André Gide

THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES. By ANDRÉ GIDE. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1929. $2.

Reviewed by ABEL CHEVALLEY

IN a delightful booklet called "Caractères," now as rare as a first Folio, André Gide once wrote: "Each new book of mine is a reaction against the mere *amateurs* of the one before. . . ." At the risk of betraying an inveterate amateurishness, I find Gide's last book, "The School for Wives," admirable as the one before, "The Counterfeiters," though entirely different. If this statement could possibly have a share in causing Gide's next "réaction," it is with a light heart that I would bear my tiny bit of responsibility.

The great success of "The School for Wives" is due partly to its reactive quality. "The Counterfeiters" was a triumph of intricacy, disconnection, and reconnection. "The School for Wives" is a marvel of simplicity and economy. In "The Counterfeiters," Gide had, as he told me, to gather his strength and take a fresh "élan" at every turn of the road. He constantly shifted his point of view. Or, rather, his characters led, and he followed. In the Diary of the counterfeiters, we have a full record of that mental hurdle race, inside a labyrinth.

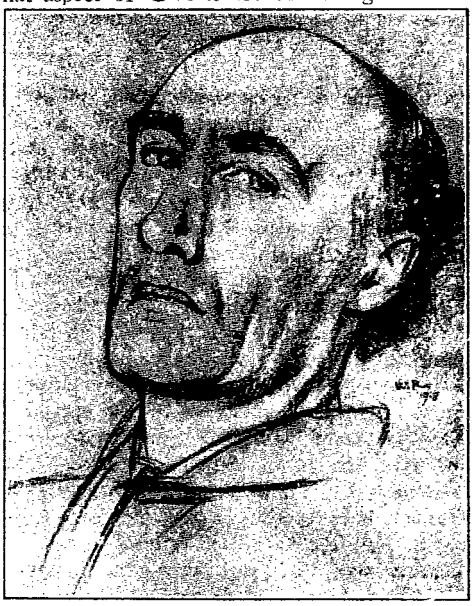
"The School for Wives" is of a quite different type, perfect unity, classical continuity, two characters only, a man and his wife, both of them coherent and static, one single observer and recorder, the wife, one single record, the wife's diary, the style a miracle of directness and simplicity: not one "difficult" word in the whole volume.

It is as if Gide had wanted to convince the admirers of his "The Counterfeiters" that they admired its defects, not its merits, and that he was able to wield the simplest as well as the most complicated instruments of mental analysis.

The first part of Eveline's Diary in "The School for Wives" is written just before her marriage, the second twenty years after. The purity and gravity of her young love, the intensity of her devotion, are expressed in a liquid and transparent language. She is one of those cultivated, highly conscientious, and somewhat inartistic girls who unfold their intense and secret life in Gide's works. The sense of beauty which they radiate translates itself into their conduct, their way of being, not their manner of writing, painting, dressing, or singing. Eveline begins to discover the clay feet of her idol just before she gets married to the idealized fool who becomes her husband. Eveline's second diary, beginning after twenty years of marriage, when she is on the point of leaving her husband, contains pages which for candid emotion and sheer poignancy are unforgetable. Nothing can be more commonplace than Eveline's story of disillusion, despair, and sacrifice, nothing more exquisitely expressive and *nuancé* than the progress of her disenchantment, more pathetically concise than the end of the drama. The whole story is told in less than 16,000 words. Truly, all great art is omission.

Some of Gide's recent books, "The Counterfeiters," for instance, and also "Lafcadio's Adventures," had led his admirers too far in their opinion on his real share in the government of modern noveldom, at least in France. Both books contain something like a tentative theory of the novel. Both are, to a certain extent, regarded as samples of a new conception of mental and effective activity and of a new manner of applying and displaying that view of life in the art of fiction. This is not the place to enter into details. But the character of pure gratuitousness is the supreme achievement of all human acts, and its culmination in Lafcadio's crime were not without tempting some amateurs into premature conclusions. Others may have hailed rather irrelevantly "The Counterfeiters" with its fold-upon-fold construction, circumvolutive progress, coiling rhythm and movements, brain-like texture, as a sort of round Japanese box of art and psychology, containing in the last of its concentric recesses the secret of Psyche and the truth of fiction. It was only a fiction of truth. "Each new book of mine is a reaction against the amateurs of my preceding work," says Gide in "Characters." And he adds: "That sort of round-about turn is to teach them that if they applaud me, it must be for the right reason. They must take each of my books for what it really is: a work of art."

Of art . . . but not of propaganda, even artistic. That aspect of Gide is too often neglected. You



ANDRÉ GIDE

From "Twenty Portraits," by William Rothenstein.

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will find many others in the books of general information on the contemporary novel mentioned in my recent foreign letter to the *Saturday Review*, but none more important.

If you want to understand Gide, read Lalou's chapter on him (it is one of the best in his book) and Bernard Fay's sketch of his career. You will then realize the intense admiration he excites and the extraordinary power he wields. But if you want not only to understand, but also to "over-stand" him, to look at him from a point of vantage, he and he alone is able to supply you with the necessary platform. There is no help, no remedy. You must read his whole works. He is not definable in sections. He is too big, too great, too complex.

From one point of view, perhaps, he might be effectually schematized, that of comparative literature, and comparative psychology. But that is a subject which does not lend itself to generalizations, simplifications, current journalism. And this is a review, not a lecture.

In brief, let it be recorded that no estimation of the novel of our times can be attempted without first an estimation of the comparative share of Marcel Proust and André Gide in its development. And in brief, let it be remembered that Marcel Proust, indifferent to *morality* started from *mentality*, made immense discoveries, and died in his labyrinth at the moment he was issuing from it into the open world. Gide was born and remained a Moralist (though he wrote "Immiraliste"), traveled early to the world of pure and independent psychology, did not stay there, and has since returned to his tormented quest of an integral life.

Of these two men, the greater analyst was perhaps the narrower artist. Gide is more complete, a richer asset in the books of humanity.

October 1929