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Narcissus

OSCAR WILDE -- By Andre Gide; Philosophical Library, N. Y.; \$2.75

These two brief essays, written in the opening years of this century, may be taken as expansions of the references to Oscar Wilde in the important "Journal" of Andre Gide now being published in English translation.

Wilde first visited Paris in 1891 when he was at the flood-tide of his success. "His books astonished, charmed. His plays were the talk of London. He was rich; he was tall; he was handsome; laden with good fortune and honors. . . His gestures, his looked triumphed." At the dinner where Gide first met him, "Wilde did not converse: he narrated. Throughout almost the whole of the meal, he narrated." Wilde had the habit of Aesop, and indeed of Jesus: "Without a parable spake he not unto them." And Gide gives a remarkable example, fortunately short enough to quote.

"When Narcissus died, the flowers of the field asked the river for some drops of water to weep for him. 'It' answered the river, 'if all my drops of water were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus myself. I loved him!' 'Oh!' replied the flowers of the field, 'how could you not have loved Narcissus? He was beautiful! Was he beautiful?' said the river. 'And who could know better than you? Each day, leaning over your bank, he beheld his beauty in your water. . . 'If I loved him,' replied the river, 'it was because, when he leaned over my water, I saw the reflection of my water in his eyes.'

Then Wilde, swelling up with a strange burst of laughter, added, "That's called 'The Disciple.'" This fable seems to me a perfect epitome of Oscar Wilde: Beauty he made the instrument of wit; his cynicism always had an undertone of wistfulness.

Gide's next meeting with him in Algiers, where Wilde admitted that he had put his genius into his life and only his talent into his writing. Gide adds, "It was only too true. The best of his writing is only a pale reflection of his brilliant conversation."

Their last dismal meetings were again in France, whither Wilde had gone as soon as he left prison. Gide ends his account with the hope that "I have been able, be it ever so little, to be of service to a sad and glorious memory, for which it is time to cease having only contempt, insolent indulgence, or pity even more insulting than contempt." Today, nearly half a century later, Gide's hope for Wilde's fame has been nearly fulfilled; Oscar Wilde is remembered far more for his achievements than for his defeat.—MORSE ALLEN