THE CRITICS

A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

The enduring confessions and unmatched hedonism of André Gide.

BY ANTHONY LANE

In June, 1940, André Gide—novelist, diarist, sometime Communist, and a hub of French literary life for half a century—found himself in Vichy. It was a loaded place to be, and there were many things to keep a Frenchman awake at such a time, but for Gide the cause was specific:

Through the open window of my room giving onto the end of the park, I heard, three times, a heart-rending cry: "Pierre! Pierre!" and almost went down to find the poor demented man who was uttering that call, desperately, in the night. And for a long time I could not go to sleep, ceaselessly imagining that distress.

Such are the helpless sympathies of the creative mind: the sound of a single voice suggests a story, or an auspicious predicament, and the writer is instantly condemned to a desire to know more. For Gide—not just a fervent homosexual but an avid connoisseur of longing in other men—the possibility that Pierre was not only lost but lusted after, like the faithless lover in a medieval lyric, provided the evening with further bewitchment. All of which must have made it something of a letdown when, the next morning, Gide learned that what he had listened to was the local night watchman, who had seen a lit window and was warning the occupant of the room to observe the wartime blackout: "Lumière! Lumière!"

You can't help admiring Gide for his honesty here; some writers, with a cautious eye cocked at posterity, might have kept Pierre and killed the light. But this incident arises in Gide's journals, which, more than any of his other works, are the test site for his politely explosive belief that, whatever else happens, we should aim for sincerity. As convictions go, this is seldom practicable and sometimes close to indefensible, especially when, as in Gide's case, other people get caught in the blast. But it feels alarmingly apposite to our own era, when a few insincere words to the press corps are almost enough to unseat a President, and Alan Sheridan can be proud of himself for producing "André Gide: A Life in the Present" (Harvard; $35) with such an elegant sense of timing.

He is not alone in his endeavors. The French critic Claude Martin recently brought out "André Gide, or the Vocation of Happiness" (Fayard), which has yet to be translated into English. Like Sheridan's book, it runs to well over six hundred pages, but it covers only half of the story; a second volume will appear later. Given that Martin founded the Association of the Friends of André Gide, in 1968, and that he has hitherto written or edited twenty-two books by or about Gide, I can understand that he has a fair amount to say. Then, there is Jonathan Fryer's "André & Oscar: The Literary Friendship of André Gide and Oscar Wilde" (St. Martin's; $24.95), and, on a less gossipy level, Naomi Segal's "André Gide: Pederasty and Pedagogy" (Oxford; $65). I make a point of trying to read one completely unreadable book every year, and Segal's study looked promising; sadly, it's brilliant stuff, expertly tracking the contrary motions of outpouring and

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stage since his death. "I am not writing these Memoirs to defend myself," he wrote. "I am writing them in order to be accused."
restraint in Gide’s unpolluted prose. But the larger question remains: Why the refreshed interest in Gide himself?

The last—and, for most of us, the only—time we were likely to have encountered the man was in high school, where novellas such as “Strait Is the Gate” and “The Pastoral Symphony” were used to prod us along the pathways of French style. Both are models of lucidity and stateliness, so much so that, as Sheridan tells us, one London publisher turned down “Strait Is the Gate” in the early nineteen-twenties “on the charming grounds that the French of the original was not difficult enough to justify a translation.”

There may have been other grounds, more treacherous underfoot. Gide is actually quite hard to translate; beyond the curt simplicity of his sentences, which makes him a more formidable recorder of physical action than his reputation gives him credit for, there is what he called the gait of thought. The pacing of this passage from “The Vatican Ceilars” cannot be faulted, but where, exactly, is the author directing its steps?

They had no sooner settled in Rome than they arranged their private lives independently of each other—he on his side, she on hers; Veronica in the care of the household and in the pursuit of her devotions, Anthime in his scientific researches. In this way they lived beside each other, close to each other and just able to bear the contact by turning their backs to one another. Thanks to this there reigned a kind of harmony between them; a sort of semi-felicity settled down upon them; the virtue of each found its modest exercise in putting up with the faults of the other.

There is a punctilious courtesy in such prose that could stiffen into staidness, were it not for the sense that underneath the good stylistic manners, as under the life of Anthime and Veronica, lurk all kinds of animosity; to the seasoned ironist, indeed, propriety is the only possible outlet for the perverse. The young man who, in the same novel, passes his penknife over a flame, jabs it into his thigh, grimaces “in spite of himself,” and then sprinkles drops of peppermint water on the wound, all in an effort to cool a fit of anger, is like a model of the novelist’s method, and well-bred English readers of the nineteen-twenties could be forgiven for suspecting that there was something not quite nice about the unflappable M. Gide.

In the English-speaking world, in fact, the vogue for Gide started late and faded fast, without quite reaching the fist-clenching mania that attended Camus and “The Stranger.” Nevertheless, there was a time when to be seen with a copy of “The Immoralist”—Gide’s sparse yet luxuriant tale of a man who, in the philosophical interests of liberty, tries to pig out on life—was de rigueur for young males of errant libido and unsound mind, otherwise known as students. It was not until 1926 that Gide dignified one of his works, “The Counterfeitors,” with the rank of “novel”; the rest of his output was a melee of travel writings, poems, plays, polemics, lectures, essays, neoclassical dialogues, studies in criminology, apologies both political and sexual, librettos, autobiographies in numerous guises, and what he liked to call récits and soties—respectively, simple first-person narratives and light-fingered literary games. Plowing through the Gidean landscape is a lengthy business, though seldom an arduous one, and it is more in awe than in ridicule that one pauses for breath to reflect that most of his working life was spent writing about André Gide, or, on more generous days, engaging in a heartfelt struggle not to write about André Gide.

He was born in 1869 and died in 1951. The dates alone hint at his extraordinary span: here was a man who befriended Wilde, visited the ailing Verlaine, and attended the legendary mardis—the tobacco-filled Tuesday discussions at the home of Stéphane Mallarmé—but who also lived long enough to observe the crushing of the Nazis, to fall in and out of favor with Soviet
Communism, to niggle over the newly fashionable Sartre (“I’m willing to be an Existentialist, provided I’m not aware of the fact”), and, at the age of seventy-eight, to get terribly excited by the Kinsey Report. In 1908, he helped found the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which, first as a journal and later in its links to the publishing house of Gallimard, became one of the more efficient powerhouses of French culture. It is hard to recall an equivalent figure in the English-speaking world; Edmund Wilson had some of Gide’s persistence in a multitude of literary forms, and each man showed a laudable determination to muscle his way through disapproval in the pursuit of what he held to be right, even if, in repeated instances, he turned out to be wrong for the right reasons. (Wilson, who once called Gide “the fairies’ Dostoevsky,” would not have welcomed the comparison.) But Gide had a head start on Wilson, by more than a quarter of a century, and even his briefest encounters suggest someone wandering between two worlds—a vigorous hedonist cloaked in the guise of an Edwardian man of letters. He could be found in Cannes in 1912 with the unlike duo of Arnold Bennett and Pierre Bonnard, and during a trip to Calvi in 1930 he divided his time between open-air debauchery with naked Corsicans and Thomas Hardy’s “The Woodlanders.”

Gide himself insisted that there was a dash of doubleness in his nature from the start. “You know how complicated I am,” he wrote to a friend in 1902, “born am,” he wrote to a friend in 1902, “born, to evolvement of self the most perfect realization of self” and of a “limitless allowance of happiness.” Whether St. John would have countenanced Gide’s idea of an allowance is open to question. The writer himself remained unabashed by the attention he paid to his own body; “If It Die” contains a famous passage in which the young André is expelled from school for three months for “enjoying alternately my pleasure and my chocolates” beneath a classroom desk. His parents send him to the family doctor, who points to a row of Tuareg spearheads on the wall behind him and declares that such weapons are commonly used to operate on boys who persist in self-abuse. The lofty Gide is unimpressed: “This threat was really too thin for me to take it seriously.”

It is this two-tone constitution—the hot blood in his veins and the icy ink in his pen—that makes Gide’s egotism, which should be unbearable, close to captivating. No other writer could have so mournfully, almost liturgically, expressed “a regret not for having sinned, but for not having sinned more, for having let some opportunity for sinning slip by unused.” Experience, he claimed, “is usually nothing but exhaustion, a repudiation of the best that one once had.” His autobiography draws readers through a roster of enthusiasms, inquiring coolly, “In the name of what God or what ideal do you forbid me to live according to my nature?” There are many honorable answers to that question, but Gide, by the time he was twenty, was in any case living according to his Nietzsche: he had infiltrated literary Paris, and in 1891 he published “The Notebooks of André Walter,” forging a fictional hedonist who bore a marked resemblance to Gide himself. The book drips with symbolist languor and with dreams of “the softness of brown skins.” The impressive thing is that instead of merely playing with this idea—under the desk, as it were—the adult Gide decided to quit town and hunt the real thing. He sailed for Africa.

From here on, Alan Sheridan’s book grows crammed to the point of confusion. It is not really his fault: Gide was such a mover, travelling tirelessly between Africa and Europe, between France and her eastern neighbors, and between Paris and the family home at Cuverville, in Normandy, that there were times when I wondered whether Sheridan should have dumped the whole idea of a biography and simply provided a highly detailed map. You would need crisscrossing lines for routes, green spots for oases of creative tranquillity, and clusters of little red flashes for sites of carnal interest. In Tunisia, for example, at the end of 1893, Gide lost his virginity to a boy in Sousse and then, in the New Year, lost it again with a female prostitute in Biskra.

This sounds like a busy schedule, and Gide was true to his inconstancy; he would never relinquish his sweet tooth for young Arabs, or for teen-agers of any race, but, on the other hand, he would marry his cousin Madeleine in October, 1895, and remain unhappily married until her death, in 1938. It was not even a question of keeping the two halves of his existence apart; on their honeymoon, in Africa, Gide left Madeleine and sought out willing companions from his earlier trip, and in 1898, in Rome, he would photograph young men on the Spanish Steps and invite them back to his apartment while his...
wife was out. Theirs was, as Sheridan says, a mariage blanch, forever unconsummated, and it was no coincidence that Gide’s beloved mother—he was, of course, an only child—had died a little over two weeks before he announced his engagement. A few months later, he wrote in his journal, “How often, when Madeleine is in the next room, I forget that she is not my mother!”

There was a moment when this wretched alliance reached critical mass: after more than twenty years of marriage, Madeleine told her husband that she had burned every one of his letters to her. It was her sole surge of insurrection; for the rest of her stay on earth, she was as quiet as a nun. Gide’s reaction, predictably, was to call this lost correspondence—only a small portion of his twenty-five thousand letters—the treasure of my life, the best of me—and to compare its destruction to the death of a child. He does not appear to have asked himself what deeds of his—or want of them—may have forced her to such a flamboyant gesture. Sheridan quotes Gide’s idealistic claim that only a gay man “can give a creature that total love, divested of all physical desire” and that “I thought I had built the very temple of love.” As Sheridan sharply adds, “This is not an intelligent man of 1998 speaking, but it doesn’t sound like an intelligent man of 1919 either.” In the one area where he had most need of it, Gide’s dazzling willingness to see the other person’s point of view deserted him. Only after Madeleine’s death did it hit home; Gide was hollowed out with grief and remorse, and it served him right. There are limits to happiness, after all, and they transform his biography from an adventure, and a notable success story, into a cautionary tale.

A purist would argue that we must sift out the chaff, and that Gide’s disloyalty does not corrupt his achievements on the page. The trouble is that, more than any other writer of his time, he kneaded his life and art together into an indistinguishable mass. This is partly an issue of his many romans à clef; it takes a minimum of biographical skill to turn the clef and discover the figures locked inside the novel—to see in the devout and spinsterly Alissa of “Strait Is the Gate,” say, not just a portrait of Madeleine Gide but a more subtly horrified pondering of what she might yet become. Beyond such identifications—always, by their nature, unsatisfying—there is a sense that Gide was conducting his life as if it were itself an art form. His embattled quest for spiritual peace, his tendency to plan a new trip as if it were the next chapter, his rhythmical frequenting of high literary society and low-rent hustlers on the streets: all these lent shape to his experience, and they give Sheridan’s account of it a more juicy, Balzacian feel than the thin and bitter taste that sometimes stains the fictions of Gide himself. Even his longest and most intricate novels, “The Vatican Cellars” and “The Counterfeiters,” are inclined to sound shrill these days, with their shrewish lampoons of Catholic piety and their disappointingly bloodless stabs at the fantastical. “The Vatican Cellars” is best remembered for an incident in Book Five when one character pushes a total stranger out of a railroad compartment: the infamous acte gratuit, mean and motifless. You can construe the scene as a contribution to the history of Surrealism, as a deliberate affront to the laws of civilization, or as a pastiche of the thriller; at a distance, however, it feels more like the mishmashy dream of an author whose writing desk, in his Normandy house, looked not outward into the countryside but directly into a mirror. As the murderer muses just before the deed, “It’s not events that I’m curious about, but myself.”

The same loyalty—to self rather than to others—was the mark of Gide’s love life. His sexual capacities, fully and soberly explored in Naomi Segal’s book, suggest that if the writing had failed him (which it rarely did) he could always have found employment in Hollywood, or in the old industries of Forty-second Street. His close friend Roger Martin du Gard wrote in 1921, after a technical discussion:

Gide needs to empty himself out completely of sperm, and he reaches this state only after coming five, six, or even eight times in succession. I don’t need to mention that there was no trace of bragging in his account. . . . First he comes twice, more or less at the same time, “like a singer,” he said, “who takes a second breath. . . . The second orgasm,” he went on, “seems to climb on the shoulders of the first.” . . . The third one happens soon after. He can rarely come more than three times with the same person. When circumstances permit, he then finds himself a second person and comes the fourth and often fifth time. After that he is in a very special state.

I bet he is. Martin du Gard adds that the final flourish, No. 7 or 8, tends to take place at home, alone. The remarkable thing is that Gide found time to do anything else. A typical diary entry for 1922 lists three hours of piano practice, an hour of Shakespeare, an hour of Sainte-Beuve’s criticism, two hours of correspondence, six hours of novel writing, and thirty minutes or more of exercise, so how he ever slotted in a couple of sexual partners I have no idea. No wonder Madeleine couldn’t control him; she would have needed one of those Texans who fly in to cap oil rigs. Fortunately, she never learned of a day in 1922 when Gide, more or less as a favor, had sex with a friend named Elisabeth Van Rysselbergh; at his first attempt, he fathered a child—Catherine, who at the age of thirteen was told of her father’s identity, and to whom he maintained a touching devotion.

This capacity to surprise never failed: Gide accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1947, but he spurned the invitation to join the Académie Française, which, considering his eminence, was like a bishop refusing to go to church. Most impressive of all is the sheer stamina of the man—his mental powers competing with his physical ardor in a race to disprove the theory of human decline. Two impassioned nights in Tunis, for instance, with a fifteen-year-old known simply as “F.” were treasured for their “joyful lyricism” and “amused frenzy” the boy “seemed to care so little about my age that I came to forget it myself.” Gide was seventy-two. Shortly afterward, plainly rejuvenated, he returned to the task of translating “Hamlet” into French.

The most unexciting but telling fact about Gide, apart from his devoutly regular reading of the Bible, is that he inherited a private income—not vast but big enough to cushion the blows. As often happens with the conscientiously wealthy, he was generous to others but increasingly parsimonious with himself; leaving a hotel, he tried to run back to his room to find and finish a
half-smoked cigarette. He never had to work for a living; his most sustained bout of enterprise came during the First World War, when he devoted sixteen months to helping Belgian refugees. We should not begrudge him his leisure, but neither can we help wondering how he would have conducted his life without a safety net. The young Gide believed in dénuement, in stripping life down to its spiritual and sensory essentials (with a prose style to match). As Sheridan points out, there was "something ludicrous" about a man's "sitting in the luxury of the Hôtel Kühn at Saint-Moritz, on the first stage of a honeymoon that was to last seven months, preaching the virtues of dénuement."

Sheridan is never fooled by his subject, and often takes him to task. In the nineteen-thirties, for instance, Gide abandoned his evenhanded political skepticism and, in common with many Frenchmen of the age, stared longingly and comprehendingly at the Soviet Union, with its "unlimited promise of the future." To his credit, though, Gide did what other fellow-travellers never bothered to attempt: he went to the promised land and reported back. At first, the Russians lionized him; he stood next to Stalin and Molotov in Red Square. But Gide, who began by crediting a parade of Soviet youth with "perfect taste," quickly saw behind the showpieces, and on his return he wrote "Back from the U.S.S.R." Reading it today (and it's available only in French), you will find it mild and compromised. But to French Communists, who brought to their totalitarian faith the kind of exclusive rigor that was formerly the preserve of French Catholicism, it was blasphemy. Gide's collected works were banned in the Soviet Union, and one year after his death they were placed by the Vatican on the Index librorum prohibitorum. This is a fine double whammy: any author who is deemed wrong by so many people must be doing something right.

What Gide did right was perhaps not as simple as the version that he offered to the world on receiving the Nobel Prize. "If I have represented anything," he wrote, "it is, I believe, the spirit of free inquiry, independence, insubordination even." He was a rebel with innumerable causes, it is true, but his protests, like his more unseemly political affiliations, have faded from our hearing, leaving behind a calmer but still frighteningly acute tutorial in self-inspection. What prevents many of Gide's novels from taking on a life of their own is his desire to hire characters for the purpose of investigating his own life instead. One of the heroes of "The Counterfeiters," Edouard, writes in his journal:

If I were not there to make them acquainted, my morning's self would not recognize my evening's. Nothing could be more different from me than myself.... My heart beats only out of sympathy; I live only through others—by procuration, so to speak, and by espousals; and I never feel myself living so intensely as when I escape from myself to become no matter who.

This was published in 1926, when all but one volume of "Remembrance of Things Past" had already appeared, and it reads like a dark, metaphysical riff on the more benign Proustian discovery that social life disperses the self among other people—that it is only through the courtesy of friends and gossips that we somehow exist at all. Sheridan's biography certainly leaves you with just such a queasy sensation; the Gide who demonically harried his young prey is himself out of reach—one friend called him "ungraspable." If you think the pursuit worthwhile, you must supplement the new biography with the journals—the core of his creative burrowings, I think, and not just an addendum to the formal works. In French, they are best followed, or picked over, in the two-volume Pléiade edition; my copy of the first volume, according to a stamp on the title page, was withdrawn from the library of the Facultés Catholiques in Lyons—a proscription that Gide, who lost one friend after another to the lure of Rome, might well have relished. In English, there is a four-volume translation of the journals by Justin O'Brien, which is now out of print, as is a one-volume rescension published by Penguin. Surely someone could hitch a ride on the Sheridan biography and release the unabridged journals again for American readers. Who can afford to miss this entry, from October, 1940?

Art inhabits temperate regions. And doubtless the greatest harm this war is doing to culture is to create a profusion of extreme passions which, by a sort of inflation, brings about a devaluation of all moderate sentiments. The dying anguish of Roland or the distress of a Lear stripped of power moves us by its exceptional quality but loses its spe-
cial eloquence when reproduced simultaneously in several thousand copies. Isolated, it is a summit of suffering; in a collection, it becomes a plateau. . . . The artist does not know which way to turn, intellectually or emotionally. Solicited on all sides and unable to answer all appeals, he gives up, at a loss. He has no recourse but to seek refuge in himself or to find refuge in God. That is why war provides religion with easy conquests.

The logic—the brute truth—of such a passage feels hard and steely, and yet there is tenderness in its plea for moderation. Against all expectations, Gide can be as companionable as Montaigne; indeed, the two men could be read as bookends to the bold, compendious tradition of French self-interest that takes in such contrary spirits as Rousseau and the Baudelaire of "My Heart Laid Bare"—an interest so clear-eyed, so supple in the honor it does to the vagaries of mental mood, that by the end it hardly feels like vanity at all. Reading Gide at his best is like watching the skies—fogged by sadness, sharp as ice, or foully clouding over with doubt. "I love life passionately," he wrote, "but I don't trust it." His daily commentaries on both World Wars—on the weak victory in the first (Gide had foreseen a "long, dark tunnel, full of blood"), which led to French capitulation in the second—work as a disquieting analysis of a people and also as a downcast reflection upon his own infirmities. We like to think that diaries are written in the wings—in the half-dark, away from the action and the spotlight. Since his death, however, Gide's journals have moved to center stage:

I am not writing these Memoirs to defend myself. I am not called on to defend myself, since I am not accused. I am writing them before being accused. I am writing them in order to be accused.

This magnificent masochism is a ringing rebuff to our current mania—barely more than a tic—for the confessional mode. We are besieged by personal revelation on every side, and at first blush Gide looks like a useful antecedent. In fact, he set a standard of honesty—on the page, at least—that shames the new bunch of plaintiffs. He does not settle scores or start rumors; he refuses to cry vengeance or claim compensation. "It was in the very excess of their modesty," he wrote of Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, "that their pride sated itself." Strange to say, Gide, after a lifetime of looking the mirror, was not in it for himself.