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ANDRÉ GIDE

By Eugène Vinaver

The Journals of André Gide. Translated from the French, with an Introduction and Notes, by Justin O'Brien. Volume I: 1889-1913. Seeker and Warburg. Pp. xx. 380 xix. 25s.

André Gide began his diary at the age of twenty and published it fifty years later. The first volume of the English translation just published by Professor Justin O'Brien, of Columbia University, covers the period up to 1913. It is a record of active literary life, of thoughts and impressions which went to the shaping of the author's method and outlook, and to some extent of the intellectual trends of France in the quarter of a century preceding the first world war. It is, however, little more than that. What one misses in it is precisely what one is tempted to look for in a work of this type—a sense of human presence. François Mauriac once said that when reading Gide's "Voyage au Congo" he was under the spell "not of Africa but of this Gide, so different from what the journalists have written about him." Something of the same feeling will be experienced by the readers of the very early parts of the "Journals," for what Gide has to say there is sincere throughout and clearly addressed to no one but himself. But with his gradual rise to fame his manner changes; "this Gide" yields his place to an author who not only expects his diary to be published some day but treats it as a means of explaining himself to the readers of his novels.

Professor O'Brien in his admirable introduction begs us to remember the words which Gide often quotes, "Judge not," and suggests that the difficulty of "seizing the real personality of Gide" is due to the fact that more than any other writer he "hesitates, contradicts himself, and complicates his thoughts." A more likely reason is that such greatness as Gide has lies in his works, not in himself. These works alone have caused him to be regarded as the literary conscience of our age, as the man who

has reopened the debate of the individual with whatever keeps him from being "authentic," and as one of those who have helped both to release the latent energy of the modern artist and to give him the sense of restraint essential to his integrity. It is through the pages of "Les Faux Monnayeurs," "La Porte Etroite," and "L'Immoraliste" that this message has been made apparent.

As for the Gide of the "Journals," whatever exegetic value may attach to them, he remains for us a dim silhouette. His supremely intelligent judgments on problems of religion, art, music, and literature will be remembered as judgments, not as sidelights on his real self; they will not produce in the reader's mind an image of the man such as emerges from the essays of Montaigne: an image irresistibly real and coherent in spite of, or perhaps because of, the incoherence of the medium through which it is conveyed.

But such is the quality of Gide's thought that if only for this the book is worthy of the closest study. Of Christianity he says that "it consoles us for an evil that it does not claim to suppress. Others wanted to suppress the cause of all sorrows; this was more difficult." Of Moréas, that as a Greek he could not see "a work of art born of any other need than the plastic one," and that had he been more French he would have been "better able to understand the æsthetic value of thought." Of Racine, that it is a great mistake "to emphasise the natural qualities where the art should be emphasised. Suzanne Desprès would like to act Phèdre because, as she says, she feels the rôle. To begin with, it is Racine that one should feel." And perhaps the most memorable of all is the remark that "to be a poet one must believe in one's genius; to become an artist one must question it."

The translation is accurate, lively, and thoughtful. The editing is, if anything, too conscientious. It is hard for us to imagine a reader interested enough in French literature to get as far as page 295 of the book and yet needing to be told in a footnote that "Les Pirates de l'Opéra" means "The Pirates of the Opera." But we must take Professor O'Brien's word for it that such readers exist.

Vol I

306