Imaginary Interviews par Vincent Sheean (The Saturday Review)

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The Papers of André Gide

IMAGINARY INTERVIEWS. By André Gide. Translated from the French by Malcolm Cowley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1944. 172 pp. $2.

Reviewed by VINCENT SHEEAN

TO begin with, I must admit that Mr. Cowley's conception of translation is one with which I can feel little or no sympathy. It might work between kindred and equally exalted talents—Poe and Baudelaire, for instance—and it has its place, of necessity, in all translated poetry; but it seems to me that in modern prose of the western European language group there is no need to paraphrase, to add, and to subtract. All Mr. Cowley had to do was to translate Gide; instead, he has deliberately chosen to paraphrase, saying (as he does in the introduction to this volume) that he does not translate word for word, but instead tries "to achieve the same sort of movement and rightness in English."

This could be done only if Mr. Cowley possessed in English the same kind and degree of talent for analytical expression that Gide possesses in French. But, on the contrary, we find some of Gide's best and freshest French coinage exchanged for English pennies worn smooth and faceless with too much use. Thus when Gide calls Pippa (of Browning's poem) the *"déterminatrice dans l'existence d'autrui,"* Mr. Cowley renders this as, quite simply, the "agent of destiny." The powerful expression *"songe-creux"* is translated as "idle visionaries." And *"points d'appui,"* in the same passage, becomes "certainties" in English. *"Impénitent"* is translated as "incorrigible," merely because the expression "incorrigible romantic" is common in English—reason enough of itself for avoiding it when the speaker is supposed to be André Gide. Gide calls the child Goethe a budding pedagogue (*"pédagogue en herbe"*) and says that this is what we meet in him ever afterwards; Mr. Cowley renders this as a "pedagogue in pinafores," and thus leaves us with the strangely comic notion of the sage of Weimar wearing a child's apron at all ages—a notion which is not in Gide at all.

There is hardly a paragraph of this book which can be said to be straightforward translation. Everywhere we are led by the hand; explanations litter the pages; by addition and subtraction, by locutions and supererogatory un-Gidelike phrases, we are given a flattened out version of what Gide really said. Set this against Mrs. Norton's Rilke or Scott Moncrieff's Proust and the inadequacy of Mr. Cowley's formula becomes apparent. I do not wish to be ungrateful to Mr. Cowley for having undertaken the difficult task of making Gide's recent papers available in English, but I do believe he could have achieved this desirable result with less work for himself and the rest of us if he had stuck to the original text. No doubt he was afraid of "Gallicisms" and expressions unusual in English; but does not the public expect a Frenchman to speak with a French accent? In any case I find such translations as that on page 95, where *"chrétiennement"* is rendered as "episcopally speaking," quite simply intolerable.

The book itself has merit enough to rise above the unfortunate system of its translator. (It is Mr. Cowley's deliberate system, not his ability to translate if he had chosen to do so, which is in question here). It contains the sixteen imaginary interviews with himself which Gide wrote and published in *Figaro* between November, 1941, and the spring of 1942. In the middle there is inserted the introduction he wrote to the Pléiade edition of Goethe's dramatic works, and at the end are added his "Chardonne 1940," a review of a collaborationist work, and some pages from his "Journal" at the time of the liberation of Tunis.

The interviews cover a variety of subjects, all literary or related to literature. But in the France of the years 1941-1942, living so much of its life in secret or underground, many words had acquired new associations. Thus it was with "oppose," and "resist," and "collaborate," and a number of other verbs and nouns which Gide could properly use while speaking of Goethe or Leopardi and still suggest something else. As a matter of fact, this kind of double-talk, although new to France, has been characteristic of literature and life in both Germany and Italy throughout the Fascist era; it is the natural product of police censorship. What such sly references contribute to the work is the assurance that Gide was steadfast, that he never truckled under to Vichy or the Germans, and that his heart, at least, was in the *maquis*. He lived in the south of France during most of the time spent on these interviews, went over to Tunis for the winter of 1942-1943, and remained there until the liberation.

Some of his opinions have changed considerably, we observe in these papers. Victor Hugo is no longer to be deplored; his vast and stormy genius has contributed too much to the consciousness of France. (It was Gide who once, when asked to name the greatest of French poets, replied, "Hugo, alas!") Goethe is less admired than of yore because his serenity and light, achieved with so much patient effort, made darkness intolerable to him—the point Gide observes, at which Shakespeare and Dante leave him. Mallarmé is still a saint of literature and life, but at the same time (in another paper) we are told that it is dangerous for a painter to change his colors unless they belong to objects recognizable by their forms; and in still another we learn that the laws of French prosody are immensely valuable even to those who depart from them, since "poetry without restrictions is poetry without art." Several times, in the warmest language, Gide welcomes Aragon's return to rhymed verse as the "return from a long journey." Valéry is still a god of music and magic; but Proust—whom Gide specifies as a very great writer—is pillaged for an amusing list of errors in grammar. For Gide to write without self-consciousness about either Valéry or Proust is perhaps a little difficult; this has been a long pilgrimage for both the living and the dead.

André Gide, from the portrait by Sir William Rothenstein.

Gide is seventy-five. Like Voltaire, he has had numerous fatal diseases for half a century. Those who value a reflective and analytical intelligence of rare quality will hope that he survives as long as possible, so as to give us more of these thoughtful pages, animated by the love of life and letters, lit by the sun of wisdom.

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