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Vol. I

PROTESTANT WITNESS

The Journals of André Gide. Vol. I, 1889-1913. Translated by Justin O'Brien. Secker and Warburg. 25s.

Were his *Journals* M. André Gide's only published work, it is tempting, and maybe not altogether unprofitable, to speculate as to the sort of impression they might leave upon the imagination of the reader. Here, he would no doubt conclude, was a man of highly cultivated intelligence, exceedingly sensitive, remarkably scrupulous, by nature slightly withdrawn from the world, yet keenly aware of external life, at least in so far as it had a definite contribution to make to his own peculiar type of self-knowledge. Would he deduce, on the other hand, that M. Gide was also a creative artist of very great ability? Between the strokes of this fascinatingly elaborate, subtly limned, yet, in the last resort, often somewhat shadowy self-portrait, would he divine the existence of an author capable of producing such books as *L'Immoraliste*, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, *Les Caves du Vatican*? It seems unlikely; for although the *Journals* (of which a first section, covering the period 1889 to 1913, has now been translated by an American enthusiast, Professor Justin O'Brien) are without question one of the most interesting personal records in modern European literature, among their more curious characteristics is the persistent elusiveness of the writer's personality.

It is easier, in fact, to describe the volume by means of negative than of positive terms. Gide's diaries have little of the dramatic and visionary brilliance that illuminates the autobiographical passages of Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes*. They have none of the picturesqueness of the Goncourts' mighty work, with its wonderful set-pieces and rich accumulation of collector's odds and ends. We see few signs of that unsparing,

half-angelic, half-idiotic candour which enabled Boswell to put on record both his noblest impulses and his shabbiest private escapades. The writer's confidences usually pause half-way. Dramas in his personal life—and from his other writings we know how important has been the influence of personal emotions upon his literary development—are neither fully chronicled nor completely ignored. We glimpse them immediately beneath the surface: they are reflected in a brief paragraph or a single fragmentary phrase; then discretion appears to supervene and the rest, so far as that particular adventure goes, is a faintly troubled silence.

To ask more is perhaps unreasonable. M. Gide has so thoroughly explored the crises of his youth and early maturity in *Si Le Grain Ne Meurt* that he could afford to be comparatively reticent when he came to prepare his diaries for the edification of the general reader. In his autobiographical essay and in a succession of novels, literature has had the lion's share. It has gnawed experience almost to the bone; and the residue, though certainly worth preservation, has only a small share of the living and arresting quality with which he clothed, for instance, his portrait of the tormented immoralist or the unforgettable account of his own momentous stay at Biskra.

Yet perplexing, even disappointing, though the book may sometimes be it is never flat or commonplace. Throughout it is enlivened by the flickering movement of a naturally restless and constantly inquisitive mind, of a spirit that neither early security nor latter-day fame has ever lulled into quiescence. Other writers have bursts of introspection: in Gide the introspective mood is

almost continuous. His Protestant past is always with him; and though, with Blake, he may have come to conclude that it is better to "murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires," he has always been apt to pursue his pagan inclinations with a solemn conscientiousness for which "puritan" would seem to be the most appropriate label. Thus an extremely significant confession was committed to his journal on October 10, 1893:—

• Ceasing to call my desires temptations, ceasing to resist them, I strove on the contrary to follow them. . . . Self-abandon struck me as a superior wisdom. . . . Yet the habit of asceticism was such that in the beginning I had to force myself towards joy. . . .

M. Gide's temperament, as the above quotation may suggest, in spite of a thick overlay of intellectual sophistication, does not lack a touch of naivety; and among other involuntarily comic notes we remark a passage where this scholastic amateur of the pleasures of the flesh records, with delight and astonishment, his "voluptuous" discovery that it is "more natural to go to bed naked than in a nightshirt." Indeed, mingled threads of puritanism and paganism, of innocence and experience, continually add to the variegated texture of the author's private musings. M. Gide is a man of impressive intellect: nothing that he has to say, whether it is on the subject of some unknown friend or of a personage as well known as Paul Claudel or Remy de Gourmont, on literature or love or faith, fails to catch our interest; but that he remains unexpectedly young at heart is not the least of the charms of this preliminary volume. Professor O'Brien has translated it capably; but a few obvious transatlantic colloquialisms might well have been avoided.