The Book of the Day—By Laurence Stallings

Some Properly Euthusiastic Remarks on an Old Theme of Andre Gides.

IT IS unwise to call a modern novelist an artist. In the first place, he usually isn't one, and in the second, the epithet may find him crying libel. For most modern novelists, if they are not purveyors of entertainment in questionable taste, look upon themselves as psychopathologists or sociologists. There are two schools. One looks upon art as a paragraphic, the other as a pornographic, consideration.

Thus most novelists are nowadays nothing but mildly scientific bores. The short narratives with which they occasionally boon their publishers are things too attenuated to be strung into novel length. One throws his cap into the air for a novel such as "The Good Earth" not only because it is, as Mr. Faddiman happily says, "a novel of major appeal," but because there is nothing else to sail a cap over. One hears that soon there is to be a novel by Thomas Wolfe or F. Scott Fitzgerald, or by Willa Cather or Elizabeth Maddox Roberts; but a reviewer cannot wait, even though your usual novelist lives in town all winter and is too cloyed with the metropolitan pleasures to write anything until vacation time. One thinks of them and then of the two colored boys who met outside a Harlem cabaret at the approach of summer.

"What choo going to do wid your vacation?"

"Well . . . I think I'll git me a job."

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These animadversions come to mind after reading two early stories by Andre Gide, published this week by Alfred A. Knopf in an English translation by Dorothy Bussy. They are perfect tales, printed now in one volume under the title of "Two Symphonies." The first story of "Isabelle" was written about twenty years ago, and the second of "La Symphonie Pastorale" less than fifteen. Gide holds his reader by the economy of his art, and also by his trick of a searching mind devoted to winnowing out the concealed emotions of a group of people. In the "Isabelle" story Gide, a young student from the Sorbonne, spends a week in the country between Pont-l'Eveque and Liseaux for the purpose of examining some manuscript.

The countryside must be that of such a village as Trouarn, and the house one of those gloomy eighteenth century relics in the midst of an unhappily bedraggled French park. In this house are two sets of aging couples, a crippled child, a brusque Abbe and a doglike gardener. Gide, the eavesdropper par excellence, the story-teller with the attributes of an immortal Peeping Tom, sets himself to unravel the mysteries of a ghostly house. There is a miniature of a young woman, a portrait with which he falls in love. The daughter of the house, she is said to visit it sometimes at night, to kiss her sleeping child, and to leave before dawn. These elements at hand, Gide begins his labors.

"I don't know that Gide is superior in his observations to other writers. But he is capable of giving a reader this feeling of superiority, so that the reader seems to apprehend the truth in company with Gide, and remain at the end shocked and edified by his own perceptions. This lovely and passionate daughter, for whom we are prepared to extend our sympathy and love, proves not at all the figure worthy of it. But we are not disappointed. We are never let down. We have shared with Gide the revelations, not of the woman's heart, but of our own.

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Once we have read the story, the fact that Gide once again is occupied with his favorite motive (that of the gratuitous commission of a crime) gives us the pleasure we had expected at the outset. Reading the narrative he fashions, and perceiving the artistry and the economy of the tale, we are yet captured by his favorite devices as readily as we lost our wills when entering 222 Baker Street to breakfast with the great Sherlock.

The second story is a heart breaker. Gide confesses at the outset the hackneyed matter with which he has to deal, even naming Dickens' own masterpiece on the subject. It is a theme recently revived by Charlie Chaplin in his "City Lights," for it concerns the blind girl whose sight is restored by a benefactor whose love is hopeless. There are ten years intervening between the two stories. It would be nice to say that "one marks the development of the artist, etc. . . ."

But I am too obtuse to recognize any great forward steps on behalf of Gide. Perhaps, as in his recent "The Immortalist," he has grown more acid. But I doubt seriously that a reader who knew no work by Gide, given all his work with dates made identical, could tell unerringly the order in which they were written, as savants profess to give many obscure writers some chronological succession.

The second story, "La Symphonie Pastorale," is Gide the story-teller at his tip-top best. Doubtless he has more of the quality his enthusiasts celebrate in his later things, occupied as they are with a world a little nearer the amoral essence of the post-war scene. But Gide has always been a man to turn morals wrongside out and examine them, and never with a meticulous air.

In the symphonic tale a Lutheran pastor brings home to his house a girl of 15, blind and by environment dumb, from the deathbed of a deaf aunt. This pastor, in the midst of his family, plays the role of Pygmalion, and communicates to this girl all the things of his mind. Gide can quote Scripture to his own ends. He can also prepare situations that would be unrelieved mawkishness in the hands of another man—in the hands of Dickens or Chaplin, say—two with genius for communicating every gesture to the herd. But Gide is master of the most delicate situations. If you would know the difference between an artist as a story teller, and a story teller as a shocker relying upon his situation for his emphasis, read in Gide of the first approach of the pastor's son and the conversation between the two men when father reproaches his first-born, unconscious of the fact that he loves this blind girl exactly as his son.

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I have not told the whole fabric of either story. It seems to me, for all that, Gide is a man of stature, his work should be hushed to those who do not know it, just as no one in good sense will tell the end of any mystery story to one who has yet to read it. These stories, if you have not read them originally, should be read now. The second one should be read late at night, for some minutes of quiet afterward are necessary to its full appreciation.

And I think it is a good time to say that no other publishers, for all they have put Mr. Knopf's taste in bindings and end papers and formats into good use recently, can approach the taste with which he fabricates a book. This one of Gide's, with its somber gabardine and its light gold stamp on the outside, and with its soft stock and its lustrous Elzevir inside, is a fine piece of work. It fits the pocket, too, as all simple stories should.