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Autobiography & Memoir

Andre Gide: A Life in the Present
Alan Sheridan
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In Sheridan's conclusion to this very complimentary biography, he talks about how Gide's work has never gone out of fashion in France—that most fashion-conscious of all countries. Sheridan attributes this to Gide's "protean nature"—the ability of his work to always capture the attention, in some new way, of young intellectuals. Gide began publishing in 1891 when he was twenty-two and often felt he had outgrown the idea of a book before it was published; before, in some cases, he had even finished writing it. "The books which I have hitherto written seem to me like the ornamental pools in public gardens—their contours are defined—perfect perhaps, but the water they contain is captive and lifeless" (The Counterfeiters). More than a reinvention of self with each finished work, however, Gide's intellectual development was self-realization—he didn't shed his skin with each publication, he grew a new one.

Gide's life was like his novels—in fact, much of his life became the novels. He wrote about his friends, his sexuality, his travels, his philosophy and his wife; even giving her name to one of his books. Sheridan uses Gide's Journal (the book Gide said he would choose if only one could survive), forty volumes of letters, interviews and the novels themselves to build this outstanding biography. Sheridan's voice is clear in the narrative, and his personal comments and insights lighten the over 600 pages of chronological text.

André Gide often reads like a novel. There are hilarious sections when an event is described in several different ways, in several different letters, to several different people. There are reading lists and journal entries; "cruising" successes and failures; and synopses and interpretations of all his works. The famous and infamous appear on nearly every page of Gide's very social life: Wilde, Nijinsky, Rilke, Henry James, Hermann Hesse, Jean Cocteau (who was the model for Passavant in the Counterfeiters as well as Baron de Charlus in Proust's Rememberance of Things Past), General de Gaulle, etc. Large events in Gide's life bring body to the resumé of events: his first trip to Africa and the realization of his homosexuality; his

marriage (unconsummated), heterosexual infidelity and consequent birth of a daughter; an account of his Communist endorsement; and finally Vaneau, the “experiment in human living.”

According to Sheridan, it is Gide’s very un-French sincerity and the mysterious mix of curiosity and self-absorption that ensured the endurance and vitality of his work. Cocteau described Gide as “…pastor and bacchante…”—sales figures of the Counterfeiters are testament to Gides continuing inspiration, and now everyone also knows that his bacchanals were, without a doubt, beyond compare.