

Books on Our Table: By William Soskin

Gide's "Two Symphonies" Present Him in Varying Moods and in a Happy Vein

ANDRE GIDE'S problem, he once said, is not to succeed, but to endure. For many of the younger writers this dates him as one of the subscribers to permanence, and everybody knows that the physicists and mathematicians have destroyed and abolished permanence. Nevertheless, certain pragmatic tests are worth more than the abstract speculation of the physicists. You read Gide's "Two Symphonies" (Alfred Knopf), a pair of stories written fifteen and twenty years ago and published here today, and you know that his performance is of a significance just as rich now as when it was negotiated.

The two stories in the beautifully made volume Mr. Knopf gives us are "Isabelle" and "The Pastoral Symphony." In certain fundamental characteristics of delicate psychological structure, of subtly suggested motivation, of carefully restrained presentation of the story, these works are similar, but in mood they seem to be very different.

"Isabelle" has been interpreted as a psycho-analytic allegory, I believe by Rebecca West. It is also possible to trace musical motifs and to demonstrate literary orchestration in its brilliant writing. I prefer to regard it as a super-mystery story, an eerie psychological study that has all the suspense and all the intricate and concealed motivation one demands from a good thriller and none of the hackneyed melodrama and exploitation of coincidence which make a sick thing of the ordinary mystery tale.

"The Pastoral Symphony," on the other hand, may be regarded as a dramatic presentation of the creeds of Christianity and Christ in opposition, a war of St. Paul and Jesus expressed in a wise, ironic story of a pastor who plays Pygmalion to a blind girl.

I think I prefer the atmospheric painting and the canny development of the first story, but I know the emotional climax of the second story "got" me. And I found myself affected in a way that Gide considers essential in reaction to a good piece of writing. He refused to place Anatole France among the world's greatest artists because reading France involved no "trembling." In the face of Gide's skill in "Two Symphonies" there is considerable trembling to be done.

Isabelle Mystery in a Chateau

THE mystery thriller Gide has set in a French chateau—gray, run-down, sleepy, with just the right amount of leisure about and just the proper supply of half insane, vaguely menacing characters to lift the story out of the realm of stern reality and to give it theatrical lighting. Also Gide has told the story in retrospect through the lips of one of those sensitive, reserved, seemingly young chaps who serve as ideal protagonists. The common sense of this character lends authenticity to the whole affair. The remoteness of the story in the past surrounds it with veils and mists.

One of the student becomes an investigator, shrewd detective, Gide himself, when he learns that the daughter of the house, she of the miniature, occasionally visits at midnight and kisses her sleeping son, to leave again before dawn.

Also Gide imbues his young man with a fevered, romantic passion for the lady of the miniature. The texture of the story becomes firmer and more taut with gradually revealed incidents to establish the background and the motives of the mysterious visits, the strange child, the rotting old people who shout and mumble their way about the house. Finally, after we are prepared to see the lovely young girl emerge as an injured heroine, all her sufferings dispelled through the young man's intervention, Gide presents us with a considerably effective surprise.

Yet the story is no tricky one. We do not resent the surprise. Gide does not hit us over the head with it; in fact, as he develops the strange climax, it seems quite natural. It is difficult not to reveal the details of that climax—but no, I won't.

Symph. pastorale Symbolic Battle

IN "The Pastoral Symphony" Gide admits right at the start that the theme has no originality. The pastor, elderly and Protestant, finds a poor, ignorant blind girl and takes her home to join his wife and their five children. He creates a consciousness for the girl, teaches her language and makes a living being of her—much to his wife's silent but unmistakable disapproval. It is inevitable that he falls in love with her. He does, though he will not admit the fact to himself. To all intents and purposes the pastor is unaware of his love. Gide, however, contrives neatly to make us know that the man is viscerally, intuitively aware of the passion, and that his quoting of Scripture and his rationalizing of a disturbing situation are mere escapes from the fact.

Jacques, the pastor's son and a theological student, falls in love with the blind girl, Gertrude, and wants to marry her. Then we have the fascinating situation of the father, unconscious of his own passion but guided by an instinct not quite his conscience, warning the son of this marriage. He quotes St. Paul to the boy while the boy notes that the prohibitions his father cites are not in the words of Christ. The symbolic battle whirls about the head of Gertrude. Then she undergoes an operation and regains her sight.

She knows now that the happiness and light the pastor created for her are less important than the misery in his wife's face. And the love she returned to the pastor seemed blighted now by sin. And the face she thought the pastor would have was really his son's face.

She tries suicide. She dies in a collapsed world.

"Two Symphonies" will leave you with the feeling you have read rich and full novels instead of clearly distilled stories. That is Gide's genius.

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