

Andre-Paul-Guillaume Gide

Chronology

Born Andre-Paul-Guillaume Gide in Paris on November 22, 1869, the only child of Paul Gide, a Huguenot from Uzes in southern France and a professor of law at the University of Paris, and Juliette Rondeaux, a rich heiress of Norman extraction. 1869-1880 grows up in Paris, near the Luxembourg Gardens; attends private school for young boys and is expelled for masturbation; begins studying the piano; spends vacations in Uzes and Normandy; enters Ecole Alsacienne, but his schooling is often interrupted by illness and nervous conditions; 1880 Paul Gide dies of intestinal tuberculosis; 1882 Andre is drawn to his cousin Madeleine Rondeaux, following the discovery of her sorrow concerning her mother's infidelity; decides to devote himself to her; 1889 passes his baccalaureat at the Ecole Alsacienne; not required to earn his living, he decides to focus his life on literature; 1891 joins Stephane Mallarme's circle and is influenced by symbolist aesthetics; Madeleine rejects his proposal of marriage; publishes anonymously and at his expense Les Cahiers d'Andre Walter (The Notebooks of Andre Walter); 1893-1895 visits North Africa; meets Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas, and confronts his homosexual tendencies; publishes Le Voyage d'Urien (Urien's Voyage); 1895 Gide's

mother dies; marries Madeleine Rondeaux; publishes Paludes (Marshlands); 1896 elected mayor of La Roque, and is youngest mayor in France; 1897-1908 publishes numerous works, including The Immoralist (1902); founds La Nouvelle Revue française with Jean Schlumberger, Jacques Copeau, and others; publishes La Porte Etroite (Strait is the Gate); 1914 works with Red Cross and other civilian groups helping Belgian refugees during World War I; publishes Les Caves du Vatican (Lafcadio's Adventures); 1923 Catherine Gide, daughter of Andre, is born to Elizabeth van Rysseberghe; 1925-1936 Gide's social and political involvement grows, including interest in the Communist Party; 1925 travels to central Africa, particularly Chad and the Congo, and later criticizes French colonial policy; 1926 publishes Les Faux-Monnayeurs (The Counterfeiters); 1936 visits the Soviet Union in June, but is disillusioned by the Soviet system; Madeleine Gide dies; 1942-1945 stays in North Africa; writes Thesee (Theseus); 1947 receives honorary doctorate from Oxford University and the Nobel Prize for Literature; 1950 publishes his Journal for the years 1939 to 1949; resolves to write nothing else; 1951 dies February 19, and is buried in Cuverville cemetery beside his wife.

Activities of Historical Significance

Andre Gide, along with Marcel Proust and Andre Malraux, are the major figures of French literature in the first half of the twentieth century.

Gide's contributions as a writer and thinker may be divided, broadly speaking, into two arenas: content and form. Not only did he portray and discuss themes with a boldness new to the novelistic tradition in Europe, he also expanded the forms and modes in which a narrative could

be presented.

Throughout his life, Gide sought to explore morality, both collective and individual. As much or more than any other major writer, his literary output is consistently personal. His writings, his fiction and theatre as well as his diaries and other purely autobiographical texts, illuminate his efforts to express the evolution of his viewpoints on social, psychological and political topics. In works like Corydon (1924), in which he justifies his homosexuality, Gide defends the individual's freedom, in the face of conventional societal pressures to conform. In his fiction, characters are constantly exploring their possibilities: sexual, moral, and artistic. Lafcadio Wluiki, for instance, in Les Caves du Vatican, exemplifies this quest for personal liberty. His availability (disponibilite) to life, and his interest in the gratuitous, or unmotivated, act form the basis of his character. To a great extent, he reflects Gide's attempts to understand and discover himself, just as Andre Walter had represented all of Gide's "youth of religion, books, and love."

Gide's influence on later generations of French writers, particularly the existentialists and practitioners of the New Novel (Nouveau Roman) such as Butor and Robbe-Grillet, stems as much from his narrative, or structural, innovation as from his role as a moralist. In this regard, he has been compared to James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust.

Gide's contributions revolve around his meditation on the nature of the narrative object; this reflection takes two principal forms in his writing.

The first concerns the question of genres. Gide called The Counterfeiters his only novel, preferring to name his other fictional works traites, recits, or soties. The use of the latter term, a word which originally referred to a 15th-century satiric work, demonstrates Gide's desire to define precisely his texts, and his refusal to accept the given narrative categories of his day. In fact, he changed the generic designation of some of his works, such as Paludes, as he evolved toward more complex forms of fiction.

Related to the first, Gide's second, more important form of narrative innovation consists of the development of the polyphonic novel, in which multiple perspectives are presented. Gide stated in 1910 that "The novel, as I recognize it or conceive of it, includes a diversity of points of view...it is by its very essence a complicated work of art." One often-discussed aspect of this complexity is the construction en abyme, or story within a story, wherein a character attempts to write a text parallel or similar to the book the reader is actually reading. By creating a contrapuntal form of narrative, in which events are related through journal entries, conversation, and the direct authorial voice, Gide blurred chronological coherence, questioned the omniscient narrator, and in general paved the way for further exploration of the novel's structural possibilities. Gide's experimentation with the novelistic form directly influenced a number of later writers, most notably Aldous Huxley and Lawrence Durrell, but also inspired others, including the nouveaux romanciers of the 1950s and 1960s.

Although controversial throughout his life, Andre Gide was widely admired as "an important humanist and moralist," whose integrity of thought was

as important as the purity of style of his recits and the innovation of The Counterfeiters. Both as a thinker and a writer, Gide stands at the forefront of modern French literature.

Overview of Biographical Sources

Andre Gide has been the subject of countless studies, including many useful and perceptive English language works. Literary analyses of his creative works predominate; Germaine Bree, Thomas Cordle, Jean Hytier, G.W. Ireland, and Harold March among others have published perceptive volumes on various aspects of Gide's literary production. These studies often discuss his life as well, given the intensely personal dimension so many of his works possess. These volumes, however, focusing as they do on theme, narrative structure, character, etc., provide only partial or tangential information on Gide's life.

A number of fundamentally biographical works also exist. Many of these appeared soon after Gide's death in 1951, but others had been published during his lifetime. (In fact, Hector Talvart, in his bibliography, indicated that by 1941, when Gide was 72, 30 books, 150 book chapters, and 500 articles and reviews had appeared about him.) Some of these are polemical in nature, attacking Gide's lifestyle in general, his homosexuality, or his treatment of his wife. Of this type of study, Gide had even commented, "when a critic wants to write about me, he strives not to explain or understand me, but to take up and maintain a position against me."

Other works, more even-handed and often prepared with Gide's knowledge and cooperation, have examined the author from a variety of perspectives, but generally with the aim of probing his personality, his psychology.

Indeed, one of the most detailed studies, focusing only on the period up to 1895, was written by the eminent psychiatrist and member of the Academie Francaise, Jean Delay. Other studies, such as those by O'Brien and by Guerard, not only sought to paint a clear, unbiased portrait of the author, but were prepared with Gide's personal participation.

Evaluation of Principal Biographical Sources

Boisdeffre, Pierre de. Vie d'Andre Gide, 1869-1951. Paris: Hachette, 1970-1971. (A) This as yet untranslated, two-volume biography is a straightforward, standard life of Gide. Although quite extensive and written in an excellent style, it is also piecemeal at times.

Delay, Jean. The Youth of Andre Gide. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. (A) Abridged and translated by June Guicharnaud, from a 1956 French version, this psychobiography examines Gide's life up to the age of 25, believing that "Andre Gide's youth contains all the situations and all the characters of the drama that was resolved in and by his works." Based heavily on Gide's letters to his mother.

O'Brien, Justin. Portrait of Andre Gide: A Critical Biography. New York, Alfred Knopf, 1953. (A) Arranged in chapters according to myths important to Gide, this is a "meticulously accurate" study of Gide's life and work by the translator of Gide's voluminous diaries. "Carefully

documented," it is an account written with "deep admiration," yet "neither blind or uncritical."

Painter, George D. Andre Gide: A Critical Biography. New York, Atheneum, 1968. (A,G) A revision and enlargement of a work originally completed in 1951, this work is a "refreshingly well-balanced account." Proceeding chronologically, Painter approaches "Gide's works through...their organic growth from the history of [Gide's] mind and heart."

Primary Sources

Gide felt that some of his best writing was to be found in his letters.

He was devastated when, in 1918, his wife Madeleine burned all his letters to her following an incident with the young Marc Allegret. Fortunately, Gide's correspondence with a number of major literary figures of his day does survive and has been published. English translations have appeared of Gide's writings to Paul Claudel (1899-1926) and Paul Valery (1890-1942).

Other collections, as yet untranslated, include letters to Francis Jammes, Francois Mauriac, Charles Peguy, and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Gide's Journal chronicles practically all his adult life, and is one of the most important autobiographical texts in modern French literature.

The first installment, covering the years 1889 to 1939, was published by Gallimard in 1939. A supplemental volume appeared in 1950 covering the next decade. The entire diary, with some supplementary material from Gide's last years, was later issued in the definitive "Bibliotheque de la Pleiade" series. Justin O'Brien's masterful translation of this work

appeared between 1947 and 1951, published by Knopf.

Fiction and Adaptation

In 1948, Jean Delannoy directed a well-received film version of La Symphonie Pastorale starring Pierre Blanchar as Pastor Martin and Michele Morgan as Gertrude. Gide himself is said to have enjoyed it.

Darius Milhaud set to music Le Retour de l'Enfant Prodigue; it was recorded in 1960 with Janine Collard and Michel Caron singing lead roles and the orchestra of the Paris Opera conducted by the composer. In the 1930s, Igor Stravinsky set to music Gide's "Persephone"; it was recorded in 1950.

In 1950, Jean Meyer directed a stage adaptation of Les Caves du Vatican at the Comedie-Francaise in Paris, which Gide also enjoyed immensely.

Museums, Historical Landmarks, Societies

Bibliotheque Literaire Jacques Doucet (Paris, France). Contains 50 manuscripts and over 11,000 letters Gide wrote.

Other Sources

Canalon, Elaine D. "Andre Gide" Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 65. An excellent introduction to the life and writings of Gide,

presented chronologically. Includes useful lists of Gide's works, his published correspondence and selected book-length studies.

Cordle, Thomas. Andre Gide. New York: Twayne, 1969. A brief monograph (in the Twayne World Author Series) on Gide's writings. Contains a selective bibliography and a brief chronology.

Guerard, Albert J. Andre Gide. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969. Focuses on Gide's craft as a writer and places him within a broader literary context. Guerard views The Immoralist, not The Counterfeiters, as Gide's masterpiece. Analyzes "the original psychic experience and the active poetic process."

Hytier, Jean. Andre Gide. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962. Originally a series of 8 lectures given in 1938, this work remains an extremely useful analysis of Gide's literary output. It is divided up by genre: lyrical prose, soties, recits, plays, and The Counterfeiters, and focuses on the aesthetic dimension of his work.