P.M. 23 May 1948

Andre Gide seeks his soul while passing through a 'desert region'

THE JOURNALS OF ANDRE GIDE. Volume II, 1914-1927. Translated and annotated by Justin O'Brien (Alfred A. Knopf, $6).

By Leon Edel

THE SECOND VOLUME of Andre Gide's journals encompasses the years 1914 to 1927, from his 45th to his 58th year—dark years, brooding years, war years. In March 1917 he notes: "Passing through another desert region. Atrocious, idle days, utterly devoted to growing older. Outside, icy wind, rain. War." That gives the tone of a substantial portion of this book: an icy wind blows across the pages as it was blowing across Europe, and the novelist sits at his writing table chilled and in agony.

"My journal reflects . . . only my periods of despair," Gide muses at one point. "I fear that it will give a rather false idea of me. I have not kept it during the long periods of equilibrium, health and happiness but, instead, during those periods of depression when I needed it to catch hold of myself, in which I show myself as whining, whimpering, pitiable. . . ."

Since he has consented to their publication during his lifetime, we may presume that the journals do not give as false a picture as he supposed in that passing mood. At any rate, even when he "whines" and "whimpers," he does so in an unfailingly interesting manner and in beautifully chiseled prose. This work (for it is an artfully written book rather than a spontaneous journal) bears witness anew to the continuation of a great literary tradition by a people to whom art is a wonderful, terrible and inexhaustible passion, in a land where the multitude fears neither ideas nor their discussion.

The Gide of this volume has come far from the Gide of the earlier journals (1889-1913), which were published last year. The early Gide was the artist in search of himself as palpable man; the Gide of the middle years is the artist in search of his soul. The early Gide looked into the mirror of his days to study or admire the figure that he saw there. The Gide of the middle years is a Narcissus no longer interested in the mere reflection of himself. He is trying to see *into* the reflection, to pierce the gloom and despair, to seek the secret self.

A brooding and utterly unfounded sense of impending death haunts these anxious pages in fantasies of doom born of some inner wish to escape the chaos of the world around him and in his own mind.

The Gide in the journals of the war years is a phantom, shuttling from Paris to Cuverville and back, working with French and Belgian friends and refugees. At first there is an intense and feverish absorption in the day-by-day events of a war that burst upon a Europe which was even less prepared for disaster than we were in 1939. Two days after the Central Powers declared war on Serbia, Gide wrote, "We are getting ready to enter a long tunnel full of blood and darkness."

Passionate self-inquiry

During his four years in this tunnel he worked intermittently in a relief organization, translated Conrad and Shakespeare, reached into himself to re-examine the foundations of his religious and moral beliefs and, in the process, went back to his past to write the remarkable *Si le grain ne meurt* (*If It Die*). As he probed, in densely crowded pages of passionate self-inquiry, he sensed the Devil ever at his elbow and indulged in imaginary conversations with him, discovering that evil is "a positive, active, enterprising principle" and not simply a "lack of good, as darkness is a lack of light."

In these passages Gide became a Faustus who had not made a compact with the Evil One but flirted with him and matched wits with him. (There is even a Marguerite in these pages, somewhat indistinct and shadowy, to whom Gide read Browning, Defoe and Dante and who played a significant role in his life.)

The Gide of these outpourings finally decided that he was "neither a Protestant nor a Catholic . . . simply a Christian." And he felt, at the same time, that he had put down nothing that "the most orthodox Catholic . . . could not approve." His religious search was prompted partly by the conversion to orthodoxy of two of his friends and partly by his struggle with the problem of homosexuality, which looms large in the journals of these years, when he was writing his defense of it in *Corydon*.

Gide was willing to discuss the secrets of the body, but he held that "the soul's recesses are, and must remain, more secret than the secrets of the heart and the body." It is curious, incidentally, to find that a man so well oriented as Gide should understand so little of Freud, whom he dismisses in one entry as "an imbecile of genius."

The Gide of action, moving among his fellow men and glimpsed all too briefly behind the Gide of contemplation, continues to give us a series of brilliant vignettes of his contemporaries—a memory of Rathenau, a meeting with Vandervelde, a talk with Blum, the first glimmerings of a litterateur's interest in the world of political and economic fact as well as that of artistic idea.

There is an unforgettable picture of the ailing Proust, drawn with sharp, brief strokes:

"He says that he has not been out of bed for a long time. Although it is stifling in the room in which he receives me, he is shivering. He has just left another, much hotter room in which he was covered with perspiration. He complains that his life is nothing but a slow agony, and, although having begun as soon as I arrived to talk of homosexuality, he interrupted himself to ask if I can enlighten him as to the teaching of the Gospels, for someone or other has told him that I talk particularly well on the subject.

"He hopes to find in the Gospels some support and relief for his sufferings, which he depicts at length as atrocious. He is fat or, rather, puffy. . . . At moments he rubs the side of his nose with the edge of a hand that seems dead, with its fingers oddly stiff and separated, and nothing could be more impressive than this finicky,

Continued on next page

Vol. 11 530

P.M. 23 May 1948

NEW BOOKS continued

awkward gesture, which seems the gesture of an animal or a madman."

And there are miniature portraits of the painter, Jacques-Emile Blanche, the massive Claudel, the facile Cocteau. There is an infinitely pathetic and yet amusing account of a meeting with Sir Edmund Gosse, an encounter between Gaul and Anglo-Saxon.

Gosse, the reticent British man of letters, by then the librarian of the House of Lords, makes a slip in French, using the word *embrace* for *handshake*, and Gide takes him at his word, applying "to both his flabby cheeks two big kisses in the French manner. He jumped a bit . . . I was forgetting that he spoke French only half well and that, in short, for the English, so chary of demonstration, a prolonged handshake was better than any embrace."

Vivid, with a vividness that is the essence of Gide's art of narrative, is his account of the starling he found and nursed and which became so tame that it answered his call, rejoicing in him as in a beneficent father and, thus deprived of its avian instinct of self-defense, greeted the family cats as fathers, too, and was torn to pieces by them. Under Gide's pen this becomes a touching tale.

Justin O'Brien continues to be equal to the difficult task of translation throughout, and his glossary of persons illuminates the text to a remarkable degree.