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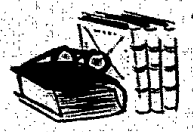
BOOKS

The Journal Keeper



THE second volume (1914-27) of André Gide's "Journals," published by Knopf in the excellent annotated translation of Justin O'Brien, contains such frank declarations on his famous "immoralism" that it will obviously be looked into for its scandal. At the risk of neglecting elements that have certainly not been of minor importance to Gide, I should like to discuss this book—surely the most remarkable journal ever divulged during an author's lifetime—from another angle: its revival of the journal as a work of art and a spiritual document.

Gide is now seventy-eight, and he has been keeping a journal since he was eighteen or nineteen. He began it as a literary exercise and once wrote that he kept on with it to give himself practice "in writing quickly." He has always tested his life and ideas on it, and he has probably never written a sentence in it without shaping it for publication. Like all writers' journals, it has been a "savings bank," in Emerson's phrase, for future work. Such books are dictated as much by prudence as by self-fascination, and it is hard to say of many passages in this one whether Gide was lamenting his life or rehearsing a passage for some unwritten book, since for a writer so consumed by literature there is a constant injunction not to lose a shred of experience. Even in his moments of severest agony, Gide has never forgotten to write well; when a careless passage is forced out of him, he usually instructs himself to repair it. There is probably a good deal of his real life that he has sacrificed for the point and leanness of that amazing style that has been the admiration of even his enemies and his recompense for a certain thinness of imagination. Yet I am sure that Gide has given himself to his journal more freely than to any other book, or idea, or passion. Begun as an exercise, kept up in illness, in travel, in flight from work and as a constant stimulus to work, with many a grumble against its tyranny over him, it has become not only his best book but the symbolic center of his life—its armory, its apology, its supreme justification. If he has surprised himself by living so long, surely one reason has been his unwillingness to finish it.

Journal keepers are a strange breed, and with all their faults are less given to complacency than most people. There have been many writers greater than Gide who kept inferior journals, and many who were incapable of the journal's traditional complaints of failure. It is as absurd to imagine Balzac writing a journal (what for?) as it is to imagine Amiel writing anything else. The Goncourt brothers kept one as a gossipy history, and it has survived their novels; Tolstoy seems to have kept his largely to complain of his wife, who kept one against him. (They exchanged them occasionally.) Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau thriftily incorporated large sections of theirs into their works; Melville started one on his voyage to Palestine, when he was half out of his mind and eager to keep himself going against the day he would write again. Perhaps, to carry on a journal in our time, a writer must have a certain vital anxiety about himself and a realization that his personality is his chief literary resource. The great journal keepers have been extreme Protestants, brought up to account for every minute of their time to a watchful God—our early literature is crammed with them—and Frenchmen, in whom the introspective rationalism of their literary tradition has encouraged the keeping of *cahiers*. Gide is both Protestant and Frenchman, and more, a human being who from early childhood realized that he was "different" and that he could find freedom and consolation only in that dialogue with oneself of which every sincere journal consists.

The continual interplay of these elements makes Gide's "Journals" unique. He is a writer whose real gift has always been for the modelling and modulation of his personal experience rather than for any central originality as a thinker or artist, and in these notes all his ability for moral speculation and the abrupt *pensée* is turned on himself, his work, his friends, the cockpits of literary Paris, and his longing for God. One never knows from passage to passage where the burden of his concern will fall next—whether it will be on himself as a "sin-

ner" who needs to flout the outward law but is afraid that pleasure unhinges him for work, or on his superlative keenness for spotting weakness or falseness in his own writing and that of everyone else, a gift that is sometimes indistinguishable from his desire to write a masterpiece that will redeem him from the gnawing sense of his personal unworthiness. He is either noting scraps for future work, or reproaching himself for wasting time, or getting back at critics, or mourning over his sins, or encouraging himself to sin (those Greeks!), or trying unanticipated flights of thought to get the most out of himself, or finishing salon conversations in which someone else, it is clear, got the upper hand. The book is his confessor, with his ever-present Bible his only spiritual tool, for while he venerates Jesus, he is unable to believe in any church, Catholicism being "inadmissible" and his ancestral Protestantism "intolerable." It is also a register of all his reading (he is as careful to make a notch for each new book read as was Justice Holmes or John Quincy Adams), of his progress at the piano (he cannot play if anyone is listening), and of letters to unfriendly critics that he will never mail. The journal is even a character in his life and work. We find him addressing it as his taskmaster, his conscience, the shadow of that outer world he hopes to escape when he enters the journal's happy chaos. When he is idle elsewhere, he can be busy here; when he is writing, or even unexpectedly happy, he complains that he notes in this book merely his bad days—will history misjudge him? But only the journal is adequately flexible and easy to contain all his contradictions; only its privacy will force him to the bottom of his own mind. A good deal like Eliot's Prufrock, he is constantly asking himself "Do I dare?," and, having dared, he attacks his failings with Puritan indignation. He is an unresting student—even after he had reached seventy, he was still memorizing long lists of German words, and he later incurred the wrath of the party-line patriots, who already disliked his views on Russia, when he revealed that he had been studying his beloved Goethe during the Occupation of France—but even here he sadly comments on his inability to rely sufficiently on himself; all those books he must finish are only a way of getting him "ready" for his work. His greatest wish has always been to let himself go, to confess the heresies of his mind and his sexual cravings to the limit. But two injunctions stand on opposite sides of him—the command of

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Jesus that a man must "lose his life" in order to save it, and the ethic of supreme liberation he worships in the Greeks, in Blake, Keats, Goethe, and Nietzsche. It is interesting to note that his passion for Socrates was not shared by Blake and Nietzsche—*he* needs them all. He would like to "renounce" his life, and, in a famous passage written in 1916, during his religious crisis, notes his wistful belief that "it is in perfect abnegation that individualism triumphs . . . self-renunciation is the summit of self-assertion." Yet, like another La Rochefoucauld, he notes with his little smile that "vice" is "more imperious than any duty." Actually, he has never expected liberation but has characteristically sought the literary text for liberation. If he had achieved the Greek ideal, he would never have defined so correctly, and with typical French *justice*, the limits within which man actually lives. He would like to be both free and good, and, failing both, has compromised by being honest. He is not noble and does not pretend to be. There is many a feline thrust at Francis Jammes (too cloying), at his friend Paul Valéry (makes too many demands on his intelligence, is almost inhuman), at Paul Claudel (too self-righteous, like so many Catholics he knows). And there is a particularly cold portrait of Marcel Proust, whose boldness about his own homosexuality shocked Gide; we are not surprised, in a later passage, to find him peevishly criticizing Proust's syntax. Yet, with all this, he never allows us to forget that, despite everything he feels lacking in his own life and talent, he is a European and that his great tradition has been to translate every experience into an idea.

What is it that drives a man to keep a journal so long? Each writer starts with his own need, but surely the reasons are always the same—the struggle against death and for time, the need to use one's life to the uttermost. Recording one's days somehow saves them from extinction, and if one is a writer, there is always the hope that they will be reused in the tasks that lie ahead. There is nothing so moving in all Gide's works as this struggle with himself to maintain the victory over life. "I cling desperately to this notebook," he writes in one passage. "It is a part of my patience; it helps keep me from going under." In another: "It is time to learn once more to prefer the events that choose men to those I should have chosen myself." The journal is thus an accounting of necessity and a training in necessity. He notes that Briand's secretary, whom he dislikes, is the perfect type of climber: "He succeeds by means of patience, of minute economy, of hygiene." Add "moral" before "hygiene," and this "minute economy" becomes the very pattern of Gide's own journal. Even as he is repeating to himself Jesus's command to "lose" one's life, he is saving his in little ways, improving it, sharpening his mind on the classics, and constantly turning the whetstone of his style. It is this unremitting search for self-correction and self-purification, by a succession of small efforts, that reveals the essentially religious source of the journal. To this must be added the candor of a man who knows that he will always stand outside conventional society; and this would give a special pathos to his book if he were not always able to use up the dead matter of his days in other work. Work fills every gap, and if he cannot work, he must tirelessly analyze why. It is not until one has lived through so many days of Gide's life that one realizes how much modern man has replaced faith in another world with work in this one. Gide is never so Protestant as when he is counting up every minute of his time, and never so modern as in his belief that work will fill the spiritual vacuum. But if the ideal success has escaped him, there is always his journal. And so, consuming his life, he still has it.

—ALFRED KAZIN