

Review

Jef Last:

Mon ami André Gide

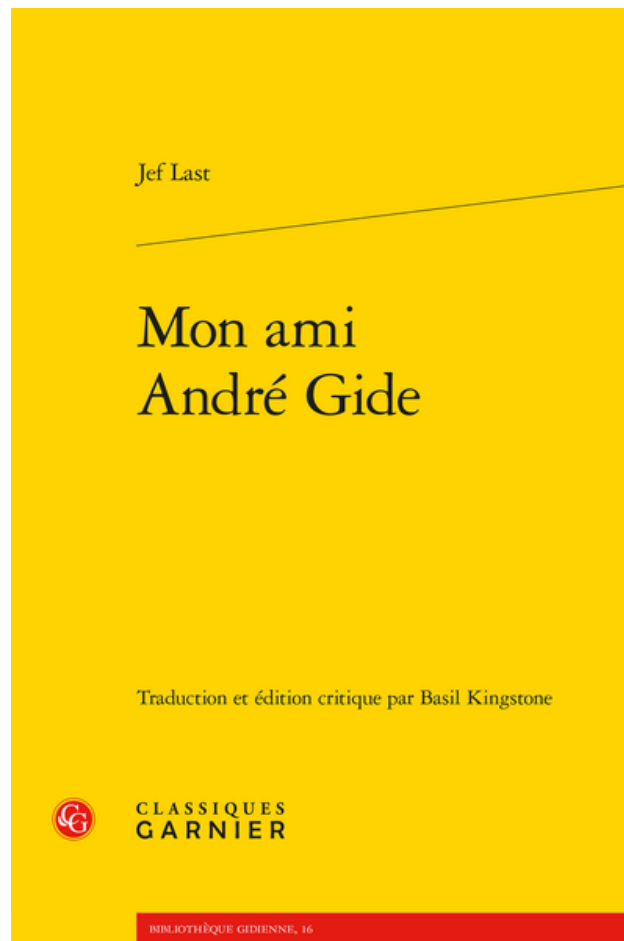
Basil Kingstone (traduction et édition critique)

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The Dutch writer and journalist Josephus Carel Franciscus Last (1898-1972), better known in cultural historiography as Jef Last, rose to prominence in the 1930s, first as an activist and propagandist of the international communist movement, and then as its vilified defector. It is this latter quality of a renegade from a political religion that gives Last's reflections on his friendship with André Gide, another apostate from Stalinism, their pugnacity and bald take on the French author's intellectual and emotional idiosyncrasies. Originally published in Dutch, in 1966, and hitherto untranslated, Last's retrospective impressions of the final two decades of Gide's life are a source of valuable biographical information. Yet one is hard pressed to treat this text as a straightforward memoir or eye-witness testimony. The narrative filters factual reportage through extensive speculation about the motives behind Gide's existential, artistic, and intellectual choices, all of it against the backdrop of Jef Last's autobiography whose purpose is to justify and legitimize the Dutch author's quarrel with the revolutionary Left.

The narrative falls roughly into four parts, not always following formal chapter segmentation. The first tells the story of the friendship's early years, interspersed with extended digressions about the role of homosexuality in Gide's life and work. The second part recounts Gide's political pilgrimage to the USSR, in the summer of 1936, most of which Last witnessed first-hand as the French writer's travel companion. The third part deals with Last's participation in the Spanish civil war, an experience that did much to accelerate his falling-out with communism. The final part accounts for the author's interactions with Gide throughout the 1940s, including their joint trip to post-war Germany.

The friends, far removed in their aesthetic views, had been initially brought together by shared political and sexual passions that combined a quest for social justice with a challenge to social mores. Such pairing of ideology with sex was a source of tensions, since Gide's and Last's investment in radical leftist politics, embodied at the time by the culturally retrograde Marxist dictatorship on Europe's eastern fringe, sat quite awkwardly with their homoerotic proclivities. To be sure, while homosexuality was a constant topic of conversations between the two married men (21, 23), they were never lovers, as Gide fancied adolescent boys, the younger the better (Last never stops pointing this out). Having abandoned the communist faith, Gide's friend retained the mental habits underlying Marxism's preternatural appeal in intellectual circles, namely simplistic reductiveness posing as informed analysis and the self-righteous conviction of being in possession of ultimate yet hidden knowledge that fully explains human behavior. (The reader will take as an unwitting compliment Last's dismissive remark that Gide did not study Marx thoroughly enough [73].) If in his communist period Jef Last followed the Marxist catechism, which located the hidden sources of human conduct in the economic structure of society, in his post-communist

years he replaced economics with sexuality, but his analysis hardly became more nuanced.

Arrogating the role of Gide's analyst with such confidence as to recall the famously opinionated narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale fire*, Jef Last makes statements to the effect that his friend's "entire oeuvre, in all its aspects, was meant only to show that a pederast could also be a great and accomplished man" ("[...] toute son oeuvre, avec toutes ses facettes, devait servir seulement à démontrer comment le pédéraste peut être en même temps un homme grand et complet" [23]). Readers who are not outright discouraged by this assertion will be interested to learn that the French writer's "wanderlust, his admiration for Dostoevsky, his hatred of the bourgeois which at a certain moment nudged him toward communism, and his longing for unattainable amoral spontaneity, all this finds an explanation in his predicament as a married pederast" ("[...] son amour des voyages, son admiration pour Dostoïevski, sa haine de la bourgeoisie qui à un moment l'a poussé dans le communisme, et son désir d'une spontanéité amoral que qu'il ne pouvait pas se permettre, s'expliquent tous par sa position de pédéraste marié" [31]). Although aware of André Gide's formative experience in the company of Oscar Wilde (23, 32), Jef Last, whose aesthetics hailed from the Stalinist ideal of *proletarian literature*, may never have heard of modernism, that transnational cultural community whose ethical and aesthetic quests had shaped Gide as an artist and thinker. The Russian representatives of that cultural community had been driven into silence or exile before Last began his pilgrimages to the *paradise of workers and peasants* in the early 1930s.

Last's analytical preamble casts Gide's trip to the USSR in a fresh light, although the reader will not always agree with the conclusions suggested by the narrator. Students and aficionados of Gide's oeuvre will undoubtedly find the second part of Last's narrative the most interesting and informative. Last furnishes enough new detail about Gide's tour of the USSR, at once farcical and scary, to make the most inventive dystopian satirist pale with envy. Suffice it to mention the Leningrad opera performance which stopped midway and resumed from act one because Gide arrived late (84); or the recycled welcoming banner hung in a show of spontaneous outpouring of joy in each provincial Soviet city Gide visited (he recognized it by a stain and a tear [105]). At times the details are comical, as when the head-on collision of Gide's and Last's sexual preferences with conservative Stalinist mores (the country had criminalized homosexuality shortly before their arrival) is reflected in the crooked mirror of the awkward attempts by their Soviet handlers to cater to Gide's sexual proclivities (99, 103). That this is done by Soviet bureaucrats desperate to sway a foreign opinion-maker in favor of the *homeland of the victorious proletariat* imparts to Gide's journey something uncannily Gogolian. Readers familiar with the photographs of the radiant André

Gide surrounded by adoring Soviet youths or contemplating, atop Lenin's mausoleum, a march of scantily-clad young athletes, may find almost gratifying Jef Last's claim that it was the French writer's sexual predicament which made him keen not only on young men but also on "the international issues of the youth" ("[...] à cause de son caractère pédéraste [...] Gide s'intéressait passionnément, pas seulement aux jeunes gens mais aussi aux problèmes internationaux de la jeunesse" [34]). Why else indeed would this aesthete and individualist dwell on such vacuous balderdash and waste time on trips to *international youth fora*, as the one Last describes at the end of his narrative?

The new information Last provides about Gide's trip to the USSR also tells another story, albeit unintentionally. The country they visit is plagued by youth homelessness resulting from the state-induced famine in the areas resistant to agricultural collectivization. Homeless minors are omnipresent on the streets of the Soviet cities visited by Gide's retinue, and no secret is made that these are the lucky survivors of the Ukrainian famine (53, 118, 121). The inordinate attention the wine-and-dined foreigners pay to these vulnerable youths (only boys are mentioned) casts a particularly sinister pall over Gide's journey, despite Last's best efforts to depict the traveler as a clairvoyant observer of Soviet conceits. Given Last's relentless insistence on Gide's sexuality, such socializing with street children cannot but recall the French writer's dalliances in search of sexual liberation in the Maghreb. Waxing poetic about a Moroccan trip he took with Gide prior to their journey to the USSR (70-73), Last makes an unwitting rapprochement between Gide's Soviet and North African adventures. Both are united in the unspoken and unsavory connotations of sexual exploitation practiced by European tourists in exotic and impoverished lands where they can count on willing underage subjects and on the connivance of local authorities.

Students of European intellectual history will no doubt find in Last's narrative a valuable supplement to François Furet's (1995) magisterial account of the long and tortuous story of the European intelligentsia's infatuation and subsequent disappointment with the Marxist credo. One precious detail stands out, namely the growing fear experienced by Jef Last throughout his last trip to the USSR in Gide's company and the resultant sense of relief and safety this card-carrying communist felt when their plane landed in Nazi Germany, of all places, so the travelers would catch their connecting flights (123). Although, on Party orders, Last unsuccessfully tried to stall the publication of Gide's *Return from the USSR*, his own impressions from the trip can serve as helpful annotations to Gide's book, filling some gaps in the French writer's circumspect critique of the communist experiment.

The French translation of Last's narrative by Basil Kingstone reads smoothly. Kingstone has outfitted the volume with annotations and an annex

containing six of Last's previously unpublished letters to André Gide (1939-1946). The annotations will be useful for the general readership, while specialists in European cultural history will find them lacking in pertinence and precision.

Reference

Furet, François. 1995. *Le passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle*. Paris: Robert Laffont/Calmann Lévy.

About the reviewer

Leonid Livak is a professor in the Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures and the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto (Ontario, Canada). His research expertise ranges from Russian-French and Russian-Jewish cultural history to exilic and modernist studies. He has published four critical editions, numerous articles, and four monographs: *In search of Russian Modernism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), *The Jewish persona in the European imagination: A case of Russian literature* (Stanford University Press, 2010), *Russian émigrés in the intellectual and literary life of interwar France* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), and *How it was done in Paris: Russian émigré literature and French Modernism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). He was recently elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. For the academic year 2021-22 he was chosen by the Région Île-de-France for the research appointment "Chaire d'excellence internationale Blaise Pascal", under the auspices of the Eur'Orbem Centre, Sorbonne University, to research and write the cultural history of the Russian emigration in France during the Second World War. Leonid Livak's new book, *Études sur l'histoire culturelle de l'émigration russe en France* (2022) has been recently published by Eur'Orbem Éditions, Paris.

