

The Writer's Candor

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Before me now lies a book of literary history, a frivolity to which I have taken refuge these days from the dull, stagnant life that the educated live in these years. People take refuge from the frivolity of life and its burdens, at times, in travel through space, and at times, in travel through time: they journey to distant places when the heat drives them to cross the sea, and to nearby places when the cold tempts them to seek warmth in the upper reaches or the lower reaches of Upper Egypt; and they journey through time to wherever their culture, their need, and their purposes prepare them to journey, drawing far off at times and drawing near at other times; some of them steep themselves in the life of the ancients, some in the life of their contemporaries, some in the life of the Middle Ages, or in the life of the modern age; and some range through all of this, moving in a single week, or in a single day, among distant and divergent eras, gathering up what their peoples have left behind of monuments and remains as a bee gathers from a flower, drawing out its nectar, and shaping from this nectar his culture, his learning, and his literature, forming by grace of this nectar his course in his working life, and in his dealings with the people he meets.

The book to which I have taken refuge these days is a recent book, by a contemporary woman writer, which reached me a week or a little more than a week ago; it is a history of a book brought out by the great French writer, André Gide, in the closing years of the last century, titled *The Fruits of the Earth*. This book influenced generations of French and European youth with a profound, far-reaching influence, which some people commend and others fault; for it is a book by which André Gide meant for man, and the man of letters especially, to perfect his freedom to the fullest degree freedom can be, in receiving his life upon this earth, so that he may taste what life offers him, material life especially, in complete freedom, without scruple, without reserve, without being bound by the conventions people are accustomed to, nor by the customs and traditions they have inherited; and then he does not content himself with this frank, free practice of life, but expresses the effects of this practice within himself, if he is a man of letters, in a free, frank expression innocent of hypocrisy and dissimulation, letting himself go according to his natural disposition in enjoying what the earth offers of its fruits, and

letting his art go according to its natural disposition in portraying whatever pleasure and pain, whatever happiness and misery, he finds in this enjoyment. The book, then, is a frank call to satisfy the senses without affectation or austerity, and then to satisfy art without reserve or caution.

This book appeared in 1897, and scarcely anyone paid it any attention or took any notice of it; the writer's friends received it with a very great deal of reserve, some of them fearing for the writer because of this error into which he had fallen and persisted, and some of them suspecting him of affectation and conceit, and of attempting innovation by the wrong path. No one approved of the book but a small handful of the writer's companions, scarcely more than five, all of them young men of the writer's age, not yet thirty or barely past it; as for the general reading public, it paid the book no mind whatsoever, and the proof of this is that the copies sold during the first ten years of this book's life did not exceed five hundred. But the book then surged forward suddenly, gently, and people began taking it up somewhat, so that its first edition sold out in the fifteenth or sixteenth year of this century, and people sought the book and could find no way to it; and the writer sensed this reception, of which he had despaired, and found in this sensation some measure of satisfaction.

The first edition numbered no more than fifteen hundred copies, and it took twenty years for it to sell out entirely; the book was then printed again and again, and translated into as many of the languages of the West and the East as God willed, and it emerged that Easterners were even more drawn to it than Westerners, for it was translated in China and India before it was translated in England, for instance. The appearance of this book at the close of the last century now counts as an event in the literary history of French letters, for it changed the mentality of generations of French youth, and of the young people who practiced literary production in particular.

I am not writing this piece to speak of this book that André Gide brought out, nor to speak of the book Madame Yvonne Davet wrote on the history of Gide's book, to which I have taken refuge these days from the frivolity of life; rather, I am writing this piece to put before men of letters and the educated a question that Gide's book raised among French writers when it appeared, namely: to what extent can the man of letters be frank in the works he produces? The constraints around which the contention between the writer and his opponents and supporters arose

are not those that come from the law, from the ruler's approval of literary production or his displeasure with it, nor from convention, from public opinion's approval of literary production or its displeasure with it; for these constraints hold no weight for the free man of letters, who cares nothing for approval or displeasure, who does not seek a reward through literature, nor fears a penalty on its account, nor cares what commercial failure may befall it.

Rather, the constraints around which the contention arose are those that come from the soul of the man of letters himself, when he writes and answers the call of his art in description and song, and in portraying whatever emotion he finds, and whatever feeling stirs in his heart; for the poet Francis Jammes remarked to his friend André Gide that his book portrays pleasure and joy, satisfaction and delight, and goes on portraying all of this to very great lengths, while around it, on earth, lie many pains and continuous misery, and individuals and whole communities of people who find nothing with which to ward off pain from themselves, nor anything with which to guard against misery. He describes gardens and the flowers, trees, and fruit within them; he describes journeys and the variety of their sights, the diversity of their views, their kinds of knowledge, and their sorts of pleasure; he describes luxury and the bliss within it, while on earth there are people who have no path to any of this at all.

It is incumbent upon the writer, then, to think of these people, to be gentle with them, to show them compassion, to tend their wounds, to help them bear the misery they are in, and to console them for some part of the wretchedness they suffer. It belongs neither to manly virtue, nor to tenderness of heart, nor to evenness of temper, nor to good taste, to speak to the hungry man tormented by hunger of the pleasure you take, as you sit at your table, in the variety of dishes and the beauty of the tableware; nor to speak to the blind man, who cannot see the light of the sun or the beauty of sky and earth, of this very beauty, in all its variety, its diversity, its marvels, and its mysteries. That is more likely to add pain to pain, sorrow to sorrow, and grief to grief; and the proper business of the writer and the poet is rather to console, to comfort, to help, and to restore to souls some part of what they need of security, contentment, and satisfaction.

Let the affluent, then, enjoy themselves, and let the wealthy delight in the good things of life God has permitted them; but let them be sparing, and feign moderation and modesty, when they speak of the

luxury, bliss, and enjoyment they live in. They favor themselves, or are favored by the circumstances of life, with luxury and bliss; let them also favor themselves with discretion in speaking of that luxury and bliss.

So wrote Francis Jammes when he criticized this book; but André Gide answered this criticism of his by saying that literature must stand apart from wealth and poverty, from satisfaction and displeasure, from luxury and misery, so that it may be able to describe all of this in candor, freedom, independence, and truth; and the blind man's deprivation of the enjoyment of nature's beauty is no bar to nature's beauty being a reality that has every right to be known, and every right to be a subject for description and song; and silence about nature's beauty does not console the blind man for the sight he has lost, just as silence about describing flowers, trees, and fruit does not console the deprived wretch for the misery and deprivation he suffers.

The writer's silence, whether willing or compelled, avails the wretched and the deprived nothing at all; and perhaps the writer's talk of nature's beauty, and his description of the arts of luxury, may console those upon whom deprivation has been decreed, and may stir in their souls various kinds of dreams that lighten for them the weight of what they endure, granting them the beauty of dreams when they are kept from the beauty of waking life — just as the description of wretchedness, misery, deprivation, and want is apt to stir in the hearts of the strong a tenderness toward the weak, and in the souls of the rich a gentleness toward the poor, and to awaken in the hearts of both a desire for cooperation, sympathy, and solidarity, and an inclination toward reform, so that the hungry may be fed, the deprived may find relief, and the wretched man's share of wretchedness may lessen. People ought not to be like ostriches, warding off evil by avoiding talk of it and avoiding engagement with it, and avoiding pain by turning away from describing the bliss with which God has filled the world, bliss that could suffice for all people.

And André Gide says, in answer to his friend, that he had agreed with his wife upon a plan in which he sees nothing but good: namely, that should he lose his sight, and be kept from nature's beauty, she would see whatever she was able to see, gaze as intently as she could, and describe to him in detail whatever she saw and discovered, hiding nothing from him, and withholding nothing from him, little or much; for he would rather delight in the shadow of beauty, faint and slight though that shadow might be, than be kept altogether from enjoying beauty whole

and abundant.

This, then, is the question at which I paused while reading this book of literary history; I put it before men of letters and the educated, that they might ponder and reflect upon it. It is clear that André Gide's position on this very question is the position people have long been accustomed to since literature began, and will go on being accustomed to so long as there remain among them those who produce literature; but it remains, nonetheless, a fitting subject for deep reflection, pondering, and thought. And who knows — perhaps it will yield us the reading of a delightful book, or a worthy chapter on this subject. And can men of letters hope for anything better than to delight in reading a chapter, or to take pleasure in looking into a book?