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A LORD OF LANGUAGE

The Journals of André Gide, Vol. II, 1914—1927. Translated and annotated by Justin O'Brien. (Secker and Warburg. 30s.)

André Gide. By Klaus Mann. (Dobson. 15s.)

By JOHN RUSSELL

ANDRÉ GIDE has himself defined the difficulties which afflict his English translators. A uniquely suggestive and insinuating writer, he has founded his style as much upon delicacies of syntax as upon a varied and individual vocabulary. No writer in our own time has confronted us more abruptly with the profound differences which divide the English language from the French; and we may judge, from Gide's own translations from Shakespeare, of the devoted care which he has himself brought to the problem.

Professor O'Brien's second volume ends with the 58th year of Gide's life. Much is yet to come; and meanwhile we view this modest and infinitely scrupulous translator with the sympathetic admiration reserved, in other spheres, for the Channel swimmer and the hero of the Marathon. Nowhere in Gide's work are the problems of translation more taxing; melodious unity of style is here replaced by an unending variety of tone and attack—and also, one must add, by a great mass of telegraphic allusion.

To all this Professor O'Brien presents a patient and smiling front. Distance and the gift of veneration have enabled him to bring off what few Europeans would have dared to attempt; and those who do not read French may be assured that they will find in these commodious volumes the matter, if not the music, of one of the most important books of the 20th century.

For those who already prize the Pléiade edition of Gide's *Journal*, the real interest of the present monumental venture will reside in the extent to which it succeeds in piercing the indifference of those other readers for whom Gide is, at most, an honoured but unvisited ancient. Diaries are not to everybody's taste; and over long periods Gide envisaged his own as an

auxiliary engine, for use only when the mainsail hung idle at the mast and the great winds of creative activity had dwindled to a zephyr. At such times even the finest writer may feel himself "ready," in the words of the present edition, "for the ashcan."

To such passages Mr. Klaus Mann's "ANDRÉ GIDE" is a useful though often an exasperating corrective. Mr. Mann expresses himself with a shambling colloquialism such as could only appal the great Lord of Language who is his subject; but he supplies exactly what English readers of the *Journals* may need—a biographical chronicle in which Gide's life and work are examined year by year.

Mr. Mann has the advantage of knowing Gide well, and his book has also a certain historic curiosity in that it portrays, with often involuntary fidelity, the enormous influence which Gide at one time exerted in Germany, as much as in France. The nature of this influence is often discussed in Volume II of the *Journals*; for in these middle years Gide's personal dominion was ever-increasing. The material of the *Journals* ranges, as before, from the problems of literature to those of religion, international relations, social justice and personal morality. The great subjects swing to and fro like censers; and while the publishers rightly insist upon the interest of Gide's conversations with Blum, Rathenau, Proust, Claudel and Maritain, it is the conversations with himself which are the true centre of the book.

In these interior dialogues one may glimpse the last of the giant professionals of literary art; and, with him, the man who, in defiance of the general current of our time, continues to believe in the perfectibility of his kind. It is this heroic obstination which sticks in the mind—for Gide's lifelong struggle to perfect himself may be reproduced in miniature by any one of his admirers; and to read this book is to confirm, or if necessary to rekindle, one's hopes for human nature.