



—By Berthold Mahn from "*Hommage à André Gide*."
André Gide on his deathbed.

The Barely Posthumous Gide

JUSTIN O'BRIEN

A LITTLE more than a year ago, on February 19, 1951, André Gide died in Paris. Those of us fortunate enough to have seen him during the last weeks of his life marveled at the physical and intellectual vigor of the eight-one-year-old writer. I remember a January afternoon when he was being filmed in his Rue Vaneau apartment for four hours under the blinding Klieg lights with but a single half-hour break, during which he entertained us with anecdotes of his youth. And even then he would not let me leave for dinner until we had shared a half-bottle of Cinzano. A week later, in a projection-room on the Champs Elysées, I saw the unedited film sequences run off to the accompaniment of joking comments from a cloaked and beaver-hatted Gide beside me. But most vividly of all, because it was our last meeting, I recall that bright February morning when, a few hours before plane time, I called to say a farewell that I knew might be definitive. The tall Gilbert, his faithful domestic servant and chauffeur, was shaving him as he sat at a small table littered with papers. During the operation he continued to smoke a nervous cigarette. Through lathered lips he enthusiastically de-

scribed the villa near Naples where he planned to finish the winter, now that his doctor had forbidden a projected trip to Marrakech.

He talked of the unfinished manuscript on the table between us, likening it to Montaigne's "Essays" and boasting that he had at last managed to write something quite spontaneously without even rereading his prose. We discussed writers (I had just had interviews with Montherlant and Marcel Aymé) and certain literary reviews (he admired *La Table Ronde* while finding it too much dominated by the spirit of François Mauriac). He talked of his attractive daughter's intellectual growth and promised to have his nephew send me some photographs and a privately printed book. As I suggested leaving, since he doubtless had other things to do, he detained me though admitting: "I *always* have other things to do."

A fortnight later Berthold Mahn was sketching his death mask in the same room, and Gide's posthumous life had begun. The past year has naturally produced in France a flood of recollections of the man and the writer. Whereas such memoirs had long been expected to pour forth at his death, no one counted on them to contain

revelations. For, in his lifelong cult of sincerity, André Gide had long ago told the essential facts about himself, dominated, as Roger Martin du Gard noted in 1920, by "the need he feels of legitimizing his conduct by analyzing and explaining it, by seeking its underlying causes. Not for the satisfaction of proving that he was right to act as he did, but because he claims the right to be as he is and because, being as he is, he could not act otherwise."

Together with the "Journals," the Socratic dialogues of "Corydon" and the memoirs entitled "If It Die" left nothing but the details to be filled in by others. Gide once planned and left unfinished a preface for the memoirs to explain why he published them in his lifetime. It said: "I have no confidence in posthumous publications. The devotion of parents and friends is skilful in camouflaging the dead, and I hold that very few of them, if they were to return to earth, would not have occasion to protest against the zeal that retouches and hides, or adds to, their features. I believe that it is better to be hated for what one is than loved for what one is not."

"Et nunc manet in te," by André Gide, which appeared in Switzerland a few months ago, is not precisely posthumous, since thirteen copies of it were privately printed and distributed to friends in 1947. Arnold Naville even listed it in his scholarly bibliography, to the exasperation of those who could not find it anywhere. "And now she remains in thee" is the way Gide understood the title, borrowed from the Vergilian "Culex," implying that his wife lived on solely in his memory. It is a beautiful essay of less than a hundred pages, at once self-accusing and self-excusing, which recounts the tragedy of his conjugal life. Most of the details of that intimate drama could already be read between the lines, where Gide deliberately wrote them, of his other personal writings. We already knew of the puritanical youth's marriage in 1895, shortly after his first homosexual experience and the death of his mother, to the first cousin he had loved since early childhood. As a middle-aged man he had referred to it as a marriage of heaven and hell. We had noted the pseudonym of Emmanuèle that he had given to Madeleine out of

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Justin O'Brien, professor of French at Columbia University, translated the four volumes of Gide's "Journals"; he is now writing a critical study of Gide and translating "Et nunc manet in te" for Alfred A. Knopf.

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New Materials for Writers

EVERY now and then some critic interested in contemporary writing and the poverty of the themes used by our novelists sticks his neck out in suggesting that our postwar boom offers subjects for fiction unrivaled since Theodore Dreiser wrote "The Financier" and "The Titan." These novels were drawn from his study of the Chicago tycoon Charles T. Yerkes, who appears in them as Frank Cowperwood, and from his investigation of the dynasties of Carnegie, Rockefeller, Flagler, and Frick. All of them, he believed, were conspiring to enslave the masses. There is no reason to bemoan the loss of these picturesque buccaneers and others of their kind as source material for writers. The financial crash in 1929 and the depression that followed put an end to the dynastic ambitions of men whom Theodore Roosevelt had labeled "malefactors of great wealth."

People who have followed in the press the financial scandals of our own day or who will take the trouble to read a recent book reviewed here last week, Blair Bolles's "How to Get Rich in Washington," sardonically subtitled "Rich Man's Division of the Welfare State," can discover a host of fascinating characters whose activities have robbed the taxpayer in five or six years of more money than Frank Cowperwood could have conceived in his most opulent dreams. It is not necessary for the writer to penetrate the privacy of millionaires or to break into Wall Street's towering walls. The control of wealth and the power that goes with it have moved from Wall Street and the stock exchanges of other great cities to Washington. Congressional and other public investigations of financial barns

from which the horse has been stolen offer all of the evidence and the material, including word portraits and histories of the malefactors, that any writer could wish for. It was an historic day when J. P. Morgan was induced to testify before Congress, made all the more memorable when a dwarf perched on his lap. Today everybody testifies except Wall Street bankers, who are no longer necessary for investigations into the mysterious loss of billions of the people's money.

In 1948, Mr. Bolles explains, there was an illusion that private enterprise was firmly re-established as the irrevocable American way. Unfortunately, there was not enough money available in all of our Wall Streets to supply a steady stream of private capital for investments in old or new enterprises. Washington had put up most of the billions necessary for the development of our war economy. The losses due to extravagant and careless bookkeeping were fabulous but excusable; the enormous job had to be done in a hurry. But the war years had taught the middlemen, the lawyers, the friends of the Government servants who had control of the distribution of vast sums of money, how to get rich in Washington.

When the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which had been set up during the Depression to spark the dying American economy, was re-established by Congress it contained a clause "in the interest of the general public" which abolished the restriction of loans to private lending institutions, and opened the barn door wide to loans "to maintain the economic stability of the country and to assist in promoting maximum employment and production." "The RFC directors," Mr. Bolles writes, "took the

law as a mandate to make good loans and bad at a furious rate; by their reading of the law they satisfied the 'public interest' whenever they lent money to small business whether or not it was on the verge of bankruptcy, or promoted employment by keeping alive some industry of doubtless efficiency that had five or more persons on the payroll." One of its beneficent results to what used to be known as private enterprise was that private lending institutions unloaded their sour investments on the Treasury.

THE revised RFC was a bonanza not only to a snake farm in California, a gambling house in Reno, or the owners of dying oil wells in Texas, but to some of our largest corporations, now controlled by salaried managers instead of the owner tycoons of Dreiser's day. Another form of the distribution of public wealth was the hurried attempt to put into private hand billions of dollars' worth of surplus war goods scattered around the world, including the sale of American blood plasma at fourteen cents a unit to a Chinese merchant who promptly resold it for thirty-five dollars a unit as a new "male rejuvenator." The revised RFC enabled ambitious young men with only a handful of change in their pockets to start a prosperous business and often through sheer carelessness handed over millions to established businesses and large corporations. The "independent agencies," like the Maritime Commission, were victimized by companies which had discovered how to evade the law and get money for private enterprise. Enormous ship subsidies were handed out to thirteen companies whose net worth was increased by three millions.

If the figures furnished by Mr. Bolles and others are fabulous, so are some of the people involved in getting hold of Government wealth. They include the little men who came to Washington to get anything they could lay their hands on, the go-betweens, the exalted friends of more exalted officials, baffled and angry Senators and Congressmen, and the heads of small and large departments who erred in trusting subordinates or friends, or who through stiff-necked pride of office refused to hear or see anything evil about the outrageous behavior of their subordinates. There are women in the story, too, and not only those who received mink coats from grateful employers. Here they are ready for the American writer who has imagination and the capacity for a little research. What could another Dreiser or a Dickens or Balzac have made of them!

—H. S.