

If It Die

A. Gide

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Gide professes a disinclination to furnish the empty rooms of his memory. The latter must be a temptation for any writer of memoirs, and whether Gide successfully resisted it, we may never know. What goes on in the mind of an individual is hidden to the outsider, and the ultimate arbiter is the individual himself. For most people what goes in their mind is an entirely private matter, not so for the writer, whose mindful activity supposedly overflows and needs exhibitionistically to be spilled out to the world at large, both to relieve pressure and to serve as a benefit to a wider circle. Few writers can resist the temptation to write their memoirs, a most pressing concern, especially as you get the first whiffs of old age around fifty. Gide is no exception.

The memoirs split up into two parts. One long and rambling depicting his early years up to his baccalaureate, after which he is free to live his own life. A second shorter and more focused, centering on his exposure to North Africa and discovering his own particular source of pleasure. No doubt it is the second part of the memoirs, so different from the first, that excited the opprobrium of the reading public. Such open and defiant exhibition of his deviant sexual orientation required a lot of courage at the time.

He depicts a basically happy childhood, the only child of two, presumably elderly, parents, with a bevy of cousins of all possible ages. It is a childhood spent mostly in Paris, with summer excursions to Normandy to the maternal family estate, as well as to Provence with an elderly grandmother, likewise with a country estate. Without aiming for any strict chronological account, Gide allows his mind to wander among his happy memories delighted to making any kind of digression. His relatives are described in detail as well as associates and maids. He roams around as a country bumpkin, nursing his interest as a collector of insects and plants, which he would keep for the rest of his life. His schooling is very intermittent. Once he is taken out of school due to his open habit of masturbation, in which he had started to indulge in already as a toddler, according to his own testimony, and confronted with doctors. He is given a sequence of tutors, occasionally lodging with them. He is obviously a smart boy, more than able to pick up things by himself, through excessive reading (his mother is however reluctant to let him loose on her husband's library.) if needs be. In his later teens he is devouring a book a day, dreaming about becoming a poet and a writer.

His father dies back in 1880 when he is only ten. It does not seem to have made too traumatic an impression on him. The father a professor of law mostly held himself busy with his work but was very fond of his boy and treated him with more respect and indulgence than his mother. After his death, she would impose on him, and when she dies, when he is still a young man, at the very end of his memoir, he feels, in spite of the inevitable love for his departed mother, a big relief. Finally he is a grown-up boy of his own, escaping maternal clutches, and ready to marry his cousin, on whom he for a very long time has entertained certain designs, however not necessarily reciprocated.

What makes him tick? From early on he shows a fondness for boys, with a natural instinct to act as a protector of those who seem even shier than he is himself. On the other hand he is no sickly boy, but seem physically apt, holding his own against his classmates. Nowadays, there is much talk and concern, about 'mobbing'. Pupils being bullied and becoming outcasts. In the past this was probably even more pronounced, school being a rather ruthless institution. Also, Gide went presumably to elite schools, to which in principle only the bright had access, so even if he comes across as a middling scholar, his achievements on that score were far from negligible. A disdain of study and scholarship comes with the territory, which means that much of it was pursued secretly. As a consequence of the elitist educational system, bright students had a fair chance of meeting similarly endowed in their classes, something which is not so obvious nowadays.

Before closing the door on Gide's childhood one should not forget the artistic education his mother imposed on him. She was anxious to improve his taste, and as her own was not that well-developed, to start out with, it really turned into a joint project undertaken by the two of them. When it came to painting, Gide lacked behind, with music it was different. At first his mother thought, reasonably, that it did not matter who taught him, anyone half-way competent would be able to teach him the rudimentary. Gide prevailed, but when he finally received the attention of a certain Monsieur de la Nux, his eyes (or maybe rather his ears) were opened. For the first time he realized what music was really about and he marveled at the pedagogical skills of his teacher, and came to regret that he had not been exposed to his tutoring at a far earlier age. Then think what might have become of him. In fact he once sits outside the door to the apartment of his teacher and eavesdrops on another student who has just replaced him. He is overwhelmed by the way the other plays a Schumann sonata, and is brought to tears by his own inadequacy. Nevertheless, his teacher thinks high enough of him as a musician, as to suggest such a career to his mother. She will have nothing of it, fearing that it will just play to his vanity, and he is not made privy to the suggestion until many years later when it is too late. Clearly music played an important role in Gide's life, and he has many interesting things to say about it, revealing that his interaction with it was penetrating. He professes a predilection for pure music, not music that is supposed to express particular emotions, that is too didactic for him. In particular he disdains the music of Wagner.

His later teens are taken up by his writing. It starts out in a sense, when the boy singled out for praise in composition, is not the usual Pierre Louis, but Gide himself. He is overjoyed, as well as a bit paralyzed. What about if this will earn him the enmity of the school-mate whom he has looked up to. Luckily it turns out that they become friends instead. Friendships means a lot to Gide, as it does for all adolescents. He is obsessed by the book he is writing. It will be the one book of his life and he sees nothing beyond it. He pours everything in it. But of course he is just at a Narcissistic stage in his life, and he is devoid of concrete experience. Drunk on philosophy (a subject for which he had the highest hopes, and the bitterest disappointment, akin to those that accompanied his religious education, until he happens to encounter Schopenhauer, who delights him no end) he strives for the general and universal. The book is printed in many copies, but he ends up buying up most of them destroying them out of despair. His youthful dreams of universal accolade is being tempered. He realizes that what he craves is not general

applause but discerning praise. It is far worse to be praised for the wrong thing than not to be praised at all. Of this attitude to recognition he is quite proud. It is a specimen of the love of truth, a very Platonic attitude.

Gide as a young man is something different. The cover picture of my Penguin edition (incidentally translated by Dorothy Bussy, a good friend of his) shows Gide as a fashionable bohemian, not to say a dandy. A cigarette between his fingers, long sloping walrus mustache, and on top of it a big wide-brimmed black hat, no doubt concealing an abundance of long hair. He moved in literary circles cultivating an effete and aesthetic image to the hilt. So far from the pictures of the more mature Gide, a balding man with almost oriental features.

Gide at twenty-three on the verge of his manhood, was a debauched virgin, according to his own assessment. The debauchery due to his solitary habits, to which he has made a couple of references in his childhood memoir. The virginity, supposedly due to shyness. And so he sets off with his painter friend Paul Laurens, the latter traveling on a stipend, to Tunis. Already in Toulon there is trouble. Gide does not feel well, but nevertheless embarks with his friend rather than postponing. He is sick during the visit, and in a sense a burden on his friend Laurens, who out of friendship curtails his own explorations. They leave the capital and penetrate into the desert arriving at Biskra. In the process Gide loses his virginity to a young Arab boy who naked slides down a sand pit. Gide is delighted by the experience. His friend Laurens is a heterosexual though, and together they share the services of a young nubile prostitute by name of Meriem. The young prostitutes for hire in the city are described by Gide in almost ecstatic terms, as if they were a species of angels, momentarily residing in the city, then to return to their Native villages loaded with money and received with rapture. Talk about rationalizations. The shared presence of young Meriem scandalizes his mother who has come down with her maid to relieve his companion of his nursing duties. Is Gide heading for death? His lungs are afflicted and his physical energy is ebbing out. After all his father died from a tuberculosis related sickness. However, later on a brusquer doctor dismisses it all as a question of nerves. So Gide travels again, does time in Switzerland, which he loathes, only to return to North Africa, this time to Algiers. By chance he encounters Oscar Wilde and his companion Lord Alfred Douglas. The former is totally besotted by the latter. Douglas on the other hand is out for a good time and spotting young Arab boy. Wilde and Gide roam the city on their own. They seek out a disreputable coffee house, where a young boy plays the flute exquisitely. Gide is enraptured. Afterwards Wilde offers to fix him up with the boy. Gide cannot but accept the offer. Everything is arranged, they eventually move to a hotel, where Gide is somewhat disconcerted by the presence of police, while Wilde waves it aside as a good sign. They are there to ensure the safety of foreigners. They each retreat to their own rooms. Gide reports the pleasure to have been intense and counts the number of conclusions. But he does not provide more details than that. What turns Gide on, is not just physical beauty, but also the tenderness of character and the expressions of the eyes¹. He now knows where his sexual proclivities are, having earlier been humiliated by his inability to perform with

¹ When he two years later encounters the same boy again, he admits that his beauty has not faded, but the expression of his eyes have hardened (maybe because the former softness was brought about by the languor caused by hashish?) and his desire is nipped

a more knowledgeable and even more beautiful relation to Meriem. It is noteworthy that Gide confesses that sexual desire with him is not primarily visually aroused, but could as well be provoked by a smell, a pain, or a sound.

The second part is not over yet. He needs to give an account of the antics of Douglas in Biskra, to which he has brought a young Arab boy, all decked up as an oriental Prince, with Douglas in tow. Quite a spectacle, but Douglas craves the company of Gide, as the boy speaks no language but Arabic, and the Douglas command of that language is non-existent. Gide keeps himself aloof, thinking that the tribulations of Douglas are just the fair pain to pay for his pleasures. In the end Douglas finds out that the young Arab boy is cheating on him, availing himself of the services of Meriem. The whole sordid adventure is brought to a conclusion. What to make of it? Nowadays, Douglas at least, would have been sent to jail as a pedophile. Gide may have escaped on formal age grounds. Much was made in the 60's of sexual toleration and liberation. Strictly speaking it is less embraced nowadays than ever before.

The second part ends, as noted, with the death of his mother. One is curious as how old she was? It is unusual of a woman to be stricken with a stroke in her fifties, and his mother Juliette cannot have been much older than that,

In conclusion, what do you look for in a memoir. On one level there is instruction. How did such a young man acquire such fame later on? What did he have that I may not have, or what was his secret at improving himself? Such interests are only relevant if you are a very young man yourself, and young people tend not to read biographies, because those are written mostly out of nostalgia, and hence read mainly by those who want to revel in it, be it vicariously. The quotidian life that Gide relays from the 1870's and 1880's are in some way strangely modern, because nowadays a much larger section of the population may enjoy the kind of life that in the past was only to be enjoyed by the privileged. The architectural settings would not differ to much of those today, as I believe that a large part of present day Paris was actually built around that time. The streets, however, were filled with horses and carriages, but of those there is not a trace in the account, because, I guess, they were simply taken for granted. But what emerges are large apartments with solid furniture, book-lined walls, filled with potted plants, and piano music, kept up to par by maids in starched aprons. We look upon it with some awe, as we believe it was free from the vulgarity of the modern world. There are no TV-sets, no radio even, and no gramophones. Entertainment had to be earned by your own labor. There were diversions though. Walks in the parks, even riding, skating along canals (but that must have been exceptional). Then of course the summer excursions out in the country side, be it as mentioned above, in Normandy or Provence, must have been a real joy. Untrammelled nature providing free expanses to explore, and Gide does so, fueled by his naturalist interest, retrieving from the past memories of rivers meandering through gullies, their clear waters eminently potable (at least so we imagine). To drink out of such unsullied sources. No wonder we envy the young Gide his paradise.