

O. Wilde

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## BOOKS OF THE DAY

### Charles Gide's Famous Essays on Oscar Wilde

OSCAR WILDE, by Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman. Philosophical Library, New York. 50 pp. \$2.75.

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Wilde paraded around Piccadilly Circus wearing long silk stockings and carrying a lily in his hand. Claiming special freedom for the artist, he engaged in an intimate relationship with Lord Douglas. For this vice, Victorian England sentenced him to jail for two years at hard labor. Wilde found himself deserted by friends. When a petition was circulated among writers for a shorter prison term, few were willing to sign. And so, Wilde was left to crumble in jail, tormented by solicitors, grieved by news of his mother's death, and finally shattered by a court decision depriving him of his two children. In the thick of these blows, Andre Gide spoke in his defense.

Philosophical Library has just re-issued two essays written by Gide in that period over forty years ago. Gracefully Gidean, they are ably translated by Bernard Frechtman to be "like a wreath to a forsaken grave, pages of affection, admiration and respectful pity." The first essay sketches Wilde when he was "King of Life," a noted playwright, rich, handsome, the gay raconteur at every party; the second finds Wilde broken and ready to die as he sits alone in his frayed

coat at a Parisian cafe. Till the very end he is shunned, even by Gide a bit. This is the story of the destruction of a man and an artist.

#### Stands with Wilde

Gide stands with Wilde in the small, but growing circle of esthetes who claim moral immunity for the artist. In Wilde's fate they seek corroboration of their views. Gide does not seek forgiveness for Wilde; instead he attacks those who would deny him his kind of life. Together with Wilde, Gide says, "To regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's development, to put a lie into the lips of one's own life." Gide insists that since the life of an artist

is the seed for his work, the two cannot be separated and must be taken together.

These words, spoken years ago, seem to be gaining respectful hearing today. Gide, trumpet voice of the unhampered life for artists, enjoys a wide following. For example, in a recent Sunday book section there were four separate references to Gide, and all in terms of devoted regard. What can this mean? Is it part of the neurotic pattern, the sign of a morbid interest in pathology and intellectual superiority; or, happily, a deepening interest in literature? The test must be made not in the author's personal life but in his work. Neurosis is not the seed of art nor its fruit, but rather one of its materials.

Gide's is a small book, little more than an hour's reading, yet it offers great scope for debate.