



LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

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M. GIDE LOOKS BACK

The span of M. ANDRÉ GIDE'S success as a writer extends between Les Nourritures Terrestres and Thésée; there is therefore at least a pleasant symmetry in the fact that almost simultaneously should be published a factual examination of the former by Mlle. YVONNE DAVET and Mr. JOHN RUSSELL'S scrupulous translation of the latter, offered in a little book as elegant as the prose which it contains. As a commentary upon the intervening fifty years a volume of correspondence between M. GIDE and Francis Jammes provides precious material, which has not been sufficiently noticed in this country.

Among the calamities of old age none is more embarrassing than celebrity. Les Nourritures Terrestres is a very small volume indeed; but it is at nearly twice its length that Mlle. DAVET taps the source of its themes, quotes the comments of the critics and assesses its repercussions. She proposes, she says, to do the same for each of M. GIDE'S books in turn; and the palate is already confounded by the dust on forgotten periodicals, the dates, names, scraps of opinion, all reduced by Mlle. DAVET'S skilful cooking to a bone-soup of earnest

and served up on a pair of French scholarship is of pedantry. It is impossible, therefore, to watch without dismay the methods of literary research employed at some of the young American universities making scarcely an appearance in Paris.

The patient of M. C. DE, however, in face of and embarrassment, is sufficiently moved by the fascinating letters which passed between himself and Jammes. They cover mainly the years up to 1906, although, after a long ruptured correspondence begins in a few years before the death of Jammes in 1938; and

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they leave the reader not ungrateful for the comparative light-heartedness of English literary existence. Jammes is displayed, in an admirable frontispiece photograph, sitting on a camp-stool, swathed in a cape and examining, through pince-nez perched anxiously between beard and eyebrows, a rose. In the subsequent pages—exceptionally well edited by M. ROBERT MALLEF—the rose is picked cruelly to pieces. Seldom can a friend have been so firmly and invariably insupportable as Jammes, seldom a correspondent so tolerant and kindly as M. GIDE. In his Journals he sometimes writes severely of Jammes; he applies words like orgueil and infatuation where they belong. But he has never denied a debt of genuine sympathy contracted at the beginning of his career, and it is thus hard to exaggerate the attraction of the carefully opposed voices—Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet—exchanging from cantoris and decani the fresh harmonies which are now accepted as fundamental to modern French writing.

At the time of Les Nourritures Terrestres their friendship was at its height. The two writers were personally unknown to one another, except by letter; but a powerful affection was soon established between the impoverished and sedentary Jammes in a remote village of south-western France, and M. GIDE, prosperous, fashionable and a constant traveller. More than thirty years later M. GIDE expressed his ironical thanks to those of his friends who, by their example, had prevented him from joining the Catholic Church, and Jammes, like M. CLAUDEL, is included in the list; but, at the time, a vivacious and friendly debate was in progress between the two—a debate which was only made more ardent by Jammes's reaction to the pantheist and rhapsodic note struck in Les Nourritures Terrestres. That note has worn somewhat ragged by now, in spite of all that Mlle. DAVET may say to the contrary.

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