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BOOKS AND THINGS

By MALCOLM COWLEY

**THE JOURNAL OF ANDRE GIDE. Volume I: 1889-1913. Translated from the French, with an Introduction and Notes by Justin O'Brien. 376 pages. Knopf. $5.*

ANDRE GIDE, who will be seventy-eight years old in November, has achieved a literary position in France something like that of Goethe in nineteenth-century Germany. Like Goethe he keeps young by never repeating himself. His fifty published books fall into at least eight different classifications. His next book — who knows?—may require a classification of its own.

André Gide

Justin O'Brien, his latest translator, has listed all the books in an appendix to this first volume of "The Journals of André Gide."* The books include (1) poems and prose poems; (2) tales or short novels, no two of them alike; (3) satirical farces; (4) one novel—only one, but it is "The Counterfeiters" and ranks highest in contemporary French letters, except for Proust; (5) criticism, a field in which Gide is unexcelled; (6) miscellaneous, including memoirs; (7) travel books; and (8) the journals, which he has been keeping for sixty years and which now, by sheer bulk, have become his central work.

Mr. O'Brien is undertaking a work of years merely in translating them. And he is going about the task as it should be done—not hastily, like many translators, but with a full editorial apparatus of introduction, bibliography, index, glossary of persons mentioned and notes on doubtful points. The result is that his English text, though less graceful than Gide's French—as how could it help being?—is even more informative.

Tries to Explain His Nature

It is of course Gide himself who makes the book worth reading. He keeps trying to explain his nature, in the clearest possible language, and succeeds in making himself more and more incomprehensible. Trying to imprison his spirit in a definition is like trying to catch an eel in one's bare hands. "If some one," he says, "thinks that he can finally seize my likeness in my latest writing, let him be undeceived: it is always from my last-born that I am most different."

He is at the same time Christian and pagan, radical and conservative, solemn and humorous, modest and inordinately proud. He is extremely French and yet, by his scruples, almost a New Englander, so that he sometimes resembles a mixture of Henry Adams and Rabelais. There are, however, two non-contradictory statements that can be made about him. First, he lives and has always lived for literature, by which he judges everything else in the world. "As the convinced Mahometan cries, 'God is God,'" he says in the "Journals," "I should like to shout, 'Art is Art.'" Second, the quality he most values in art or literature is sincerity.

It is a virtue that has a way of sounding dull, like piety or moderation, but Gide has always made it exciting. He found early in life that one can't be sincere by a simple act of will. It takes work on the writer's part—work to find out what he really does feel, and more work to put it into exactly the right words. It takes courage, too, because the sincere man in an insincere society always ends by creating a scandal. There have been so many scandals around Gide that they no longer bother him. He keeps working away at his sentences, one after another, till each of them says what he means.

Interests Turn Outward After 1902

I would be falling far below Gide's ideal of sincerity if I said that I was enthralled by every page of his "Journals." The first years are dull because the entries deal with his inner aspirations, which he doesn't always bother to explain at length. After 1902 he began to turn his interests outward, even in these private notebooks, and we find sharp, humorous observations on books and persons, though with tedious interludes. The best entries in the present volume are those for the last five years, from 1909 to 1913. There are still better entries to come, in the two remaining volumes.

I doubt even so that they will reach a wide public in this country. But for writers—and even those who merely dream of becoming writers—"The Journals of André Gide" will be essential reading. They are not merely a picture of the French literary world in some of its most exciting years, but also—transcending nationality—they are the best record anywhere of an honest writer's difficulties and hesitations and enormous patience. If he had genius in the beginning, he chose to disregard it. The story the "Journals" tell is how he worked with his mere talent year after year until he had transformed it into something better than genius.