

## Current Literature

### NEW NOVELS

**The Counterfeiters.** By ANDRÉ GIDE. Knopf. 10s. 6d.

**In Such a Night.** By BABBETTE DEUTSCH. Secker. 7s. 6d.

*The Counterfeiters* is the most important work of Gide's to be translated into English and its appearance is an occasion to consider in what the merit of Gide's work consists.

There is probably no French author whose reputation it is harder for an English critic to appreciate; we are accustomed to have our neglect of Racine and Corneille flung in our faces, with our incapacity to appreciate a certain esoteric perfection in La Fontaine, which makes French critics think that however much he is praised in England, he is never praised right. In these cases it is something essentially Gallie that we are supposed not to be able to understand. With Gide, however, it is obviously because his essential quality is so English that we are not impressed by it, and that the French, who have had no Pater to give an academic twist to the sensuous world or clarify the distress of adolescence, derive such absorbing and elusive excitement from his work.

Yet Gide is the most credulous of all leaders of French thought. Valéry is an intellectual who applies his perspicacity like a hose to the problems of metaphysics, or the most finicky refinements of classical verse. He belongs to the main French tradition, though to a highly rarefied development of it; Gide, though intellectual, would suppress his gifts in favour of a capacity to grasp physical sensations and transmit them in poetry. He would feel that the dilemmas of the intellect do more to wreck a poet than all the temptations of the world, and that he who is master of his emotions is generally his reason's slave.

Where there is a rigidly defined tradition, there is an equally defined revolt from it, and this the *surréalistes* now lead. English literature, being less rigid, drives its prodigals into a hazier and milder opposition; they know nobody will try to chase them, so it is absurd to run away. Gide is in this position in France; romantic in outlook, classical in style, with no political background to his work, and a horror of being taped, or being defined or captured—like Proteus—in his original shape, or killed—like Mercutio—at a battle to which he was not asked. He is the apostle of the hybrids, a class in England so numerous as not to deserve the name, in France so rare that no provision has yet been made for them in any literary code.

The hybrid is perpetually haunted by a conviction of exile, his spirit is expended in homesickness, his intellect in trying to discover what is his home. This central loneliness, this native hue of indecision causes the hybrid to cling desperately to all societies that are at ease in the world; complex himself, he is drawn to the simple, sceptical to the religious, meditative to the men of action, homeless to the homely. Of course the hybrid, as we are familiar with him, is not so deeply tainted as this; he is usually an aristocrat turned intellectual, an artist who dislikes his art, a Bohemian turned respectable or someone unable to choose between two values, art or ethics, action or thought. These are the hybrids of circumstance, who have not had the courage to suppress their possible selves, to prune themselves of half the buds that weaken the fruit by being allowed to flower. They are torn between conflicting vocations, not realising that they have only one vocation and that is to be torn. With the spiritual hybrids, it is worse. Homeless since the loss of Eden, these Cains and Ishmaels acquire a conviction of guilt as profound as their sensation of exile. This leads to a passionate curiosity that sends them experimenting everywhere to find where they belong, but dictated as it is by conscience, and not by science, it trails away into sensationalism, or the rich luxurious wail that is the war cry of these dangerously articulate people, and which, loaded with lyric beauty and self-pity, must surely drown all refrains of hymns and psalm tunes, and acquaint the Creator of the amount of subjects He has left on the earth "erroneous there to wander and forlorn."

M. Gide possesses all these characteristics, and almost every possible combination of hybridity; without his puritan sense of sin he would not read into the physical world so much calculated sensuality; without his classic style he would not be able to carry off so much that is abandoned or sentimental; and without his intellectual integrity, he would not be able to affect a relative indifference as to how people behave. The effect of this is a kind of darkness which pervades all his work, something vacillating and intellectual which proceeds from his sensuous comprehension of so many contradictory schemes of life. Then one feels that he is not naturally a rebel, that he hates young

men to read his books and promptly run away from their parents, that he tries to make himself like it, and that the result is a higher degree of morbidity than before, so that he can hardly describe a plate of fruit without making one feel it is indecent, or a noble impulse without suggesting that it is impure.

The peculiar quality of his work is a kind of desultory lyric strain that runs through all English literature, but is very uncommon in French; this, however, is more apparent in his earlier work, and has given way to a kind of philosophising that is the root of his great influence on the young, because he teaches them to dramatise, and sentimentalise the values of their own life. This is what Wilde and Pater did for England, and Gide combines the insuriance of the one with the applied philosophy of the other. There is no scene so typical of Gide as that in *Marius* where the young Marius and Flavian read through *The Golden Ass* in the barn, or the young Sebastian refuses to be painted in the family group because he is unsocially under the influence of Spinoza. Gide is, however, an extremely intelligent man with a much wider curiosity than Pater, and a profounder insight than Wilde's. Moreover, he writes entirely on the side of youth, his mission seems to be to glorify the distress and the idealism of adolescence, and sound for the first time the depths, if any, of the French schoolboy's reserve. Childhood has long been idealised in England, and we have had a host of public school stories and groupings of the different shades of prison house that close round the growing boy. In France, however, adolescence has almost passed unnoticed, there has been no transition in literature from the spoilt, precocious French child to the pale and serious young man. For this reason Gide's romanticism, his sympathy and restless habit of troubling all the waters where the young Narcissus sees his face, is invaluable to French thought—both as steering a middle course between the Academy and the wild men, and as tapping a new reserve of intelligence and beauty, which is that birth of intellectual values and sensuous perception that occurs to all youth in all lands. But this, however valuable to France, has long been understood in England, and it is absurd to treat Gide, whom we have in reality fathered, as representing either a new way of life, or of literature, and least of all as one of those mysterious cults from across the Channel which it requires a sixth sense to appreciate, and an intelligence greater than our own to understand. France is still grappling with Butler, Wilde, and Pater; if they are to catch us up, they cannot do better than by thus assimilating them, with a strong dash of Swinburne, and all rolled into one.

*The Counterfeiters* is a novel about a novelist writing a novel called *The Counterfeiters*; we see the characters through a series of receding mirrors, the nearest reflection being all that we get of their real selves. The novelist is Gide, or a novelist's idea of Gide, and we see him, noble, understanding, helpless, brewing indecision and distress all round. His counter-type, or Anti-Gide, is another novelist, de Passavant, who is in the true Lord Henry Wotton style, modernised, so as to be a caricature of the rich, slick, amateur, fashionable writer whose book *The Horizontal Bar*—whose epigrams ("what is deepest in man is his skin") point very much to the leaders of the motion for motion's sake, wagon-lit, dancing dervish school. Then we have two boys, Olivier and Bernard, who represent the emotional and the intellectual aspects of Gide's approach to a way of life. The novelist is on the whole a disappointing character. He seems, like most hybrids, to lack vitality, or rather to find it tidal, so that he is forced to prey on the spirits of his young friends and becomes easily afflicted with that kind of premature old age, which is the punishment of those who are afraid to grow up with their contemporaries. The plot is intricate and absorbing, and this is the kind of book that is very much easier to read in English than in French. There is a large amount of profound criticism and irony scattered through the book, as well as many true observations on the novel itself. Occasionally, however, the sophistication becomes irritating, and in Edouard's long analysis of love one hopes in vain for some Melbourne to break in with "O can't you let it alone!"

What really is preposterous, beyond even the author's morbid sentimentality, is the gang of Borstal boys which he depicts. Apart from Bernard and Olivier, the schoolboys, when not engaged in bringing out a literary manifesto, are discovered organising a brothel, stealing books, blackmailing their parents with stolen love letters, passing false coins on a large scale, and finally hounding the weakest to death by means of an extensive suicide pact. Not since Jude's little son hanged himself and his brothers, have book-children shown such enterprise in the control of their lives. Granted Gide's preoccupation with suicide, or certain cases like the Loeb murders, the depravity

is just credible, but one certainly feels that it shows a decadent necessity for feeding on the extremes of action, for searching out the perverse in nature or the innocent in order to pervert it. His love of life seems a *passion malheureuse*, and his curiosity about it a *soif malsaine*. The book is very well translated and well worth trying to read in spite of the impatience which one is bound to feel. It is an excellent book to have brought out in England, because, although it will not influence English intellectual life in any way, it does help us to understand the kind of revolution that is going on in France. Besides, to appreciate an author who is intoxicating the younger generation is always an experience, especially when one is not intoxicated.

*In Such a Night* is a novel about a party in New York. The whole book records one evening from the points of view of the chief guests there assembled. It is one of those brilliant feats of technical accomplishment that we are beginning to receive from across the Atlantic. The party is hectic and Bohemian, the guests embittered and vital; it is not such a good party as *Mrs. Dalloway's* but a better party than the two in *Latterday Symphony*; everybody is very unhappy and wears a mask, but there is nothing to be done for them, except to feel grateful for the way in which the author has understood them. These smart and aching Bohemians probably err in being so much in love with life that they are abjectly afraid of it. This is the danger of finding nothing in life preferable to life itself, a danger that some sort of code, or a moral standard, perhaps, might enable them to avoid. It is a versatile and impressive book. One enjoys the truculent confidences, the hopes and fears of the guests at the housewarming, the ultra-modern, over-metallic glitter of the style.

CYRIL CONNOLLY.