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The Graphique de l'esprit

The Graph of a Mind

Irish Times Dublin

The Journals of André Gide: Volume One, 1889-1913. Translated from the French, with an Introduction and Notes by Justin O'Brien. Secker and Warburg. 25s. net.

THE award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to M. André Gide in 1947 was one of the few acts of justice which occurred in that ignoble year. *Si monumentum requirit*, you do not need to look farther than this spacious book. It is the first of three volumes; and when the other two have appeared, readers will be able to possess in English, for the first time, the Journals which M. Gide has kept so assiduously for half a century. They enshrine an intellectual progress of inquiry and dilation, and record in fascinating detail the life and times of a literary man who for so long has inhabited the core of European civilisation. As a young man he argued uncompromisingly with Mallarmé and went sight-seeing in Algiers with Oscar Wilde. He had such friends as Proust, Degas and d'Annunzio on equal terms; and his influence on, and intimacy with, contemporary French and European writers has been powerful, if not always beneficial.

The range of his achievements is a good measuring rod. He has written a series of short books—scarcely more than pamphlets—on such subjects as prison reform, the theory of Communism, and pederasty. His "Voyage au Congo" set the French Colonial Office by the ears through its revelation of corrupt and nefarious policy in Africa; he has written plays, poetry, novels and criticism; he has translated, with other works, "Hamlet" and "Antony and Cleopatra" into admirable French; he is a more-than-competent pianist; and, above all, he is a tireless seeker after the identity and nature of man. Several of his more popular books have appeared in the United States, done into English; but, although he long has been a distinguished name, the English-speaking public knows little of his work. It now has its chance; for the Journals may prove to be his most durable contribution to humanism.

A Sketch of Progress

The book under review gives us a portrait of the author as a young man whose maturity led him from the desperate individualism of his early years to the ceaseless inquisition of self and constant modification of belief that have characterised him since then. A French Protestant, he accepted neither the rigid structure of that faith, nor the more supple blandishments of any other. He was concerned in a ferocious and yet scientifically detached absorption with the puzzle of his own individuality. In the early part of his book he reflects this absorption directly:

And now my prayer (for it still is a prayer): O my Lord, let this too narrow ethic burst and let me live, oh, fully: and give me the strength to do so, oh, without fear, and without always thinking that I am about to sin.

Later, however, he sheds his light obliquely, and the result is more soothing to the mind than this harsh radiance. He admits other people to his journal, and it becomes populous with their images, and bright with the sparks which they strike from M. Gide's whetted mind. On receiving a copy of a magazine called *Sincérité* he explodes:

And what a confusion between sincerity and cheek! Sincerity means something to me, in art, only when it is consented to reluctantly. Only very banal souls easily achieve the sincere expression of their personality.

And, writing of Claudel, he says: "Beating about him with a monstrosity he devastates our literature." His discussions of work in progress—for example, "La Porte Etroite," "L'Immoraliste" and "Les Caves du Vatican"—provide admirable research specimens for the student of the creative mind. Indeed, there is too much in the book for one review—and one reviewer. To discuss it adequately, a series of articles would be necessary. Philosophy, sociology, literature, the routine of living, music and botany all pull the reader's interest in a hundred directions—until he feels that he has spent a night as Procrustes' guest.

Beloved Enemy

But there must be no impression that this is an Olympian book—in the forbidding sense of the adjective. M. Gide does not neglect to record his many moments of self-disgust—"I am merely a little boy having a good time—compounded with a Protestant minister who bores him." Materially, it is true, he has had a good time. He was endowed with a private income; and we may be grateful that this has allowed him to conduct his experiments in comfort. His significant virtue is his willingness to change his mind, to modify, to discard, to re-assemble his judgment in the light of new evidence. He is pledged to no formal belief—religious or political. And what could be more fascinating than the journal of a practising empiricist, who charts therein the graph of his mind's adventure? In a smaller man one would laugh at the confession that "I have found the secret of my boredom in Rome; I do not find myself interesting here"; but one can keep one's face straight when the remark comes from M. Gide. He is his own subject; and his distress when he detects a temporary failure of intellectual egotism is understandable. No man is happy when he lacks the tools of the trade in which he endured a long apprenticeship.

In his Journals he has given himself unsparingly to his public—which, as many people believe, will include posterity. Montaigne never went about the task of self-portraiture with more enthusiasm or with a more varied intelligence. Whether M. Gide is writing of art or life, he urges forward the minds of his readers, exhorting them indirectly to go and do likewise—to think and discover for themselves.

It is all a most exciting adventure in personal revelation, and in deciphering the signature of things. Hedonist and puritan, lover of God and persecutor of formal religion, sceptic and fanatic, he is without doubt a major artist of our time. His reputation will stand or fall by his Journals, which are an achievement of candour and penetration. This is an essential book for every serious writer to study, and for every serious reader to read. It has been translated and edited admirably by Professor Justin O'Brien, of Columbia University; the production is superb; and the publishers deserve great credit and gratitude for introducing a modern classic to the general public. B.W.

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