"Of Making Many Books"

By WALTER YUST

ANDRE GIDE'S "Travels in the Congo," published by Knopf, is not a "best" book of the month. If it were, M. Gide might learn, to his amazement, that his book is going better in America than was expected. Alas for M. Gide. His book will have to worry along as best it can on its own peculiar merits.

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Ordinarily, I am not attracted by travel books. The personality of the author too frequently intrudes, and unless the personality is that of a Doughty, or a Gertrude Bell, a Marco Polo, or a James Morier, its intrusion worries me into indifference. With perhaps unnecessary perversity, I prefer to do my traveling as well as my book-selecting myself.

Drawn to "Travels in the Congo" by its dust cover and by the name of the French author, whose "Strait Is the Gate" and "Counterfeiters" are memorable experiences, I soon learned its distinction. Andre Gide is no ordinary reporter who sets to paper the highlights of an eventful tour of inspection. His book is not a representation of the Congo as seen by Andre Gide so much as a representation of Andre Gide in the Congo. And the difference is something like that between journalism and art.

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"Travels" is a collection of "notes" (M. Gide calls them) written from day to day during a ten-month tour of the French Congo in 1926, I think. The author traveled in a semiofficial capacity, with a weather-eye out to catch evidence of the abuse of the natives by French companies exporting Congo products. The traveling was done on foot, horseback, in boat, motorcar and in a kind of hammock swung from the shoulders of blacks. Halts were made at the native settlements when M. Gide could stand the stench or in the compounds of Government or company officials.

His "notes" are, as I've said, autobiographic. M. Gide recorded with equal enthusiasm his rereading of Milton, Racine, Conrad, Stevenson and his first sight of the precise architectural beauty of the gunshell-shaped huts of a Congo village. The catholicity of his taste in reading—he enjoys a more extensive variety of writers than I do—would suggest his capacity for appreciation and perhaps that serenity of mind (although he confesses he howls when hurt), which gives his "notes" no little of their charm. It seemed to me, as I followed the hot blistering trail with M. Gide, that I couldn't be far from doing that literally, inasmuch as the author, refusing merely to celebrate a memorable Congo tour, reflected in his "notes," written without literary design, himself and his hours (the trivial and the significant) as they were touched by a strange place and a strange people.

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I have painfully tried to explain why I enjoyed this book. And my reasons for calling "Travels" good may not be sufficiently convincing reasons why any one else should like the book. That's a difficulty under which the book reviewer—as well as book-selecting committees—labor. In a judgment on books reasons are personal only; one can hope only that the capacity for enjoyment is identical enough in most human critters so that one person's reasons may be at least intelligible to another.

This doesn't always work. Very often it is difficult to agree. In the Congo, for example, the natives never eat eggs. They save them for white travelers passing through. The white travelers will buy them if the eggs are fresh. When they aren't fresh they are not sold, but handed over to the native children, who enjoy old ones quite as much as the whites enjoy fresh ones. Native adults don't like them at all, fresh or ripe. There can be, you see, in the Congo no common basis for agreement on the quality of eggs. * * * But never mind—a book has a better chance here.

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Remembering how today, in America, deep-thinkers worry over the absence of individuality in modern American life and its deplorable standardization, I came upon this notation by M. Gide with something of a start. He is writing from Bosoum, in deep Africa, where evidently they are having the same trouble:

"The absence of individuality, of individualization—the impossibility of differentiation—which depressed me so much at the beginning of my journey, is what I suffer from, too, in the landscape. (I experienced this sensation as early as Matadi on seeing the population of children all alike, all equally agreeable, etc., * * * and again on seeing the huts of the first villages all alike, all containing droves of human cattle with the same looks, tastes, customs, possibilities, etc. * * *)"

And later: "At Fort Archambault, on the marshes of Islam, barbarism is behind one, and one enters into contact with another civilization, another culture. A still rudimentary culture, no doubt, but yet one that brings with it a fineness, a comprehension of nobility and hierarchy, a disinterested spirituality and a feeling for what is immaterial.

"In the regions we have just been through there are nothing but downtrodden races, not so much vile in themselves perhaps as made vile by others, enslaved, without an aspiration but for the grossest material well-being. Here at last are to be found real homes; at last individual possessions; at last, specializations."

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M. Gide and his friend took motion pictures, and were least successful when they rehearsed the natives. M. Gide complains about it: "A mother was told to give her child something to drink; she did so, more or less skillfully, and had to be instructed to incline the calabash a little more to the right or the left. Then, directly after, I saw her put the calabash down on the ground and take up a handful of water and let it stream over her thumb into the baby's mouth—a charming action, quite unknown, I believe, to our French mothers, however rustic."

The second way was the common way, but the good lady wouldn't do it for a photograph * * * There are superficial differences, no doubt, but social problems and the human critter vary but little wherever you go.

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