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501

Gide: The Head and the Heart

> Er ist dumm wie alle Menschen, die kein Herz haben. Denn die Gedanken kommen nicht aus dem Kopfe, sondern aus dem Herzen.—HEINE.

IMAGINARY INTERVIEWS. By André Gide. Translated from the French by Malcolm Cowley. Alfred A. Knopf. $2.

IT IS a good omen that the first book to come through from France, in translation, after the silence that gripped that country from the 1940 invasion on, is a piece of literature—and one so fresh and vigorous that it might have been written by a man in his vigorous prime. It was written, as a matter of fact, by a man in his early seventies. Gide was born in 1869, a date difficult to credit in this connection. Malcolm Cowley, who has done an excellent job of translation with these nineteen dialogues, two short essays, and a brief journal written at the fall of Tunis, brings out in his introduction the presence of certain passages concealing hidden fire to smoke out treachery. These passages exist, it is true, and no one can bring off such subtleties with the same ease and *brio* as Gide. At the same time, it would be a mistake to take this book as a piece of writing whose value lies solely in its hidden polemic. The remarkable thing about it is its openness. By comparison, much of the writing to which we have been accustomed in an un-

censored American literature, these last heavy years, seems closed and stifling. It is the final answer to those opponents of Gide—and how numerous and vocal they were—who prophesied for him final sterility. It is the final proof that his "Christianity without dogma," his belief in harmony and joy, his determined belief in individuality, had firm bases. It is also a proof, as Cowley says, that a wholehearted devotion to the literary art may in itself constitute political action The "Interviews" appeared regularly from November, 1941, to the spring of 1942 in the literary supplement of *Le Figaro,* one outlet for serious writers in the unoccupied zone.

The works of André Gide have been presented to American readers in the most haphazard way. "The Counterfeiters" came out rather promptly after its French publication; but, detached completely from Gide's career as a whole, it could not but puzzle many readers. "Si le grain ne meurt . . .," the key book to Gide and one of literature's great confessions, appeared in its first French public edition in 1924; it was published here in an expensive limited edition ("If It Die") in 1935. The two lives of Gide in English to which Mr. Cowley refers in his preface are valuable, but nothing is so valuable as reading Gide himself, from beginning to end, in his proper order. He has, from the first, possessed the rare faculty of being able to make more or less disguised autobiographical material a continuing basis for his writing. This accomplishment—for autobiography is the most dangerous, and can be the dullest, material in the world—proves an actual underlying development. His vivid grasp of his own experience has been put into the service, moreover, of his moral ideas.

This man, whom readers of translations will have to piece together from the scattered books available to them—they have his "Dostoevski," his African travel notes, his book on Russia, as well as certain short pieces of prose—became a center of influence only after 1918. He had purposely kept his early production small and varied, in what his opponents considered a perversely baffling way. His opponents were intelligent and formidable. To Catholics especially he came to represent corruption and secret-keeping: the result of a truly demoniac possession. What was manifesting itself in Gide was manifesting itself in several isolated individuals at the time—Freud, Havelock Ellis, Shaw. The fact of the unconscious was breaking through European thought. Gide's basic tenets, upon which he acted with, to others, an infuriating tenacity, were actually rather simple. Combining in himself opposing elements of the most irreconcilable kind —a Protestant upbringing and a passionate nature the sexual organization of which differed from the "normal"—he early broke, through action, from the illness and misery imposed upon him by seemingly implacable forces. He refused to continue the endless and sterile struggle "against a conformity to which all nature was in contradiction." "It dawned upon me at last that this discordant duality might be resolved into harmony. And then I saw that harmony must be my supreme object, and the endeavor to acquire it the express reason of my life." Many years later he repeats his conviction—the conviction that defeated, for him, the anxiety which so afflicts modern man: "When I made the discovery that joy was rarer and more difficult and more beautiful than sadness, joy became for me not only (which it is) a natural need but even more a moral obligation."

In order to give his "dangerous thoughts" some kind of circulation in the heavy pre-1914 world in which he found himself, Gide resorted to ruses. He wrote his books under the protection of the myth. It is difficult fully to understand Gide without a knowledge of these small early works. They are filled with a diffused wit, gaiety, and freedom. They brought into French literature something completely opposed to the heavy work of Barrès—in its own way "mythical." They gave release from deadly compromise and pervasive hidden or open pressure. They "decompressed," in the phrase of one modern French critic.

It is this faculty for "decompression" which gives life and vigor to everything Gide writes. It is present in his criticism—in modern France the criticism which comes nearest to the warm humanism of Montaigne. It is a releasing touch that operates under the cool and pure classic style that Gide has made flexible, while keeping about it "an odor both resinous and dry." Under this serene surface exists an intellectual and emotional organization fully conscious of "the winds from the abyss." Gide has never allowed his need for reconciliation to blind or deafen him to the terrible contradictions of life, to the often insane tensions functioning in the human spirit. It is the appreciation of the force of these terrors that has drawn him to Dostoevski, Blake, Flaubert, and Shakespeare. He believes in the validity of the extreme, of the sincere, of intense limitation; and it is largely Goethe's disinclination to limit himself that makes him, in Gide's eyes, "banal, in a superior way."

The crucial importance of Gide's thought at present is that he has discovered, and long acted upon, the fact of each man's personal responsibility for evil.

> What a sad need for hatred [he wrote in his Journal in 1937] I see on all sides today! . . . the need to oppose all that should be understood, completed, enriched, united. These conflicts I have felt working in myself, before having come upon them in the outer world. I know them; and by this personal experience I know how one uses oneself up in the struggle. . . . [A day came] when I said: What good does it do? when I began to look, not for struggle and partial triumph, but for accord; to understand that the more separate and different are the parts composing this accord, the richer the harmony. And in the same way in a state—it is a somber kind of Utopia, this dream of smashing one part by another; this dream of a totalitarian state where the subjugated minorities cannot make themselves heard; or, what is worse, where each and all think the same. It cannot be a question of harmony when the choir sings in unison.

It is inevitable that this translation of "Interviews imaginaires" should bear some marks of being printed for an immediate use; of being enlisted to a hard-hitting purpose, with a special target in view. This sharp direction of appeal has resulted in one or two faults. The first translation into English of a set of Gide's essays should be more fully annotated. Some footnotes exist, but not enough. The dates and publisher and titles of Sarthe's books (and Sarthe's full name)? The date and publisher of Thierry-Maulnier's "Introduction à la poésie française"? Some identification of Kléber Haeden and August Dorchain? (The fact of a closed France cannot be a complete explanation; although no

French scholar, I have two of the books mentioned on my shelves.) Such annotation would tie these essays firmly into a background of reference, as well as being a reassurance that the time will come when literature will again move freely over long open spaces, without fear of traps or ambushes.

The sly, the sinuous, the demoniac Gide: can his opponents find him in this book? I do not think so, any more than his admirers can find an infallible guide; for Gide can make mistakes in literary judgment. The important thing is that they are never mistakes of sympathy. He can be wrong about American writers, but for interesting reasons. And we search in vain for the stiff old figure, loaded with years and evil —the end his enemies prophesied for Gide long since. This man who, during the fighting in Tunis, walks the streets happy in the radiant spring weather, who falls into a happy conversation concerning the respective merits of George and Rilke with the first British staff officer he meets, who lies at night with his window open on "a field of stars," is an aged man. It is impossible to remember this as we read him. His trust in life has not been an empty hope; he is free; and he hands the unambiguous key to freedom to us all.

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