WRITERS AND WRITING

THE NEW LEADER LITERARY SECTION

André Gide: MAN AND WRITER

Reviewed by ISAAC ROSENFELD

THE JOURNALS OF ANDRÉ GIDE. Volume I: 1889-1913. Translated from the French, with an introduction and notes. By Justin O'Brien. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. xxxix + 380 pages. $5.00.

THE imagination is the man. Professor O'Brien, who says of Gide in his introduction to the *Journals* that "like Montaigne and Goethe, he is first a man and secondly a writer," provides ground for a possible disappointment in these notebooks, by leading us to expect a more intimate revelation of the man than the *Journals* have to offer. We are much too ready to believe that "intimate" writing—letters, diaries, journals—is somehow truer and more revealing of the writer than his imaginative work; we suppose, in this age of the overestimation of the biographical, that every man has a confession to make, that the confession is his supreme work and that everything else is ancillary. But the truth is the other way round: if not in every case, certainly so in Gide's. The *Journals*, at any rate, are bound to disappoint the usual expectation: that here is the man, laid bare of his fiction and his other disguises, to be seen for the first time as he really is. Gide has always been stripping himself clean, paring away the core; and there is more of the "intimate" man in his autobiography and his fictions (to respect his judgment that *The Counterfeiters* is his only novel), than in the *Journals*. Besides, the separation of man from writer, always questionable, is false in Gide, where the whole man is the interaction of a man and writer, and each of these elements of the self is the result of the other. And why maintain that any writer is first a man? Our idea of "man," "real" man, "essential" man, is through and through a literary one. "Character" is not something directly taken from nature which the imagination, if it be powerful, can approach as to the limit of its power. "Character," rather, is the work of imagination, whether in literature or in life. We would pay the debt which our sense of reality owes to fiction if we discarded the distinction between man and writer. But there remains the usual division into inner and outer man, private and public self; at least so much of every-day psychology is every day in order. I should like to see what relevance the usual placing of a "man" in relation to his "work" has to an understanding of Gide.

The first thing of use from *The Journals* is the picture Gide draws there—as he has drawn it everywhere—of himself as a divided man, his own actor and spectator. He speaks of having to constrain himself to throw off constraint, of forcing himself to joy. He complains of being "... merely a little boy having a good time—compounded with a Protestant minister who bores him, and writes, "Never a man, I shall never be anything but an aged child. I live with all the incoherence of a lyric poet, but two or three ideas, crosswise in my brain and rigid like parallel bars, crucify every joy; everything that would like to try its wings at random runs into them." (*Cf.* Edouard in *The Counterfeiters*: "I am constantly getting outside myself, and as I watch myself act I cannot understand how a person who acts is the same as the person watching him act, and who wonders in astonishment and doubt how he can be actor and watcher at the same moment.") Such statements may be said to show the personality-structure of the writer and the problems, at this personal level, that Gide's awareness of himself puts before his mind. It is here that the analytic separation of man and writer appears most justified; but it is also from this point that Gide in his work begins to move toward self-integration.

The personality problem is repeated in the literary problem. We find it expressed in the *Journals*, at the higher, symbolic level of writing, in the vexation Gide feels at his inability to keep his journal rapidly written, spontaneous, uncomposed. (Why the vexation at all; hasn't composition its own spontaneities?) The *Journals* are full of dissatisfaction: complaints at being trapped in division, at inadequacies of mood, energy, vitality. ... Gide applies himself to the *ad hoc* solution of the problem—he forces himself to be spontaneous, he sets himself the task of working from nature, of recording, describing, evoking the scene—a French sea-scape, a North African landscape, a garden, a town—of rendering the qualities of Italian sculpture and painting, etc. He looks everywhere for help, to conversation with friends, notes on his reading, reflections on literature, music and morals. But everywhere his dissatisfaction remains: whether we find it in the absence of positive felicity (in the writer—the writing is felicitous in spite of him) or in the presence of a curious publicity in the motive of the *Journals*—the difficulty Gide has in hitting the truly "intimate" tone, which shall not show itself to be compromised by the intention to publish what he writes "for himself."

ANOTHER thing in the *Journals* which allows us to maintain the division between man and writer is the trouble Gide has with imaginative writing. One never feels in reading his entries—as one does in reading say Chekhov's *Notebooks*—that they are connected by an ongoing imaginative activity, a continuous process in the intercourse between writer and world. In Chekhov's *Notebooks* the imagination converts the recorded objects into personal symbols—in virtue of their objectivity. Things stand by themselves; the writer need not present himself. The whiskers, shoes, trousers, medals and watch-fobs with which Chekhov loads his pages, the snatches of dialogue and plot, the sometimes silly notations, answer for the man. Imagination does the work for him of defining his relationship to the world. Whatever Chekov touches becomes his own object, and it is in the confidence that he has left his mark that he absents himself with the observation that a certain lady wears a lorgnette, a certain gentleman, a fur collar. In Gide's *Journals*, however, there is no such telling lightness of touch. We feel the pressure of the hand that wants to leave its own impression; but we are aware of its restraint—Gide knows the value of lightness. We get both the deliberate pressure and the deliberate withholding, but not the natural ease. In place of ease stands embarrassment: Edouard's perplexity at his own division into actor and spectator may be predicated also of Gide's consciousness wondering about its imaginative activity, and with that same wonder, inhibiting it. But here again, in the writing, is the "personality-structure," the "man," typically modern in his over-awareness, his over-extension; the "writer" is never free of him. One might almost yield to the discomforts of the *Journals*, scrap the "writer" altogether, and grant the "man" mercy by conceding: there is value in this, the sum of value for our time. The *Journals* are of greater importance than the fictions. What we were accustomed to look for in the characters of novels, we must be content to find—as much of it as we can have—in the men of journals. Imagination is now impossible, the old value has been lost for good.

BUT precisely at the point of breakdown, where the "man" leaves us facing paralysis, literature comes to our assistance; it draws on a source of its own, converting separation into schematism, paralysis into equilibrium, personality into "character." "In art, what is merely stated," runs R. P. Blackmur's gloss on James, "is not presented, what is not presented is not vivid, what is not vivid is not represented, and what is not represented is not art." But the inhibition of this process can also be represented—Gide's discovery—and the breakdown celebrated instead of the safe arrival. The divisions of the self create in *The Counterfeiters* a novel of layers and levels. Edouard acts out Gide's crisis as actor-spectator; Edouard's Notebook acts out Edouard's crisis; the narrative in actual time acts out the Notebook, etc. The tension between the divided parts of the self is translated in *The Immoralist* into dramatic tension, and the theme of self-determination through the following-out of the homosexual impulse gives the story—and the author's personality-structure—its unification. The personal derangement, the self's being at sixes and sevens, is never completely transcended; the "man" remains in the writer. But a new "man" is indicated; his emergence as a "character" at the upper symbolic levels of composition affects the self-divided man who remains below; the literary character becomes the unification of the actual personality. To the extent that a "solution of the problem" is possible by other than radical means—a complete break with literature, a surrender to psychology—Gide's imaginative writing "solves" both the personal and the literary problem.

The man-as-"character," at this point and from here on, takes precedence over the man-as-personality. We are left at last with the writer who has taken a hand in creating himself. And the advantage has passed over to the imagination—it is the created, artificial man, the literary character composed of parts of the real personality who reveals the "essential" man, and does so better, more fully and more intimately than the man who writes the *Journals*. We are back at proper proportions. Confession, intimacy, personal writings always have an element of distortion. Inevitably so, as Paul Valéry made clear in his essay on Rousseau, for the self is naturally on guard, and to force down its guard is to violate its natural posture. But the imagination betrays the man; the more objective its work and the more distant from the personality, the smaller the suspicion with which it must contend and the greater the personal revelation. Edouard of *The Counterfeiters* has it all over the Gide of the *Journals*, thank God. And the humanity of *The Counterfeiters*, its earnest, didactic morality (which is also one of its weaknesses), its concern with the true way of love and the true way of life are the clarified expression of the self-complaint of the *Journals*.

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THE literary idea of "character" is primary to our understanding of human beings. We smuggle poetry into psychology and deal more with fictions than with facts. "Character" is a theme to be worked out, a pattern of emotional responses to be completed. In reality the pattern is never completed and there is no final flourish to the theme, which remains forever open. It is a pure imposition of a literary idea on life to expect consistency of character, the subordination of all impulses to the dominant ones of theme. But the ambiguity of the idea bestows a double advantage on the writer. The poetic completeness of the imagined character completes his own; but where, as in Gide, the character is not fully imagined-off, where it remains open, owing its literary reality to the fact that it may be said to represent the actual loose, divided condition, then reality supplements literature, and we find ourselves reversing the process, and smuggling psychology into poetry. Gide owes his "essential" nature to his poetic aspirations; and his characters, from which we derive and complete his own figure for him—to the benefit of a doubt. The higher, literary reality may after all, be imperfect: a triumph of naturalism in default of imagination. Here a deficiency becomes a virtue. We reinforce our belief in the stature of the artist precisely because it does fall short.

There is something impermanent about the present estimation of Gide; with time it may settle to a lower level. For all his pursuit and incorporation into his work of the values of classicism, there is little of the classical at the heart of his writing. Gide's famous clear style to the contrary, much in his writing depends on illusion: that the personal defect—the division, the wavering—has been overcome. But the value of the personality is enhanced by the same reservations. For though we admire and criticize the function of the personal element in his work, when we consider the function it has fulfilled in his life, we can only admire it. Gide's good influence on his time, his friendliness toward every new or dissident impulse, his definition of the intellectual as the man whose natural role it is to be heterodox, his constant change and development have all been grounded in the advantages of self-division. The honesty which we celebrate in Gide is nothing accidental, nor is it a deliberately cultivated thing, as with a man who seeks out the good by reputation. It is rather a constitutional virtue, the reward in his life, as it is in his writing, of an irresolution that could never come to rest anywhere, and that kept him from acquiring, and favoring, vested interests in himself. Hence Gide's youthfulness, his frosty vitality. For as Edouard put it, "I am not far from thinking that in irresolution lies the secret of not growing old."

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BUT doesn't this assert what was denied at the beginning, the supremacy

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The Nobel Prize Winner

ANDRÉ GIDE

is the subject of an excellent critical study by Van Meter Ames, just published in The Makers of Modern Literature Series. The book traces Gide's artistic evolution and analyzes all of his best books. $2

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A Great Writer

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of man over writer? Not really. Professor O'Brien's statement that Gide is first a man and secondly a writer is actually a judgmen in literary criticism—and a severe one. It is because of shortcomings in the writer that we locate primary value in the man. But man and writer are one in Gide, and the judging of them belongs to literature. So also does the idea of self-revelation, which is all too readily appropriated for its own by the confessional predilections of our time. But the revealed man is revealed through the imagination, which we should restore not only to the man, Gide, but to our whole idea of what a man is, lest it be consumed in the mass of highly personal, irrelevant details on which the psychological sense gluts itself, to the impoverishment of understanding.