

Extract from
Manchester Guardian

1948

Books of the Day

ANDRÉ GIDE IN ENGLISH

By Eugène Vinaver

“Many an idea of mine,” wrote Gide in 1922, “taken singly and set forth or developed at length in a thick book, would have made a great hit—if only it were the only child of my brain. I cannot supply the initial outlay and the upkeep for each one of them, nor even for any one in particular.” This is what Gide’s readers will feel again and again as they follow the innumerable threads of his intellectual and artistic development in his “Journals,” the second volume of which has just appeared in Professor Justin O’Brien’s excellently annotated translation, *The Journals of André Gide*, Volume II, 1914-1927 (Secker and Warburg, pp. xx. 462, 30s.).

The book is as rich in wisdom and inspiration as almost any work of its kind, but the very richness of it makes one wonder what has become of the treasures scattered in its pages: has the “initial outlay” been supplied for them all, or are they mere indications of what the artist might have done had his creative faculty been able to keep pace with the ever-growing wealth of his inner life? It is in the “Journals” that we approach most closely the potential greatness of Gide and the tragedy of unfulfilment which attends his every step: that tragedy which is apparent even in his one really great novel, “*Les Faux-Monnayeurs*,” once described by E. M. Forster as “interesting, but not vital” and found unsatisfying by the author himself; not out of

modesty, but as a result of a clear realisation of his own unused resources.

This may be the reason why so much that belongs to the creative artist and thinker is to be found in the “Journals,” a medium which requires less “initial outlay and upkeep” than any other. Gide confesses as early as 1914 that “all life long” he has experienced “the fear of having too little time”; the fear “that the earth might suddenly disappear from under his feet.” And even now that the fear has gone, what has taken its place is not a sense of achievement but one of personal enrichment through active existence. At the conclusion of his latest narrative sketch, “*Thésée*,” published in 1946 and now made more easily accessible to English readers thanks to Mr. John Russell’s delightful translation, *Theseus* (Horizon, pp. 56, 7s. 6d.), he writes: “I have fulfilled my destiny. Behind me I leave the city of Athens. After I am gone, my thoughts will live on there for ever. Lonely and consenting, I draw near to death. I have enjoyed the good things of the earth. I have worked always for the good of those who are to come. I have lived.”

One would have preferred not to mention here Mr. Klaus Mann’s essay on *André Gide and the Crisis of Modern Thought* (Dobson, pp. 208, 15s.), which is unfortunately so far the only full-size English book on Gide. It is not a good book, for the pious platitudes which fill its pages are one of what Gide himself once called an overenthusiastic friend: “*Ne comprenez pas si vite, je vous prie.*”