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Everybody's Bookshelf—

Gide's "Corydon" In English Edition

French Author's Literary Work
Has First American Translation

By Basil Woon

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Today, Monday January 23, 1950, Farrar Strauss of New York publish the first English translation of "Corydon," by Andre Gide. If a man would make writing his career, then I would say to him that he must consider whether he is ready to consecrate himself. For that is what it will amount to, if he expects to create anything that will live after he dies—anything,

that is, worth of the sweat and time and intelligence he puts into it. There are four things that count above all others in sincere writing: talent, craftsmanship, patience and integrity. With the first three you may "crack the slicks," you may be trumpeted by the book clubs and Hollywood, and you may make a fortune. If that is all you want, well and good.



WOON

But if you want to create something of lasting value, if you want to be remembered six months after your name has vanished from the review columns, you must have integrity. What is integrity? It implies courage, determination, the unswerving devotion to an ideal—or, if you prefer, to a style or an opinion. A man with integrity can't be bought off, he can't be pushed off, he can't be silenced, except by death; and often death makes his voice louder than it was before.

Faith in Man's Divinity

Writers with such integrity are rare. Walt Whitman was one. Andre Gide is another. I bracket them because neither evaded the accusation that morally, as we understand morals, they were perverted. The perversion of Walt Whitman has not diminished his glory as the man who sang the American song better than anyone has ever sung it; America may have been his only mistress but she was supreme among his loves. Similarly, Andre Gide, in the twilight of his life in France, her greatest poet, immortal while still breathing, is the greater because he refuses to bow to a public opinion that would have him surrender the one god he worships, his faith in the divinity of man. To attack Gide—and no living writer has endured more calumny—is futile, and to praise him is absurd. In "Corydon" you have a book on a forbidden subject. And the measure of Gide's achievement, and his greatness as a writer, is that in spite of its theme there is no word or phrase in the book that could contaminate the mature, while as for the immature of all ages they will find no salacity and hence no thrill and may even consider the book dull.

The Socratic Manner

I read "Corydon" in its original French and I remember that its tragic philosophy, so foreign to my own, left me sad but breathless; the very loneliness of the man in his avowed creed gave him a kind of pitiful grandeur; for many are we to defend our virtues but we are few who dare defend what the world considers our sins. And, besides, "Corydon" is, for the epicure of language, a veritable text book in the ancient Socratic art of dialogue. . . .

"There you are! They all feel ashamed and retract as soon as they are faced with public opinion, the press and the court-room."

"Or, alas! commit suicide. Yes, you are right. To try to establish one's innocence by disavowing one's life is to yield to public opinion. How strange! One has the courage of one's opinions but not of one's habits. One can accept suffering, but not dishonor."

That was when Gide was considering withholding the book (for 13 years only two tiny private editions totaling 43 copies were all of "Corydon" that existed) and the dialogue may be considered as his own argument for daring to publish it. Since the Nouvelle Revue Française finally published the book in 1924 it has sold about 33,000 copies. The only translation so far published is a German one; this is the first time "Corydon" has been available in English. The present edition includes a distinguished comment on the Second Dialogue (there are four) by Professor Frank Beach, the Yale psychologist, who finds some of Gide's contentions valid and takes issue with others. There are also three prefaces by Gide.

The strength of this work in my view is at the same time its weakness; the genius of Gide is apparent in the brilliance of the dialogue, but, since Gide is his own vis-a-vis, he has asked himself only those questions which he is prepared to answer and put forward arguments he is sure in advance he can demolish. His book, therefore, will make no converts to homosexuality but will make many converts to Gide as a fashioner of beautiful prose and more especially as a master of Socratic dialogue. Whether this alone justifies its publication for general and library issue is a matter for debate.

Sublime Love

If we needed an antidote to "Corydon" it could be found in a

novel by another brilliant writer living in Paris, Anais Nin. "The Four-Chambered Heart" is about the love of a woman for a man, of a Frenchwoman for a Guatemalan Indian, to be exact, and all the folly and poetry of passion are here deployed to hold the reader besieged and defenseless. Since her days with "transition" Anais Nin has come very far along the difficult road the true craftsman travels toward perfection. It is not mere polish she has sought but the kind of art some jewelers achieve, of cutting a gem so as to release its inner fires. This literary luminosity is a soft brilliance distilled in the thoughts and despairs of Djuna, the violences and disorders of Rango, and the pathological cunning of Zoro, Rango's wife, who holds the husband she has never loved by torturing his soul. Rango was . . . "like nature, good, wild, and sometimes cruel. He had all the moods of nature: beauty, timidity, violence and tenderness. Nature was chaos. . . ." Djuna in offering him her love was offering a new world. Here is a "triangle" love story that will play havoc with your senses; in it Anais Nin has captured the beauty and the insanity of love and made it somehow sublime.

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