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"Midway the Journey . . ."

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

THE reader who advances into the second section of Gide's "Journals" can be sure of a very nearly complete record of sincerity on all levels. The style takes its tone of truth from the material; the material is clarified by the style. In spite of our romanticisms the classic ring of absolute sincerity in writing is happily recognized by modern ears. The broad, generalized biographical work, as well as the emotional "confession," now leaves us more or less unmoved. We can easily detect that false smoothness and serenity which echos a "maturity" achieved through the repression of a whole side of the personality. We also suspect, as Gide points out, the finicky style, as in Amiel, or the self-satisfied style, as in the Goncourts. Gide's "Journals" are one biographical work of our period where modern "truths" are discovered, and then openly presented in a manner equal to their complex demands.

The second part of the "Journals" also disproves the assertion of Gide's enemies that he is always ready with a specious formula that might at any moment be transposed into its opposite. We see only too clearly in the entries between 1914 and 1917 how Gide, harassed by the paradoxes of his own nature, as well as by the historical situation in which he found himself, and the object of critical attacks from all sides, was often compelled to improvise some way of life, and some means of spiritual survival, from day to day, as best he could. It is one of the "Journals'" virtues that these desperate improvisations have not been deleted from it. Gide often allows himself to sound like a lost soul—or like an ordinary human being whose control is snapping and whose will is petrified.

The search for equilibrium in a highly organized modern man, the theme which runs through the long work as a whole, is particularly apparent in this second section. Gide, at the beginning of the 1914-18 war, was able to envisage his own worth and the moral and aesthetic tasks which lay before him, but only intermittently and in a partial way. He was forty-five, an age when the spiritual nature is impelled toward some comfortable orthodoxy, when the physical being begins to lose energy, and when the creative mind is assailed by fears of depletion and dryness. It is a period, moreover, when manias and compulsions may seize hold of the personality and force its acts into some repetitive pattern. It is an age when one must learn patience, without losing drive. "I cling desperately to this notebook; it is part of my patience; it keeps me from going under" (February, 1916).

The "Journals" at this time of doubt and loss become confused and begin to stammer. Long periods are filled with entries that are empty and dull. Gide finally consents to their mediocrity. He also consents to any diversion which will give him a little peace: piano practice, reading and translating, pets, botany, household tasks and gardening. This is a time of the sharpest analysis of people. Whatever "life offers" must be scrutinized with care; and Bourget, Cocteau, Valéry, Proust, Maritain, alive and in the flesh, are so examined, along with crowds of the non-illustrious. We now recognize in these activities the attempts at "therapy" of a man whose more minatory side has taken the upper hand, and who is convinced that part of his nature is "abominable." Later Gide could write: "Arrogance and boredom are the two most authentic products of hell. I have done everything to defend myself against them and have not always succeeded in keeping them at a distance. They are the two great provinces of romanticism."

Gide finally made two decisions, with what difficulty the contemporary entries show. First, he rejected any sort of orthodox religion, in spite of his belief in God and the proselytizing efforts of his converted friends. Second, he decided to put down his "childhood recollections," in the first person singular, with as much frankness as possible. He also decided that the time had come to publish his study of the place and importance of homosexuality ("Corydon") in a signed commercial edition. His dissatisfaction with his work continues (. . . "it all lacks tremor, elasticity, and richness . . ."); but soon the days of real desperation are over, even though the necessity for constant self-discipline continues. "I must go right on even if I have to write in the margin: to be rewritten." By 1917 Gide has made himself capable again of love and joy. The periods "when my mind [is] much concerned with ridiculous anxieties that fatigue and dim it" lessen and then almost totally disappear.

The Gide who in 1921 begins "The Counterfeiters" has come into that state of equipoise where original, because unfrightened, assessments of human nature and morals can be made. "The Counterfeiters," published in 1926, begins where most novels leave off. The conventional theme of adultery becomes only an ironic detail in this survey of the neglected sides of human existence: the tragedy of senility, the sadism of childhood, the latent or real criminality of adolescence, the irresponsibility of the romantic. By 1927 all Gide's secrets were out. The man who had for a long time projected his ideas in the form of parables was now able to step forward with open statements.

This volume ends with Gide convinced, as one of his best critics has said, "that evil is a force which can become a factor of progress"; that "the real value is hardly ever the apparent value"; that "life destroys individuals, but, on the other hand, individuals bungle life." At fifty-eight Gide tells us that self-satisfaction is bad enough but self-satisfaction on the anxiety level is both stupid and a waste of time. There is a world elsewhere. If he has not formulated the approaches to that world in neat metaphysical language—which he abhors—he has allowed us to watch the full spectacle of himself living them through.

A preface to each volume rather than an over-all preface to the three would have helped to clear up certain points obcure to American readers.

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