

Andre Gide through a looking glass

THE JOURNALS OF ANDRÉ GIDE, Volume I, 1889-1913. Translated with an introduction and notes, by Justin O'Brien (Alfred A. Knopf, \$5).

By Leon Edel
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ANDRÉ GIDE might be described as the supreme actor among modern writers. He has been fashioning a role for himself for more than half a century, elaborating a thousand touches to his make-up, putting on disguises and costumes, striking attitudes and committing with himself in magnificent soliloquy—and all in front of the public. There has been no private dressing room in Gide's life. He must exhibit himself at all times, even in the act of preparing to create. It was inevitable, therefore, that he should authorize the publication of his journals during his lifetime.

There are writers who lead private lives, preferring to create behind the locked door of their study. They destroy their notes and diaries much as a carpenter sweeps up the shavings once he has completed his work. Such writers leave the mystery of their creation to be fathomed by the critics and scholars from the finished work and from such notes and documents as escape destruction. The evidence that is left on their desks when they die has the merit of spontaneity. It is unrehearsed; it provides some slight entry into their minds, where a search may be made for the elements that combined to produce their art.

But journals such as Gide has kept, and dipped into for publication, end by being no journals at all. They constitute still another artfully created book, to be placed beside his other books, so that at times we wonder whether the cunning old actor may not spring on us some still more private journal in which he took notes for his public journal.

For, if ever we had a conscious case of Narcissus, played out on a large literary stage—and not with limpid pools, but with great mirrors, massive plates of glass that magnify and distort and shimmer and reflect—it is the case of André Gide, who has made of his narcissism a chiselled art and has sat for a remarkable literary self-portrait all his days.

Aware at every step

Narcissus, it will be recalled, was a handsome youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool and pined away because he could not possess his shadow. But Gide has not pined away. He has looked at the pool with evident satisfaction and even stirred it a little, so as to see what happens to his image when there are ripples. He hasn't always been happy about his countenance, but he has made capital of his unhappiness as of his happiness.

In these circumstances his journals cannot be considered an outpouring, for his own use, of the innermost contents of his mind, or a reflection of inner feeling. Gide is, at every step, aware of his public. Justin O'Brien's claim, in his quite admirable preface, that the *Journals* will endure because of their "spontaneity" seems to me only a half-truth. They will endure, but precisely because of their remarkable lack of spontaneity.

Gide himself observes in an entry of January 10, 1902: "The need that makes me write these notes has nothing spontaneous, nothing irresistible, about it. I have never enjoyed writing rapidly. That's why I want to force myself to do so." He would, indeed, like to be spontaneous. Yet he must force himself, and for that purpose, and others, he kept his journals. He asks himself: "What good is this jour-



André Gide, the first volume of whose *Journals* (1889-1913) is reviewed here.

nal? I cling to these pages as to something fixed among so many fugitive things. . . . Even here . . . I grope." And again, he observes, the *Journals* are "good solely as a way of getting into the habit of writing."

He is, then, the least spontaneous of men, for he must always carry his mirror with him. He has to watch himself talking and grimacing in public. It is no accident that the author of *The Counterfeiters* wrote a book of verse early in his career, called *The Treatise of the Narcissus*, or that mirror images spring at us from the pages of the *Journals*.

Skating on fresh ice, Gide observes himself "as if lying in space . . . leaning over the reflection like Narcissus." On page 10: "To me the world is a mirror, and I am amazed when it gives a bad reflection of me." On page 18 the image is that of "leaning over the mirror of our acts." On page 84 the furniture of his surroundings are "a mirror, a prepared approbation." And on page 105 he gives himself up to the full pleasure of self-admiration: "This morning, on awakening, I enjoy seeing myself in the mirror. Good sign. On bad days I looked at myself just the same, but my reflection seems odious to me."

On page 267 he is with a group: "Each one of us here looks to me as if he were in the tailor's fitting room, surrounded by mirrors reflecting one another, and seeking in the minds of others his multiplied image. In spite of oneself, one assumes a pose, one throws out one's chest, one would like so much to see oneself from the back."

He even prefers to see others in mirrors rather than directly. "Paul Claudel is more massive, wider than even; he looks as if he were seen in a distorting mirror."

The rest follows. We can see how, as a boy, being interested mostly in himself, he was not interested in his playmates. He describes this vividly in his candid, Rousseauesque memoirs. *Si le grain ne meurt* (published by Baudouin House under the title *If It Dies*). We understand

why he tells us in his *Journals*, "My greatest joys have been solitary."

We grasp readily his discomfort or shyness or self-consciousness in the company of his fellow-writers: "In a group it's not so much the others that bore and annoy me, it's myself." And again: "I have found the secret of my boredom in Rome. I do not find myself interesting here." When we read, on page 15: "talking of myself bores me," we can only shrug our shoulders and remark that Gide seems to have bored himself a great deal.

But he doesn't bore us, for he lays himself open, with a sense of self-observation and dramatized self-analysis that makes him a superb literary case history. We are invited to enjoy a perceptive mind. If, in its own image, it is "tightly buttoned up," it nevertheless reaches deeply into itself for our benefit and its aggrandizement.

Gide is unrelaxed. He doesn't know the meaning of relaxation. He drives himself constantly to work, to read, to his long hours at the piano. He holds every minute of his life precious and must live it with a worried intensity. He must analyze himself constantly. He cannot even go to the races of an afternoon in a relaxed frame of mind. The wonder is that he goes.

Such paltry pleasures

"Wasted two hours at the Auteuil races for 10 minutes of adulterated emotion. I haven't the habit of such paltry pleasures. My demoralization came especially from having paced the public enclosure over and over without meeting a single person with whom I wanted to talk or go to bed."

A man so fixed in his regard of himself is not likely to see others with any degree of objectivity. His evaluation on such occasions is invariably in terms of attitude, intellectual or emotional; the attitude Gide makes the person observed take beside him, in front of his mirror. He makes some brilliant remarks, for example, about Anatole France:

"He is fluent, subtle, elegant. He is the triumph of the euphemism. But above it no restlessness in him; one knows him at

the first draught. . . . I suspect that he hardly exists at all behind and beyond what he reveals to us. Everything comes out in conversation, in relationships. These who frequent him appreciate being taken right into the drawing-room and study; these rooms are on one floor; the rest of the house doesn't matter. In my case I am annoyed not to have any hint of the nearby room in which a crime is committed or of the room in which people make love."

Inner rooms of the mind

This throws much more light on Gide than on France. A critic less inclined to self-protection would not reproach France for a lack of restlessness. There are restless people and calm people, and if, in the judgment of Gide, Anatole France was calm, unperturbed, extrovert, refusing to display the inner rooms of his mind or even to give a hint of them, it is the quality of his calmness, the manner in which he treats or displays the rooms of his personality, that is the concern of those passing judgment.

To reproach him because "there is no restlessness in him" is like reproving a person for having brown eyes instead of blue. What Gide says, in effect, is: "I like restless people."

Inevitably, therefore, Gide is at his best when he is recording his own emotions. There are no pages in the *Journals* more vivid or moving than those he has consecrated to the death of his novelist friend, Charles-Louis Philippe. They constitute a perfect short story, although little more is told than the quite commonplace history of death and burial. They acquire vividness because we move with Gide, in his grief, from the death chamber to the final moment in the cemetery and take from him the crowded series of images that have colored his mind throughout this deeply-felt experience.

A biting pen

So, too, when he occasionally gets away from his mirror and looks directly at the object he is describing and thinking about, he can write with a sense of detail and a biting pen; almost as if he were painting a scene. There is such writing in his vignette of the Countess de Noailles:

"She was expecting us, and this is rather apparent: she is lying on a chaise-longue made up of two armchairs and a stool that all go together, sinuously draped in a sort of Rumanian or Greek robe of black Tussore silk with a broad band of whitish gray, of that soft white one finds in China paper and certain Japanese felts; the chemise floats amply around her bare arms loaded with Venetian bracelets."

"A scarf wanders around her, the color of the yolk of a hard-boiled, or rather a soft-boiled, egg; the color of dried apricots. Siren, her feet disappear mysteriously under a Tunisian cloth. Her hair is undone, abandoned, and jet black; cut in bangs on her forehead, but falling as it wet onto her shoulders."

Mme. de Noailles talks with an amazing volubility; the sentences rush to her lips, crush themselves and become confused in their haste; she says three or four at a time. This makes a very tasty compote of ideas, sensations, images, a bit-trutti, accompanied by gestures of the hands and arms, of the eyes especially, which she turns skyward in a swoon that is not too artificial but rather too encouraged.

Given his self-centered personality, we can understand Gide's failure to appreciate the political side of Leon Bhun, and his stricture, "If politics did not bend all his thoughts, what a keen critic he would be," is a projection of his sense that criticism belongs only to the artistic or crea-

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tive life. And we can understand, also, his failure to see that it is a very rich and very creative part of the political life of a nation as well. What literature lost in Léon Blum, French politics gained. It goes beyond this, for Blum was able to work in a political party with his fellow-men.

Knopf has made an attractive volume of these *Journals* covering the first 24 writing years of Gide's life. Others are to follow that will reveal the Gide of the First World War, his subsequent flirtation with Communism and the journals he kept during the late war.

The editing of the volume is, on the whole, meticulous; the footnotes are helpful but not obtrusive, and a glossary provides the uninitiated with a valuable directory of the French literary and art world of the last half-century. O'Brien's translation has caught the full flavor of Gide, the austerity and economy of expression, the individual turn of the phrase and the sparse, intellectual quality of the prose.

As a result, the self-portrait emerges with all its rich tints and tones. To study it is to go on a fascinating adventure with an Ego.