

THE PANORAMA OF RELATIONSHIPS.

M. André Gide's Fascinating Study in Complexities.

By RICHARD ALDINGTON

M. ANDRÉ GIDE occupies a peculiar but important position in contemporary French literature. Directly and indirectly, his influence has been very considerable. In France active writers tend to group themselves about an important literary review, in a way almost unknown in England, where we are more individualist; and the review is also the organ of a great publishing house. It is sufficient to name the "Mercure de France" and the "Nouvelle Revue Française," both great enterprises built up by brains, not capital; and to add that M. Gide has been connected with both, especially with the latter. One feels, rather than knows, M. Gide's influence on that development of French literature associated with the N.R.F. But if it is difficult to define this influence, it is almost impossible to define the quality of his genius or to summarise any one of his books.

Genius of Irresolution

"He has originality of soul as well as originality of mind," says one of his early and most clear-sighted critics. But how define this originality? Subtlety; yes, M. Gide is subtle, perhaps over-subtle; the genius of irresolution, yes, for he seems to think himself into Gordian knots of uncertainty; scepticism, and a revolt against his scepticism; introspective, yet an acute observer; a sense of morality with a mastery of ambiguous, perverse, disturbing suggestions. One flounders in antinomies. André Rouveyre, that sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued critic, calls Gide "le retors," a beautiful portmanteau word which means "far-fetched, affected, strained, refined, deep, artful. . . ."

But who can know M. Gide? Does he know himself? His books are a series of almost agonised efforts to obey the Delphic "Know thyself." But he is different all the time, and one gives up the task in despair. Hence, M. Gide's books can only appeal to a very intellectual audience, and with all their subjectivity there is something very aloof and evasive about them. They have been likened to the books we see locked under glass in public libraries. No doubt M. Gide enjoys all this uneasy mystery.

A Brilliant Book.

"The Counterfeiters" (by André Gide. Translated from the French by Dorothy Bussy. Knopf; 10s. 6d. net.) is a characteristic production of the curious genius we have not succeeded in defining. It is a brilliant book which will either bore or irritate most novel-readers. Most novel-readers are not particularly interested in literature, neither are they interested in ideas or subtle studies of the relations and inter-relations of complicated characters, nor in originality of method, nor in an aristocratic elegance of style. "The Counterfeiters" contains all these qualities, which are so many bafflements to the reader who only wants a story, a romantic escape from himself. Of course, there is a story in the novel, but M. Gide seems to feel almost as much horror for such a concession to vulgar taste as a modern painter. The "story" is suggested, hinted at obliquely, examined from different angles, turned upside down, and suddenly broken off. Yes, there is a story, but to summarise it. . . . Where is the critical hero who will attempt that task?

Why then is the book so fascinating, and how explain its fascination? This partly lies in its very complexity (an invitation to strain our attention to take it all in) and in its enormous display of virtuosity. The man who could write a book like this could write five ordinary novels a year. The main theme, shall we say, is a study of the finer, more brilliant young men of the post-War genera-

tion, seen partly through the author's own eyes, partly through the journal of another (invented) novelist, Edouard, partly through their own eyes. It is M. Gide's attempt to explain to himself a group of young men who evidently puzzled him, and to understand his own attitude to them, theirs to him, and to each other. The book contains at least twenty characters, admirably rendered, vividly realised, and M. Gide has attempted to portray some of their "relationships," as the novelists say. Think of all the possible relationships between twenty different people!

A Display of Virtuosity.

M. Gide has only worked out part of this problem in psychology—a sort of geometrical progression—and he has carried it almost to the line where complexity becomes confusion. But it never does become confusion. It is a superb display of virtuosity in novel-construction. The question is whether so much virtuosity does not destroy itself, leaving us baffled, suspicious, doubtful. What, after all, do we gather from it? That life is a very curious thing, that characters are much less simple than they seem, that people modify each other, that young men and women do things which seem ridiculous and outrageous to their elders, that one generation cannot possibly comprehend another, that "the heart of another is a dark forest"? And then the superb insolence of the chapter entitled "The author reviews his characters," a sort of disdainful and confidential talk about the author's relations to his characters in the middle of the book!

But it is surely an indication of genius that a book should baffle analysis. "The Counterfeiters" is a work to be re-read and mused over, it is rich in ideas and delicate interpretation of character. You may not find it a very thrilling "story," but if you read it intelligently you will have learned much about human life and the hidden recesses of the mind. It is a panorama of relationships. You have the three families, the Moliniers, the Profitendieus, the Vedels, with two, sometimes three generations in each. You have Passavant, the successful novelist, and Edouard, the somewhat self-righteous novelist, whose Journal tells part of the tale, and Lady Griffith, who is a sort of villainess to Passavant's villain, and the old M. and Mme. de la Pérouse, who hate each other so much. The lives of the young people, Vincent, Olivier, George, Bernard, Armand, Laura, Sarah, Rachel, and Boris are all intertwined with each other, and with the lives of the older people. You get characters verging on caricature, as indicated in the very names of Profitendieu and Passavant; and you get also characters rendered with the most exquisite restraint and probity.

An Experience of Life.

The object is not to entertain with a mere tale, not to provide a slice of life, but to convey an experience of life. It is utterly different from the spontaneous urge and rush of Balzac's imagination; it is all calculated, arranged, "retors," with intentional vagueness, baffling surprises, almost like a Picasso picture. The effect which Henry James tried to produce by over-elaboration of style, is here produced by complexities of exposition and analysis. "The Counterfeiters" is rather like one of those immense monologues about his novel which Henry James used to dictate before he sat down to darken it with style. M. Gide's style here is delightfully limp—his style is not always so—and that at least can be praised unreservedly. The translation is a good one, in spite of a few customary slips.

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