

Belles-Lettres. *Like writers in fields as disparate as the fine arts and pure science, critics of literature have discovered that they find a readier and more attentive audience if they approach their subject biographically. Stretches of esthetic evaluation are always more palatable if liberally spiced with gossip and anecdote. An influential school now contends that the biographical approach is valid not only for its reader-catching qualities but also because the sociological facts of a writer's life inevitably shape his work. (About this Charles Angoff has some provocative things to say on page 17.) The five major books reviewed below all approach literature biographically. F. W. Dupee's "Henry James" comes closest to pure criticism. But there is valuable self-evaluation in "The Journals of André Gide" and Stephen Spender's "World Within World"; while tucked amid the trivia and vital statistics of Blanche Patch's "Thirty Years with Bernard Shaw" and Irving Howe's "Sherwood Anderson" are many valuable critical insights.*

The Great Disturber

THE JOURNALS OF ANDRÉ GIDE,
Vol. IV. Translated, with an introduction and notes, by Justin O'Brien. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 341 pp. \$6.

By VAN METER AMES

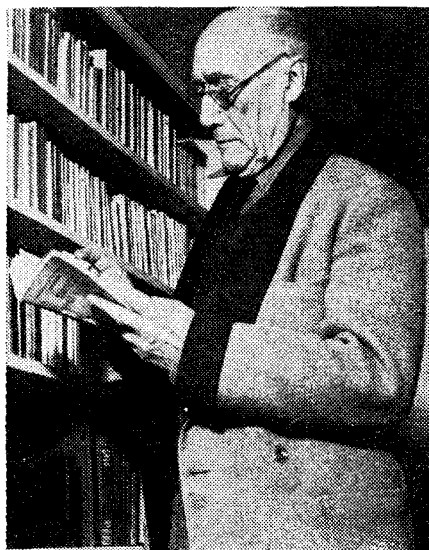
GIDE SAYS: "Nothing excellent can be done without leisure." While his life was free of the need to make a living, the jotting down of his days was removed from what he lived for, a leisure of the second degree. He lived to write as carefully as he could; he kept a diary to write as carelessly as he was able. He could not help being a perfectionist. To the end he noted grammatical faults in great writers yet envied those who could dash off their thoughts without retouching. He admits even polishing his "Journal" for publication. And this fine translation of the final volume, again with helpful notes and explanatory list of persons mentioned, reads as if written in English.

To write well, with or without care, was not just pride with Gide. Primarily a moralist, he wanted his writing to help people toward a good life. Many have gratefully felt that he succeeded. Some have attacked him as an immoralist because his views on sex cannot be accepted, his religious ideas are unconventional, several of his characters are immoral, and the aim of getting people to think by disturbing them is not easy to appreciate.

These last pages, covering the decade of 1939 to 1949, often dwell upon death—which came to himself on February 19, 1951, at the age of eighty-two. They reaffirm the humanistic religion he had arrived at after giving up orthodox Protestantism and reject-

ing Catholicism. That his humanism could not be shared with his wife was the drama of his life. In this volume he mentions again the suppression of sections concerning her yet once more makes plain that after the New Testament had united them the progress of his thought about it seemed impious to her.

There are passages showing his abiding interest in science. He would venerate its martyrs in place of the saints, though he is sobered in the hope of its solving all problems. He fears that many problems may not be solvable except through force. Still, he strives to avoid this outcome and believes that men could take the frightfulness out of life. His experience in France under Pétain and in the siege of Tunis of Hitler's use of force is a sore trial. He does not try to make himself out braver than he



—Interfoto.

André Gide—"primarily a moralist."

was or to hide moods that would be held against him. He is ashamed of his initial discouragement and submission and says conformity must always be resisted. Early in 1941 he dissociates himself from the famous magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française* when he learns that its new editor is a Fascist, and he takes the risk of deflating a French book in praise of Hitler's new order.

He wants to distinguish between his concern with social questions and his literary work. But what are the limits of literature? Does it include his "Journal"? Bulletins on the ups and downs of his health may be subliterate, yet they shade into meditations on death. He exclaims that literature is rubbish beside life. As a diary should, this one jumps. It tells his dependence on friendship, his anxiety about loved ones. Esthetic appreciations are frequent, and reflections on culture. He annoys the reader with what a boy does to annoy him. The great disturber himself no longer plays the piano for fear of bothering the neighbors, he who would put down any book for Bach. It is something to see him as a father proud of his child and baffled by her. What he had against French families was their blundering with the young.

For anyone who likes to read a chief interest is in the account of his prodigious reading: everything of value in French past and present; much in German; a surprising amount in English; fifty lines of Virgil's Latin every morning for therapy; all with comments and comparisons. He still loves the Bible. Reading about Hinduism, he cannot wish to lose in eternal Being the individual contours defined by his Western education. Yet the new social interpretation of Hinduism is akin to his humanistic Christianity. And he admires Gandhi.

Both men, the ascetic Hindu as well as the French defender of sensual pleasure and the gratuitous act, responded to the New Testament message of love. For Gide the gratuitous or utterly free act (which might take a frivolous or even criminal turn) could be refined to the capacity of such love. He says he gets on his knees before "the least act of self-consecration, of self-sacrifice, for others." Ten pages later he sees Gandhi rise above insoluble problems through selfless love, getting millions to join him. His death "is like a defeat for God." But death cannot be the last word for Gide. His favorite text was: "... if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

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Document of a Poet

WORLD WITHIN WORLD. By Stephen Spender. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 312 pp. \$3.50.

By HORACE GREGORY

IN THE United States the reader of literary memoirs and belles-lettres is likely to be bewildered by Stephen Spender's new book of prose. But in London, where the presence of Spender has been well known for nearly twenty years, even the more obscure pages of his autobiography will shed further light on the activities of an Oxford group that in the 1930's held the center of new hopes for poetry. The almost gray, closely printed pages of his book fail to convey the erratic charms of one who was spoken of as the handsomest young poet in London; they fail to carry the clear image of Spender's tall, angular figure, his graceful head, his quick, boyish, heart-shaped smile, his turn of wit in reciting prejudices, and the brilliant, not quite candid stare from intensely blue eyes. Americans are not likely to know that Spender's uncle was J. A. Spender, an influential London journalist who edited the *Liberal Westminster Gazette* with desperate restraint and considerable skill; Americans are likely to forget that the attractive nephew of a celebrated man in London has easy access to its literary circles.

On this side of the Atlantic Spender's name has a slightly different set of associations. One of them is a popular book of poems published in 1933; the book was youthful and lyrical, and it contained a now-famous poem, whose opening line is: "I think continually of those who were truly

great." Other associations were of the Left and Oxford, which in the early 1930's meant that a singularly opalescent aura of Communism arched like a rainbow over Spender's verse. This was refreshing and memorable, and at the moment of arrival very new. What may puzzle Americans reading Spender's autobiography is the following passage on page two:

If, lying in bed awake, there were times when I regretted not having my arms extended on a cross with rusty nails driven through my hands, there were others when I craved for a savagery, a demonism which seemed to have gone out of the world. I should have liked to have gone naked with Picts and Celts, painted in woad or clothed in pelt and rags, shameless around fires or in dark caverns.

The writer is obviously a person who once held to extreme and strange desires, quite as if he were a St. Sebastian in undress, and one who might all too readily be wounded by the arrows of self-pity. Fortunately, this uneven book is not all like that; there are scenes of his meeting W. H. Auden at Oxford, of his holidays with Christopher Isherwood in Germany, of his visiting Leonard and Virginia Woolf at their house in Tavistock Square, Bloomsbury, London. Not the least important of these sketches is the portrait of T. S. Eliot as the kindly, discriminating friend of younger poets. All these details are of amusing interest to future literary historians.

Sincerely felt as it may well have been (and there are many passages in the book which offer proof of his attitude), Spender's desire to meet the proletariat bears an uncanny resemblance to his wish to go "naked with Picts and Celts," which to the American reader is more than a little bit odd. Yet despite these lapses, which are both disastrous and absurd, one can understand that a similar impulse entered the feelings of many writers who in the early years of the 1930's swung to the side of Communism. Although their minds and motives were often confused, their hearts were on the side of the oppressed, the underprivileged, the unemployed. They did not know (as they learned later) that the Communist Party, dictated by the policy of the USSR, saw them not as poets eager to right the scales of justice but as publicity men and camp followers of a political machine.

The Communists, not unlike the Fascists and the Nazis, flattered young writers by approaching them as thinkers and then offered them the rewards of political power. As events soon proved, nothing corrupts more deeply



—Alexander Bender.

Stephen Spender—"the stormy Zeitgeist."

the source of creative life than the hope or acceptance of such rewards. This was the lesson that many writers, including Spender, had to learn. His "Forward from Liberalism," which he now disowns and which, being accepted by the British Left Book Club, was in effect a Communist tract, involved him in the horrors and disillusionments of the Spanish Civil War. He then began to see that Communism was not liberalism at all and that Marxism, however cleverly disguised as liberalism or progressive thinking it may be, leads to dictatorship and not to democracy.

If Stephen Spender's book can be said to preach a sermon it is that too many young British writers of the 1930's rode the stormy *Zeitgeist* of the Spanish Civil War, the Munich Peace, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and World War II as though it were a rocking horse newly unearthed from a collection of broken toys in the nursery. On the last page of his book Spender writes:

... now I am a middle-aged man, in the center of life and rotted by a modicum of success. . . . My mistake was to think that my own nature would make everything easy. Perhaps I was less a child when the purpose was clearer and now that I am old I am encumbered by many childish things.

Although his autobiography serves as another document of the 1930's, it is to be hoped that Stephen Spender will return to the writing of his poetry.

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Three Epitaphs

By Witter Bynner

I

I HAVE befriended and kissed,
But I lie in the family plot;
I thought I was going to be missed,
But I knew I was not.

II

Broken and thrown to the ground
Is the vessel that carried me round,
Having spilled back the watery me
To the earth and the sky and the sea.

III

Grant me to grasses, fashion me no
grief,
Be glad awhile as I was glad before.
For you as well there shall arrive a
leaf
Forever swinging better than a door.