A Spreading Plant

THE COUNTERFEITERS. By ANDRÉ GIDE. Translated by DOROTHY BUSSY. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1927. $3.

Reviewed by THEODORE PURDY, JR.

IN the journal which he kept during the composition of his immense novel André Gide has revealed the germ from which the entire book sprang. In the beginning there were two newspaper clippings. The first told of the arrest of a band engaged in passing counterfeit coins. The youth of the members and the extraordinary code revealed in their confession made the affair unusual. The second was a simple but terrible story of suicide. Driven to the act by his schoolmates, a young student blew out his brains in the midst of a class. Details show the horrible *sang froid* and planned cruelty of his comrades. On these bits of juvenile abnormality Gide has built up, with rare firmness of touch and inventive ingenuity, a complicated narrative framework. The process is laid bare in his journal. The result is "The Counterfeiters."

Unlike his earlier stories, which he now refuses to dignify with the name of novels, "The Counterfeiters" is far from stylized, simplified, and reduced for the expression of a single principle. He has been careful to make its form such that all traces of the modern psychological novel shall disappear. Yet it is not realistic, nor does it offer us a cross-section of any particular *milieu*. He has, instead, attempted to dispense with all the unessentials, to fall back on the old idea of the "pure" novel. From his two clippings an immense plant of the imagination has grown, so luxuriant and often so exotic that any summary of it must necessarily be both inadequate and misleading. The book is a sort of demonstration of strength on the novelist's part, a kind of proof that material, a thesis, documentation, psychological correctness, and all the other shibboleths of whatever school are unimportant. What matters (he appears to claim and demonstrate) is the way in which the narrator illuminates his subject, whatever it may be. His knowledge of existence and his ability to set down that knowledge clearly is all that distinguishes even the greatest novelist from the teller of tales without meaning.

The demonstration is almost gratifyingly successful. The fabric of his novel is intricately woven, and at times extremely curious to Anglo-Saxon eyes. Against a background barely indicated, but at moments diabolic and unreal, he presents a series of interlocking episodes, each leading to another, continuing yet renewing the narrative without any slackening of interest. The principal figures are Bernard Profitendieu, his friend Olivier Molinier, and Olivier's uncle, Edouard. Finding that he is not the son of the man he has always supposed to be his father, Bernard leaves his home, confiding only in Olivier. When Olivier goes to meet his uncle at a railway station on the following day, Bernard follows him and picks up the check which Edouard has dropped after leaving his valise in the parcel room. Instead of returning check or luggage to Edouard, Bernard claims the valise, opens it, and finds in it Edouard's journal, from which he learns that Olivier's elder brother, Vincent, has become

involved in an affair with a married woman, Laura Douviers, who is expecting a child by him. He has lost at roulette the money intended to aid her during the confinement. It is to help Laura, with whom he had once fancied himself in love, that Edouard has returned to France. In a state of romantic frenzy, Bernard rushes off to Laura's hotel, where Edouard turns up in time to catch the thief of his luggage, pardon him, and arrange to take him to Switzerland with Laura, as secretary. There Bernard conceives a passion for Laura, while Edouard talks at length of the novel he hopes to write,—a novel to be called "The Counterfeiters." They meet a Polish boy, Boris, who is recovering from a nervous disease at their sanitarium, and he returns to Paris with them to enter the pension school kept by Laura's father. Meanwhile Olivier has been introduced by Vincent to Count Robert de Passavant, a brilliant and perverted young writer. Vincent has been helped by this personage both financially and in his love affair with Lady Griffith, a typical "femme fatale." He now makes Olivier editor of a magazine he is financing, and takes him to Corsica for the summer. At the pension Bernard is thrown rather unwillingly into the arms of Sarah Vedel, a daughter of the house. All these persons come together at a dinner given by Passavant's review, at which Olivier confesses his disgust for his patron to Edouard, who persuades him to give up the editorship. Bernard returns soon after to his home, much chastened, and Laura goes back to her husband. The book ends with the two episodes founded directly on the clippings,—the counterfeiting affair in which Oliver's younger brother is concerned, and the suicide of Boris.

The character of the book is not always pleasant. The preoccupation with sexual perversion which Gide has shown lately ("Corydon" and "Si le Grain ne Meurt") is here exemplified in the relationship of Passavant and Olivier, and in a more sentimental manner in the affection of Edouard for Olivier. There are traces, too, in the valise incident of an earlier attitude which may seem curious to those unfamiliar with Gide's other books. Indeed, Bernard was originally named Lafcadio,and was to have been the hero of "Les Caves du Vatican" in a later stage of development. It will be remembered that that delightful young man pushed a fellow traveler out of the window of his railway carriage simply because it occurred to him that there could be no possible motive for doing so. The influence of Dostoievsky, to whom Gide has devoted one of his best critical works, is doubtless responsible for these peculiarities of conduct on the part of his heroes.

But matters of derivation and significance aside, what a miraculous growth is this novel of many novels! For from the initial situation spring new situations, the original characters engender new ones, until there is not one, but a whole series of novels within the book. One feels that Gide has stopped this endless multiplication by a sheer effort of will and not because his imagination is in any way taxed. He is sophisticated without ceasing to be profound and he is profound without dulness. The task of writing a novel that is modern in the worthiest sense and yet still as clearly a novel as "Tom Jones" has been superbly performed. His tact and skill in construction, the classic quality of his style (for even his enemies will admit that Gide writes French as no one else can at the present time), and the continued intelligence of his observation, combine to make "The Counterfeiters" rich beyond all but the best of twentieth century fiction. Yet it can be read with pleasure for the "story" alone. Perhaps Gide's real triumph is this manifestation of the universal beneath a glittering surface of the particular. More than a happy instinct for expressing emotions, more than the tricks of the trade, have been necessary to achieve this subterranean wealth.

André Gide's reputation in America has so far been of the most deadly sort. Four of his books have been translated; his name is known and will even produce a certain effect if injected abruptly into a literary conversation; but it may be doubted that any save the few whose business it is to read him have really bothered to do so. Now that France and Barrès and Proust are gone there is no one whose word carries greater weight in the province of French prose. He is not a "difficult" writer,—not, for example, half so difficult as Proust. His work is sufficiently varied to afford for almost any reader the discovery of some good thing.