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Andre Gide's Criticisms of Oscar Wilde

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"OSCAR WILDE: In Memoriam; De Profundis," by André Gide; translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman. (Philosophical Library, $2.75.)

Reviewed by Ney MacMinn

Today André Gide, referred to by most contemporary critics as "the greatest living French writer," continues to write at the age of 80, exceeded in years and creative productivity only by Shaw and Santayana. Recently an English translation of his Journal, the medium thru which he has portrayed the interplay in his life of friends, books, and creative work, has been widely acclaimed here in America; and with increasing frequency one sees in the literary magazines allusions to his novels, essays, and critical pieces. So wide a public has Gide found among Americans that the editors of the Philosophical Library have decided to publish this book on Oscar Wilde even tho the two essays that compose it date back, the first, to 1901; the second, to 1905.

André Gide

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Gide first met Wilde in 1891 when he was 22 and Wilde was 36. Thereafter, between that time and 1898, when he left France to travel, his encounters were various—often and everywhere (for in his heyday Wilde was a ubiquitous soul): in 1892, once in Florence in 1894, again in Algiers in 1895, once at Berneval in 1897, and twice in Paris before Wilde's final horrible crack-up.

What he does report is Wilde's appearance and state of mind during the times he saw him. In 1891, when the English author was at the peak of his powers, he was handsome, rich, laden with good fortune, and full of the marvelous talk that won him widespread adoration. "He did not converse," says Gide; "he narrated." From him flowed talk about the real world, the world of art, nature, the beauty of lying, pagan naturalism as opposed to Christian idealism, and a multitude of the fables he loved to compose to enforce his ideas—fables of the death of Narcissus, the crucifixion, Christ and those He had healed, and the sinner naked before God. The fables as reported by Gide are shorter and more compact than as published by Wilde.

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Four years later, when Gide ran into Wilde in Algiers, he found him changed. The Englishman was hard, raucous, and frenzied; he did not tell fables and he was sunk in anxiety and foreboding. He viewed with dread, Gide thinks (albeit contrary to most biografers), the outcome of his quarrel with the Marquis of Queensberry. At any rate, six months later he was in prison, sentenced to two years at hard labor.

When Gide again saw him he had served his sentence and was planning to give up his former sybaritic way of life to write. "I've put my genius into my life; I've put only my talent into my works," he had told Gide in Algiers; now he proposed to reverse the process. Lord Douglas (the B— in Gide's book) was to be abandoned; Queen Victoria was an ideal woman; pity was the greatest and most beautiful thing in the world; and Flaubert was a small writer because he did not understand pity and the Russian novelists great because they did.

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Within a few months, however, Wilde was in Paris with Douglas, hoping to be again, as he phrased it, "the King of Life." Gide saw him twice more, but Wilde was not the King of Life. Frayed, penniless, friendless, beaten, he was on the way to death.

In the last pages of his book Gide gives his views of Wilde's "De Profundis." Altho there is, he says, no expression of regret by Wilde for his life of excess, there is a recognition of the fact that he must "advance toward a more significant destiny"—a soul-saving device which Gide subsequently was to make serve as a cornerstone for his own philosophy.