Gide of the Journals

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In the 1920s André Gide, who had begun his career as a writer in the 1880s (and who won the Nobel Prize in 1947 when he was 78), had a tremendous influence upon the younger intellectuals of two continents. As a founder of the Nouvelle Revue Française, one of the most honest literary reviews in any country at any time, as well as through his own books, Gide helped free literature from many of its shackles. His "Corydon," "The Immoralist," and "The Counterfeiters" shocked people. But they were read and discussed by other writers, if not by the general public.

Author of his own partial autobiography, Gide has been the subject of many biographies. One of the best in English is Van Meter Ames's "André Gide," in the New Directions Books' series of "The Makers of Modern Literature." To those not well versed in Gide's writing or legend it makes an admirable introduction to Gide's "Journals," beautifully translated by Justin O'Brien, the second volume of which (1914-1927) is published this week.

Biography: Ames's study is a combination of biography and analysis of Gide's writings. It is largely based on the "Journals," but it goes to other sources and thus illuminates Gide's own chronological account of his life and thoughts. Here we see Gide, a shy youngster of Catholic-Huguenot heritage, growing up on a diet of the Bible and "Arabian Nights," tied to the apron strings of his "generous but overanxious mother" who, like himself, was dominated and restricted by his "punctilious Aunt Claire." He found schools unbearable and private tutors unsatisfactory. His passion—which lasted all his life—was music.

Perhaps the greatest influence of his youth was a Scotswoman named Anna Shackleton, the companion and friend of his mother. Although she hardly figures except nostalgically in his "Journals," it was Anna who instilled in young André an interest in science—an interest that Ames finds permeates all his work and his entire outlook on life.

Later, after his first wild adventures as "an immoralist," Gide married his cousin Emmanuèle—the "Em" of the "Journals"—and their strange relationship (there is question whether the marriage was consummated) affected his life as writer, ponderer over religion, avowed homosexual, and searcher after truth.

Journal: Gide early rebelled against the stiffness of his Protestantism and, at an early age, escaped to Africa, where the "most surprising" of his discoveries was his "natural proclivity" to homosexuality. Later he was to write his defense of this in "Corydon." To many this has kept them from reading Gide. But though it is never neglected in his "Journals," it is by no means a dominating theme.

Everything that Gide wrote in his novels and satires he first threshed out in his private notebooks. Here we can see him working at his writing, fighting his distractions, trying to arrange his life with Em. We follow the progress of the one book of his he allows to be called a novel, "The Counterfeiters." Since he appears in this as the journal-keeping author who tells the story, we get here a magnificent firsthand study of how he resolved his own adventures into fictional form. Those who have read Henry James's recently published "Notebooks" (Newsweek, Nov. 3, 1947) will find Gide's auctorial struggles equally fascinating—and less wordy.

Gide's great struggles with himself, his conflict over Protestantism, Catholicism, and hedonism, his struggles with "the devil," his restless probings, take up many fascinating pages. His conversations with Léon Blum and Walter Rathenau over the politics of Europe, with Proust and Claudel over homosexuality, and Jacques Maritain over religion, and with other close friends over the editing of the Revue, are filled with thoughtfulness admirably expressed. His long entry about his visit to Proust, at which he discovers the truth about his friend, is effective reporting.

More than one critic has suggested that in the end Gide will be read less for his novels, his travel books, his animadversions on the Congo or Soviet Russia, than for his "Journals." Whether written with the thought of publication or not, they have the appearance of finality, of having been thought out and carefully written. Gide's greatness as an artist, as well as his eccentricities as a man, is apparent throughout. O'Brien's translation is without fault. (The Journals of André Gide. 1914-1927. *Translated and Annotated by Justin O'Brien. 328 pages. Knopf. $6.*)