

JEF LAST AND ANDRÉ GIDE: THE RECORD OF A FRIENDSHIP

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In a Dutch literary history of 270 large pages,¹ (richly illustrated, it must be admitted), Jef Last receives less than four column inches, half the space accorded to Theun de Vries. It may therefore not be superfluous, even for Netherlandic specialists, to begin with a brief sketch of Last's life.²

Rightly Josephus Carel Franciscus Last, he was born in the Hague on 2 May 1898, of bourgeois parents - his father was a ship's officer - and he studied Chinese language and literature at the University of Leiden. His ideals, however, led him to become a socialist (indeed, from 1932 to 1938 he joined the communist party) and adopt a working class style of life, or lives; he was at various times a textile worker in the US, a sailor, a taxi driver, and a gardener, before becoming a journalist, writer and lecturer for the Marxist cause. He fought for the Republican Spanish government against the Nationalists in 1936-7, beginning as a private and rising to captain by his soldiers' vote, and remaining under arms until internal intrigue made his position untenable. The Nazi invasion of 1940 found him back in Holland, where he became prominent in the Resistance as editor of the underground paper *De Vonk*. After the war he taught school in Bali, and from 1950 to 1954 he was cultural adviser to President Sukarno of Indonesia. He resumed his Chinese studies and in 1958, at the ripe age of sixty, he obtained a doctorate in that field from the University of Hamburg. He died in Laren on 15 February 1972.

André Gide's career, on the other hand, is well known. He was born in Paris in 1869 and died there in 1951, but his home was always the point of return from constant travels, especially in Europe and North Africa. His major works are the twin novels *The Immoralist* (1902) and *Strait is the Gate* (1909), then the farcical *Vatican Cellars* (1914) and the complex *Counterfeiters* (1926). With the latter work Gide rather exhausted his considerable talent as a novelist. Thereafter he devoted a great deal of effort to fighting for reforms, so that in the 1930's he was the most prominent figure in a series of leftist organizations and causes.

This is how he met Last, who was smuggling a refugee from Hitler into France - no country wanted them - when he was asked to speak to a meeting, chaired by Gide, of the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires. The rally, held on 23 October 1934, was the report on the first Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow,³ but Last himself spoke about "the fate of German youth",⁴ a subject of which as a journalist he had obtained first hand experience. There was an immediate affinity between the two writers. In Gide's words: "An irresistible rush of sympathy hurled us towards each other at once"⁵ and "I already felt with Jef Last that

sort of sudden violent fellow-feeling which leaps over artificial barriers".⁶

They took a holiday in March and April 1935 in Morocco, so as to get some writing done. Gide was trying to write the play *Robert*, about the relations of capital and labour. Last told him flatly that he had no idea about the working classes as such. It was, according to Last,⁷ his advice on this score which led Gide to invite him to join his group of friends who visited the Soviet Union in June-July 1936, but Last is being too modest. Their close friendship was also to thank for this, as well as Last's previous visits to Russia and his knowledge of the language.

During this visit the Spanish Civil War broke out, and Last immediately felt this was the critical confrontation between fascism and democracy, and volunteered to fight on the republican side. As the months went by, however, his position there became more and more impossible and a great source of worry for Gide and his circle of friends. Last was, after all, publicly associated with Gide, and Gide published the mildly critical *Back from the USSR* and, when this was met by a storm of abuse from the communists, the even more critical *Revisions to my "Back from the USSR"*. As a result, after only a few months, Last was arrested and demoted (but reinstated and released), then court-martialled on a trumped-up charge (but acquitted), then posted to a recruit training camp where he was closely watched. All he had wanted to do was fight in the front line defending Madrid.

Life in Gide's circle, all through these years, was a frenzied round of seeing people, receiving news, getting worried, pulling strings, collecting signatures, organizing protests and meetings, and generally trying to swim against the tide of events. The misfortunes of Jef Last are prominent in Maria van Rysselberghe's diary of those times.⁸ We see in it the reflection of the various pressures on Last to stop Gide from publishing his books on Russia, the arrival by direct and indirect channels of facts and rumours about Last's safety, and the efforts to persuade him to leave Spain before he stopped a bullet from his own lines. The Stalinists' struggle to take over the Republican government, indeed, was ruthless; even people as important as Andrés Nin, the Minister of Justice and leader of the non-Stalinist communists, had been shot.

In April 1937, after the court-martial and unsatisfying new posting, Last gave up and left for the Netherlands. His troubles, however, were not over. He found the Dutch communists had been intercepting all his mail and had broken into newspaper offices to destroy articles he had written. When he wrote in defense of Gide and against the Moscow purges and trials, he was severely reprimanded and forced to write an article criticizing

Gide for failing to see the Soviet Union's accomplishments. He did, however, refuse to deliver a speech criticizing *Retouches*, on the grounds that he hadn't read it. It took the efforts of two major French writers, André Malraux and André Chamson, to persuade the Party that this was a valid reason. Gide himself did what he could by not publishing in *Back from the USSR* a letter from Last corroborating that Gide's group had indeed seen the poverty and inequality they had seen, and by not publishing a character sketch of Last until 1938 (in his preface to the French translation of Last's novel *Zuyderzee*).

Last was in trouble not only from the Left, however. After some months spent giving lectures in Scandinavia in which he spoke for the Spanish republic rather than for communism, he was one day informed at the Dutch border that he had lost his citizenship for having "served in a foreign army without the King's permission",⁹ and thereupon he was arrested for illegal entry. Gide launched a press campaign, and Last was released in a few weeks. Thereafter he worked for international socialism in Scandinavia. Not, however, before going through some worrisome months in which he did not know he could earn a living, and these worries too are faithfully reflected in the circle around Gide back in Paris. In fact, Gide made several journeys to Amsterdam or Antwerp or Brussels, to talk things over with him.

Then came the war, and after it Last wrote to Gide, and received a long letter in reply, and their friendship was renewed. Now they were in such complete agreement about politics and everything else, that, says Last, their discussions weren't even interesting any more.¹⁰ In the 1930's that had been far from true: their literary tastes had been further apart, and on the Munich agreement they had been diametrically opposed.^{10a} But the war had changed them both in the same direction. They were disillusioned with revolutionary ideas, and with the state of the world in general. Gide, in a moment of sadness, said: "I often have the impression that certain feelings we cherished mean nothing to today's youth. Integrity, sympathy, respect for others, individualism... They live from sensation to sensation."¹¹ Last admits to no such feelings, but Maria van Rysselberghe noted: "I am struck by the expression of deep melancholy which lives in (Last's) face and which, despite all his spontaneous verve, he cannot really hide."¹²

Before Gide's growing age and weakness confined him to his apartment, they had one last trip together. A friend of Last's, the admirable Harry Wilde, invited leading writers from all over Europe to address a meeting called "A message to German youth", in Munich in 1947. They spoke to a generation shattered by bombing, that was starving in cellars, and did not know what philosophy of life to adopt. The rally was a great success. Last spoke of joy, and Gide, who half an hour before his speech could not think of a word to say, spoke excellently of the need for individuality.

So ends my account of the events of their friend-

ship. We come now to the key question of what kept it going and growing. Firstly, how did the two men see each other? Gide spoke of Last in very flattering terms, which Last calls "perhaps somewhat exaggerated"¹³, to Claude Mauriac:

"What an astonishing lad!...What devotion! What generosity! He never has a penny, though his works sell immensely well in Holland, because he always has homeless comrades whom he lodges and feeds. He's done everything. He knows every language."¹⁴

Gide's picture of Last in the preface to the French translation of *Zuyderzee* is fuller and more balanced:¹⁵

"Last is a poet, not only in his writings, but in his movements, his behaviour, his being, at once selfish out of absent-mindedness and extraordinarily generous in his thoughts and acts...Incapable of calculation, fraud or hidden thoughts, but also disordered, careless and capable of forgetting anything, including himself. Always ready to help. ...Authentically communist, out of love. ...Deeply revolted by all social injustices, taking advantage of none of them, usually penniless; when he had money he shared it with others, not out of theory but out of irresistible need. Listening a lot, constantly learning, but never losing sight of his own thought, as is the case when the thought is not an artificial addition but emanates from one's deepest being."

Of Last's forgetfulness, Gide tells in the preface the following story, which indeed he told to Maria van Rysselberghe the moment they got back from Morocco¹⁶: on the train to Madrid, Last picked up a flea. There was no help for it, he had to go to the washroom and get rid of the little pest. After they had gotten off the train, it dawned on him that he had never put the shirt back on; it was still in the washroom of the train. And à propos of his clumsiness, Gide recalls the time Last couldn't find a sardine which should have been on his plate, and discovered he was sitting on it. In a brand new beige coat, no less! One sees why Gide's friend the novelist Roger Martin du Gard, a close mutual friend, called Last "that lovable scatterbrain"¹⁷

Last feels that Gide was delighted by these faults because they were his own, only worse: "My incapability of remembering names and faces, which constantly causes the most embarrassing situations, my unintentional selfishness, my carelessness, my alternating generosity and sudden greed when I can no longer ignore my financial state, the attraction which danger has for me and the unexpected consequences of that (like the time I arrived in Paris with not a cent in my pocket after a street-arab in Antwerp had lifted my wallet from my pocket with incomparable elegance) all this amused Gide highly because in it he recognized himself".¹⁸

But the most telling similarity is revealed in the next paragraph of Last's book of memories of Gide. I don't mean the fondness for chess, the early rising, the long walks, the compulsive reading, the alternating need for company and to be alone, the preference for visiting museums without a guide, or the tendency to start writing a book without a plan. I mean "The characteristic of hardly enjoying a meal, a walk, a movie or a book if one cannot share the enjoyment with someone else, so as to see it reflected in his face".¹⁹

Last does not order his list of similarities so as to emphasize this trait. When Gide speaks of Last, however, the connection between this need and their friendship is obvious. To Claude Mauriac he said:

"Friendship has played a dominant role in my life, and every time I have swerved in one direction or another, it was because I needed to follow a friend, to make myself worthy of him. In my move towards communism I was largely led by the desire not to disappoint people I admired. Jef Last very especially, for whom from the first moment I saw him, at a public meeting, I felt such an extraordinary liking."²⁰

- and here begins the praise of Last which I have already quoted. The same link is explained in Gide's preface to *Zuyderzee*²¹: whole stages of Gide's life, he writes, were determined by friendships, and Gide needed those friendships if anything was to have purpose or interest for him.

This sounds very like a definition of love. There is no love involved here, but now we must let the cat out of the bag. Both Gide and Last were homosexual. Their taste was not for each other, however: Gide liked adolescent boys, and Last liked young men. None the less Gide came into Last's life at a critical time, when Last was discovering that he hadn't overcome this penchant, that his communism had merely repressed it, and his faith weakened so the desire returned. The first tangible result was love for a young fisherman of Urk, where he had gone to do a newspaper article. This affair figures in his novel *Zuyderzee*, which Gide wanted translated into French because it did not portray such love as sentimental (as it would have been in a German novel) or pathological (as it would have been in a French novel). The preface to *Zuyderzee* states that Gide and Last went to Morocco to get away from interruptions and political worries so as to get some writing done²²; this is true, but the purpose was also to let Last discover, in safe tolerant surroundings, the joys of the sex he needed. Gide thus did for Last what Oscar Wilde had done for him, in 1895, also in North Africa. Last describes Morocco in a lyrical page of his memoir on Gide²³, and indeed he produced there his lyrical poems *De bevrijde Eros*, just as the same experience had let loose in Gide the lyrical work *Fruits of the Earth* (1897).

Last quotes Gide as saying that "Wilde only expressed himself fully to those who shared his inclinations".²⁴ The same is true here. Last became for Gide a chief confidant for all that side of his life which the public didn't want to know about (though Gide told them), and the only confidant since Henri Ghéon's conversion in 1917 who had the same inclination. Indeed, they had a further problem in common: they were both married. Most books of reminiscences tell the anecdotes and trace the life first, and the conclusions come at the conclusion. Not with Last. He tackles right away the question of why Gide singled him out for friendship. His long first chapter dwells on Gide's homosexuality and the reasons why he married, and his last chapter returns to the problem, and passionately defends the possibility of building, within such a marriage, a relationship based on trust. He feels that in their

last conversations Gide entrusted him with the task of explaining to the world - as he himself had tried to do all his life by publishing everything about himself, including his diary - that he was not to be defined by or confined to his sexual preference.²⁵

However, I would say this is the second most important factor in their friendship. We have seen that the immediate spark of sympathy between them "leapt over artificial barriers". Last, less than three pages into his book, names the barriers, the overcoming of which made this friendship perhaps unique among those which Gide had: it is the only one, he says, which Gide had with a non-intellectual. But it was built on a solid base, which Last defines:

"...social interest - of a special sort, more directed towards the humiliated individual than the system, was always one of the basic traits of his life... Perhaps it was only one of many facets of his character, and not even one of the dominant ones. Perhaps my view of him is distorted in so far as I mainly got to know him from this point of view... But this side of him was strong enough to build a friendship on, and the friendship lasted without friction or interruption almost 20 years, until his death."²⁶

In the 1930's Gide wished to know the real feelings and nature of the suffering poor, but he was the son of a professor, a landowner, a rich man, and lived in the world of books; he knew nothing of the worker as a worker. Last did. Indeed, Gide liked to pretend Last was a worker. He liked to see him casually dressed in sweaters, which is how he came to lose his shirt on a Spanish train. Last looked neat enough to be in Gide's circle, however, and intellectually he was not out of place there either: he was widely read in many languages and could discuss other things than the proletariat. Indeed, if Gide was quicker to spot fraudulent attempts to impress them in the Soviet Union, Last's clear-sighted view of the Munich agreement, and the passion with which he condemned it, led Gide to revise his first naive belief that war had been averted.

This insight and passionate belief were a rejuvenation for Gide, the very qualities he needed to feel alive. With the selfishness perhaps necessary in a writer, Gide gathered information through Last, sending him to see interesting but rough people he hadn't the time (or the right approach) to talk to personally. Last sees himself as a change of pace "een aangenaam buitenhuisje" - from Gide's regular circle. But, he says, "ten percent of Gide was always more than 90% of most other people. I gave what I had and was grateful to always receive infinitely more than I had given."²⁷

I feel here Last is doing himself an injustice. No doubt he felt out of it at times when Gide's circle were sitting around discussing books he hadn't read or people he hadn't known, but then he was thirty years younger than Gide and hadn't known him for long. I don't know of any other friend who had his own room provided in the apartment building where Gide lived in Paris, except for Maria van Rysselberghe herself, who lived across the hall. She wrote in her diary once, when Last was visiting: "He is so likeable it's as if he'd always been here and he adds to our closeness"²⁸ - i.e. to that of the

regular circle of friends. She describes Last's speeches as "thrilling, juicy, ironic", and another time "excellent"; his letters are "beautiful and moving"; "his presence is warm and heart-stirring (entraînante)", "exquisite", "irresistible". Nor does Last's overly modest claim to a marginal position in Gide's life seem compatible with Gide's readiness, three or four times in the year, to drop everything and take the train to Belgium or the Netherlands to help him. That sounds like a deep friendship.

I turn lastly to the other important thing Gide gave Last besides sexual liberation and a sympathetic ear: namely a guide to his development as a writer. Until they met, Last's literary taste had been largely for middlebrow authors with a reformist message, like Anatole France or Romain Rolland. Gide taught him to read the Greek and Latin classics, and the French classics, and to better appreciate style. These lessons, together with the liberation from shame about his homosexuality, combined to release a more personal and lyrical vein in Last, who till then had written works solely about social questions. He was led also to defend his inclination, in *Een huis zonder vensters* (1935). Moreover, Gide's personal conception of Christianity, as the opposite of God the Father and the church which condemned him, as Christ and a brotherhood of charity, became Last's conception also. In his *Vliegende Hollander* (1939) Christ returns to earth to represent Love and defeats the Flying Dutchman, who has returned to start a revolution and who represents Justice. Last also planned a long novel about Judas Iscariot, who was to be homosexual and to have loved Christ as a human being, and not for his ideas, nor because he was the Son of God. His love turns to hatred when he realizes Christ loves him as one of God's creatures and no more. Gide liked this idea, discussed the figure of Judas with Last, and gave him material for the book, but after Gide's death Last could not continue with it. His *De jeugd van Judas* is but the beginning of what he had planned.

Last repaid his literary debt to Gide. By 1966 he was responsible for 7 of the 14 translations of Gide's work into Dutch that had been done, if we count an anthology of fragments; he did one more after that. In that year he wrote the important memoir *Mijn vriend André Gide*, of which I have made extensive use in this paper. He was a founding member of the Association des Amis d'André Gide, supplied it with much useful information, and wrote an important essay on the years leading up to Gide's meeting with Oscar Wilde.²⁹

Let me conclude by quoting Last on this capital question: "When I got to know Gide, a break occurred in my work...The label 'communist' no longer fit... The interest of the Dutch public in my books rapidly declined when from being propaganda literature they became literature. Such a change, of course, is not nice for a writer. But in the last analysis Gide's judgement means more to me than that of the Dutch critics, and I know he felt I was making progress, both as a human being and as a writer. In any case, because Gide became my

friend, my work gained in depth and honesty. And that is the case with any artist who came under Gide's influence."³⁰

NOTES

¹ H.J.M.F. Lodewick, W.A.M. de Moor and K. Nieuwenhuijzen: *Ik probeer mijn pen, Atlas van de Nederlandse Letterkunde*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 1979.

² Conflated from *ibid.*, p. 166: *Meyers enzyklopädisches Lexikon* 1975 ed. vol. 14 p. 659; *Bulletin des Amis d'André Gide* vol. 15 pp. 18-19 (April 1972, on the occasion of Last's death) and Last's own memoir *Mijn vriend André Gide*, Amsterdam: van Ditmar, 1966 (hereinafter cited as Last).

³ Vide Claude Martin: "Ce fou de Jef...", *André Gide et Munich*, *Revue des Sciences humaines* no. 137 pp. 119-25, at pp. 120-1. Last remembers that the meeting of the AEAR was to prepare for the Moscow Congress, but that had indeed already taken place, from August 17 - September 1.

⁴ Last pp. 7-8.

⁵ Gide: Preface to French translation of Last's *Zuiderzee*, reprinted in *Rencontres*, Neuchâtel, Ides et Calendes, 1948, pp. 57-63, at p. 57.

⁶ Gide: *Journal 1889-1939* (Pleiade ed.) p. 1238, 6 Oct. 1935.

⁷ Last p. 75.

⁸ Maria Monnom daughter of a famous publisher, was born in Brussels in 1866 and married the painter Théo van Rysselberghe from Ghent in 1889. They met Gide in 1899 and became lifelong friends. She kept a daily diary of Gide's sayings and doings from 1918 till the day he died; it has been published in four vols., Gallimard 1973-7, under the title of *Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, and is hereinafter cited as *Cahiers*. She died in 1959.

⁹ Last p. 175.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 236.

^{10a} This, of course, is the subject of the article by Claude Martin cited in note 3 above.

¹¹ Last p. 197.

¹² *Cahiers* IV 61, 3 May 1947.

¹³ Last p. 43.

¹⁴ Claude Mauriac: *Conversations avec André Gide*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1951, pp. 193-4.

¹⁵ *Rencontres* pp. 58-9.

¹⁶ *Cahiers* II 434, 28 April 1935.

¹⁷ *Correspondence André Gide - Roger Martin du Gard*, ed. Robert Mallet, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, II 357, 17 November 1946. Last had written du Gard an undated letter and forgotten to put his address on it.

¹⁸ Last p. 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁰ Mauriac *loc. cit.*

²¹ *Rencontres*, p. 57.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58. The reason is confirmed by a letter from Gide to du Gard (*Corr. Gide - du Gard* II 21, 19 March 1935), and Gide hid nothing from du Gard about his sexuality, since du Gard, though heterosexual himself, was thoroughly tolerant.

²³ Last p. 70-1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17. However, I cannot find such words in Gide's essays on Wilde.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Cahiers* II 492, 2 Nov. 1935.

²⁹ In *André Gide* I, Gallimard 1970.

³⁰ Last p. 78.