André Gide’s Collection of Faits Divers

Elizabeth R. Jackson

Department of French & Italian, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182, USA

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Abstract

André Gide’s collection of faits divers spans a period of fifty years and includes more than 650 documents. A database analysis offers an efficient means of handling such extensive material. Our goal is to trace statistically this author’s varied interests as they evolved throughout his career.

Introduction

André Gide led a busy life. Central to all activities were, of course, his fictional enterprises — plays, récits, soties, and his novel, Les faux-monnayeurs. Adjuncts to his creative writing were manifold. Of constant concern were the faithfully maintained Journal and an extensive correspondence, both personal and professional. With eclectic tastes, he read avidly in the fields of literature, religious studies, politics, notably also in science. Music and travel similarly were constant sources of pleasure, providing spiritual and intellectual sustenance. Of immense interest for Gidian criticism, therefore, is the recent discovery of the results of another major activity: his substantial collection of faits divers, a project spanning fifty years — 1898 to 1939, precisely coextensive with his major contributions as a writer.1

The present study presents an analysis of this collection. Because of the comprehensive nature of the materials, a database program was invaluable to evaluate the information available.2 Computer resources permit us to compile data derived from more than 650 documents, with the advantage of providing comparative tables with which to illustrate a variety of factors. These include: (i) the geographical origins of the documents, (ii) chronological variations in the rate at which items were amassed as well as chronological variations of the subject focus, (iii) comparative information about the categories of subjects which Gide singled out as material for his collection, (iv) comparative information about what we have designated as “attributes” mainly to define behavioral characteristics evident as patterns throughout the range of subject items.

Initially, we will comment on the extent and the scientific limits of this investigation.

The bulk of the collection, including newspaper clippings and reproductions of clippings together with some correspondence relative to particular cases, are stored in three boxes in the archives of Mme. Gide. These three boxes contain altogether twenty folders; usefully, Gide noted the subject matter destined for the eventual contents on the cover of each folder although the contents frequently proved to include many non-related subjects. In addition to the clippings contained in these boxes, others exist elsewhere. A few items were saved in an envelope, currently in the archives. Others were published in the NRF series, “Chronique des Faits Divers,” inaugurated by the author in November 1926: a number of these appeared also in the comprehensive volume Ne jugez pas (1957). A few other cases were preserved in folders: these were originally destined for the “Chronique
des Faits Divers" column and are in the collection at the Bibliothèque Doucet. Two important additional newspaper articles were reported in the *Journal des faux-monnaieurs* (1927). In addition, there are other items which have disappeared. Mme. Gide mentions, for instance, a packet from the collection which passed into the hands of an anonymous critic a few years ago. Moreover, there are certainly clippings relative to "L'affaire Redureau" and to "La séquestrée de Poitiers" no longer available. Finally, a note concerning the *Caves du Vatican* in the Pléiade edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* contains a quotation where Gide discusses the theme of this *sotie*. In the note, he mentions "l'histoire d'un faux pape substitué au vrai...l'objet d'une escroquerie vers 1892." He continues: "J'ai encore des coupures de journaux et des affiches, ainsi suis-je parti d'un fait authentique." All of these circumstances therefore show that the figures in the following analysis are approximate and necessarily represent a minimum number of cases from a hypothetically complete collection.

Moreover, it is important to note that chance weighs heavily in this sort of enterprise. If one is interested in determining the importance of clippings concerning shipwrecks in the first ten years of the century, one must take into account a number of factors. First, the total incidence of shipwrecks throughout the world in that time period in comparison with other periods is unknown. Second, the number of articles on this subject that Gide could have read or that could have been sent to him by friends or correspondents, was limited. Third, Gide rarely indicated why a particular *faits divers* caught his attention. He marked (and only with lines in the margin) just thirty-seven clippings from the entire collection. Nor did he pursue his thoughts about them separately in a notebook or, for instance, in his *Journal*. So, little information is available which would enable us to ascertain exactly the interest he derived in an individual case or in a category of cases. Significantly, he shares with his readers a cogent remark about the significance of a particular *faits divers*. "L'originalité est aussi rare qu'ailleurs; et plus encore, car il y faut le concours de deux valeurs: celle du fait et celle du journaliste qui le raconte." To this, one may add the value judgment of Gide himself, who chose carefully those clippings which, for one reason or another, he deemed worthy of a place in his collection.

Conclusions drawn from this study are thus necessarily approximate as far as figures are concerned and hypothetical as to the particular interest which Gide may have seen in any individual case. Similarly, these conclusions are approximate as to the importance one may attach to the varying chronological incidence within specific categories and among particular attributes signalled in the analysis.

The overall value of the results remains, however, incontrovertible, for these results highlight Gide’s multiple and changing preoccupations throughout the course of his life. Inferentially, against the background of known biographical facts, within the context of the evolution of his literary works, within the perspective of ideas pursued in his *Journal*, it is possible to trace what may be termed a "Gidian profile," ethical and spiritual as well as intellectual, a profile significant for its historicity.

Especially, these tables derived from our computer analysis of the *faits divers* collection offer a rich mine of raw material to the field of Gidian criticism. They will provide material for future detailed studies to trace thematic development throughout his *récits*, his *soties*, his theatrical productions and, of course, his novel, *Les faux-monnaieurs*.

As for methodology, we initially took care to respect archival rules concerning handling of the clippings themselves, in particular preserving a record of the source, the location and the original order of the documents. Using a system of note cards, established when reviewing the collection, we then entered significant information identified by field into the database file. Accordingly, for each clipping we have noted: (i) the type of document (periodical, typed document, hand-written document, hand-written letter, or typed letter), (ii) a case type by "category" (e.g. subject: shipwreck, murder, etc.), (iii) the date, title, country and city of origin of a given periodical, (iv) the date, country and city identifying each event, (v) the protagonist (e.g. the victim or the perpetrator of a crime, the name of the ship in the case of a nautical drama...), (vi) identification by "attribute" (e.g. methodological concerns: was the clipping marked by Gide?; e.g. also behavioral focus: group action, a young person as criminal or as victim, etc.).

Altogether, the collection analyzed in this study includes 659 documents. 621 of these are in the form of clippings from periodicals. There are 31 letters in the collection addressed to Gide and 7 other documents for a total of 38 cases within the collection presumably contributed by other people. It is of note that most of these contributions date from the twenties (1927-28) and represent responses to his request for reader participation figuring in the "Première lettre sur les Faits Divers" in the *NRF* (November 6, 1926). These