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**A la Recherche d'une Ame**

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Vol I

**The Journals of André Gide. Vol. I. 1889-1913:**  
 Translated by Justin O'Brien. *Secker and Warburg*. 25s.

THERE IS no single author living today as significant as André Gide and no European literature which does not claim his works amongst its most vital influences. This influence which he has exercised on literature he has exercised on individuals as well. There is in the twentieth century a definite atmosphere which can be defined as *Gidism* just as there was in the nineteenth century an influence called *Rousseauism*. It is easier to feel what *Gidism* is than to define it. It is primarily a desire to reach the real personality beneath the "counterfeit" personality which outside constraint imposes on man. It is the longing for absolute integrity based on complete intellectual liberty and personal responsibility without which no moral integrity is possible. It is also the re-examination of the hierarchy of moral values with full honesty of self-analysis and absence of complacency. This leads to spiritual anxiety and self-doubt, to hair-splitting about motives. This spiritual anxiety is an important part of *Gidism*, it is also part of the atmosphere of our age—often called *angst*—and it takes the place of the *Mal du Siècle* of the Romantics.

Each of Gide's works is a search for himself—for one aspect of himself. It is a dialogue with himself about moral considerations. He never wrote a book dealing with one aspect of a problem that he did not feel the urge to write another giving the diametrically opposite point of view. Each of his novels is an attitude which he adopts for the sake of speculation and this makes him less of a novelist than a moralist, less of a novelist than an investigator. He does not really concern himself with creating complex characters giving the illusion of life; he is an investigator—luckily he is also a very great artist—less interested in *men* than in *man*, less anxious to make an amalgam of contradictions than to isolate a special characteristic. He is a chemist who isolates a substance in order to obtain its purest essence. Each of his works is a chemical experiment in "purifying" some one quality or vice which he pursues to its logical conclusion.

As a moralist he is passionately interested in the problem of sin—especially in the apparently virtuous and complacent. He describes himself as watching the people coming out of church on Sunday and he says "Their thoughts are freshly washed by the sermon which they have just heard and put away tidily in their heads, as if in a cup-

board. I would like to rummage in the bottom drawer—I've got the key." As he looks at civilization he is appalled at the pressure of outworn codes on the individual personality and he considers that, in his attempt to conform with this, the individual is obliged to develop a counterfeit personality which suppresses a whole set of impulses which constitute the real personality. It is the inner personality, beneath the counterfeit personality, which Gide has always tried to reach, that inner personality in which good and evil overlap as in a marriage of Heaven and Hell. In his book of essays, *Prétextes*, he explains his meaning by contrasting the opposing economic theories of Ricardo and Carey. Ricardo's theory is that when a country has been occupied for some time the best soil is cultivated, since the first settlers appropriated the best lands. Soon, says Ricardo, only the poorest soil is left untilled. Carey's theory is that the first settlers did not take up the richest lands but only those which were most easily cultivated, which in reality is the poorest soil. The fertile land is the one which, in a state of nature, is overrun by an exuberant vegetation and this land to be settled must first be cleared. Gide goes on to say that those who first studied man's nature did so only where it was most easily accessible, only gradually did they realize all the possibilities in man.

Gide is a writer of great complexity—the biographer's despair—a master of many modes. He is a novelist, a short-story writer, a dramatist and essayist; he is also an accomplished prose artist, a humorist—*Les Caves du Vatican* is one of the supremely comic books of our time. He is important as a moralist and a diarist. Of all his works it is his *Journal* which remains his greatest work and the one most suited to his genius. It is a book unique in French literature—indeed in any literature—a record of saintly variety than the *Causeries du Lundi* of Sainte-Beuve. It is a treasure house of discussion of every artistic and intellectual movement over more than half a century, of every known writer and artist. It is a book to have beside one and to dip into constantly—there is something for every taste. As a whole it may lack form and unity—how could it be otherwise with its half million words, its variety of topics and phases of life—but individual extracts are amongst the finest examples of his writing. He has written few pages of greater beauty, tenderness and simplicity than his description of the death of the writer Charles-Louis Philippe and his funeral amongst the simple peasants who were his family. As we read

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the *Journal* a picture of the author gradually rises up in our mind, not the definitive psychological full-length portrait which the biographer will one day have to paint, but the series of impressions we receive from those whom we frequent with sympathy, a picture of a man of rare delicacy, sensibility and perception, a man more at home with simple, genuine and unpretentious people than with the learned and sophisticated. There are pictures of him as he wanders through the woods picking up the injured and sick birds and little wild animals and nursing them back to health in his own bedroom, feeding them on drops of milk as if they were babies, and tending them through long nights of crisis; we see him surrounded by the dirty, unattractive beggar children in Normandy, sitting amongst them and reading to them the *Fables* of Lafontaine. They considered him their friend and would run to meet him when they saw him in the distance, striding along, his pilgrim's cloak billowing in the wind. He never felt disgust at them, though he was often obliged, when he got home, to shake the vermin from his clothes.

Yet, full as it is, the *Journal* does not give a complete picture of him. We shall never understand him nor his writings fully until we have some feeling about him as a person, until we understand more clearly his emotional life, and on this he is either discreetly reticent or else—when he is most outspoken—seems to lead us on to false trails. There are many passages in his autobiography—and amongst the apparently most frank—which seem to one reader at least to bear interpretations other than the obvious, other than those he wishes us to hold. We can never know him fully until we understand his relationship with his wife which he calls in the *Journal*, "*le drame secret de ma vie*". He admits that because of his reticence on this subject his diary is "*aveuglé*" and that he had only been able to give a mutilated picture of himself with "*un trou à la place du coeur*". This is a terrible admission from a sincere diarist. Nevertheless the *Journal* does reflect indirectly the stresses and strains, the complexity and depth of what was undoubtedly the greatest emotional experience of his life. He calls his attachment to her "*le secret de toutes mes indéciions*". Indeed he speaks truly when he says "*Ce sont mes réticences qui sont les plus passionnées*". Although he has written much about himself he does not want to be fully known—or rather he only wants the personality he prepares to be known. He is afraid when people begin to interpret. "*Ne me comprenez pas si vite!*" he begs in the *Journal*. The outspoken truths he gives us are less like weapons to be used against him than a shield to protect himself.

Hitherto the complete *Journal*, published in Paris in 1939, has only been available in French. Now there comes from America this beautifully produced translation. Mr O'Brien has written an admirable preface which sets Gide in his place in the literature of his time and is an excellent introduction to a study of his work. This edition has the advantage over the French in having a better index, explanatory notes and a glossary of the persons named in the text, compiled with the help of Gide himself and his publisher. The diary is to be published in three volumes of which this is the first, running from 1889 to 1913. This is a very important phase in Gide's life and development. He began to write at the height of the Symbolist Movement and the works written then have the richness of style of that school. It is the period of conflict between his puritan upbringing and the desires of the flesh. It is an unhappy tortured phase. Then he went to Algeria to escape from his anguish. There he found liberation and the philosophy of joy which he expressed in *Les Nourritures Terrestres*—the work which had most influence

on the rising generation of the 'twenties.

He returned to Paris and plunged again into the literary *mêlée* with his new happiness. His mother's death brought him home and once more to the brink of the abyss. As a result of his grief and despair at her death he turned again to religion for strength and consolation. Then he married his cousin whom he had loved since childhood. She seemed to him all that he most admired and needed, she would save him. She was the great love of his life, his only deep emotion. But you cannot give happiness—your own kind of happiness—to anyone else—it can only grow from fusion—and things did not turn out as he had hoped. During the following twenty years—in spite of his great love—he lived in a state of conflict with himself which is reflected in this volume of the *Journal*. He has worked out the different aspects of that long conflict in his novels—the two opposing aspects are seen in *L'Immoraliste* and *La Porte Etroite* respectively. In the first he has shown the problem from the point of view of the husband; it is the tale of a man who destroys his own and his wife's happiness through his egoistic conception of personal liberty. In *La Porte Etroite* he gives the problem from the angle of the woman; it is the story of a girl who destroys her own happiness and that of the man she loves through immoderate virtue. We find the same conflict reflected with more warmth and emotion in the *Journal*. There was between them incessant struggle which was never resolved. In *Num Quid et Tu* we have its last flashes, the last attempt at self-subjugation, the final attempt to be what Emmanuèle would have wished. But after the war he seemed to change. He cast away his scruples, his hair-splitting about motives and guilt, he said, "*Je laisse les contradictions vivre en moi*". This later phase and the works which were its outcome will be reflected in the other volumes of the *Journal*. With his liberation from his own personal conflicts he was freed from his obsession with self.

Now he had energy left over for objective considerations. He became the champion of the underdog—criminal offenders, colonial natives and the socially underprivileged—here was his temporary adherence to Communism. Then there emerged a new shade in his conception of liberty. He now thought that liberty was not sufficient in itself. It devours itself if it is not linked with an ideal beyond mere egoism and self-expression—with some duty even. This is the "*liberté serviable*" of his middle years and is a change from the individualistic liberty of the early works. Later still he came to believe that absolute liberty destroys the individual and society unless it be linked with tradition. Tradition is the thread which permitted Theseus to return from the Maze.

In Gide's development as an artist there has been the same development in his style as in his thought. First he was a poet who used language to express personal lyric feeling; eventually he became a moralist with a style of pure and sober classicism. By the end of the First War he had banished all extraneous ornament from his style as he aimed at achieving the classicism of Racine while sacrificing nothing of the poetry, by expressing most by saying least, in a strict form containing, restraining, deep emotion. He abandoned all lyricism, all rhetoric, all images, but a deceptive simplicity remains which only a supreme artist could achieve. We see the transition in the *Journal* when he says that he wanted his style to become more stringent, more purified, "deeming that the only justification for ornamentation is to hide some defect and that only insufficiently beautiful thought need fear utter nudity". It is here that the translator most betrays him. Gide is one of the great masters of French prose but the English gives no conception of the beauty of his style. It is true that he is extremely difficult to translate, for his simplicity is very subtle and every effect is calculated. With his horror of the trivial and the commonplace he would be incapable of writing, "I didn't use to be like that". It is also very doubtful whether he would ever have described a boy as "having his hair in bangs down to his eyebrows". Admittedly the very Gidian expression "*Je me suis ffileusement blotti dans un peu de sa tendresse!*" defies adequate translation but he would not have written "I snuggled up in her affection", nor "a moment of sagging" for "*un moment d'affaissement*".

There is sometimes a lack of precision in Mr O'Brien's translation which fails to convey the shade of meaning of the French. Gide tells how once he noticed with interest a boy who came accompanied by his widowed mother and sister to sit for his *baccalauréat*. When they left he went out after them and followed them for a long time. Then suddenly realizing the vanity of his behaviour, he turned back sadly, "*Je m'en retournais très triste*". Mr O'Brien renders this as "I returned home very sad". On another occasion Gide describes the destitution of the poor little children who follow him round, children who do not seem ever to have learnt to smile and he says, "*Ils sont à refaire en entiers*", they need to be remade entirely. Mr O'Brien's translation is "They ought to be completely outfitted from head to foot" which does not express what Gide wishes to convey.

Proust called his great work *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Gide's could be called *A la Recherche d'une Ame*. All through his life it is spiritual values that he has pursued—albeit often in the byways. When time will allow a fully objective judgment of his work he will be seen as a moralist in the great seventeenth century tradition—the tradition of La Rochefoucauld and Pascal—whose nobility of thought and writing place him on equality with the great masters of the Golden Age of French literature.