

"Families, I Hate You!"

Roger Martin du Gard's Cyclic Novel

THE THIBAULTS. By Roger Martin du Gard. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: The Viking Press, 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by JUSTIN O'BRIEN

RARELY has a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature so richly deserved that honor as Roger Martin du Gard. The French Academy can be excused for neglecting him, as for ignoring André Gide, since to don its green livery and sit under its dome a writer must present his own candidature, and neither of these two old friends has sought that official consecration. But the Swedish Academy, which moves on its own impulse, can reward in the divine manner.

Even now, after a career of thirty years, Martin du Gard remains faithful to the attitude of his first hero who said: "As for literature, write if you wish; but for God's sake don't talk about it." It is in great part because of this dislike for personal publicity that his work has not achieved a wider recognition outside of France. Like Marcel Proust, he first fully revealed his talent on the eve of the World War with a substantial novel. Popular acclaim did not come, however, until the publication, stretching over the years from 1922 to 1936, of the ten volumes of "Les Thibault," the first four of which appeared in this country in a translation by Madeleine Boyd that for some reason was not continued. The present new and very satisfactory translation by Stuart Gilbert includes the first seven volumes; the remaining part, for which the French had to wait seven years, is promised for the fall. This work, great in both quantity and quality, marks the height of its author's achievement. The first and best of the many cyclic novels popular in France since the war, "The Thibaults" is superior also to that earlier model, Romain Rolland's "Jean-Christophe."

Perhaps the work's chief distinction lies in the fact that it is a pure novel—that is, one which aims to represent life rather than to reflect upon it. Martin du Gard has been compared to Tolstoy for his breadth of vision and creation of atmosphere, to Zola and Flaubert for his precise documentation and rigid objectivity. The ascetic regime he followed for so many years at Bellême, writing a regular number of hours every day in a room lined with reference works and filing cases, recalls the arduous life of Flaubert, the hermit of Croisset, whom he resembles moreover in his willingness to destroy completed manuscripts and rewrite the same volume four or five times. In his early paleographical and archeological study at the Ecole des Chartes he acquired a scholarly method which makes of his work the result of

a unique collaboration between the historian and the novelist. Yet for all that he possesses the true artist's faculty for synthesis which protects him from being blinded by the individual as Jules Romains often is, in whose work documentation too frequently substitutes for creation. Or one has only to compare "The Thibaults" with that pale imitation of it that is being written by Louis Aragon. Roger Martin du Gard differs from all his contemporaries, besides, in that his style is an absence of style. In an age of literary affectation, he has written with such directness and limpidity that not even the slightest film interposes itself between the reader and the life whose unfolding he follows with passionate interest.

The reality of that life, throbbing and multiform, strikes one from the very first page of "The Thibaults" with its sudden projection of the reader into the drama of Jacques's and Daniel's flight from home. The gradual revelation of the various personalities within the Thibault and Fontanin families becomes so absorbing that not until a second reading does one notice the author's skillful use of the multiple plot that Gide and Huxley were later to borrow in "The Counterfeiters" and "Point Counter Point." Jérôme de Fontanin's many infidelities, Jenny's illness and the Christian Science healer's intervention, Antoine's reactions to his father's pomposity, all in the first chapters, seize the reader's attention. The rest of the novel contains no disappointment: Antoine's improvised operation on a little girl (already included in French anthologies) and his passionate love-affair with Rachel, Daniel's philanderings in the manner of his father, Jacques's sufferings in the reformatory and tender love for Jenny, Antoine's daring effort to shorten his father's death agony, are passages which show the author's mastery of situations and emotions. At once the reader establishes direct contact with the characters.

For over fifteen years Martin du Gard has lived in seclusion with the same characters, whose number, in view of the extent of the novel, is remarkably small—only ten or a dozen of major importance. As Daniel, now a young painter, says in the still untranslated portion of "The Thibaults": "Everything I have learned I have drawn from the tenacious study of a single model. Why change? You do much better work when you force yourself to return constantly to the same starting-point, when each time you have to start all over again and go further in the same direction. If I had been a novelist, I think that instead of changing my characters with each book I should have attached myself indefinitely to the same



Florent Margaritis

Roger Martin du Gard

ones, in order to dig deeper." This passage, the only one in which a character speaks for the author, reveals Martin du Gard's method. Combining a taste for vast constructions and a lively sense of individual qualities, he still does not claim to reconstruct all of contemporary life in the manner of Balzac or Jules Romains. Rather he gives, under the name of one of them, the history of two families during about a dozen pre-war years. Though these families, one Catholic and the other Protestant, represent a large section of the Parisian bourgeoisie, the author in no way uses them as symbols. In "The Counterfeiters" André Gide likewise depicts the dissolution of two families of the same class, one Catholic and the other Protestant, and the dedication of that novel to Roger Martin du Gard implies a recognition of his debt, fully acknowledged elsewhere.

The debt is however mutual, as is evident from the unforgettable description (in Part Three, Chapter 1 of "The Thibaults") of Daniel de Fontanin's discovery of Gide's "Nourritures terrestres." That breviary of revolt and self-expression gave Daniel the courage to be himself. It may well have furnished also the starting-point for "The Thibaults," since the novel's major theme is that of evasion with the idea of revolt either expressed or implied. Jacques Thibault constantly burns with a peculiarly Gidian gemlike flame. After his first unsuccessful flight with Daniel at fourteen, followed by a period of calm smouldering, he makes another break for freedom, this time fully successful, years later; and his last act, after the outbreak of the war, is to attempt to soar above the horrible reality into the ideological. Rachel's mysterious departure for Africa to join a man she fears provides another example of evasion. Gide himself has hardly more often illustrated his doctrine of fervor

and unrest leading to a salutary uprooting of body and mind. Nor has he, in *his* chronicle of the liquidation of two families, more vigorously translated into action his early sentiment: "Families, I hate you! Closed circles around the hearth! Fast shut doors . . ." Gide has unquestionably influenced, and in turn been influenced by, Martin du Gard, thus proving the truth of his contention that literary influence does not create but rather awakens. Even if Gide had never existed (which God forbid) Roger Martin du Gard would still be one of the few truly great modern writers of French prose. As a picture of French life or a study of two families in disintegration, as a novel of adolescence or a novel of evasion, "The Thibaults" has already won a place among the great works of fiction.

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Science and Cézanne

THE ART OF CÉZANNE. By Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. \$5.

Reviewed by MILTON W. BROWN

THE Barnes Foundation with laudable perseverance is still attempting to introduce the scientific method into art-history. This volume is the latest contribution to its effort. However, the concept of the scientific in art is highly debatable. This mechanical transference of the laboratory technique to art, in spite of its undeniable value, may lead to regrettable distortions and misconceptions, for not only is the work of art an extremely complex object, but the routine and the apparatus of analysis are variable. For example, when the authors attempt a judgment as to the relative technical efficiency of one painting in relation to another, or Cézanne's style as contrasted with that of Renoir, they apply a standard which is closer to prejudice than to science. They assume the painting of the Venetian Renaissance to be the highest expression of the art of painting: an obviously questionable proposition. And although they realize the complete subservience of Cézanne's technique to his general artistic vision, they repeatedly invoke what is in this case the irrelevant criterion of sensuous beauty.

The book makes no new contributions to the interpretation of Cézanne's art, accepting as it does the traditional conception of his art as a reconstruction of the material world of mass and space in terms of color. The authors have after exhaustive study recorded and codified all the technical means by which Cézanne achieved his goal, and for this the Cézanne scholars must be thankful. It should be stated, however, that Dr. Barnes and Miss de Mazia have made no concessions to the general public, either in readability or arrangement.

One Revolution Was Enough

A DIARY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION. By Gouverneur Morris. Edited by Beatrix Cary Davenport. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1939. \$9.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

THE diary of Gouverneur Morris has long been one of the mainstays of conservative historians of the French Revolution. Morris, a younger son belonging to the rich landed family of the manor of Morrisania in the Bronx, had taken the successful side during the American Revolution, and, going abroad on business in 1789, remained to succeed Jefferson as our Minister to France. Morris was a thorough Hamiltonian, and he had already had in America about as much revolution as he was built to stand. Long before the collapse of the monarchy in France he had noted in his meticulously kept diary the vanities, impracticalities, and impossible aims of the French radicals, and had predicted the essentials of the sequence Terror-Thermidor-Bonaparte at least as early and as clearly as had Burke. His short-term predictions in the early years were quite as accurate, and earned for him an extraordinary reputation for political sagacity among the aristocrats whose society he loved to frequent and, among the revolutionists themselves, a reputation for political meddling which rather lessened his effectiveness as a diplomatist.

Known in its main features ever since Jared Sparks used it in his life of Morris written over a century ago, the diary in its entirety has not hitherto been easily accessible. The present work, carefully edited so as to preserve just what Morris wrote—including a use of capital letters generous even for the eighteenth century—and equipped with good if allusive notes and introduction, goes through the year 1792, leaving a less important third volume for future publication. There is apparently little here to cause historians to make major revisions in their estimates either of Morris or of the French Revolution. But all students of the period will be glad that so important a source-book is now available.

Diary fans will find pretty good fare. Morris tells all, or almost all, about his love affairs. As an eighteenth-century gentleman, of course, he takes love with a grain of salt, and his lack of romantic or Freudian concern will annoy those who don't like the eighteenth century. He goes into satisfying details about his illnesses, mostly of the digestive tract,

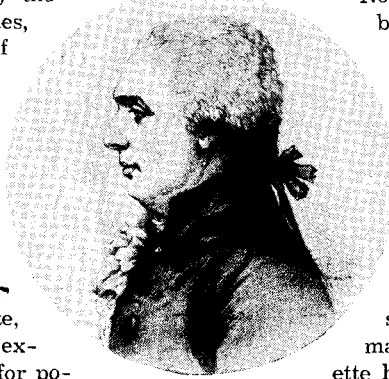
and about his food, which to this vitamin-ruled age of ours will no doubt seem an adequate explanation of his illnesses. Of his numerous and complicated business affairs he writes daily at great length, but somewhat cryptically, so that very little of his business seems to make sense. Perhaps, however, the notion that business ought to make sense is an intellectual fallacy nourished by classical economics, and Morris may here be both a modern and a realist. At any rate, he seems to have been a good business man.

In his travels he notes details of crops, soils, posts, inns, and now and then remarks an elegant prospect. But he is not to be seduced by the new rage for Gothic. He posts through Amiens without even mentioning the cathedral. Forced to wait for horses at Rouen, he grudgingly strolls by the cathedral there, and notes,

"Nothing to admire unless it be the Labor expended in Minutiousness and Ornamentality, so as to take away from Greatness the Appearance of Grandeur." Not as a rule notably successful in bringing to life the hundreds of persons he mentions, he is now and then shrewd enough in estimating character. Of Lafayette he writes, "in Fact he is the Lover of Freedom from Ambition, of which there are two kinds, the one of Pride, the other

of Vanity, and his partakes most of the latter." Morris was no intellectual. Talking about the kindly and liberal Duke of La Rochefoucauld, who was puzzled by the failure of events to conform to the best books, he notes "That none know how to govern but those who have been used to it and such men have rarely either Time or Inclination to write about it. The Books, therefore, which are to be met with, contain mere Utopian ideas."

For readers not especially fond of the diary as a form of literature, the book cannot be very strongly recommended. Morris is no Pepys; and many readers will find his business engagements, teas, dinners, physics, and gallantries a bit wearying in the repetition. This diary, in spite of the great names that dot its pages, seems not to be the illuminating record of an insider, like the diary of Greville, recently published in its entirety; nor is the Morris here revealed as interesting and important a person as our greatest political diarist, John Quincy Adams. Morris was indeed very right about the course of the French Revolution. He was a sensible man, temperamentally a bit inclined to pessimism, and such men are usually right about revolutions.



Gouverneur
Morris