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Book Review
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"My Most Important"---Gide

CORYDON.
By André Gide. With a comment on the second dialogue by Frank Beach. *220 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus and Company. $2.75.*

Reviewed by
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IN RECENT years André Gide has expressed his opinion that "Corydon" is the most important of his books. His readers agree that he is wrong. But he is in good company, for even the greatest writers—such as Petrarch, Voltaire, Wordsworth and Flaubert—mindful of the effort occasioned by this or that composition, have put forth similar judgments that have not been ratified by readers.

It is easy to understand why Gide feels as he does. Having discovered his own sexual anomaly as a young man, he followed with great interest the trial of his friend Oscar Wilde shortly thereafter and the homosexual scandals in the German aristocracy in 1907-1908. He then began writing these Socratic dialogues in defense of homosexuality which he had printed in 1911 and again in 1920, with both author and publisher remaining anonymous. In 1922 Proust's fictional treatment of the same subject came out at about the same time that Freud was made available in French. Two years later "Corydon" was issued openly under its author's name and was followed by an even more courageous work, Gide's personal confessions entitled "If I Die . . . " Most of the attacks launched at André Gide during the '20s and '30s were inspired by these two books and he is not wrong in thinking that they set up a barrier between him and official honors. But the Nobel Prize in 1947 seemed to consecrate, and the Kinsey Report to document, his theories, the expression of which had already begun to strike him as unnecessarily timid.

That the book springs from a profound conviction there can be no doubt. Gide has here treated a very serious theme in what seemed to him the simplest manner, avoiding all appeal to the emotions. As early as 1911 he noted in his "Journals": "I do not want to move to pity with this book. I want to embarrass." "Corydon" ought to embarrass those who glibly decided what is natural and what is "unnatural." Gide achieves this effect by a clever and ironic technique in which he has excelled since the early years of his career and which achieves its finest examples here and in "The Fruits of the Earth" and "The Prodigal's Return." Has he not said that he is a creature of dialogue? The progression within the dialogues from exposition of the problem through natural history to its various solutions in human history skillfully illustrates the author's intention to persuade logically rather than to stir emotionally. All his life Gide has been an accomplished naturalist, and the testimony of Professor Frank Beach, of Yale, to the validity of his arguments after thirty years proves his soundness. It is unfortunate that Professor Beach comments only on the second dialogue and reproaches Gide for not including the related subject of lesbianism, about which he had no special competence. Furthermore, if the "straightforward definition" of homosexuality which the commentator misses does not emerge by implication from this book, he should turn to "The Journals of André Gide," Vol. II, p. 246 under date of 1918. The translation, attributed solely on the jacket to Hugh Gibb, is "honest" as he often says in rendering the French deceptive cognate; in other words, it is notably free and reads easily though not always preserving the tone of the original.

The publishers might have, now that we have the mass of Gide's work available, used as an epigraph the following lines from "If I Die . . .": "We always have great difficulty understanding the loves of others, their way of making love. . . . And doubtless this is why we are so lacking in understanding on this point and so ferociously uncompromising."

Justin O'Brien recently completed the translation of the Gide "Journals."