

ANDRÉ GIDE

ANDRÉ GIDE: HIS LIFE AND WORK. By LÉON PIERRE-QUINT. Translated from the French by DOROTHY M. RICHARDSON. (Cape. 7s. 6d. net.)

PAGES DE JOURNAL (1929-1932). Par ANDRÉ GIDE. (Gallimard.)

M. Pierre-Quint's is apparently the first book on André Gide to be published in English. For M. Gide it is a fortunate chance, because M. Pierre-Quint adduces the most interesting and problematical points in his work—taking them into a field of general discussion—in a condensed and attractive manner. He does not laboriously chronicle, treating first one book and then another, but describes a psychological and ethical progression. The method is especially suited to M. Gide, whose works are mostly elaborations on himself: he is very personal, and that, after his lucid prose has been admired, is the ultimate appeal (or the contrary) of his work.

M. Gide, born in 1869, was the son of a professor of jurisprudence and a wealthy heiress, the marriage, we are told, being primarily a union of religious traditions and bourgeois traditions. His father died when he was eleven, and "he grew up in an atmosphere of sadness, surrounded by three women whose lives were dominated by the fear of thinking or acting otherwise than with perfect rectitude." In "Si le grain ne meurt" we learn something of his childish behaviour. He was expelled for bad habits from school. As he grew older he suffered mental turmoil because of the disharmony between his inclinations and his Puritan upbringing. This contest with the flesh was the subject of "Cahiers d'André Walter," printed at his own expense, copies of which he sent to eminent writers of the day. It was thus, in the eventful nineties, that he entered the world of letters. Two years spent without restraint in Algeria, during which he met Oscar Wilde, freed him in fact from Puritanism—and yet never fundamentally or utterly. There remained through most of his work a sense of protest, which had its origin in the early dilemmas—dilemmas which M. Gide certainly accepted with courage: "To suppress the inward dialogue is to arrest life itself," he has said. Living so, it was inevitable that he should evolve his theory and desire—"the gratuitous action." M. Pierre-Quint studies with perception this notion, which seems capable of several interpretations, one being simply a moral suspension, when the dialogue would cease. A Gidean character, for example, threw a stranger from a railway carriage window without motive. But such an act appears as a perversion of the possible excellence of the notion.

M. Pierre-Quint, while admitting that M. Gide has never established a system, has nevertheless attempted to reconstitute his ethic from

"diverse thoughts one discovers in his books, often in apparent contradiction with each other." His care and penetration are praiseworthy. The individual morality may be epitomized by a phrase: "Each one must follow his bent . . . but in an upward direction." Each one has *his own* good and *his own* evil, and by following his particular desires a man discovers his true self. The sin is to deprive anyone of his characteristic savour. Aspirations should bear some relation to one's nature. "How many intelligences have been wrecked through seeking a perfection that is unrelated to their abilities." But it would be unfair to consider M. Gide as a mere advocate of hedonism. Having adapted one's morality to one's consciousness and to life, one must be faithful to it.

All this may be described as lyrical and vague; and certainly not calculated to appeal to conventional and traditional spirits. A logical extreme of comment would be: that under it an act is judged by results only and that no one knows beforehand whether he is doing a good or bad thing. The statement of the modern psychologist Stekel is apposite: "No action is in itself immoral. It becomes so only in relation to time, custom, country and environment." The "freedom" which M. Gide at one time desired was simply the absence of these relations—a nostalgic result of early family pressure. This is a purely subjective freedom and, lacking any triumphant detachment, is illusory; it is as if M. Gide, even when he seems most liberated, is most a prisoner of that from which he fled. He is contained within a world of personal feeling and intuitional morality. But in the domain of objective thought, and in the perception of what is, he gives an impression of curious uncertainty, almost of failure. Yet in his own sphere of personal feeling M. Gide is a master of self-expression. He emphasizes the time dimension in feeling, the importance of acute living in the present on a high level of consciousness. He even goes so far as to see the highest possibilities of life at hand *now*; having, it may be, adopted the Nietzschean explanation: "The Kingdom of God is conceived [by Jesus], not as a chronological and historic event, but as a transformation of perceptible being."

M. Pierre-Quint's book, admirably translated, is a brilliant survey of a complicated personality and evokes numberless starting-points for discussion. The new extracts from M. Gide's journal show the latest turnings of his mind. But on the main question of art it may be seen that he remains as at the beginning:—

Les grandes œuvres ne nous instruisent point tant qu'elles ne nous plongent dans une sorte d'hébétéude presque amoureuse.