereby the natives are still obliged to carry the packs of the whites, the tributes in kind and especially in rubber exacted by the big concessionary companies, have shocked him. With his customary independence and his Protestant severity, Gide has not hesitated since his return to take to task these high financial powers, and even to furnish the press of the extreme left with such ammunition as one can well anticipate. I only mention the matter because it is interesting to observe how the most abstract, individualistic, and egocentric of writers can be brought sooner or later to emerge from his isolation and to enter the fray. This ought to effect a reconciliation between Gide and journalism, with which as we know he was recently at odds.

Along with the Voyage au Congo, André Gide has issued a Journal des Faux Monnayeurs. In a Letter of last year [1] I discussed the Faux Monnayeurs, which is perhaps Gide's best novel and is in any case an excellent book. The author had the curious idea of putting down for us, and especially for those of us who are writers, the daily register of his efforts, the chart of his reflections, his most intimate plans of composition, and the editorial repentances which followed upon the evolving of the book. In a sense, it constitutes the voyage of his speculations. How interesting it would be, Gide thought with justice, if we had from the hands of the authors themselves an account of the genesis of famous novels; of the working out of Clarissa Harlowe, the birth of Manon Lescaut or the Idiot. Whereupon, he undertook this task, in which thanks to his fine clear mind, gift for analysis, and habit of watching himself think, he was supremely fitted to succeed. The result is an interesting experience never previously described which falls within the categories of psychology and of literature. We here find a uniformly

[1] Cf. Paris Letter, THE DIAL, June 1926.

characteristic Gide, with his slogan, "It is my rôle to disturb." And is he not speaking for himself, with one of his heroes as intermediary, when he writes: "Through hatred for this religion, this morality which oppresses all his youth, through hatred for this rigourism from which he has never been able to break free, Z. works to debauch and to pervert the pastor's children. There is rancour here."

Eglantine is the title of the "latest" by Jean Giraudoux. The work of this author has the unity of life itself. "I write just as I think," summarizes what he once said in an interview. "When the required length for a book is reached, I stop, add a title, and send to the printer." This is very accurate. The work of Giraudoux is one long uninterrupted reverie, a psychic monologue which nothing could stop but the exigencies of the trade. Out of deference to custom, Giraudoux consents to a nominal change in the subject of each volume; but he does so without conviction, and he could be willing in no other respect to impose on us. Rest assured that in buying a book of Giraudoux's you may count on three or four hours in the company of one of the rarest and most poetic spirits of the times. Who would ask for more? Eglantine may boast of being Giraudoux chemically pure. The famous Bella was a study in adaptation to life. Actuated by violent emotion (animosity towards Rebendart, which is to say Poincaré) Giraudoux allowed himself to etch those harsh, pitiless portraits to which the book owed its success. But this was not his true self. He returns to it however in Eglantine, the story of a sweet girl who shares her life with two elderly men, one a French nobleman, Fontranges, and the other a Jewish financier, Moïse (known to us already as characters in Bella). Between these two persons of advanced years Suzanne is as it were face to face with two hemispheres, Orient and Occident—neither having seniority of the other. So many poetic qualities, the purity of the style (the purest French since Anatole France) the transparent and almost dreamy lightness of the characters, the gentle and fantastic movement of the plot, make Eglantine as fresh and delicious as a cool drink in summer.

M Luc Durtain gives us in 40° Etage three stories with the United States as background. They possess a charming brand of satire and an alert style, and are unusual in design. Crime à San

Francisco is really excellent. When so many young American writers take Paris and present-day France as a setting for their work it is quite fitting that French authors begin returning the compliment. Edmond Jaloux with Soleils Disparus remains the sensitive novelist typical of a generation whose feelings never obscure intelligence and who are immune to the barrenness of the post-war era. Jaloux has also published a serious little work in memory of Rainer Maria Rilke. In his new novel, Le Quai des Brumes, Pierre Mac-Orlan has undoubtedly succeeded best of any author in extricating his personality from the aftermath of the war, thanks to his athletic vigour, his love of the fantastic, his sense of modern life, and his admiration for that German romanticism which we saw reborn elsewhere, dressed out with American innovations, under the fallacious name of expressionism.

I should mention a special number, which certainly will become rare, of the review Feuilles Libres, devoted to the poet L.-P. Fargue. Fargue is one of the three editors of Commerce, a review in which art unmixed is in the ascendancy. A contemporary and friend of Valéry, of Valery Larbaud, of Marcel Schwob, of Apollinaire, of Jarry, and of Gide, though he has written little, Fargue has had a profound influence upon many of the French writers of our day. The public at large does not know about him, but how could it understand pages so curiously new as Poèmes and Pour la Musique? "A child having for its plaything a mind prodigiously cultivated"; it is thus that Valéry describes him, and as such he will certainly pass down to posterity, an hermetic and perfect poet, the curious personality of a Parisian noctambulist, the first of the indolent, the last of the *flâneurs*.

While still young, Robert de Flers, of the French Academy, died this August. He was a childhood companion and close friend of Marcel Proust, though their careers had otherwise, little in common. Flers was a very likable Parisian, of the pre-war *boulevardier* variety, a Frenchman with a flowing tie, vivacious and clever. His glory was born in the salon of Madame de Caillavet, of which he will be one of the last representatives. Like Meilhac and Halévy, he is related to a charming tradition of the Second Empire—though with less distinction. In their time, Le Roi, Le Bois Sacré, and L'Habit Vert were great dramaturgic successes of

the boulevard; and if these plays did not cross the Atlantic, it is because they were written in a spirit and for an era where talent was not yet bridging oceans.

The 1927 season of the Ballets Russes, which celebrated its twelfth anniversary this year, was quite brilliant at Paris, and perhaps even more brilliant in London. I was on the Lido a few weeks ago with Serge de Diaghilew; and by the shore of the Adriatic, where his remarkable dancer Serge Lifar was dutifully engaged with his exercises, I watched this indefatigable impresario of genius bent over a large map of Europe, as he traced with a blue pencil the locus of his approaching autumn triumph at Berlin and at Vienna. La Chatte was the best liked novelty of the season. M Henri Sauget is a very young French musician, younger than any of the Six (all of whom are now thirty or over) and claims for his work a direct attachment to Erik Satie. His music is dextrous and light, expressly continuing the tradition of the French operetta. The settings by MM Gabo and Pevsner, all spirals and mica, contributed greatly to the success of this charming ballet. Le Triomphe de Neptune betokens in Lord Berners great musical skill and a thorough grounding in his predecessors, from Bizet and Délibes to Auric and Strawinsky. An ingenious transposition into the atmosphere of Early-Victorian England, it will serve superficially to give the public across the Channel the impression that at last an original musician has been born to them. As for the Pas d'Acier of Prokofieff, which has enjoyed a brisk *succès de snobisme*, it is a "red ballet" in the fashion of Moscow, agreeably and intelligently choreographed, with organized workers performing musical arabesques and cutting rhythmic capers to the glory of the Sickle and Hammer. But the music seems to me unoriginal, despite pretensions to audacity, and I make many reservations as to its future.

Oedipus, on the other hand, marks a new turn in the work of Strawinsky. But are not the Oiseau de Feu, Petrouchka, the Sacre, and Mavra all so many abrupt veerings in the remarkable development of this man, whose zigzag course baffles us as much as that of Picasso? Yet one can say that each new stage in Strawinsky is a refinement and an advance. Certainly Oedipus is not a ballet. These austere groupings of soloists and of choirs banked upon the stage obviously disconcerted the frivolous public of the "Russes."

The Latin text, after Jean Cocteau, astonished. As to the music, i was more in the nature of an oratorio, a concert piece. It is a vas architectural structure in the style of Bach or of Handel, with con centrated emotion, compactly and concisely written. Here, in th words of the musician himself, "there are no lies"—and the for mula is so new that one would naturally not expect a great imme diate success. The public of the Ballets will of course continu to demand Petrouchka; this is its privilege, as it is also the privileg of Strawinsky to evolve and to outstrip his audience's ability t follow. Oedipus is a work which can well await the judgement o posterity.

Jean Cocteau has given us in October another volume of poems, Opéra. In Poésies some pieces on death with an accent particularly dolorous and profound had already led us to anticipate a new ex pression. Opéra confirms us in this, and yields some marvellous poems on all those subjects with which Cocteau has since been pre occupied: death, converse with the invisible, the value of Right and Good which henceforth vie in his work with Beauty. Coc teau plunges into a world of dreams, and brings out of it for us something beautiful, fresh, and perfect.

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