

The Novelist as Reporter: Travelogs of French Writers of the 1920's through the 1940's, from André Gide's Congo to Simone de Beauvoir's America¹⁾

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What is the purpose of re-reading, seventy-five years after its publication in 1927-1928, André Gide's relation of his travel through Equatorial Africa, from July 1926 to May 1927, or his 1936 visit of the U.S.S.R., or, fifty-five years after her own travel through the United States in 1947, Simone de Beauvoir's account²⁾? Parts of what they saw no longer exist and what they saw was partial. They cannot match a historian's perspective or a sociologist's demonstration. Yet, their travelogs stirred their contemporaries, fueled debates. Since then most of these volumes (but not all³⁾) have been reprinted in paperback editions. The prominent place of their authors in XXth Century French Literature explains it but also the accepted wisdom that the novelist has to be a better traveler, or at least a better storyteller. Conversely, it is justified to observe how their travelogs reflect the circumstances of the day and the literary traits common to their works.

Travelogs and diaries

Travelogs proceed from time honored ship logbooks: they list time and exact location of each entry, record daily events. It is the skeleton of a letter without an explicit addressee, akin to entries in a diary. The French writer Julien Green (1900-1998), born in Paris of American parents, author of a massive seventeen volume diary which encompasses most of his life (started in 1919, its first volume covers the 1919-1924 period under the title, rephrased from a line by

Arthur Rimbaud: *On est si sérieux quand on a 19 ans*⁴); its last volume, deals with the 1996-1997 years⁵), gives this humorous definition: “A diary is a long letter that the author writes to himself [...]”⁶

André Gide setting out to Africa or the U.S.S.R., Simone de Beauvoir to the United States, could have preferred the essay as a form to that of the diary. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, in *Mea Culpa*, relates his 1936 visit of Leningrad and Moscow with the polemist’s usual ways and means and potentially at least, in brief sketches, those of the novelist’s. Essayists on the other hand quote from authoritative sources defining their area of competence. The French sociologist Georges Friedmann was another “fellow-traveler” of the 1930’s. His published research speaks in his favor, yet it is mostly forgotten⁷. His analysis of the industrial development of the U.S.S.R. is well informed and on the whole not unbalanced. Following André Gide’s denunciation, although in restrained terms, of the U.S.S.R., Georges Friedmann, wrote a rebuttal in the January 15, 1937 issue of the monthly *Europe*⁸. He contested the value of information and figures presented by Gide and he contrasted them with his own in-depth knowledge of the issues debated. Although Georges Friedmann expressed reservations about the U.S.S.R.’s economic policy and its totalitarian regime, he did not reveal the extent of his personal doubts until much later⁹.

But Gide’s less scientific questioning of the soviet’s regime is far more pertinent and has remained a reference since then not the least because he plainly presented a truth which was not unknown to his readers or to the subscribers of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. The contributors to the review Gide had founded in 1908 as well as those to the competing monthly review founded after World War I, *Europe* (Romain Rolland, Jean-Richard Bloch, Jean Guéhenno) or other reviews of the 1930’s such as *Marianne* or *Commune*, who reported on the issues of the day — the U.S.S.R., Nazi Germany or the Spanish civil war — have in common to be novelists. Yet, most of them adopt the essayist’s approach¹⁰. Not Louis-Ferdinand Céline,

whose *Mea Culpa* is an exception: a twenty page's monologue, punctuated by exclamation marks¹¹⁾.

Gide had remained faithful to the diary as a form. His "Carnets d'U.R.S.S.", contain entries from June 17 until August 23, 1936. He used them to write his *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* The original notebooks have been published in full in the 1997 edition of his *Journal*¹²⁾. Gide is more direct in these notes: he appears more discouraged by his discovery of the U.S.S.R. than he let know in the text published in 1936.

The currently accepted critical opinion is that logbooks and diaries are an essential part of Gide's writing process. *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, *Retouches*, its sequel, are indeed part of his 1889-1949¹³⁾ *Journal*, and so is *Voyage au Congo*.

André Gide's Congo

André Gide placed the diary of his travels through the colonies of Congo and Chad under the invocation of Joseph Conrad (whom he had translated) and a quote from Keats: "Better be imprudent moveables than prudent fixtures". His first entry is dated July 21, third day into the crossing towards Dakar, then Pointe Noire and Brazzaville. The traveler as an adventurer, travel as self-discovery, such are the themes sounded in the first entry as in an operatic overture.

Writers are readers; a diary serves also for reading notes. Gide travels with a small library. He re-reads *Le Cœur des ténèbres*, the French translation of *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, compares the translation with the original, which he uses as a private guidebook. He re-reads also Robert-Louis Stevenson's *Master of Ballantrae*.

The French authors who are part of the voyage appear to be less appropriate to the situation: Bossuet's sermons, classical tragedies by Racine and Corneille, *The Misanthropist* by Molière (not Gide's favorite play, as he explains that its hero, Alceste, is far too contrived). He also reads at length La Fontaine's fables. The latter is

perhaps the most obvious counterpoint to the wilderness of the African continent. The wisdom of a Montaigne, the delicate feeling of a Mozart, notes Gide. From the ship's deck the approaching landscape is wild, a different Garden of Eden. Ashore, Gide reaches out to the local population and continues to do so throughout his travel. In ethnographic fashion, he describes the physical appearance of the various tribes, their customs, beliefs and social structure.

Numerous footnotes contain the facts and figures of Gide's quasi-official mission through Equatorial Africa: distances, population, health situation, cost of goods, price of cash crops. An appendix collects in chronological order letters and other documents germane to the debate, which followed Gide's denunciation of the system of mining and rubber concessions. The concessions were awarded to companies, which exploited them to the detriment of the local labor, with or without the help of the colonial administration. Gide is particularly vehement against these companies, listing charges in the manner of a prosecutor. His travelog itself is not as systematic an indictment of the colonial practices, nor is it as colorful as the chapters of L.-F. Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, inspired by the author's experience as a plantation manager in Cameroon, in 1916-1917.

Gide devotes more space to the description of the fauna and flora. Butterflies, scarabs, other insects are captured and properly labeled; flowers, rare plants are placed in a herbarium. Landscapes are described, photographed, and filmed by Gide's companion, Marc Allégret. Gide finds the scenery disappointing as he judges it both excessive and monotonous. Above all, he looks in vain for an African jungle, which he had imagined as dense, dark and mysterious.

As in all diaries, entries place on an equal footing the progression of the traveler, the different means of transportation — boats and cars, palanquins and porters —, the people encountered, the weather. Gide chronicles also his own moods, his state of health. He notes whether he has slept well or not, because or in spite of the medicine he had taken. He is just as thorough with Marc Allégret, whose ill-

ness is recorded at length, and so is that of Dendiki, a tamed *pérodic-tique potto*. Gide quotes the description of that tree dweller from Cuthbert Christy's book, *Big Game and Pigmies*: "The Potto is very slow and deliberate in his movements". Gide finds *deliberate* a perfectly fitting word (March 16, 1927). He relates in detail the last days of Dendiki, and exclaims that he felt the grief of a mother having lost her little child¹⁴ (May 1st, 1927). He does not wonder, as readers may, whether the rich diet he fed his potto (jam, condensed milk) was not in fact the cause of death or whether such luxuries were appropriate in view of the food shortages afflicting Africans.

To a writer's writer such as Gide, the Parisian world of French letters is neither out of sight nor out of mind. Henri Béraud, a writer who had attacked Gide and his friends of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* repeatedly in polemical diatribes, is made the butt of a joke on his portliness (Marc Allégret having shot a wild boar, Gide remarked that it must have weighed as much as a Béraud), the announcement of the death of the novelist René Boylesve, read in the periodical *L'Illustration*, is the occasion of a compassionate reminiscence. A French hunter, encountered during the journey, a man by the name of Rousseau, looks to Gide rather like Paul Claudel: massive appearance, inferred obstinacy — not a complimentary portrait.

Simone de Beauvoir's America

Just like Gide, Simone de Beauvoir is one of these intellectuals whose influence went beyond the literary world¹⁵. In 1947, when she visited the United States she had not yet published the essay which made her famous (*Le Deuxième sexe*, 1949), nor had she started publishing her autobiography (its first volume: *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, appeared in 1958). However, the genres of the essay, the autobiography and the diary were all considered by the author in her attempt to give a comprehensive account of the four months she spent in the United States. In her *Preface* she disclaims having written an essay: "it would be too presumptuous"; she justifies her per-

sonal comments in philosophical terms — the subject is part of the experience — and thus the diary as the most appropriate form. However, she admits that it is a retrospective diary, rewritten from notes, letters and memories¹⁶. By that she means that she respected the chronological sequence of entries: discoveries first, followed with their gradual understanding, ending with conclusive statements. Nonetheless, she inserted within the chronology of events a system of footnotes to link together the main themes of her reporting. She used initials instead of full names for private persons as is customary among diarists, even when such initials do not serve to hide the person's identity¹⁷. And she chose not to be explicit about her relationship with "N. A.", the American novelist Nelson Algren¹⁸.

That relationship, now well documented, was the object of successive treatments by Simone de Beauvoir, through different genres. The last being the publication of her letters to Nelson Algren, from 1947 to 1964¹⁹: more than three hundred letters, written in English, while the letters from Algren have remained unpublished. The circumstances of their encounter are described at length in the February 21, 1947 entry of *L'Amérique au jour le jour*: Simone de Beauvoir's schedule leaves her with thirty-six hours to spend in Chicago. Her friends in New York had given her the addresses of a writer and that of an old lady. She says, tongue in cheek, that she chose the former. Having met him in the lobby of the *Palmer House* she spent the evening in Algren's familiar haunts on the seamy side of the city around West Madison Avenue and, the following day, in the Polish district. In an aside, another standard feature of diaries, she expresses her satisfaction: far from being a tourist she is "going native". She leaves Chicago with the hope that she will be able to return. Her readers of 1948 were not given the reason for such an emphatic wish. She was indeed able to return to Chicago in May of that year and pursue her relationship with Algren in subsequent stays in the United States. It is also the literary material of Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Les Mandarins*, which received the 1954

Goncourt prize. It is dedicated to Nelson Algren, appearing under the name of Lewis Brogan and she as Anne Dubreuilh; the scene: Chicago.

She rewrote their story in the third volume of her autobiography: *La Force des choses* (1963). On that occasion again she compares the merits of the different genres. Concerning *Les Mandarins*, which she does not consider a “roman à clé”, she admits she was not entirely truthful. Speaking now in her own name she explains the facts, argues her rationale. She cautions however that in autobiographies and diaries what “goes without saying is not said”. Perhaps, but it can be guessed and it generally is by the reader, filling in the blanks of the narrative, weaving a story where there is none, reconstructing the coherence of a personality from fragments. The underlying contract between writer and reader stipulates that the choice of the diary as a narrative makes clear that it will convey reality, although there is no other reason to believe that diaries are by nature more authentic than essays or fiction.

The writing of her autobiography allows Simone de Beauvoir to establish a parallel between what she actually lived and the fiction which she derived from it. She maintains that she lent her feelings to Anne, her character, but she admits that she took liberties with the chronology. Fiction writers have that right but the author of a piece of reporting as *L'Amérique au jour le jour* is labeled must justify such changes under penalty of a loss of credibility. The product must be truthful to its appearance, hence the belated justifications of Simone de Beauvoir.

Flying from Paris to New York is still an adventure in 1947²⁰). Simone de Beauvoir is overwhelmed by the new world. She had read some of her predecessors' books, such as Georges Duhamel, whom she mentions by name. He is the author of another travelog (*Scènes de la vie future*, 1930) It contains descriptions of some of the same sights, such as the Chicago stockyards. However, she does not men-

tion Louis-Ferdinand Céline's American chapters of *Journey to the End of the Night*. Sartre headed his first novel *La Nausée* with a quote from Céline's play, *L'Église*. But in 1947, Céline is no longer quotable: he is detained in a Danish prison, awaiting extradition proceedings²¹. Simone de Beauvoir objects to a petition in his favor being circulated at the behest of Henry Miller, a devout admirer of Céline (entry of March 20, 1947). Much to her disappointment, in the ensuing conversation with her Californian hosts and their friends, the charges she brings against Céline appear to fall on deaf ears.

Simone de Beauvoir had formed her view of the United States through the reading of writers such as Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Caldwell who had received critical acclaim in France since the 1930's and whose translated books enjoyed considerable success in the post-war years. Time and again she is surprised to hear them denigrated, with the exception of Faulkner, by the various writers and intellectuals she meets during her stay. Jazz, which she considers a major art form, seems to be treated mostly as background music in its native land. The setting of American films she had found poetic in Paris proves to be plain reality in New York. Her American counterparts view France through Marcel Pagnol's *La Femme du boulanger* (1938), a standard reference in the United States, but perhaps not in her own mind. The actual social statute of American women proves to be a disappointment also. She will in turn disappoint feminists of the following generation²².

Much as Gide did in Congo, and above all in the U.S.S.R., Simone de Beauvoir brings a measure of scholarly research to her coast to coast traveling, as she visits university campuses, where she was invited to lecture and meet faculty and students. She also visits a prison, comparing capital punishment procedures with the warden, as well as a psychiatric hospital. That part of her exploration of the United States is in line with that of Doctor Georges Duhamel, and is not unlike the visits organized for guests of the Soviet Union, until its very end²³. More generally however, she attempts to meet people

from all walks of life, with the expected preference of a class-conscious intellectual for the downtrodden. She observes and duly notes the social rituals, gives examples of comparative non-verbal communication. But it is a diary and not an anthropologist's essay: all entries are listed on the same plane.

Footnotes inserted by the editor of the 1997 paperback edition reveal the names behind the initials, for instance D.M.D. (entry of February 1, 1947) is Dwight Mac Donald, formerly of *Partisan Review*, then founder of *Politics*. With William Philips, William Barrett, Mary Mac Carthy, editors and contributors to *Partisan Review* Simone de Beauvoir differed heatedly on Philosophy, political perspective in post-war Europe, including Franco-American misperceptions in terms which could have been written to-day: her counterparts never fail to remind her of Europe's debt to the United States, she of the imperialist policy of their country, fanned by a belligerent press. She points out the gap between the principles of democracy and its actual practice (February 4 and 5). Above all she measures the isolation of intellectuals and academics in their own country, the conformity of students. Some of the people she met returned the compliments in subsequent books and articles (notably Mary Mac Carthy in *The Reporter* of January 22, 1952: "Mrs Gulliver in America"). Their reactions to Simone de Beauvoir's comments are listed in the editor's footnotes of the current French paperback edition. Victims of a diarist's caustic comments do not always enjoy such equal treatment.

As she progresses in her discovery of America, Simone de Beauvoir refines her analysis. She examines the religious beliefs, the philosophical references of the American society, its evolution through the works of historians of the early Twentieth century — Jack Turner, Charles A. Beard —, summarizes the contemporary debate about segregation with Gunnar Myrdal, author of *The American Dilemma* (1944). Her description of the American way of life is not one-sided as she contrasts it with French mores, which she despises.

Mary Mac Carthy dismissed her as an unreliable eyewitness. We may choose to test such judgment by again comparing Simone de Beauvoir's personal account with a representative novel of that time. Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is, among other popular books, yet another picture of post-World War II America and was perceived as such when published in 1955. It deals with the 1945-1950 years. This is the story of Tom Rath, a veteran who has served in Europe and the Pacific. Having returned to civilian life he wears the gray flannel suit uniform of executives who commute daily from their Connecticut suburban houses to the offices of a company in New York. He shares the common anxiety of his next-door neighbors — paying the mortgage on the house in order to be able to afford a larger one, saving for his children's education. The character, later played on screen by Gregory Peck, became an object of ridicule for the next generation. A touch of nostalgia has now made him more appealing. Simone de Beauvoir's America has acquired the same sentimental patina while retaining a comparable historical pertinence.

To go back to our initial question: what is the purpose of re-reading yesterday's travelogs? We can answer that the books written by Gide and Simone de Beauvoir from their personal experience in the countries they visited and attempted to comprehend, for the benefit of their readers and for their own are indeed among their greater accomplishments, even if these are not the most well known. It is a paradox that while being precisely dated these books may have aged less than their author's works of fiction. Their travelogs have remained largely relevant, although the time it took to reach such unchallenged opinion varied: from thirty years or so for Gide's Congo to more than fifty for the U.S.S.R., considerably less for Simone de Beauvoir's America. They also demonstrate the superiority of a literary form which integrates all aspects of the others: multiple narrative scenes which need not conform to accepted categories of fiction, dialogues and monologues which range from personal introspection

to factual descriptions of the outside world. Finally, they prove that Literature can be more efficient than Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, Economics or demographic reports, prospective studies. Gide's *Voyage au Congo* and *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, Céline's *Mea culpa*, Simone de Beauvoir's *America* reach the essential directly. The traveler makes the difference; the writer indeed is a better reporter.

Notes

- 1) This article is the written version of a conference presented at the University of California at Santa Barbara, May 19, 2003.
- 2) André Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, Paris, Gallimard, 1927; *Le Retour du Tchad*, Paris, Gallimard, 1928; "Folio", 1995-; Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (January-May 1947), Paris, Mhrien, 1948, Gallimard, 1954, "Folio", 1997-.
- 3) *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, originally published in 1936, and reprinted in the Gallimard "Idées" collection, in 1978, is not available in paperback. Neither is Louis-Ferdinand Céline's own account of his 1936 visit to the U.S.S.R. — *Mea Culpa* — nor Simone de Beauvoir's travel through China (*La Longue Marche*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957).
- 4) *Journal 1919-1924*, Paris, Fayard, 1993.
- 5) *En avant par-dessus les tombes*, Paris, Fayard, 2001.
- 6) "Un journal est une longue lettre que l'auteur s'écrit à lui-même, et le plus étonnant de l'histoire est qu'il se donne à lui-même de ses propres nouvelles." (*Journal*, January 1946).
- 7) Georges Friedmann, *Problèmes du machinisme en U.R.S.S. et dans les pays capitalistes*, Paris, Éditions sociales internationales, 1934; *La Crise du progrès*, Paris, Gallimard, 1936; *Problèmes humains du machinisme industriel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1946.
- 8) Georges Friedmann, "André Gide et l'U.R.S.S.", *Europe*, January 15, 1937; "De la Sainte Russie à l'U.R.S.S.", *Europe*, February 15, 1938.
- 9) Georges Friedmann, *La Puissance et la sagesse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970. See also his posthumous *Journal de guerre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.
- 10) Barbusse, Aragon, Nizan, as members of the French Communist Party, but also such diverse figures as Henri Béraud, Georges Duhamel, André Malraux, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Roland Dorgelès and, with André

- Gide in 1936, Pierre Herbart, Eugène Dabit, Louis Guilloux. Cf. Fred Kupferman, *Au pays des soviets. Le voyage français en Union Soviétique, 1917-1939*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Archives", 1979.
- 11)L.-F. Céline, *Mea culpa, La Vie et l'œuvre de Semmelweis*, Paris, Denoël & Steele, 1936; new editions: *Cahiers Céline* 7, Paris, Gallimard, 1986; *L'Infini*, Automne 1993.
 - 12)André Gide, *Journal II 1926-1950*, Martine Sagaert ed., "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 634, 635.
 - 13)The last entry is dated January 25, 1950: Gide comments that the previous entry, dated June 12, 1949, will probably remain the final one in his *Journal*.
 - 14)The French translation of George D. Painter's *Gide* (Paris, Mercure de France, 1968), says "père", p. 162, and not "mère" as in the text of *Voyage au Congo*, "Folio", 493.
 - 15)Cf. Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels*, Paris, Seuil, 1997. Mavis Gallant, the Canadian writer, reviewing in 1974 Simone de Beauvoir's English translation (by Patrick O'Brian) of *Tout compte fait (All Said and Done)*, her autobiography of the 1962-1972 years, painted this humorous portrait: "A portrait one might call 'The French Intellectual in Majesty' belongs in every reader's imaginary museum. Your intellectual sits enthroned; a few of the saved cluster like cherubim overhead, while the naughty ones who would not listen to Reason writhe beneath his left foot. He wears a decipherable political label, though nothing else may be clear. He has left an account of a doomed world in which he apparently intended to be the sole survivor; he has also provided us with sublimely inaccurate and humorless descriptions of places and societies he was unable to fathom, for the simple reason that he was indifferent to them in the first place. In the fifth volume of her autobiography Simone de Beauvoir lives up to the set criteria." *Paris Notebooks*, London, Bloomsbury, 1988, p. 208; first publication: *The New York Times Book Review*, July 21, 1974. A French translation is included in *Nouvelles de France*, Paris, Encre de nuit, 2003, p. 269.
 - 16)Simone de Beauvoir, *Préface*: "À défaut d'une étude qu'il serait présomptueux de tenter, je peux ici apporter un témoignage fidèle. Comme une expérience concrète enveloppe à la fois le sujet et l'objet, je n'ai pas cherché à éliminer de ce récit : il ne saurait être vrai qu'en tenant compte des circonstances singulières, personnelles, où chaque découverte s'est effectuée. C'est pourquoi j'ai adopté la forme d'un journal ; quoique

rétrospectif, ce journal reconstitué à l'aide de quelques notes, de lettres et de souvenirs tout frais, est scrupuleusement exact.”, *L'Amérique au jour le jour*, “Folio”, p. 9.

- 17) A case in point: Sylviane Agacinsky, wife of former French Prime minister, Lionel Jospin, published a diary of the 2002 Presidential campaign of her husband (defeated on the first round of the election, April 21, 2002), under the title *Journal interrompu 24 janvier-25 mai 2002*, Paris, Seuil, 2002. In its entries, her husband, a public figure, appears as “L.”.
- 18) Best known for *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949) adapted by Otto Preminger with Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak as main actors (1955).
- 19) Simone de Beauvoir, *Lettres à Nelson Algren, Un amour transatlantique 1947-1964*, translated by Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.
- 20) Albert Camus had visited the United States in 1946, a year before Simone de Beauvoir, crossing on a passenger cargo ship. His diary of his March to May 1946 travel through the United States was published in 1978 (*Journaux de voyage*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978).
- 21) Céline was to be released later that year and was not extradited. He returned to France in 1951.
- 22) Élisabeth Badinter, defends Simone de Beauvoir’s position against her successors (Antoinette Fouque, Sylviane Agacinski): “Le féminisme post-beauvoirien est bigarré, voire contradictoire. Le seul point sur lequel on s’accorde est la critique de l’ancêtre. Elle aurait méconnu la différence des sexes, dénié l’existence de l’identité féminine et prôné un universel abstrait qui n’est en vérité que la marque de l’universel masculin.” Élisabeth Badinter, *Fausse Route*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2003.
- 23) The French contemporary novelist, Annie Ernaux, describes in her diary, *Se perdre* (Gallimard, 2001) a 1988 « voyage d’écrivains à Moscou, Tbilissi et Leningrad » in the tradition of the “fellow-travelers” in the 1930’s.

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