The Nation

"As Much Humanity as Possible . . ."

THE JOURNALS OF ANDRE GIDE. Volume I: 1889-1913. Translated from the French, with an Introduction and Notes, by Justin O'Brien. Alfred A. Knopf. $5.

THE publication of this first of a projected three-volume American translation of Gide's "Journal: 1889-1939" should mark a fresh start, rather than a continuation, of Gide's reputation in the United States. The "Journals" draw Gide's other works into focus; but do many people now read Gide's former American translations? Scattered and few and out of series, these translations began to appear in 1924 with "Strait Is the Gate," reached a high point of popular interest in 1927 with "The Counterfeiters," and narrowed down thereafter to a few assorted works presented more or less at random. After 1931 no more was heard of Gide in ordinary trade editions (a limited edition of "Si le grain ne meurt . . .," translated by Dorothy Bussy under the title "If It Die," came out in 1935) until after his disillusionment with Soviet Russia: "Return from the U. S. S. R." appeared in 1937 and "Afterthoughts on the U. S. S. R." in 1938. The latest work published in America is Malcolm Cowley's translation of "Interviews Imaginaires," in 1944; and here again, as in the two former books, Gide is presented as an aging but active idealist, nearer the edge of politics and journalism than the center of literature.

The "Journals" correct these views and provide a firm basis for judgments of Gide's character and place in letters. For they are the central pier upon which the imposing edifice of his work is built. Gide, in fact, from the beginning of his career has been a diarist. The regular, often daily record of thought and event has provided him with a form at once exigent and large, wherein his desire for stability as well as for movement and change, his detailed inquisitiveness as well as his wider curiosity, could be satisfied. Bored with the "big machines" of French literary form, incapable of filling in conventional backgrounds or of inventing stock figures, wary of technical tricks not based on actual emotion, happy to change his mind concerning the worth and direction of his material while that material was still in the process of composition, Gide has always preferred the short

form, where effects can be brought off with full spontaneity, before the impelling emotion is exhausted.

Gide's most unfriendly critics have never been able to attack him in respect to his style. The present volume of the "Journals" shows us that style in the making, from the days when the young symbolist had not yet decided to write "without metaphors" to 1913, when the accomplished man of letters had evolved a manner of writing so clear and flexible that it was a matter of pride to himself and of emulation to his disciples. The youthful admirer of Châteaubriand has "sharpened his beak" upon Stendhal. The "Journals" soon come to be based upon sincerity of feeling. In this way they never become a mere record of events. Neither do they fall into the errors and *longueurs* of the *journal intime*, since Gide effectually skirts the endless introspective self-indulgences of the intimate diarist. Experience and interest continually enliven the record: books read, music played (Gide is an "intellectual" who can use his hands with precision and speed), journeys undertaken, gardens planted, friends met, meals eaten, daylight walks and midnight prowls described, methods of work delineated with the same care as the most obscure of passing moods, the weather and the scenery enjoyed. Gide's advance into maturity is by no means in a straight line, without forced detours or periods of circuitous progress. But he early found his pace and his road. He writes, in 1905: "I escaped early from that world in which, to appear proper, I had to watch myself too closely."

Gide's courageous moral stand, which had so much influence on the post-1918 generation, is not indicated very clearly here: he has written his "confessions" elsewhere. The first exposition of his moral theories appeared in "Les Nourritures Terrestres" in 1897, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, at a time when, in French intellectual life, all that was not "determinist" or "finalist" was suspect. A rigid positivism had penetrated French thought to an excessive degree. The only escape for "sensitive souls" was into the refuge of an equally strict and confining religious dogma. In this situation, through bitter

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personal suffering, after a stay in North Africa and a friendship with Wilde, Gide dared to reconcile irreconcilables. He brought emotion over into the moral realm, declaring the experiences of the flesh to be of equal value to those of the mind and the spirit; and he affirmed that spiritual values could operate in a life-giving manner outside the rituals of religion. Always claiming a basic Christianity, he began his meditations on the figure of a Savior who stood for man's joy rather than for man's tragic and deforming frustration.

As the world of affairs begins to claim more of his attention, Gide meets people and events head-on; he does not take anyone's opinion as his own; he analyzes character and motive with a penetrating combination of intuition and acumen. His dislike of virtuosity in art parallels his impatience with the deviousness and pretentiousness of human beings. The tension between the oppositions within himself continues; perfect balance between impulse and scruple, asceticism and sensuality is never entirely achieved. There are breakdowns, nervous crises, and capitulations, as well as spiritual and physical convalescences and reanimations. By keeping the poles of the tension clear, however, Gide escapes most of the enticements of self-deception. His life and relationships must be kept, so far as possible, vital and necessitous. All must be natural in the area of the senses while at the same time the will must function with a kind of "supple obstinacy." Gide's dealings with his colleagues and friends never lack an edge of critical sharpness; but shows of ambition, jealousy, rancor, and spite never occur, and small gossip and downright malice are relatively rare. His chief desire is to have friends who "exist behind and beyond what [they] reveal to us." He does not neglect "the insulted and injured."

> Take upon oneself as much humanity as possible. That is the correct formula. . . . Absence of sympathy equals lack of imagination. The most gifted natures are perhaps the most trembling. . . . As soon as an emotion decreases, the pen should stop; when it continues to run on just the same—and it runs on all the more easily—writing becomes detestable. . . . The wonderful thing on this earth is that we are forced to feel more than to think.

These are the words of a man and an artist who has detached himself from killing and "glacial" abstractions and moved into a world where the modern divided spirit is at least partially healed, where there are provable and classic linkages between the timeless and the time-bound.

Nothing has been spared—neither good-quality large paper nor an intelligent and meticulous editor—to make this American edition, to be complete by 1950, impressive. The French *Pléiade* edition (1939 and 1940) on which it is based still retains a peculiar charm, however. Complete in one volume, printed on thin paper, its 1,352 pages compactly yet flexibly bound, this French edition resembles some object delightful and usable: a convenient missile, let us say, against "the Philistine"; or a concentrated form of nourishment, on which one could maintain life over a long period.

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