

BLACKFRIARS

AMES ET VISAGES DU XXE. SIECLE. By André Rousseaux. (Grasset; 15 fr.)

English readers are apt to be impatient with much modern French intellectualist criticism; they feel that its tendency is to force the facts to fit some preconceived thesis, and consequently, however brilliant the exposition, they remain unconvinced. The present volume of essays is much more thorough. M. Rousseaux certainly draws conclusions, but only after a patient examination of the writers' lives and works. He is an avowed disciple of M. Bourget, and therefore does not confine his attention to the purely aesthetic aspect of literature, but treats it broadly *en fonction de la vie*. Looking at the contemporary French scene he considers the fundamental influences to be those of Proust, Gide and Maurras: he does not, however, discuss them in particular, but concentrates on those writers, the product of their influence, who are actually to the fore. The basic tragedy of our time, in his view, is the crisis of order: on the one hand are the 'conformists,' *pour qui l'ordre est objet de conserve et non regime de vie*, and, on the other, the revolutionaries, *qui rêvent de lui substituer l'amour surhumain, en fait antihumain, par lequel ils espèrent changer l'univers*. The only settlement of this crisis, he holds, is through the reign of Charity, which alone can establish a dynamic order. And this is why there is no problem in our time, *qui ne finisse par relever de la théologie*. Several of the writers whom he studied have made their life adventure an attempt to discover or establish this order, but have failed. M. Paul Valéry, for example, dismayed at the chaos outside him, has turned within and tried to find contentment in the immaterial order of his own mind, afraid even of the causality of words: *Je rature le vif*—and the result naturally is sterility. M. Duhamel, after making various excursions into various realms, including that of religion and portraying their vanity in the story of Salavin, has retired to the plains and contents himself with the simple principles of a quiet humanism. M. Cocteau, receptive of every new enthusiasm and kept alive by them, turns, when they fail, to the preternatural and the supernatural, *l'une après l'autre, les vertus de l'opinion et l'hostie*. On his own avowal, *'il prenait l'hostie comme on prend un cachet d'aspirine.'* One of the most attractive chapters in the book is devoted to M. Mauriac, a writer of great power and sincerity, who desires to be an integral Catholic and yet is tormented by the fear of religion being the death of life—a result of the petrified religious conventionalism with which he came in contact in his youth. Interesting also is the final chapter on M. Bernanos, but one may doubt whether this catastrophic writer does represent *le vrai homme* in contrast

REVIEWS

with all the others, and whether his violent Catholicism is a fair presentation of that harmonious synthesis of nature and grace. That is questionable; but the book on the whole is of great value: it is one of the 'paper-backs' that one feels compelled to get bound.

A.M.

RECENT ART EXHIBITIONS

THE divergent estimates of Sir William Orpen's work made during his life and haphazard immediately after his death can at last be checked, and perhaps modified, in the light of the collected exhibition of his work held at Burlington House under the auspices of the Royal Academy. We are now given the opportunity of making, if not a definitive statement of his relative place in the history of English painting—that, it is to be hoped, next winter's exhibition will determine—at least a definite conception of his individual stature as an artist. The opportunity would, of course, have been far more valuable, were the system on which the paintings are arranged less obscure; as it is, the rooms are hung with so little regard for chronology or even for *genre* that any attempt to trace Orpen's artistic development is rendered at least three times as tedious as it need have been.

It is convenient to begin with one of the earliest works shown, *The Play Scene from 'Hamlet'* (No. 125), the focus of attention in the 1932 Academy. Apart from its intrinsic merits, and this is probably the best picture Orpen ever painted, it is in some sense a key to the whole of his development. Better and more original pieces of painting he certainly produced, but he never again achieved the coherence of design, the subordinated functional colour, the mellow spontaneity that we find here. Here we have an epitome of the romanticism that he later so irremediably, and I think unfortunately, discarded. It contains, however, just those weaknesses that are apparent through all his later work; the diffusion of interest, the distraction, for instance, introduced by the irrelevant illumination of the group in the right foreground, may be paralleled by the way in which in another admirable painting, *Mother and Child* (No. 3), the very skill of the painting of the yellow and green diversions detracts from the force of the picture as a whole. Besides this, the very close affinity, visual and technical, of the figures on the stage to Rembrandt and the Rembrantesque impasto of the chiaroscuro should be observed. Without careful study of Rembrandt this picture could never have come into being and indeed, if we consider it with *Behind the Scenes* (No. 47) and *The Saint of Poverty* (No. 16), it seems to show that Orpen was