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Bertrand D'Astorg

THE DEATH OF ANDRÉ GIDE*

HE HAD everything on his side: the genie whose gift is intelligence leaning over his cradle; a fortune which freed him from financial worries; a stable constitution whose delicacy sheltered him from certain events by giving him an excuse for sudden retreats, such as long trips; marvelling friends; so many honors that he could choose among them; and finally that calm death which he had been playfully announcing for thirty years and which arrived just at the right time, after a slight impairment of his creative ability on which he commented very accurately, but before dimness, stuttering, or painful silence. These privileges are difficult to use to the best advantage; the way in which he used them is so beautiful that today we admire this life and this death: they seem so entirely successful that Mr. Massis must be doubting at present that there exists a divine judge occupied entirely in making sure that the end of a scandalous sinner shall be inglorious.

Gide was a great man in the world of intelligence. He had a great man's graciousness; his tireless efforts in the domain of literature; his conscientious ideal of discharging as perfectly as possible the duties of his calling, which were to think and to write. He was a pure intellectual who did not blush to be one, that is to say, to believe that there exists a domain reserved for fine arts and letters, an almost free life whose ways are reading, meditating, writing, lecturing, publishing a magazine, directing a play. His only ambition, his declared ambition, was to produce a work of art whose very existence would be its justification, and which would be free from all restraints other than those imposed by aesthetics and integrity. But by working thus, remote from the temporal concerns of the world, his authority had become extra-

* From "Mort d'André Gide," a chapter in *Aspects de la Littérature Européenne Depuis 1945*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952.

ordinary: from a spell of jury duty he drew his *Souvenirs De La Cour D'Assises* which foreshadowed the denunciation in our literature of the miscarriages of Justice. His *Voyage Au Congo* provoked a parliamentary inquest on the great companies that had contracted for public works and for the development of French possessions in Africa. His sympathy for communism was a telling factor in the conversion of intellectual youth to the ideology of the Popular Front, and if the *Humanité* now greets his death with an insult (forgetting that it published, about 1935, *Les Caves Du Vatican* in serial form), the fact is that the slim volume of the *Retour De L'U. R. S. S.* has outweighed it in counter-propaganda.

He leaves a work minutely balanced, the very diverse parts of which explain each other: tales of imagination that he did not dare to call novels but called rather treatises, satirical farces, or simply accounts; notes analysing the mechanics of the creation of characters (*Journal Des Faux Monnayeurs*); abundant notes on the literary, social, and even geographical conditions in which this work developed; all this resumed and reworked in the incomparable and irritating *Journal*, which is at once the story of a soul and of a half century, one of the richest in French and even in universal literature. He delighted, moreover, in imagining all literature as universal: in combatting all false nationalism, in opening the door to many influences, in recognizing them instead of hiding them, in proclaiming archly that of "all the great authors (I cannot use this word without smiling) those who have taught me least are French" (*Feuillets*, 1937). His explanation is very reasonable. His work as a critic and as a translator is that of a forerunner: Rilke, Dostoievski, Blake, Conrad, English metaphysical poetry—everywhere (and also in the present Shakespearean revival), we follow in his footsteps even if we have overtaken and passed him. It is fortunate, in order that there should be one or two marks against him, that he should have so completely by-passed Proust: "unreadable" (in his handwriting on a margin), and that (they say) he should have refused the

manuscript of *Le Grand Meaulnes*. It is a good thing, moreover, that people should not speak about his intuition, about his incomparably sure taste, but only about his finesse. He was delighted to find the following thought expressed in identical terms by Diderot and Wilde: "... the imagination is imitative. It is the critical mind which creates." Actually, it is through his critical faculties that he reached the greatest realities, while his imaginative work falls short of them. Thus through Dostoievski, and though Blake (and to a lesser degree through Michaux), Gide, the classicist, the rationalist, discovered the master keys which have opened up the defences of traditional psychology, ethics and poetry, and forced the long-forbidden ramparts of the castle in which our modern world is established, in order to explore the mysterious rooms where creation is terror. He did not dare to undertake this exploration directly since it was repulsive to his talent; he needed either the detours offered by translation or by the adaptation of a play (the *Procès* of Kafka in collaboration with Barrault), or the detour provided by the decipherable secret in some brief allusion in the *Journal*, but then it was always relieved by a note of hope: "Life can be more beautiful than men admit," and much later, towards the end: "All my courage is no more than adequate for life in this atrocious world. And I know, I feel that it is atrocious; but I know also that it could be otherwise, and that it is what we make it." (*Journal*, Spring, 1948.)

He himself had built his world in his own image and he felt the fragility of this construction. He belonged to a class of society that was abolished by the first world war, before which he had written the essential part of his work (he was nearing fifty in 1918), and it is only by reason of the normal lag between publication and influence that the cult of Gide was the religion of a part of the young people in 1920 (a similar lag is still more noticeable in space, due to the slowness of translations and the slow rate at which they become known, so that the most fervent admirers of Gide today live in Melbourne or Tokio). Certainly, there is a part of Gide's message that is always timely and so imperishable

that one wonders if it properly belongs to him alone otherwise than by the perfect form which he gave to it: the search for happiness for a life exalted in all its temptations (he would have said "offerings"), for fervor, for a surrender to pleasure and beauty. But if these correspond to his desire to be considered before all as a moralist, it is to the negative side of his attitude that those who have loved him will long remain faithful: the refusal of pretence, of easy pathos; refusal to give in to the "social truth" which is dictated to us by our institutions, by custom, by the compromise of life, everything which tends to conformity of thought; refusal also to search elsewhere than in oneself and in the mirror of one's conscience for the purest possible image of truth. Negative side? Perhaps, if Gide had stopped there. But, as a corollary, he imposed upon himself as a working principle of his life and art a duty which led him very far: that of sincerity. Nowhere that I know of did he ever comment on the warning given by Chateaubriand, that he would say in his *Memoires* only "whatever is appropriate to my dignity as a man, and I dare add, to the nobility of my heart"; such a restriction would have horrified Gide (but he would have paid no attention to it). After all, sincerity has not in similar limits been defined since the *Journal* or *L'Immoraliste* or *Si Le Grain . . .* Tell all about oneself from the highest feelings to the least noble? But by exposing them and by using each to explain the other, one destroys their true nature; the beautiful are no longer beautiful as soon as they are put in print, and to confess the ignoble feelings is an heroic ordeal that one undertakes as voluntary mortification. From life they are changed into written things with objective reality: a slight unavoidable shift between human sincerity and literary sincerity. On certain days Gide knew that every pen is a lying tongue; he returned then to his piano.

His passion for personal truth was such that he long forbade himself to become a master; he rejected (and it is one of the secrets of his style) not only whatever, by the very weight of the written word, is evocative, challenging, but even whatever is per-

suasive. In our world where man is militant, what a far cry! "Nathanael, throw away my book now"; or, "I claim to give to those who read my work strength, joy, courage, defiance, and perspicacity—but I am very careful not to give them any directions" (*Journal*, June 3, 1924); and this which is still more definite: "... my only desire having been, until very recently, to write works of art, not exactly impersonal, but as it were freed of myself, books which, if they had any influence on the reader, could only help him to see clearly, to ask questions of himself, books which would force him to think, even if it were in a manner directly opposed to my thought" (*Journal*, January 30, 1931). But on one point, a single but essential one, he forgets, he is mistaken, he deceives us. On that point, he has tried to make converts, he has attempted to convince, to seduce our imagination, to persuade us, and for once projected outside himself by the most tenacious and the most secret, to write a book which was neither a sincere confession nor a personal apology, but definitely a didactic book and one that is pedagogical in the strongest sense of the word. It was *Corydon*. What price has he paid? Around his deathbed, before his empty hands, did nobody care to calculate it? Certainly he had made peace with himself a long time before on this subject; he had squared his account with the idea of evil, with God in his heaven. At most, he still displayed a certain willingness to publish his belated successes. His power of disassociating people from their ideas was probably sufficient to prevent him from ever having the idea of calling to his side at the same time the spirits of all those who had left him, perhaps for the same reason: Claudel, Charles Du Bos, Jammes, Ghéon, almost all the companions of his youth. What isolation! Was he right then to oppose all of them and even Jef Last who was not after all a recent convert and who nevertheless asked him the same questions in a very natural voice? That February evening when I went to bow before his corpse and to scan his henceforth inscrutable face, an image came ceaselessly between us: that of a heavy old man somewhere in Paris, weighed down by titles, decorations and honors, whose thought I could

feel wandering around this funeral chamber. I could not prevent myself from seeing him at this instant kneeling in a church in the dusk of seven o'clock praying like a child for others and for himself. Oh, certainly, before these empty hands one could always wonder what would have become of him without the will to dominate of Claudel, the inability of Charlie to imagine a dialogue without a body to incarnate it, without the insulting naïveté of Jammes, the childish naïveté of Ghéon . . . But are not all these faults due to the condition of being incarnated, of being part of that simple life in which we choose our friends who remain men? A fine pretext for escaping their scolding. Sensitive souls are not lacking who, reading the dramatic correspondence of Gide and Claudel, prefer the delicacy, the fluidity, the charm of the former to the insistence, the peremptory tone and the violence of the latter. But viewing it solely from the point of view of the conquest of truth, at what moment does the delicacy become quibbling, the fluidity become escape and the charm become the play of a mind that is enjoying the spectacle that he is staging more than seeing the stake which the other is laying on this terrible game?

In the eyes of the world it is Gide who won the battle with Claudel. What an assurance in a godless century when a great man could die so serene, and so clean of any smudge of the supernatural! This rebel died without grief, no longer knowing that the true nonconformism can be to pray and to call a priest to one's bedside; that the detachment and the dearth of which he had so long cultivated the spirit, can be to beg in the end for something, to have recourse to a sign, to need someone other than oneself. There was no more question of anxiety: the dialectician had exhausted every form of contradiction; the lover of dialogue had definitely reduced God to silence. But who would deny his formidable greatness in having allotted, with a clear conscience, to man and to himself, only the two dimensions, *hic* and *nunc*, which abandon him now in the instant of death and in the corner where he will rot, his hands closed and empty?