

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 32 (1964)
Heft: 7

Artikel: From the journals
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-568816>

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ANDRÉ GIDE

FROM THE JOURNALS

Emil X used to work in his father's tailoring shop. But for the last two months the fact that they are working on half-time leaves him free almost every day. And every day he spends his whole afternoon at the baths. He gets there at one and stays there until seven. Is that why he is as beautiful as a Greek statue? He swims remarkably well; and nothing so much as swimming imposes a rhythm, a harmony on one's muscles, or so hardens and strengthens them. Naked he is perfectly at ease; it is when clothed that he seems awkward. In his workman's clothes I hardly recognised him. Most likely he also owes to the habit of nudity the dull and even lustre of his flesh. Everywhere his skin is blond and downy; on the hollows of his sacrum, exactly on the spot where ancient statuary puts the little tufts on fauns, this slight down becomes darker. And indeed yesterday afternoon, in the Praxiteles pose, his shoulder leaning against the wall of the pool, firmly and most naturally planted like the Apollo Saurochtonus, with his slightly snub-nosed and mocking face, he looked like a latterday faun.

It has been said that I am chasing after my youth. This is true. And not only after my own. Even more than beauty, youth attracts me, and with an irresistible appeal. I believe the truth lies in youth; I believe it is always right against us. I believe that, far from trying to teach it, it is from youth that we, the elders, must seek our lessons. And I am well aware that youth is capable of errors; I know that our role is to forewarn youth as best we can; but I believe that each new generation arrives bearing a message that it must deliver; our role is to help that delivery. I believe that what is called 'experience' is often but an unavowed fatigue, resignation, blighted hope. I believe to be true, tragically true, this remark of Alfred de Vigny, often quoted, which seems simple only to those who quote it without understanding it: 'A fine life is a thought conceived in youth and realized in maturity.' It matters little to me, besides, that Vigny himself perhaps did not see all the meaning I put into it; I make that remark mine.
