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BOOKS

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ANDRÉ GIDE AND THE LITERARY LIFE

THE JOURNALS OF ANDRE GIDE. Volume I: 1889-1913. Translated and edited by Justin O'Brien. Knopf. $5.00.

Mr. O'Brien has done a wonderful job with very difficult materials. He has turned Gide's tight and sometimes all but ineffable periods into excellent English; and he has supplied the text with elaborate notes on the persons, books, and events mentioned by the author. Perhaps the notes are a little over-elaborate: need a reader of Gide be told who was the author of *Werther* or the *Vita Nuova?* Mr. O'Brien seems to have prepared the volume for a wide American public. One fears there is no such public for Gide, even with the Nobel prize in his pocket.

"I want to put in everything," said Gide of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*; but he has not put everything into his journal, at least not consistently. We see very little of him in relation to his family. "Of everything concerning Em. (his wife) I forbid myself to speak here." She is here only a delicate and retiring person to whom he reads aloud evenings, to whom he writes daily when he is traveling. Like some nineteenth-century nobleman, Gide shuttles between the capital and his country estates. We observe a very little of his favorite Norman farm, its tradition-bound retainers, its old gardens where Gide experiments with flowers. But of the house in Auteuil (Paris) we see—or sense—only the library where he reads widely in several languages; the piano on which he plays Bach and Chopin; the bedroom in which he struggles night after night with insomnia; the desk where he writes his books, often slowly and painfully, in alternating fits of enthusiasm and weariness. A visit or two to a mysterious bank disposes of his business affairs. Of his fortune he writes gnomically: "wealth considered solely as a permission to work freely"; but a friend is quoted as saying of the very rich Valery Larbaud, "It is always a pleasure to meet someone in comparison to whom Gide is poor." Finally, concerning his sexual life he is, while not altogether

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silent, unexpectedly discreet. He tells us that he was virgin till he was twenty-three. Writing in 1911 of *Corydon*, his defense of homosexuality, he says that "the difficulty comes . . . from the fact that I must artificially revive a problem to which I have found (as far as I am concerned) a practical solution, so that, to tell the truth, it no longer bothers me."

Gide has dealt with all these matters in other books. He seems to intend his journal as a different kind of document, a document of the literary life. But this phrase must be understood in a very broad sense. Proust lived in order to write; Valéry wrote in order to live (or so he kept telling Gide in his weary later years—perhaps only to shock him); but both affirmed the impersonality of art. Gide has worked on the opposite principle. He writes in the journal in 1893: "I wanted to suggest, in the *Tentative amoureuse*, the influence of the book upon the one who is writing it, and during that very writing. As the book issues from us it changes us, modifying the course of our life." Like any nineteenth-century master he has regarded his work as a sort of continuous autobiography. His journal is thus the medium in which his mind, his work, his reading, his friendships, are seen in their relations. The very first entry, for Autumn 1889, shows Gide and Pierre Louys in search of a Latin Quarter garret "where our group can meet." They are rather theatrical about their literary beginnings: they remember Rastignac. "And together we dream of the impecunious student's life in such a room, with an unfettered pen as the only means of earning a living. And at your feet, on either side of the writing table, all Paris."

This early dream of the literary life quickly gives way to bitter realities. The journals are among the most disenchanted of documents. Goethe, supposedly fortunate, remarked that in fact he had never been happy for more than a few days together. For Gide life seems to have been even worse, and social life a profound irritant. He finds—or at any rate he records—little pleasure in his relations with the literary commune of France and Europe. This commune always resolves itself, for him, into distinct personalities to whom his reactions are shifting and sensitive. Reactions!—his extremely individualistic sensibility drenches him in reactions, permits him to take almost nothing and nobody for granted. He is, it is true, regularly devoted to a few friends: Marcel Drouin, Jacques Copeau, Charles-Louis Philippe—the latter's death and funeral provoke one of the most beautiful passages in the present journal. Valéry bullies him, exhausts him with his superior *élan*, talks nonsense in the passion of his eloquence. Towards the others Gide's feelings vacillate between affection and disgust. At worst, literary men are all vanity,

blague, and corruption. On the reception, in 1907, of Barrès into the Academy: "How I like his thin face, his flattened-down hair, even his common accent. What a flat speech he made! And how I suffered from the touches of cowardice, the flatteries, the concessions to the opinion of the audience, which are perhaps natural to him (I mean for which he probably did not have to distort his thought, but which met a too easy applause here); and also his thrust at Zola!" In particular, Gide is quick to scent clashes between spirit and talent, self and career. "Too much intelligence and not enough personality," he writes in 1890 of Léon Blum, then a member of his "group." A similar judgment is made again and again, on Pierre Louys, on Anatole France, etc. Intelligence, literary professionalism—the very traits Americans admire in the French—are held by Gide in high suspicion.

From literary society he takes refuge in various things. He travels in Spain, Africa, Italy. "Flee! Ah! flee farther to the south and towards a more total exile." Country landscapes and country weather inspire some of his most ecstatic entries. He seems, however, to find most relief in reading; and it is significant that he particularly enjoys English novels—much life, little art, few ideas.

His disgust with the world is paralleled by his disgust with himself. An early entry tells how he broke with the Protestant discipline of his childhood: "Whereupon, ceasing to call my desires temptations, ceasing to resist them, I strove on the contrary to follow them. . . . I was amazed that nature was so beautiful, and I called everything nature." This, like the literary dream of the Latin Quarter garret, resounds with a hopefulness that is seldom echoed by the later entries. For Protestantism, as he tells us, he too often merely substituted other strict disciplines, among which was the keeping of this journal, the ordeal of self-analysis. And he is reputed to be a great artist of self-analysis: his American publishers are advertising the journal as a modern equivalent of Montaigne's essays. Here one must take exception. Fascinating as Gide is in this respect, he is very far from the great masters of introspection. Augustine liked to compare the vistas of the inner life, terrible as their content might be, to the beauty of "vast courts," of "caves and caverns," of "fields and splendid palaces." Montaigne was a melancholy but passionately amused spectator of self. Proust, more tragic than Montaigne, was also more deeply convinced of the grandeur of mind. Now Gide has an undoubted place in this tradition, if only because he, too, writes splendidly about himself. He is even capable of a witty detachment: "I am merely a little boy having a good time—compounded with a Protestant minister who

bores him." But this spirit is rare in the journal. To Gide, on the whole, introspection is not an art, not even an objective study, but a punitive expedition. He records his moments of vanity, of aimlessness, of indiscretion just as Lafcadio celebrates each sign of weakness in himself by plunging a knife into his thigh. He writes: "Through my heredity, which interbreeds in me two very different systems of life, can be explained this complexity and these contradictions from which I suffer." Gide suffers from complexity, from contradictions, where Montaigne and Proust and even, I think, Augustine, rejoiced in them. And they could rejoice in this way, they could even construct a kind of aesthetic of introspection, because to them the self was ultimately an image of mankind. In the journal Gide's self-analysis too often begins and ends with Gide.

"The endless boredom I inspire in myself" is the subject of numerous entries; and it must be confessed that the journal, at any rate this early installment of it, sometimes bores the reader. No doubt Gide's ennui and self-mistrust are essentially matters of temperament; but surely they have been inflamed by his search for a metaphysical selfhood, a selfhood independent of the social conditions which, for most of us, are simply the conditions of existence. His greatest tales—*La Symphonie Pastorale* or *Les Caves du Vatican*—transcend this personal limit, for in writing them he accepted, in his own way, a different set of conditions, the conditions of art. But there is another and perhaps simpler reason for the deficiencies of the journal. It seems a strange charge to bring against a writer noted for his frankness, but perhaps the journals suffer from too much discretion. One feels that Gide suppresses details of his domestic and sexual life which, if included, might have helped to clarify his melancholy. As it is, his melancholy seems a little in excess of the circumstances, as T. S. Eliot said of Hamlet.

But Mr. O'Brien warns us against trying to judge the entire journal by this first installment, and he is probably right. From a slight acquaintance with the whole work as published in France in 1939, I should guess that the later sections were the more engrossing. Gide's personality became increasingly relevant, increasingly heroic, beside the grim orthodoxies—Catholic, Communist, imperialist—with which it had to contend after 1914. One might say that history gave his individualism a content and a *raison d'etre*.

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