

André Gide's Return



A Case-Study in Left-Bank Politics

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“... truth, however painful, only wounds
in order to cure.”

ANDRÉ GIDE (1936)

IN THE PERIOD between the two World Wars, André Gide was probably the best-known representative of French literature at home or abroad. He had been a published writer since 1911, with two dozen books or more in print, and although many of them propounded aesthetics which could only be described as introspective, he was doing what he could to remain in touch with the youngest and most avant-garde of his readers. In his early work he had seemed the image of traditional French Protestantism, austere and unbending, but his themes soon expanded to embrace the most sensuous of hedonisms, and he was an early advocate of a very literary homosexuality. He was known to inhabit a cultivated, somewhat bookish environment while at the same time reaching out to other cultures and literatures. When he finally admitted social concerns to his writing table, it was as if he had begun a second career. But even after

his travels in French Africa and his subsequent condemnation of “colonialism”, the image of dilettantism persisted.

“As a destroyer, Gide pierces upper-class ideologies with a spear [a critic noted in Henri Barbusse’s pro-Communist newspaper *Monde* in 1929]. But after that he washes his hands, abstains from action, offering us nothing but further reasons for concern.”

Soon his critics on the Left stopped criticising. In the July 1932 issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* Gide offered a section of his private journal up to public scrutiny. “But above all I should like to live long enough to see the plans of Russia succeed”, he had written. “All my heart applauds this gigantic and still so human enterprise.” In September of that year another section of his journal was published. “I should like to cry out my sympathy for the USSR; and I should like my cry to be heard.” (These journal entries had been written in 1931.) Then the *NRF* published, from Gide’s journal of April 1932, this confidence: “If my life were necessary to assure the success of the USSR, I

should sacrifice it at once." It was the year of his 63rd birthday.

Considering Gide's reputation, his position in the literary establishment, these declarations were newsworthy, and the press did not fail to pick them up, although the conversion was treated with sarcasm by those who took it for passing fashion. But the Communist paper *L'Humanité* saw Gide's confessions as "typical of the attraction which the magnificent Soviet experiment exercises, even on bourgeois intellectuals." Ilya Ehrenburg reported the news to his Soviet readers with even greater enthusiasm:

"There is no need to speak here of the courage of André Gide—all his past life frees us of the need for such praise. Paul Claudel ended up in the Church, Paul Valéry in the French Academy, André Gide in life."

With his declaration of love for Soviet Communism, Gide was to be drawn into history. Soon after the first sensational pages of his journal appeared in print, he was asked to endorse a World Congress Against War which Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland were promoting. This meeting, to become known as the Amsterdam Congress, was the first large-scale international rally of its kind. Gide also accepted the chairmanship of a meeting called to denounce Hitlerism in March 1933, sponsored by the "Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists", in the company of André Malraux, Jean Guéhenno and Paul Vaillant-Couturier. There Gide stated that even if the USSR also restricts freedom, it was "to make it possible at long last to establish a new society."

ONE HAS TO READ the complete published *Journal* of Gide to understand the basic ambiguities of his position. The writer who revealed anti-Semitism in his remarks on his *lycée* classmate *Léon Blum*, who had at one time sympathised with Charles Maurras and *Action Française*, and who was still attracted by the personality of Adolf Hitler, confessed to his journal: "I don't understand anything about politics. If it interests me, it is in the manner of a Balzac novel." He refused to put his name to political manifestos and petitions, he wrote, not to set himself apart, "but I don't believe that I have encountered a single proclamation of this kind the contents of which I could approve entirely, and which did not distort my position on some point."

Yet despite himself he now belonged to a cause. He was even becoming a familiar name to those who would never read a line of his work. The *NRF* critic Ramon Fernandez recounted that on 12 February 1934, during the General Strike following the portentous right-wing rioting of 6 February, a construction worker was heard to exclaim: "What

we need is rifles, to march into the rich neighbourhoods. They're the only places that serious things can be done. And then we need someone to lead us, a chief, a real man . . . say a guy like Gide." Fernandez was accordingly impressed with "the mythical power of literature", but he could also have spoken of the power of the Communist press.

Only a month before the February 6 riots Gide had accompanied André Malraux into the dragon's lair, to Hitler's capital, in an attempt to persuade Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels to release Georgi Dimitrov and his fellow defendants who had been acquitted of the charge of setting fire to the *Reichstag*, but not yet freed. Goebbels did not receive them, but Gide and Malraux left their request on his desk; and the Dimitrov group was out of jail by the end of February. In March 1934 Gide affirmed in a letter to a journalist the "right of inspection" that every man possessed concerning his neighbour, thanks to which international justice was taking precedence over local versions easier to manipulate. "Thanks to this right, to the pressure of inspection, the *Reichstag* trial acquitted the innocent; thanks to it the defendants were released at last." By then Gide was an expected presence on the speakers' platforms at meetings, and a name—despite himself—at the bottom of petitions. He confessed at a debate on his work at the *Union pour la Vérité* in January 1935: "Since I became involved in political concerns four years ago, I have stopped writing."

TO REACH the Gide apartment one had only to cross the Boulevard Saint-Germain from the Malraux' Rue du Bac, taking a second or third right turn to the Rue Vaneau; on his way to the Gallimard offices, Gide constantly passed the Malraux' door. Even a slow walker could bridge the distance in ten minutes, and Gide and Malraux exchanged visits often in those years.

In the mid-1930s, apart from the Halévy "at homes", Gide's was probably the most traditional literary salon that writers of the youngest generation could attend. Gide's biographer, the faithful Maria Van Rysselberghe, who was at once his unofficial hostess, confidante, and the mother of the woman with whom he had a child out of wedlock, had an apartment of her own next door to Gide's, on the top floor of that solid middle-class building at 1 bis, Rue Vaneau. She considered her neighbour's apartment a "crossroads"; it seemed to her that everyone who had a problem, everyone who was about to set forth on a journey, or who was returning from one, felt it necessary to call in there. The visitors she registers in her extraordinary diary quite make up a who's who of literary and intellectual Paris.

FROM THE MOMENT André Gide declared himself a *communiste de coeur*, an admirer and a voluntary defender of the workers' homeland, he made himself available to the Soviet cause, refusing no petition, meeting, movement. Having been born in 1869, Gide was the senior member of most speakers' platforms, most sponsoring boards. His books, his influence, were more of a drawing card among the discerning than the works of those fading glories, Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse. Gide was not robust, and his well-known aversion to draughty conference halls generated anecdotes. But the Communists were pleased with Gide's performance, and maintained a constant liaison with him via Paul Vaillant-Couturier and Ilya Ehrenburg, or indirectly through a network of fellow travellers or *compagnons de route*.

It was the decade of pilgrimages to the Soviet Union. Gide had been planning such a journey for years. In 1933, for example, he had tried to tempt his friend Roger Martin du Gard to accompany him, but du Gard was evasive, finally immovable. Gide himself found reasons to postpone, to cancel:

his colds (and Moscow's draughts) as well as the fear expressed to Maria Van Rysselberghe that he would be obliged to make speeches, would find himself saying more than he wished, while the translation into Russian and back into French for home consumption would make it worse, "and all the effort that I am making to keep my personal point of view in Communism will be lost. . . ." That was in October 1935. Ilya Ehrenburg pointed out to André Malraux that health wasn't everything, that Gide had a duty to the Party but also to the political crisis: at the time it was considered vital to consolidate the Franco-Soviet alliance that had been made formal in the pact between the two nations in May 1935. Gide wondered to what extent it was in Ehrenburg's personal interest to see that he went to Moscow. Then Gide's friend Pierre Herbart, who was to become the husband of Elisabeth (daughter of Maria Van Rysselberghe and mother of Gide's child), left for Moscow to work as an editor on the French edition of *International Literature*. Elisabeth joined him there early in 1936.

A Telegram to Stalin



STALIN'S EFFIGY is met with everywhere; his name is on every tongue; his praises are invariably sung in every speech. In Georgia particularly, I did not enter a single inhabited room, even the humblest and the most sordid, without remarking a portrait of Stalin hanging on the wall, in the same place no doubt where the ikon used to be. Is it adoration, love or fear? I do not know; always and everywhere he is present.

ON THE ROAD from Tiflis to Batum, we passed through Gori, the small town where Stalin was born. I thought that it would no doubt be courteous to send him a message, in response to the welcome given us by the Soviet Union, where we had everywhere been acclaimed, feasted, and made much of. I should never, I thought, find a better opportunity. I stopped the car in front of the post-office and handed in the text of the telegram. This is almost exactly what I had written:

"Passing through Gori, in the course of our wonderful journey, I feel the need to send you my most cordial . . ."

But here the translator paused: "I cannot let you speak like this. 'You' is not enough when that 'you' is Stalin. It would be positively shocking; something must be added." And, as I displayed some amazement, they began to consult among themselves. They

proposed: "You, leader of the workers," or "You, master of the peoples," or . . . I can't remember what.

It sounds as though I was making it up, doesn't it? Alas, I am not! And people had better not try to say that we had to do with some stupid and clumsily zealous subordinates. No, we had with us, taking part in the discussion, several personages who were quite sufficiently highly placed and, at any rate, quite familiar with "what is done."

I said it was absurd, protested that Stalin was above such base flattery. I struggled in vain. There was nothing to be done. My telegram would only be accepted if I consented to the addition. And as it concerned a translation that I could not control, I gave up the struggle and submitted, but declined all responsibility, reflecting with sadness that all this sort of thing helps to widen between Stalin and the people an appalling, an unbridgeable gulf.

I had already noticed that other translations of various speeches that I had occasion to make in the U.S.S.R. had been similarly touched up and "improved." X explained to me that, according to correct usage, the word "destiny" should be followed by a laudatory epithet when it is the destiny of the U.S.S.R. that is being referred to. I finally proposed "glorious", which X told me would satisfy everybody. On the other hand he asked me to be good enough to suppress the word "great" that I had put in front of "monarch." A monarch cannot be great. I at once declared that I would not recognise as mine any text by me that might be published in Russian during my stay, and that I should say so. I have now said it.

André Gide

Retour de l'URSS (1936)

GIDE'S DECISION was taken in May. First he had another talk with Malraux, and with Ehrenburg, concerning what he would be able to say in the USSR and how his words would be treated. He wanted to talk about the plight of Soviet homosexuals, for instance—would he be listened to? He could choose his own travelling companions, at any rate. The first was his editor, Jacques Schiffrin, publisher of Gallimard's *Pléiade* library. Schiffrin was a keenly intelligent man of the Left who was not a Communist and who possessed an irreplaceable asset: he was a native Russian speaker. Born in 1894 in Baku on the Caspian Sea, Schiffrin had been a student in Switzerland during the Russian Revolution. He settled in France, where he created the *Pléiade* series, and remained as its director when it merged with Gallimard. Gide also invited Eugène Dabit, Louis Guilloux, and Jef Last, then 38, described by Gide's confidante as "a Dutch sailor, writer, winning, delicious, ironic, speaking *un français impossible*" (Last was to take part in the Spanish Civil War and in the Dutch resistance during the Nazi occupation).

So Louis Aragon informed Moscow that Gide was finally on his way, and with Schiffrin as his interpreter. A telegram came back: Pierre Herbart was flying to Paris that very night to speak to Gide privately. For the Soviet hosts were evidently upset that Schiffrin was going to interpret for Gide. That seemed like a lack of confidence on Gide's part (although Herbart had tried to pacify the Soviets by pointing out that Schiffrin was just a friend). Gide phoned Aragon and told him the whole thing was stupid: to reject Schiffrin, now that everyone knew he was going, would have a deplorable effect. In any case, Schiffrin and his other travelling companions were scheduled to arrive a week after Gide himself, and none of them would accompany Gide to official receptions. Aragon said that he would try to settle the problem. Maria Van Rysselberghe observed that Herbart was evasive, reticent about speaking of his experiences in Moscow. He was heard to comment on the lack of freedom of artists and writers there: "We must utilise Moscow as an experiment, not as an example."

Herbart also revealed that the Soviet Union had printed 300,000 postcards with Gide's picture on them. "Then everyone is going to recognise me", a worried Gide remarked, "*Mais tout le monde va me reconnaître, alors!*" The Soviet *International Literature* published an issue largely concerned with Gide. The University of Moscow opened an exhibition devoted to his life and works.

As Gide packed, the news of Maxim Gorky's illness became more alarming; clearly the old writer was dying. But if it was only to go to the funeral, thought Gide, better not to go at all. Ehrenburg reported that Gorky was getting better. So off went Gide and Herbart on 16 June 1936, flying from Le Bourget airport in a German airplane (there would

be a stop-over in Berlin). Schiffrin, Dabit, Guilloux, and Last sailed to Leningrad.

GIDE ARRIVED IN Moscow with the best of intentions. His own diary expresses his state of mind: if he had once believed that man had to change himself first of all, now he was convinced that social conditions had to change before man could. Dishonest attacks on the Soviet Union had led him to wish to defend "the experiment"; he felt that the critics would begin to support the Soviet Union when he ceased to do so. He hoped that he would be able to keep his own attention focused on final goals, so that he would not be led to turn away from the USSR.

Certainly he had been shaken by the growing body of well-motivated criticism of the Soviet system. Before he left, Victor Serge, the man whose liberation from Soviet exile Gide had endorsed following the International Writers Congress just a year earlier, published an open letter to Gide in *Esprit*. How can we fight Fascism, Serge asked, if we have our own concentration camps? "Let me tell you that we can serve the working class and the USSR only with total lucidity." Herbart privately confirmed the truth of everything Serge said, but found it inadmissible for a Communist to declare such things publicly. Gide agreed. "Ah! But I should like to be able to tell Stalin everything I think about that. . . ."

Gide arrived too late to see Gorky alive. He paid his respects to him at his deathbed, and that evening attended a performance of Gorky's *Mother* before the rest of the audience was even aware that its author had died; an actor stepped to the front of the stage to announce it. The following day, Gide stood alongside the coffin with Herbart and Louis Aragon (who was spending the summer in the Soviet Union). Gide delivered a speech in Gorky's memory on Red Square, then joined Soviet writers in the funeral procession. "The fate of culture is linked in our minds to the destiny of the USSR", he declared. "We shall defend it." But he could not resist returning to the theme that mattered so much to him: the individuality to which a creative person had a right, as well as a need.

"I have often written that it is in being the most particular that a writer achieves the most general interest, because it is in showing the most personal side of himself that he reveals himself, by that very fact, the most humane."

He observed that "no Russian writer was more Russian than Maxim Gorky." But he also said that while writers have always written against their régimes, for the first time, in the Soviet Union, the writer need not be in opposition.

Everywhere he went he was treated with

deference. When he visited the Gide exhibition at the university, he talked to students assembled there. In Leningrad, where he had gone to meet Schiffrin and the other members of his party who had travelled by ship, he was also asked to speak, but there he experienced the heavy hand of the censor. He was asked to insert the word “*glorious*” in the phrase “the future of the USSR” (and to remove *great* before *monarch*). While the group visited the Crimean port of Sevastopol, Eugène Dabit fell ill, apparently stricken by typhus. The others returned to Moscow and Dabit died alone in Sevastopol on 21 August, a month before his thirty-eighth birthday. (The final entry in his private diary was a cry of pessimism, for he saw the coming of another World War. “We are hunted, we are lost. Life, in this world, becomes unthinkable.”) On his return to Paris, Gide accompanied Clara Malraux to the funeral at Père Lachaise cemetery, where Vaillant-Couturier and Aragon made speeches stressing Dabit’s sympathy with Com-

munist, Aragon referring to the dead man’s expressions of moral satisfaction with the Soviet Union. “*Hélas!*” was Gide’s comment to his diary.

Although he was giving out hints, Gide had not yet delivered himself of his sentiments concerning the workers’ paradise. Yet it was his practice to write about everything he did, saw, or thought about, and to publish what he wrote. There was also a tradition of writing about one’s travels in the Soviet Union; by 1936 one could have filled a shelf with such accounts. Gide began writing his *Retour de l’URSS* almost immediately after Dabit’s funeral. In private conversations he made it clear that the Soviet government’s severity with respect to homosexuality was only one of his objections to the régime. He was pleased, he told Maria Van Rysselberghe, that he had not seen Stalin, and had not even corresponded with him about the repressive legislation against homosexuals; there was now so much more to be said about the Soviet system than that. Certainly his Soviet hosts had done

On Being



BEFORE GOING to the Soviet Union, I wrote the following passage:

“I believe that a writer’s value is intimately linked to the force of the revolutionary spirit that animates him—or to be more exact (for I am not so mad as to believe that only left-wing writers have artistic value), to the force of his spirit of opposition. This spirit exists as much in Bos-

suet and Chateaubriand, or at the present time in Claudel, as in Molière, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, and so many others. In our form of society, a great writer, a great artist, is essentially nonconformist. He makes head against the current. This was true of Dante, of Cervantes, of Ibsen, of Gogol”. . . .

WHAT IS WANTED NOW is compliance, conformism. What is desired and demanded is approval of all that is done in the U.S.S.R.; and an attempt is being made to obtain an approval that is not mere resignation, but a sincere, an enthusiastic approval. What is most astounding is that this attempt is successful. On the other hand the smallest protest, the least criticism, is liable to the severest penalties, and in fact is immediately stifled. And I doubt whether in any other country in the world, even Hitler’s Germany, thought be less free, more bowed down, more fearful (terrorised), more vassalised.

IF THE MIND is obliged to obey a word of command, it can at any rate feel that it is not free. But if it has been so manipulated beforehand that it obeys without even waiting for the word of command, it loses even the consciousness of its enslavement. I believe many young Soviet citizens would be greatly astonished if they were told that they had no liberty of thought, and would vehemently deny it.

And as it always happens that we recognise the value of certain advantages only after we have lost them, there is nothing like a stay in the U.S.S.R. (or of course in Germany) to help us appreciate the inappreciable liberty of thought we still enjoy in France—and sometimes abuse.

AT LENINGRAD I WAS ASKED to prepare a little speech to be addressed to a meeting of writers and students. I had only been a week in the country and was trying to tune in to the correct key. I therefore submitted my text to X and Y. I was at once given to understand that my text was far from being in the right key or the right tone, and that what I was intending to say would be most unsuitable. Oh! it didn’t take me long to realise this by myself. As for the speech, it was never delivered. Here it is.

“I have often been asked my opinion of present-day Soviet literature. I should like to explain why I have always refused to give it. I shall be able at the same time to repeat with greater precision one of the passages of the speech I made in the Red Square on the solemn occasion of Gorki’s funeral. I was speaking of the ‘new problems’ which had been raised by the very triumph of the Soviet Republics, problems, I said, which it would not be the least of the U.S.S.R.’s glories to have introduced into history and to have presented to our meditations. As the future of culture

everything conceivable to satisfy his needs. Gide confided to Roger Stéphane that they had filled a swimming pool with handsome young men—whom he later discovered were Red Army soldiers. (After the bombshell of Gide's book, the Soviets called attention to a homosexual act he had committed during his trip; apparently Gide had not realised that this encounter had also been pre-arranged.)

Maria Van Rysselberghe describes the evening—23 September, 1936—when Gide read the first draft of *Retour de l'URSS* to Jacques Schiffrin and Louis Guilloux. Presumably he had already read it to Jef Last, for Last stayed at the Rue Vaneau apartment before going off to Spain. The friends found Gide's report clear but harsh. "This little book will have the effect of an exploding bomb", Maria Van Rysselberghe observed with her habitual perspicuity. "You have to have a lot of courage to publish such a book", Guilloux commented. (In his own journal, he shows himself to be less sympathetic to Gide: "I'm beginning to believe

that he went to the USSR only to obtain the authority he needed to say what he is saying today.") Gide went to the South of France to show his draft to Herbart, obtaining useful suggestions for the final manuscript. By 21 October it was at the printer's.

GIDE WANTED to save the surprise of his conclusions for publication day. But he also thought that he had better warn his friends. He began with Communists like Paul Nizan. By 24 October *Le Figaro* reported in a gossip column the "rumour" that Gide had returned from the Soviet Union troubled and disappointed. He was said to be preparing a small book for publication before the middle of November; and it might surprise. Meanwhile Gide had gone out to Versailles to talk to André Chamson, by then curator of the palace, asking whether *Vendredi* would publish his findings. How could Chamson refuse?

"Forced to Think"

seems to me to be closely bound up with their solution, it will perhaps not be amiss if I return to the subject with greater particularity.

"THE GREAT MAJORITY, even when composed of the best individuals, never bestows its approbation on what is new, potential, unconcerted, and disconcerting in a work, but only on what it can *recognise*—that is to say, the commonplace. Just as once there were bourgeois commonplaces, so now there are revolutionary commonplaces; it is important to know it. It is important to realise that the essential value of a work of art, the quality that will ensure its survival, never lies in a conformist adherence to a doctrine, be that doctrine the soundest and the surest possible; but rather in formulating questions that forestall the future's, and answers to questions that have not yet been formulated. I am very much afraid that many works, imbued with the purest spirit of Marxism, and on that account so successful today, will soon emit to the noses of tomorrow the insufferable odour of the clinic; and I believe that the works that will live most victoriously will be those that have freed themselves successfully from such preoccupations.

"When the revolution is triumphant, installed, and established, art runs a terrible danger, a danger almost as great as under the worst fascist oppression—the danger of orthodoxy. Art that submits to orthodoxy, to even the soundest doctrines, is lost—wrecked upon the shoals of conformism. What the triumphant revolution can and should offer the artist is above all else liberty. Without liberty art loses its meaning and its value.

"Walt Whitman, on the death of President Lincoln, wrote one of his most beautiful poems. But if this poem had been imposed, if Whitman had been forced to write it by order and in conformity with an

accepted canon, his threnody would have lost all its virtue and its beauty; or rather, Whitman could not have written it.

"And as, quite naturally, the assent of the greatest number, with its accompanying applause, success, and favours, goes to the qualities the public is best able to recognise—that is say, to conformism—I wonder with some anxiety whether perhaps in this great Soviet Union there may not be vegetating obscurely, unknown to the crowd, some Baudelaire, some Keats, or some Rimbaud, who by very reason of his worth cannot make himself heard. And yet he, of all others, is the one who is of importance, for those who are at first disdained, like Rimbaud, Keats, Baudelaire, and even Stendhal, are those who tomorrow will be the greatest."

But, they will say, what concern have we today with a possible Keats, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, or even Stendhal? The only value they have in our eyes now is the degree in which they reflect the moribund and corrupt society of which they were the melancholy products. If the new society of today is unable to produce them, so much the worse for them, but so much the better for us, who have nothing more to learn from them or their like. The writer who can be of service to us today is the man who is perfectly at his ease in this new form of society and whose spirit is intensified by what would have hampered the others. In other words, the man who approves, enjoys, and applauds.

Exactly. And I think that the writings of those applauders are of very slight value or service, and that if the people wish to develop their culture, they had far better not listen to them. Nothing is so useful for developing culture as to be forced to think.

A.G.

One of the anecdotes Gide told his friends—Chamson and Guéhenno both remembered and recorded it—was how, during his travels across the Soviet territories, he and his companions were always greeted at train stops by banners of welcome; only later did they realise that the banners were travelling on the same train with them.

Now the pressures began to be felt. On 26 October, Ilya Ehrenburg called in at the Rue Vaneau. To Gide's surprise, he seemed fully aware of the contents of the unpublished book. Ehrenburg let Gide know that he even approved Gide's point of view, and in fact he himself could have said much more! But was this the right time, with the Spanish Civil War raging, and the Soviet Union doing so much to help the Republican cause? Shouldn't Gide himself go to Spain? Gide liked that idea, for it suggested a means to prove that he was not breaking with the Communists. Meanwhile, Gide was getting telegrams from the Spanish war front warning that the book would represent "a mortal blow" for their cause.

Jef Last cabled from Spain, for example, begging that he at least postpone publication of *Retour* until they could talk in Madrid (Ehrenburg certainly put him up to that). Aragon telephoned to say that he was back from Spain with a message from Last: the Dutchman had given Gide *une lettre d'approbation* which was to have been printed at the end of the book; now that letter would have to be omitted. (Clearly Last had been identified as Gide's weakness.) Malraux also returned from Spain, and asked to dine with Gide who feared that this was to be another move in the campaign. But Malraux remained his old independent self. "They are bothering you a lot, aren't they? Don't let yourself be had." But when Gide met Victor Serge, Serge wondered what Malraux's attitude would be if he were asked to choose for or against Gide. Gide said that Ehrenburg had obviously seen the text of his book, even though the printer had been asked to keep it confidential, to which Serge replied that Ehrenburg was a Soviet secret agent, or an aide of secret agents. For his part Gide had asked Magdeleine Paz to be sure that his meeting with Serge remained confidential so that no one could accuse him of having been influenced by Serge. "Try not to be followed", she had warned Serge.

GIDE CONTINUED to make minor changes in his book, and before Schiffrin arrived to take the final proofs to the printer, he added a phrase at the very end, offering hope that Soviet aid to Republican Spain would represent a change in the Soviet system. When Gide's preface was published in *Vendredi*, Aragon phoned to say: "I am saddened not so much because of the probable reaction of our enemies but of that of our friends."

Even the faithful Herbart, who agreed with Gide's findings but not with his conclusions (Herbart was a member of the French Communist Party), now intervened. Gide was getting ready to accompany a delegation of French personalities representing Left and Right, Catholics and Communists, to Spain, in an attempt to end the fighting. Herbart suggested that Gide would have more influence in Spain if his book did not appear before the trip. Gide finally agreed to a week's postponement. But the planned delegation never left Paris.

RETOUR DE L'URSS was published on 5 November, 1936, dedicated to Eugène Dabit (as "reflections of what I lived and thought alongside him, with him"). In the preface, which Chamson published in *Vendredi*, Gide explained that he had declared his admiration for the Soviet Union three years earlier, that as recently as this past March *La Nouvelle Revue Française* had published his further expressions of sympathy. But now he had to recognise his error. Was it he who had changed, or the USSR? In either case humanity seemed more important to him than even the Soviet Union; it was for that nation's sake that he was criticising it now. He regretted that their common enemies would make use of his remarks, but he would not have written them if he had not felt that the USSR would eventually overcome its errors.

The body of the book—only 73 pages long if preface and appendices are subtracted—opened with a glimpse of the idyllic side of his journey: the friendly people, the natural beauty, the rest-homes But then there is the shock of coming upon long lines of consumers waiting their turn to purchase merchandise of inferior quality. Even the Persian saying (he quotes it in English): "*Women for duty, boys for pleasure, melons for delight*", did not quite apply there, for the melons were bad. He observed the indolence of workers, and doubted official statistics concerning collective farm life. Everywhere he saw conformity, accompanied by boasts about how much better things were "under socialism." But he could see the slums and the poorly-fed population behind the models; he discovered a genuine lower class. In the Soviet Union he felt that it was, ironically, the revolutionary spirit that was considered counter-revolutionary. He doubted that in any other country, including Nazi Germany, thought was less free, more afraid. He described how his own public statements were censored, told of the extra praise of Stalin that his translator insisted on inserting into his telegram of greetings to the Soviet dictator. Stalin's personal rule, he went on, was contrary to Communist principles. He had seen how art was subordinated to the state; in passing (in a footnote),

he attacked the legislation against abortion and homosexuality.

GIDE'S LITTLE BOOK was reprinted eight times between publication day and September 1937, a total of 146,300 copies. Overnight it was a sensation in the press, evoking reactions of happy surprise from the Right (although in *L'Action Française* Thierry Maulnier regretted that the criticism of Soviet life was carried out "in the name of an inane egalitarianism . . . an anarchistic individualism . . ."). In time Gide was to disavow the applause he received from conservatives. Leon Trotsky praised Gide for his intellectual honesty, contrasting him with Malraux, who (said Trotsky) was "organically incapable of moral independence." Malraux insisted that everything else be forgotten because of Spain. "His interest in the Spanish revolution", argued Trotsky, "still doesn't prevent Stalin from exterminating veteran revolutionaries."

Needless to say, *Pravda* and *L'Humanité* began denouncing Gide. Romain Rolland wrote a letter to foreign workers employed at the Stalin Steel Factory in Magnitogorsk that was published in *L'Humanité*: "This bad book is also a mediocre book", and more words to that effect.

Gide became a pre-Orwellian unperson. His name disappeared from Communist-controlled publications, from the boards of their organisations. Polemicists were enlisted to denounce him on the floor at meetings of the House of Culture, in the columns of Party organs and fellow-travelling periodicals. Aragon requested that Louis Guilloux, literary editor of *Ce Soir*, write a response to Gide's book. Guilloux replied that he could do no such thing, since he had gone to the USSR on Gide's invitation and in any case had seen little to write about. As we have seen, privately Guilloux had his own misgivings about Gide's exposé, believing that his friend should have departed from the Soviet Union as soon as he realised that he disapproved of it. "Why did he accept gifts until the very end?" And that eulogistic telegram to Stalin . . .

But Guilloux held firm. Jean-Richard Bloch, co-director with Aragon of *Ce Soir*, also pressed him to disavow Gide. Guilloux confided to his diary that if Bloch insisted, he would reply that he would not do it, and precisely because Bloch and Aragon wished him to. A few days later he was dismissed and replaced by Paul Nizan.

The consequences for Gide were predictable. Jean Guéhenno found him suddenly alone. "The human warmth with which he had felt surrounded

for several years, this affection which was perhaps on order, but nevertheless this affection which had borne him for a time, he felt that—again on order—it was being withdrawn . . ." What hurt Gide (Guéhenno wrote in his diary) "was the silence of his friends of yesterday, the watchword of silence which they were following." Guéhenno was told by one Communist: "We're going to let Gide marinate a while."

Seeing Gide walking on the opposite sidewalk one day, Jean Cassou crossed over to greet him. Gide said, "You dare to shake my hand when everybody else is attacking me?" Cassou, concerned above all about Spain (and he believed the Soviet Union was the only country which was helping Spain), replied, "If I have any reproach, it's that you put yourself above everything else . . ." By that he meant that Gide cared more about his own conscience than about their cause. Gide smiled, they shook hands and parted.

ON A JOURNEY to Spain in connection with the plan for a peace delegation, Pierre Herbart had taken a set of proofs of *Retour de l'URSS*. He showed it to André Malraux and to Gustav Regler, but also to Mikhail Koltzov.¹ While Herbart was still in Spain, Gide's book appeared in bookstore windows in Paris, and the uproar began. In Spain, deviationists who were saying (or doing) less than Gide were being arrested and summarily executed by Soviet agents, or by Spaniards commanded by Soviet officers; and Herbart felt himself in danger. He slipped away to see Malraux, then made his way back to France. Later, when Jef Last arrived from Spain, he had to see Gide secretly, for he felt he was being followed by his Communist comrades, who considered it a crime to associate with Gide.

THE INTERNATIONAL WRITERS CONGRESS had shifted to Madrid for its meetings. Delegates were assigned to a hotel near the university campus, close to the battle lines (Robert Brasillach was observing from the other side). Each evening at the dinner hour, the Franco forces began firing their cannons; inside the dining-hall Congress delegates stood up and sang: "*Madrid que bien résistes*", based on a song by Federico García Lorca (who had been killed by the Fascists the previous year). As Ilya Ehrenburg contended, the barrage by Franco forces against the Madrid sessions of the Writers Congress was deliberate.

During the Congress, a telegram arrived reporting a Republican victory on the Madrid front, and there was a proposal to make General José Míaia, who was in charge of the defence of Madrid, honorary chairman of the Congress. When André

¹ Mikhail Koltzov was a Soviet press correspondent and a GPU agent in Spain. There is a fictional portrait of him in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He was liquidated by Stalin on his return to the USSR.—ED. NOTE.

Malraux spoke, it was to describe his fund-raising campaign for the Spanish cause in the United States and Canada, and in a Hollywood film studio where, he recalled, Ernst Lubitsch was directing Marlene Dietrich in a movie.

The delegates returned on 10 July to Valencia, where one of the speakers was André Chamson. "For my part", he said, "I should like to have the strength to take home so striking a message, which says that tomorrow in all the cities of the world that are secure, in Paris, in London, in New York, at the dawn of each new day, at the hour when the air raids begin in Madrid, there is no man and no woman who fails to feel anguish . . ."

The International Writers Congress held a final session in Paris with Heinrich Mann and Louis Aragon as chairmen on successive evenings. This

time André Gide was not on the platform, having been denounced in Spain, by José Bergamin and Mikhail Koltzov. Now, in Paris, Aragon attacked him again (although this time there were protests from the audience). For Gide had committed the sin of writing frankly about what he observed in the Soviet Union; the controversy about his little book was raging.

SOON GIDE began to put together the information and reflections he had left out of *Retour*, additional facts and ideas others were bringing to him, in a second small book, *Retouches à mon Retour de l'URSS*. Gide offered the new work as his answer to those who had criticised the first book

From André Gide's Diary (1937)



IN MARX'S writings I stifle. There is something lacking, some ozone or other that is essential to keep my mind breathing. Yet I have read the volumes of "Das Kapital", patiently, assiduously, studiously; plus, from end to end, the volume of extracts very well chosen by Paul Nizan, Engels, the "Anti-Dühring". Plus a number of writings inspired by and on the subject of Marxism. I have read all this with more constancy and care than I brought to any other study; and more effort too; with no other desire than to let myself be convinced, to yield even, and to learn. And each time I came away aching all over, my intelligence bruised as by instruments of torture. I went about repeating to myself: you must. But today I think that what especially bothers me here is the very theory, with everything, if not exactly irrational, at least artificial (I was about to say artful), fallacious, and inhuman it contains.

I THINK THAT a great part of Marx's prestige comes from the fact that he is difficult of access, so that Marxism involves an initiation and is generally known only through mediators. It is the mass in Latin. When one does not understand, one bows down. Throughout all of Marx's writings (with perhaps the sole exception of the "Communist Manifesto"—and even there . . .), his thought remains scattered, diffuse, in a nebulous state; never does it coalesce or achieve density. Aside from the two famous slogans: "Proletarians, unite", and "It is not a question of understanding the world, but of changing it" (wonderful formula), one cannot manage, from page to page and chapter to chapter, to find a sentence that stands out and isolates itself from a confused magma. And the happy reception of Marxism comes likewise from the fact that not letting

itself be gripped by any such projection, its enormous mass escapes seizure, and attack, too nebulous to crumble and weather. Blows simply sink in and never seem to carry.

I CARE VERY LITTLE whether or not my writings conform to Marxism. That "fear of the Index" that I used to express in the past, the absurd fear of being found in error by the pure Communists, bothered me greatly and at length, to such a degree that I no longer dared write. What I am saying will seem very childish. But I don't care. I am not interested in showing myself off to advantage, and I believe that I am most inclined to set forth my weaknesses. But now I am free of that sterilising fear. And that fear has taught me a great deal; yes, much more than Marxism itself. The discipline I imposed on myself for three years has not been without advantage; but today I find greater advantage in liberating myself from it than in continuing to adhere to it. That plunge into Marxism allowed me to see the essential thing it lacked.

Did it require the failure of the U.S.S.R. to lead me to think thus? It is but the illustration of my blighted hope. And one first tries to tell oneself: it failed through infidelity. Then one again hears ring out the sinister words: "There has not been a revolution that has not, in the long run, strengthened the State . . ." (Lenin).

OH, HOW RIGHT you were to see in my coming to Communism a matter of sentiment! But how wrong you were not to understand that I was right! According to you, the only communism that matters is the one that is reached through theory. You speak as theoreticians. To be sure, theory is useful. But without warmth of heart and without love it bruises the very ones it claims to save. Let us beware of those who want to apply Communism coldly, of those who want, at whatever cost, to plough straight furrows on a curving field, of those who prefer to each man the idea they have formed of humanity.

in good faith. Paul Nizan had reproached him for seeing the USSR as a country that no longer changed; on the contrary, Gide felt that it was changing from month to month, and for the worse. He drew a parallel between the attacks on *Retour* and the reactions to his earlier books on French colonial territories. Those who visited the Soviet Union with a guide, he argued, were like the "accompanied" travellers in French Equatorial Africa. He confessed that only after completing *Retour de l'URSS* had he read Leon Trotsky and Victor Serge. He confirmed that Eugène Dabit had shared his disappointment with the Soviet Union, something which Soviet apologists had contested. Indeed, he said, he had purposely softened the blows in the first book.

Gide even aggravated his crime. He joined Georges Duhamel, Roger Martin du Gard,

François Mauriac, and Paul Rivet in sending a telegram to the Spanish Republican government, asking that its "political prisoners" be given a fair trial. As it happened, these political prisoners were Left-revolutionary militants of anarchistic and Trotskyist ideology (the harassed "*POUM*-ites" about whom George Orwell was writing). They were all being liquidated by Spanish Republicans on the orders of their Soviet advisers.

The final blow came from his old host, Ilya Ehrenburg, who published a fierce attack in *Izvestia* on those who were defending "the Fascists and provocateurs of *P.O.U.M.*" (the dissident Communist movement). His specific target was Gide: "the new ally of [Franco] and the Black Shirts, *le méchant vieillard . . . le pleureur de Moscou*", the "wicked old man . . . the Moscow crybaby."

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Campanology

Bells are nothing to enjoy
they break you from a dawdle to
a sweat from seven streets away

or in prattling choirs tell the street
your play will be
Sunday-neat and sad

they lie like iron bars across
the public park ringing
favourite hymns but never singing

or in their peals rush each other
like iron men bringing bedlam
to unsuspecting souls

darlings of respectability they
drag the tired from their beds
and callously deafen hunchbacks

or handheld are the loneliness
of lepers telling nightmares
through shutters or barred doors

bells are nothing to enjoy
it took a war to silence them
and even then they threatened

we knew they were Hitler's column
longing to rattle robot tongues
and bring him home.

Edwin Brock