545

Saturday Review of Literature. 18 Nov. 1950 N. York.

Variations on Classic Airs

TWO LEGENDS: Oedipus and Theseus. By André Gide. Translated by John Russell. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 115 pp. $3.

By MORRIS BISHOP

THIS is Gide at his best—cool, intelligent, graceful. Playing variations on classic airs, he retells the stories of Oedipus and Theseus, infusing into them his own values, his ever provisional conclusions. His unity is the theme of man and his fate. One hero defies fate, the other turns it to his ends.

"Oedipe" was published in France in 1931. Gide termed it then his intellectual testament. It is cast in the form of a Sophoclean tragedy, but not much of Sophocles remains. Oedipus is first shown as the strong individualist, who has conquered his own happiness. But Tiresias points out that such untroubled happiness is blasphemy. In the end Oedipus must blind himself, to admit God into his heart and to bring happiness to men at the price of his sufferings. Gide the Young Communist is speaking, between his journey to the Congo and his trip to Moscow (which ended like Napoleon's).

But in 1946, when he published "Thésée," the war had passed over him. (His facility in evolving with the times is one reason for his unfading popularity.) Theseus is the man of action, the world-accepter, the world-builder, who feels no remorse or regret for the blood shed in the building, nor for the grieving hearts of cast-off women along his way. The capital scene is the confrontation of Theseus and Oedipus, which Malraux had suggested to Gide back in 1931. (But the scene is in Sophocles, and Gide could perfectly well have suggested it to himself.)

Oedipus "had stood man upright before the riddle of life, and dared to oppose him to the gods. How then, and why, had he accepted defeat?" Oedipus explains that he had blinded himself because he had failed to see Fate's evidence. But in darkness he had found a source of supernatural light, illuminating the world of the spirit. "And this imperceptible world (inaccessible, I mean, to our senses) is, I now know, the only true one." Oedipus confesses further that in his self-blinding there was "an indefinable secret longing to follow my fortunes to their farthest limit, to give the final turn of the screw to my anguish, and to bring to a close the destiny of a hero. Perhaps I dimly foresaw the grandeur of suffering and its power to redeem; that is why the true hero is ashamed to turn away from it."

The two philosophic tales are delightful and nourishing food for the eader. Great issues are made easy, in Gide's lucid, melodious, effortless style. There is plenty of humor; but one may reflect that anachronism is the easiest comic device.

The translation, by John Russell, is in general excellent. Only occasionally is Gide's harmonious colloquialism dropped a peg. Thus "Ariadne stuck to me like a ball-and-chain" falsifies the tone of "*j'étais claquemuré par Ariane.*" And what, for heaven's sake, is "the fatuosity of the queen" (for *faste*)?

Morris Bishop is professor of romance languages at Cornell University.