The First Reader

By Harry Hansen

Andre Gide's leisurely "journalizing" during his trip through French Equatorial Africa in 1926 has just been translated into English and issued by Alfred A. Knopf as "Travels in the Congo." It is the day to day record of a man who does not intend to whitewash the French regime. And his compassion with human beings leads him to sympathize deeply with the suffering blacks.

Several times, when viewing instances of cruelty that seem unnecessary for the administration of the laws, Gide wonders why man must become brutal when dealing with inferior peoples. He is told that the blacks were worse off before the French came. This does not comfort him. He discovers in Africa a new cause.

"Hitherto I have always spoken without the least care whether I was heard or not, always written for to-morrow, with the single desire of lasting. Now I envy the journalist whose voice carries at once, even if it perishes immediately after. Have I been walking hitherto between high walls of falsehood? I must get behind them, out on to the other side, and learn what it is they are put to hide, even if the truth is horrible. The horrible truth that I suspect is what I must see."

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The testimony which Gide brings of the misery of the natives, the callousness of the officials, the dangers of disease, the lack of food and proper care, is similar to that related to me recently by two African travelers who have lately returned to New York, C. Leroy Baldridge, the artist, and his wife, Caroline Singer.

Their conclusion that the black man in Africa has absolutely no chance to improve his lot, that nature and man conspire against him, is repeated on every page of Gide's book. The latter particularly blames the French rubber companies, which exploit the native, cheating him and imprisoning him for minor offenses. Not only men but women and babes are the victims of cruel taskmasters in Middle Africa.

What Gide cannot comprehend is the overbearing attitude of white officials to their black help; he finds "the obligingness and attentiveness and zeal of our boys is beyond words; as for our cook, his cooking is the best we have tasted in this country. I continue to think and think more and more that most of the faults people complain of in the servants here come from the way in which they are treated and spoken to."

The white man, says Gide, seems to make it his business to thrust these natives back into their darkness.

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Gide's strength as an author lies in his sensitivity to human values; naturally these are uppermost also in his travel record. The landscape leaves him unmoved, save now and then; rhapsodies have no place in his style. Upon viewing the Congo Rapids one of the guests remarks: "And would you believe it, a spectacle like this is still without its painter?" Gide notes:

"This is an invitation to which I shall not respond. The quality of temperance is an essential one in art and enormity is repugnant to it. A description is none the more moving because ten is put instead of one. Conrad has been blamed in 'Typhoon' for having shirked the climax of the storm. He seems to me, on the contrary, to have done admirably in cutting short his story just on the threshold of the horrible and in giving the reader's imagination full play, after having led him to a degree of dreadfulness that seemed unsurpassable."

However, Conrad's story of the storm in "The Nigger of the Narcissus," or rather the conduct of the men in the storm, proves his ability to describe one.

Conrad is Gide's mentor on this voyage; the book is dedicated to his memory; Gide is always reading "Heart of Darkness"—in fact, he records reading it for the fourth time. Beyond that Gide is tremendously impressed with La Fontaine: "I can hardly think of a single quality he does not possess. He is a miracle of culture: Montaigne's wisdom, Mozart's sensibility. Has any literature produced anything more exquisite, wiser, more perfect?"

Gide does not make his reading an integral part of this journey; he merely tells us what he is reading. He must have carried a large "pigskin library." He mentions Goethe; Bossuet's funeral orations of Henrietta of France and Maria Theresa; Cresson's philosophy, which convinces him that he is a follower of Bergson; the "Misanthrope;" "The Master of Ballantrae." He repeats poems from "Les Fleurs du Mal;" reads Racine and Cornelile; "Samson Agonistes," "Paradise Lost," "In a Balcony," "The Flight of the Duchess," and the Concise Oxford Dictionary. He has given up the idea of translating Mark Rutherford. Apparently he is reading Goethe in the original.

He finds Browning less exciting in retrospect. He read "In a Balcony" with less enthusiasm because he had a better recollection of it. "It is often an advantage not to understand perfectly. My imagination readily succumbed to mirage in those days and generously invested my uncertainties with the colors of enchantment. Now that I see more clearly, I am a little disappointed."

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One other novelty—he finds the dancing of the native women uninteresting. The traveling white man is always entertained with dances in which whole villages take part. Gide denies that they have the sex connotations which other travelers have professed to discover. He finds most of the gyrations stupid. At Boda the women danced as usual. Gide remarks: "The shameless jigging of elderly matrons is most painful to look at. The most aged are always the most frenzied."

To which we might add that in this respect Africa and America have something in common.