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**Puritan's Progress**

3007  
by JULIAN SYMONS

The Journals of André Gide, 1889-1913 : Translated by Justin O'Brien. Secker and Warburg. 25/-.

ANDRÉ GIDE began to keep a journal when he was twenty years old. Now he is nearly eighty; and the recent award to him of the Nobel Prize for Literature commensurates as much the peculiar quality of his mind as the innovations in technique and subject for which he is perhaps chiefly famous. His triumph as an artist (the Journals emphasise what *L'Immoraliste*, *Les Caves du Vatican* and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* suggest) is that of a Puritan—a Puritan immensely aware of the traps and beauties of sensuality.

Having from his earliest years enjoyed an enviable economic independence permitting a life devoted wholly to disinterested art" (the words are his translator's), this austere, shy and graceful young man took a place, though hardly at first a prominent one, in the French Symbolist movement, which in the nineties was at the height of its influence and power. He was absorbed by problems of conduct which were also, for him, problems of literature.

At the age of twenty-one he wrote in his Journal that it was necessary to have a rule of life; that one should never prefer the means to the end; and "hence, never prefer oneself to the chosen end, to the work." But this austerity was contradicted by much in his own nature; the Puritan was intensely excited by the beauty of statues, by bright landscapes and pictures, and by the mystery and degradation of many features in Oriental life.

His life moved for years between opposing poles of sensuality and Puritanism. In 1893 he noted:

Do not read any more books by ascetics. Find one's exaltation elsewhere; admire that difficult joy of equilibrium, of the fullness of life.

He longed to be free from what was "useless and narrow" in his own nature, and, influenced by Oscar Wilde, he observed that "It is not good to excite desires by a too long resistance

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## THE BUBBLE REPUTATION

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In 1933, Montgomery Belgium was already alarmed by the view that Gide had begun to date. To-day, the ex-Communist Gide is attacked by the French Communist press, and we may gather from Sartre's editorials in *Les Temps Modernes* that Gide is already a classic and loved by the critics because he has written posthumous works during his life-time (this is said of Valéry and only implied of Gide) and that the value of his work is identical with that of his typical reader, the cultivated son of a well-to-do middle-class family in safe revolt against that family's narrow, utilitarian Theism. When the award of a Nobel prize coincides with a comprehensive English translation of his *Journals* (the rest is to follow in two more large and beautiful, American-printed volumes), the over-all question is bound to arise. Is Gide really as good as they say?

A barren question, if asked disinterestedly. I see the need for Sartre to raise it. Sartre is Gide's natural successor, and he wishes to swerve all writing into a different path—rightly, I think. In these *Journals*, Gide is equally uncompromising with the minor prophet whose mantle fell upon himself, Anatole France (with France, too, questions about what it all really amounted to were always quelled by references to the famous "style").

About Gide's huge reputation, there is something unplaceable, diffuse and possibly masterpieces that he carries weight (and in this he is justly paired off with Paul Valéry). I do not believe that his most devoted admirers would claim a great deal for him as a technical innovator or place his achievement in the recognised "creative" forms (more especially fiction, with *Les Caves du Vatican*, *L'Immoraliste*, *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, *La Porte étroite*) beside the best of his contemporaries, Rilke, Kafka, Yeats, Claudel, Proust, Joyce or Eliot. Indeed, most of his narrative fiction and drama serve the purposes of a day-dream annexe to the enormous autobiographical structure which his work otherwise constitutes. In his novels, plays and idylls, he has sketched out possible attitudes for the young man who was always at once himself and his ideal reader and whose life, even without these further delicious possibilities (such as that of ejecting people from moving trains), was never unduly constricted or wholly without a gesture and a pose. For, although it would certainly be false to say that Gide played to the gallery, yet it might be true that he plays in turn to the boxes, the dress circle and the orchestra stalls.

Grant this, and grant that the greatest are less inclined to cease their audience, and how impressive Gide remains. The secret lies in these *Journals*. Sartre should at least applaud the deliberation with which Gide "chose himself." Any attempt to pick out the first and crucial step in this choice must involve mentioning the name of Maurice Barrès, who, beginning his career as a Stirneresque ego-worshipper, later developed the line of blood-and-soil mystical patriotism which produced such curious results among the French upper and middle classes during the recent war. Gide was, in Barrès sense, "deracinate." He was born in Paris of the union of a Norman Catholic and a meridional Protestant family. "Deracinate" he therefore chose to be, and it is amusing to see how, throughout his work and not only in the *Journals*, he continues to nag at Barrès. Let the blood-stream pump as it will, Gide's own authority must come from the head, and his region will be the whole world; its generations the phases of civilisation.

The Gide of these first *Journals* is a pianist, a gardener, a bridegroom, a traveller, an indefatigable member of the best circles, a founder of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, a stylist, a translator and a Christian. As late as 1912, he writes, "How easy it would be for me now to throw

myself into a confessional!" He denounces Switzerland: "The admiration of mountains is an invention of Protestantism. Strange confusion, on the part of brains incapable of art, between the lofty and the beautiful." Elsewhere he grows angry at Claudel's inability to take the words of Christ literally.

In this wonderful presentation of a period, the minor figures I myself find most engaging are the sad, defeated piano-teacher and Mme. Gide (Emmanuelle Rondeaux, a first cousin), her presence, both early and late, a delicately tender evocation which I do not think Gide could have managed in fiction and which he did not manage in the early *Cahiers d'André Walter*, where he writes of her, as of himself, by her real Christian name. I like, too, the continual exasperation afforded Gide by the temperaments of two of his most distinguished contemporaries, the bloody-minded Remy de Gourmont, the vain and insensitive Francis Jammes. There are also the first African travels and the moving account of the death of Charles-Louis Philippe formerly published in *Nouveaux Prétexes*.

Professor O'Brien's translation is rarely marred by such Americanisms as "right now," "stop off," and "winning out," and it may be one's own fault if, while applauding the sentiment, one just fails to gather what is meant by a youthful entry which speaks of renouncing dreams and leading "a vigorous and fulsome life" or this later generalisation: "No matter how robust it is, our appetite broad-jumps over unqualifiable courses." Professor O'Brien has added some useful documentation of his own, though it is possible that one or two of his foot-notes insult the reader. I would not myself expect to see this book in the hands of anyone who did not know that *Wilhelm Meister* was by Goethe or *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe.

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