

Nobel Prize in Literature 1947



André Paul Guillaume Gide

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1947 was awarded to André Gide "*for his comprehensive and artistically significant writings, in which human problems and conditions have been presented with a fearless love of truth and keen psychological insight*".

On the first page of the remarkable journal kept by André Gide for half a century, the author, then twenty years old, finds himself on the sixth floor of a building in the Latin Quarter, looking for a meeting place for «The Symbolists», the group of youths to which he belonged. From the window he looked at the Seine and Notre Dame during the sunset of an autumn day and felt like the hero of a Balzac novel, a Rastignac ready to conquer the city lying at his feet:«And now, we two!» However, Gide's ambition was to find long and twisting paths ahead; nor was it to be contented with easy victories.

The seventy-eight-year-old writer who this day is being honoured with the award of the Nobel Prize has always been a controversial figure. From the beginning of his career he put himself in the first rank of the sowers of spiritual anxiety, but this does not keep him today from being counted almost everywhere among the first literary names of France, or

from enjoying an influence that has persisted unabatedly through several generations. His first works appeared in the 1890's; his last one dates from the spring of 1947. A very important period in the spiritual history of Europe is outlined in his work, constituting a kind of dramatic foundation to his long life. One may ask why the importance of this work has only so recently been appreciated at its true value: the reason is that André Gide belongs unquestionably to that class of writers whose real evaluation requires a long perspective and a space adequate for the three stages of the dialectic process. More than any of his contemporaries, Gide has been a man of contrasts, a veritable Proteus of perpetually changing attitudes, working tirelessly at opposite poles in order to strike flashing sparks. This is why his work gives the appearance of an uninterrupted dialogue in which faith constantly struggles against doubt, asceticism against the love of life, discipline against the need for freedom. Even his external life has been mobile and changing, and his famous voyages to the Congo in 1927 and to Soviet Russia in 1935 - to cite only those - are proof enough that he did not want to be ranked among the peaceful stay-at-homes of literature.

Gide comes from a Protestant family whose social position permitted him to follow his vocation freely and to devote greater attention than most others can afford to the cultivation of his personality and to his inner development. He described this family milieu in his famous autobiography whose title *Si le grain ne meurt* (1924) [*If It Die...*] is taken from St. John's words about the grain of wheat that must die before its fruition. Although he has strongly reacted against his Puritan education, he has nonetheless all his life dwelled on the fundamental problems of morality and religion, and at times he has defined with rare purity the message of Christian love, particularly in his short novel, *La Porte étroite* (1909) [*Strait Is the Gate*], which deserves to be compared with the tragedies of Racine.

On the other hand, one finds in André Gide still stronger manifestations of that famous «immoralism» - a conception which his adversaries have often misinterpreted. In reality it designates the free act, the «gratuitous» act, the liberation from all repressions of conscience, something analogous to what the American recluse Thoreau expressed, «The

worst thing is being the slave dealer of one's soul.» One should always keep in mind that Gide found some difficulty in presenting as virtue that which is composed of the absence of generally recognized virtues. *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897) [*Fruits of the Earth*] was a youthful attempt from which he later turned away, and the diverse delights he enthusiastically sings of evoke for us those beautiful fruits of southern lands which do not bear keeping. The exhortation which he addresses to his disciple and reader, «And now, throw away my book. Leave me!», has been followed first of all by himself in his later works. But what leaves the strongest impression, in *Nourritures* as elsewhere, is the intense poetry of separation, of return, captured by him in so masterly a fashion in the flute-song of his prose. One rediscovers it often, for example in this brief journal entry, written later, near a mosque at Brusa on one May morning: «Ah! begin anew and on again afresh! Feel with rapture this exquisite tenderness of the cells in which emotion filters like milk... Bush of the dense gardens, rose of purity, indolent rose in the shade of plane trees, can it be thee thou hast not known my youth? Before? Is it a memory I dwell in? Is it indeed I who am seated in this little corner of the mosque, I who breathe and I who love thee? or do I only dream of loving thee?... If I were indeed real, would this swallow have stolen so close to me?»

Behind the strange and incessant shift in perspective that Gide's work offers to us, in the novels as well as in the essays, in the travel diaries, or in the analyses of contemporary events, we always find the same supple intelligence, the same incorruptible psychology, expressed in a language which, by the most sober means, attains a wholly classic limpidity and the most delicate variety. Without going into the details of the work, let us mention in this connection the celebrated *Les Faux Monnayeurs* (1926) [*The Counterfeiters*], with its bold and penetrating analysis of a group of young French people. Through the novelty of its technique, this novel has inspired a whole new orientation in the contemporary art of the narrative. Next to it, put the volume of memoirs already mentioned, in which the author intended to recount his life truthfully without adding anything that could be to his advantage or hiding what would be unpleasant. Rousseau had had the same intention, with

this difference, that Rousseau exhibits his faults in the conviction that all men being as evil as he, none will dare to judge or condemn him. Gide, however, quite simply refuses to admit to his fellows the right to pass any judgment on him; he calls on a higher tribunal, a vaster perspective, in which he will present himself before the sovereign eye of God. The significance of these memoirs thus is indicated in the mysterious Biblical quotation of the grain of wheat which here represents the personality: as long as the latter is sentient, deliberate, and egocentric, it dwells alone and without germinating power; it is only at the price of its death and its transmutation that it will acquire life and be able to bear fruit. «I do not think,» Gide writes, «that there is a way of looking at the moral and religious question or of acting in the face of it that I have not known and made my own at some moment in my life. In truth, I have wished to reconcile them all, the most diverse points of view, by excluding nothing and by being ready to entrust to Christ the solution of the contest between Dionysus and Apollo.»

Such a statement throws light on the intellectual versatility for which Gide is often blamed and misunderstood, but which has never led him to betray himself. His philosophy has a tendency toward regeneration at any price and does not fail to evoke the miraculous phoenix which out of its nest of flames hurls itself to a new flight.

In circumstances like those of today, in which, filled with admiring gratitude, we linger before the rich motifs and the essential themes of this work, it is natural that we pass over the critical reservations which the author himself seems to enjoy provoking. For even in his ripe age, Gide has never argued in favor of a full and complete acceptance of his experiences and his conclusions. What he wishes above all is to stir up and present the problems. Even in the future, his influence will doubtless be noted less in a total acceptance than in a lively controversy about his work. And in this lies the foundation of his true greatness.

His work contains pages which provoke like a defiance through the almost unequalled audacity of the confession. He wishes to combat the Pharisees, but it is difficult, in the struggle, to avoid shocking certain rather delicate norms of human character. One

must always remember that this manner of acting is a form of the impassioned love of truth which, since Montaigne and Rousseau, has been an axiom of French literature. Through all the phases of his evolution, Gide has appeared as a true defender of literary integrity, founded on the personality's right and duty to present all its problems resolutely and honestly. From this point of view, his long and varied activity, stimulated in so many ways, unquestionably represents an idealistic value.

Since Mr. André Gide, who has declared with great gratitude his acceptance of the distinction offered him, has unfortunately been prevented from coming here by reasons of health, his Prize will now be handed to His Excellency the French Ambassador.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1947/press.html