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Nose-Thumbing Career Ends With Adoration Of New Idol

BY ALEX SMALL

To judge from the attention it has attracted in the world of scribblers, M. André Gide should be proud of his declaration of sympathy with Soviet Russia. He wanted, he wrote, "to see what could come of a state without religion and a society without barriers, for religion and the family are the two worst enemies of Progress." The flattering sensation of having scandalized the taxpayers is not new to M. Gide; he has for years been the bad boy of French letters.

The statement in itself is hardly interesting, having no more value than any such abstract declaration, as for instance, that religion and the family are the two best friends of Progress. An observer of human nature might find it more diverting to examine the influences which lead M. Gide to make such statements.

The process can be, of course, an unfair one. The declaration of a man may be penetrating and just, and its value is not impaired by the discovery that the man is mad, as some critics, taking the attitude of a cross-examining lawyer, seem to think. Here it is fair enough to ask, since we are not concerned with refuting the statement, why M. Gide thinks in a particular way, or rather why he strikes a peculiar attitude.

He is a man of vast culture, of subtle intelligence, and with a rare sense for the qualities of words. His talents would seem to destine M. Gide to an honorable place in the course of French literature. Yet it is likely that he will not be long remembered once his contemporary influence, now waning, has passed, nor that to the future historian he will seem more than a ripple on the stream.

The explanation is that he has thrown off so far as he could the French literary tradition. For a writer using another tongue that might have been an added quality, but French is too powerful a discipline to be discarded lightly. Its strength lies in its fidelity to its origins, a strength which those who do not like it consider that of the strait-jacket.

Instead, M. Gide has taken his influences from Goethe and from Dostoevsky. The former has naturally influenced French letters, as he has all others, but from him the French can accept only what they can assimilate. The spirit of Goethe is often curiously transformed in the process, but that is inevitable. As for the great hallucinatory Russian, he can never be to the French anything but a strange outlaw.

Deliberately M. Gide thus cut loose from the tradition which has shaped the thought of his countrymen. He has been further freed from catering to them by financial independence. Beyond doubt he could have made a living, and a good one, by writing, and his books must now be profitable to him, but he has never needed to care. He could afford always to say whatever he wanted in his own sweet way.

Whenever a man of talent makes nose-thumbing his career, it is safe to say that he has been turned away in his youth. That has been M. Gide's case and of it he has made no secret. He grew up in a field Protestant environment in which he says that he suffered. The memory of it appears to rouse to this day, when he is set by his anger and scorn, and all the spiritual experiences by which he has set so much store have in a successive series in his deliverance.

But the deliverance has never been complete; otherwise he would have forgotten about the oppression. Thus he has all his life had to pay, by opposition, a tax to ancestral Protestantism. So in hybridic America, a Mencken can never forget the Methodist parsons, and

emancipated girls and boys, devoted to whoopee and to jumping the barriers, re-echo beneath the surface the structure of their puritan morality. They do not have to be tested far to discover the limits of their audacities.

M. Gide has had the audacities, at least spiritual ones. He has counselled every form of disintegration—most likely to shock the timid. This unending battle may seem strange in a French Protestant. He is surrounded by no bands of his fellow-worshippers, imposing on him everywhere their puritanism. All he has to do, it would seem, is to escape naturally from the paternal mansion into the surrounding atmosphere of agnosticism and of natural morality.

The ordinary individual would undoubtedly do so, but this easy course could not satisfy M. Gide's combative spirit. The enemy had to be hurt and humiliated. Had he been an American, or of any nationality where even in the 20th century religious fanaticism are still strong, the solution would have been simple. He could have gone over to the opposite camp, become a converted Catholic and an obscurantist. That is enough to make whey-faces wince.

Or, being still French, had he been also a Jew, he would have had an equally simple solution at hand. French Jews are hardly more numerous than Huguenots but they have in the past stirred violent anti-Semitism and traces of it still linger. M. Gide could have joined it vociferously and satisfied his appetite for blaspheming the ancestral gods.

So M. Gide has had to search for rare and unusual ways of proclaiming his rage with the creed of his childhood. As each one has spent its affect, he has had to find another. The latest is his enthusiasm for Bolshevism, which clearly interests him only in so far as to take his own words, as it destroys religion and the family. It is the final shock to stable citizens, far better than his earlier preaching of individual anarchy. That is an isolated and literary attitude; Bolshevism is a vast force, which might some day put its doctrines into practice everywhere.

Perhaps something more explains M. Gide's allegiance to Bolshevism, and if it is true, he is the one to be shocked. Has not Calvinism taken on him a final revenge? Does he not love the Bolsheviks quite sincerely because they are ruthless, because they want to stamp out all tender sentiments and comforting illusions? That is idolatry in a primitive form, true to the aboriginal principle of all superstition—reverence for the thing which hurts. So did Calvin and Jonathan Edwards conjure up from their fierce imaginations a merciless God and worship Him because he was such.

The Huguenot Gide has been swayed by the atavistic spirit. At last he has found the God of whom he can say in ecstasy, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."