The controversy over commitment of literature to a cause strikes us as a distinctly modern one, characterizing our century. Although the critic can find in previous periods examples of the entire range of attitudes one may take toward the relationship between literature and social problems, a lively examination of these attitudes marks our own time; and in France, pressure on writers to take a stand on the political and social issues that have torn the continent has been sufficient to evoke in most a response, which then becomes a matter of public concern. This development has been paralleled and heightened by a radical questioning of the value of literary art and its place in an industrial society. A result, I believe, is that one should see as essentially different the suppositions that underlie even such varying political writings as Malherbe’s “Prière pour le roi Henri le Grand” and Voltaire’s *Lettres philosophiques*, on the one hand, and, on the other, those, say, underlying Jean-Paul Sartre’s theatre. The two writers who will presently concern us reveal this contemporary consciousness of the problem of politically committed literature as well as an increased sensitivity to political obligation. They faced a two-fold question: should literature be focused and take stands on social and political issues; and should the writer himself step into the arena by engaging in political activity? Their divergent views, and the surprising relationship we will observe between these views and their literary production during the nineteen-thirties, illustrate one of the paradoxes associated with the question of engagement.

André Gide’s position throughout the majority of his career was that acquired during his early symbolist period: art, serving only itself, was a

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superior and autonomous value, separate from life. His statement, "La morale . . . est une dépendance de l’esthétique," which carried a step further the Romantic equivalent of beauty and truth, illustrates how, for Gide, the esthetic perception subordinated even ethics to itself. With a few exceptions, such as an account of the judicial process, Souvenirs de la cour d’assises, he did not open his work, even his travel books, to considerations of politics or social organization, prior to 1926. Moreover, Gide’s principal fictional works, though dealing with pressing psychological and moral problems, take no stand. "A vrai dire, en art, il n’y a pas de problème—donc l’oeuvre d’art ne soit la suffisante solution." This is not to say that he was unaware of political upheaval and social injustice; but a kind of prejudice kept these topics out of his work. "Il n’est pas juste de dire que je demeurais insensible à ces questions; mais ma position à leur égard était la seule que doive raisonnablement prendre un artiste et qu’il doive chercher à garder. Le ‘ne jugez point’ du Christ, c’est en artiste aussi que je l’entends." He justified this view, not only by referring to symbolism, and especially Mallarmé’s example, but also by affirming his belief that human progress was essentially individual and that moral insights had priority over social and political ones.

In a sense, Gide never quite abandoned this position; it was ingrained, reinforced perhaps by his Huguenot rearing, almost necessitated by his taste for style. Not even at the time of his Communist fervor in the first half of the 1930’s could he accept the idea of art as crude propaganda. But his views on the role of the artist and the use of art did evolve during the late twenties and thirties, when European peace was again threatened. The watershed was his trip to the Congo (1925-26), which spurred him not only to publish a written account (Voyage au Congo, 1927), but also to engage in active protest against mismanagement and abuses in the colonial system. His diary and correspondence began to reveal his increasing concern with political issues and his new conviction that to remain silent was to be an accomplice of injustice. Soon he began to speak of his growing enthusiasm for Russian communism, an admiration which, though shared with many of his contemporaries, was inspired especially in his case by his lifelong concern with evangelical Christianity. By 1933 he was devoting time and energies, which otherwise might have been turned to criticism or fiction, to letter-writing, speech-making, and, shortly, traveling on behalf of pacifist and socialist causes. He remained, however, short of the total commitment of party membership; too much of an individualist for that, he gave as his reason the desire to have his words retain the weight of those of non-partisan observers. Les Nouvelles nourritures, begun as early as 1917, was completed under the inspiration of his pro-Communist sentiments and his desire to use his pen for social betterment. Organized like his tardily-famous Nourritures terrestres, the
volume, which is addressed to his “Comrades,” presents a curious mixture of lyricism, evangelical precepts, reminiscences, and socialist moralizing. Lacking structure, and with an unpleasant hortatory tone in spots, it is generally considered inferior to its predecessor. But it interests us as one of Gide’s major efforts toward committed literature.\[13\]

Obliged to consider (sometimes publicly)\[14\] the relationship between his career and advocacy of social causes, he took a fence-riding position: that literature, without betraying itself and its specific esthetic function, could also serve the revolution. This conciliating position, set out in one of his most explicit speeches, “Défense de la culture,” should interest us particularly.\[15\] The chief function of literature seen in a socialist perspective, he maintained, was simply to be itself: to sustain in a new society those values of beauty and creativity which are part of the humanism in the name of which revolutions are made. Secondly, it could be called upon to reflect the consciousness of the proletariat emerging into history. It was not a question, Gide insisted, of a mendacious social realism, but of an authentic artistic expression of the working class and its aspirations. To the accusation of estheticism and the objection that Occidental art was corrupt because it had always belonged to the upper class, Gide replied characteristically that culture should raise the people to itself, not lower itself to the people. He thus temporarily reconciled, to his own satisfaction, the claims of socialist concern with his personal doctrine of art as a supreme human value.

A practical difficulty did not escape him, nevertheless, for it invaded his own experience; though he felt that art could legitimately include social and political preoccupations, he found that the writer could not embrace such concerns without diverting his attention from his work. Such at least was his own case.\[16\] He blamed on his anguish over the European situation the new difficulty he experienced in conceiving and carrying out literary projects. “Lorsque les préoccupations sociales ont commencé d’encombrer ma tête et mon cœur, je n’ai plus rien écrit qui vaille.”\[17\] (At the same time, he recognized that the difficulty might very well derive from a real decline in his creative impetus, felt after the completion of Les Faux-Monnayeurs.) Maintaining artistic detachment and respecting esthetic considerations while participating in a politically tendentious program seemed nearly impossible. And the synthesis of which he had spoken between artistic value and political content proved beyond his scope—if, indeed, it is not an impossibility.\[18\] His solution was to throw in his lot with the activists: to give his support, directly or indirectly, to countless committees and petitions on behalf of individuals and groups, and to compose scores of pages in favor of these causes, while insisting nonetheless that art too supported human welfare. A few additional attempts at creative works dealing with social problems—for instance, Geneviève (1936) and Robert ou l’intérêt général—produced texts which are markedly inferior to his best work.
After his disappointing trip to the Soviet Union in 1936, which made him reverse his judgment on the success of Communism in Russia (though not its desirability), Gide published an account of his experiences and observations, and then a sequel. These and a few open letters and other texts mark, practically speaking, the end of his political writing, with few exceptions. He began to see the wisdom of remaining aloof, as Martin du Gard had counseled, and the futility of involvement, at least under circumstances which then prevailed. The disillusion of his trip to Russia and the despair inspired by the worsening European scene certainly contributed to this withdrawal from activity; but perhaps likewise responsible was Gide's natural tendency to react. Though he continued to wish that the artist might contribute to preserving peace and bettering mankind's lot, he began to concern himself once again more with universals rather than particulars, and moved back toward the classical themes and the elegant style which characterize certain earlier works and his last masterpiece, *Thésée* (1946).

III

The attitude of Gide's close friend and correspondent, Roger Martin du Gard, was different enough to foster a lively dialogue between them on the subject of engagement for two decades. From their earliest epistolary discussions of the relation of the writer to the social issues of the time, the author of *Les Thibault* took the position that the artist's first duty was to his art. Certainly, he felt very strongly that he himself did not belong in the political arena. It was rare for him to sign a petition or manifesto, and he joined no organization, although he read the newspapers and other topical material (sometimes, he felt, to the detriment of his work). It was not that he had a feeling of incompetence in political and social matters. Unlike Gide, who, though he read Marx, found him unrewarding and said repeatedly that he did not consider himself competent in political science, Martin du Gard was conversant with socialist theory, enough so to be able to introduce it successfully into his novels. It was not false modesty, then, that kept him from speaking out on current issues on which he had, in most instances, clear opinions. Neither was it that he was content with the status quo. Few writers of his generation were more doggedly pacifist; few felt more disgust at what seemed to be the failure of capitalism and nationalism. His correspondence makes it abundantly clear: Martin du Gard deplored injustice and economic exploitation.

Nor was the cause of his detachment precisely the fear of dispersing his energies—although that consideration might well have been valid in view of his ambitious fictional project, which required extensive documentation. It was rather, I believe, a sense of roles and definitions. The artist, having chosen his vocation, belongs to it; it is suitable to his character and is the
means by which he can ultimately contribute something. To do violence to this role by asking him to participate in politics is to falsify his very nature. He noted that talented writers, once enrolled in a cause, could at best repeat truisms and “ideas in the air,” and that their prose deteriorated. Similarly, on the question of using his medium for a distinctly polemical purpose, Martin du Gard was convinced that art, including fiction, must have itself as its aim, not didacticism. In that way, he was as “pure” an artist as Valéry, or the Gide of the earlier period. The purpose of the novel is an accurate reflection of human reality, groups as well as individuals. Any social or political truth which is communicated through fiction comes secondarily, as a result of the depiction of human actions and passions.

Martin du Gard’s position on the writer’s participation, if I have understood it rightly, may be in part a function of his bourgeois prejudice against public display—an aspect of that persistent French ideal, taste. It seemed to him on more than one occasion that Gide was making a fool of himself in public assemblies where partisan organizers took advantage of his prestige. His apparently innate pessimism, which events of the time did nothing to counteract, also surely influenced his view of the role of the artist. Since he believed in no simple solution and conceived of human progress as requiring, at best, centuries, participation seemed futile to him. His position was likewise colored, I might suggest, by the medium he had chosen—that of fiction (and occasionally drama). For fiction can and must have a bias, a point of view. With its discursive and referential content and its traditional social outlook, it can deal with social and political matters, the very treatment of which implies a judgment. The novelist thus need not turn his back on all social concern, but rather can treat current problems in his own medium.

Such is the position of Martin du Gard on the double problem of the participation of the artist and the political content of literature. He repeated to his friend that the only way he wished to commit himself was through his novels. His view is not much different from Proust’s fervent statement in *Le Temps retrouvé* that the artist’s only real duty is the apparently egotistical one of creation. Martin du Gard’s faithful adherence to this position, in contrast with Gide’s personal involvement in politics and half-successful attempts to show a positive relationship between art and revolution, make the younger man seem like the teacher of the elder. As Gide’s enthusiasms for various causes multiplied, Martin du Gard’s warnings about the futility of participation and the danger of losing thereby one’s intellectual prestige became more frequent. While sharing his dismay at European events, he urged Gide to return to creative prose.

Within this context, Martin du Gard, who had begun his career with a study of an individual and then, in *Jean Barois*, had examined both a man’s life and the social circumstances surrounding it (specifically, the Dreyfus Affair), turned his attention toward the vast topic of bourgeois society before
the first World War. He was already launched on this project in the 1920's when Gide was composing _Si le grain ne meurt_ and _Les Faux-Monnayeurs_ and continued his work throughout the 1930's. His history of two families, Catholic and Protestant, and two youthful heroes, became also a study of stress in French society, nascent conflict in Europe and, finally, war. Martin du Gard's historical training at the Ecole des Chartes had prepared him to carry out this project, and the elapsed time between the events recounted and the composition allowed him a vantage point which he could not have had if he had treated more recent events. This distance between himself and his subject was a matter of importance to him; it reflected his sense that fictional art is not merely reporting, and that truth in fiction goes beyond simple factual accuracy. Clearly, we can conclude that he felt involvement of the author in the circumstances he is describing to be a handicap, rather than an asset.

Nowhere in _Les Thibault_ does Martin du Gard speak out explicitly on the social and political issues he is treating; instead of authorial statement, the manner of handling the events, and light shed on the society which produced them, are the commentary. Of the value of this sort of judgment, Martin du Gard was fully aware; he acknowledged it, in his Nobel Prize speech (1937), when he expressed the hope that his portrait of Europe on the brink of war in 1914 might contribute to building future peace. Indeed, to him, all literature was a commitment of some sort. "Toute littérature qui vaut quelque chose, dont l'auteur a une personnalité, est engagée, même les Fables de La Fontaine. . . ." His ivory tower, then, was not that of blindness but that of perspective.

**IV**

This is indicated in the homage paid to Martin du Gard by the Marxist critic Georg Lukács. Though acknowledging that the author of _Jean Barois_ was a bourgeois and not a socialist writer, Lukács praised his analysis of the mentality and class structure in France before World War I, stating that he had brought out clearly the features of the bourgeoisie which made social revolution inevitable, and had likewise shown the dynamism of socialist doctrine. For Lukács, then, Martin du Gard was not a "modernist," but a critical realist, an honest student of European society who depicted its inner truths. Gide, on the contrary, was dismissed by Lukács as a "modernist," a Narcissistic analyst of introverted individuals, unable to see beyond their dead-end preoccupations. Without granting Lukács his entire argument, it must be conceded that Gide's best works do indeed restrict themselves to individual conflicts that would seem to have little bearing on the immediate concerns of society. And, as we have noted, Gide felt in himself the incompatibility between artistic impulse and social concern; his period
of "committed literature" was parallel to a drying up of his creative energies. Martin du Gard, who stubbornly refused to let himself be drawn into current politics, was able to produce a major social and political novel dealing with critical issues of a somewhat earlier period. Our conclusion, then, can be a paradox: Gide, the writer who had a committed period and spoke of literature at the service of revolution, seems ultimately less engaged in the issues of our century, and less successfully so, than his younger friend, who nevertheless had written, "J'aime encore moins ... celle [this expression] de 'Littérature engagée.'"20 One might venture a warning, which would bear out Martin du Gard's claims, that, even in times of crisis, the artist has an overriding duty or, if you prefer, a role to play: that of practicing his art, toward the end of veracity. If he has seen clearly and painted well, his work will be his commitment.

NOTES

1. A recent discussion of numerous twentieth century French novelists who have recognized a political and social responsibility as artists is that of Rima Drell Reck, Literature and Responsibility (Baton Rouge, 1969).
2. The chief source of statements by Martin du Gard, and one of the main sources for Gide, is their Correspondance. 2 vols. (Paris, 1968).
11. Gide's texts of this period were collected by Yvonne Davet under the title Littérature engagée (Paris, 1950).
14. The most famous occasion is the January 1935 meeting of the Union pour la vérité, the transcript of which was published as André Gide et notre temps (Paris, 1935).
18. I have discussed this question elsewhere. See Malraux, Sartre, and Aragon As Political Novelists (Gainesville, 1965).
19. First version, 1936; rewritten, then presented in 1946.
22. For instance, Correspondance, I, 600 and 606; II, 44.
29. Sartre, nonetheless, recognizing that Gide’s personal anguish was a forerunner of the experiences of later generations, pronounced the work of the great individualist to be an invaluable testimony. See his “Gide vivant,” Les Temps modernes, VI (March, 1951), 1537-41.
30. Thierry, p. 1014.