

For Connoisseurs

Two Symphonies, by André Gide, Translated by Dorothy Bussy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

THIS BOOK by André Gide contains the two well known *récits*, "Isabelle" and "The Pastoral Symphony." "Isabelle" (1911) is the story of a young romantic who falls in love with a woman's picture and name. He refuses to think ill of her even when he observes her in very questionable behavior; and wakes from his illusion only when it can no longer be doubted that she is a virtual murderess, an unloving mother and a slut. The setting is a remote, crumbling *château*, most of the inhabitants of which are quaint or superannuated. The greater part of the story has taken place before the action proper begins, and the author's main interest is in the revelation of what has gone before.

"The Pastoral Symphony" (1919) deals with a Protestant pastor and the "lost sheep"—a blind girl, at first considered an idiot—whom he rescues from the workhouse and takes into his home. Despite the opposition of his wife, he undertakes the girl's education and discovers that she possesses an excellent mind and a beautiful body. He cannot bring himself to tell her of the evil that exists in the world, instructing her in the Gospels but not the Epistles, in Christ but not St. Paul. This, together with his fleshly love for her, precipitates the ruin that overtakes nearly everyone concerned.

Both stories are so subtly told that they can be summarized only after some reflection. And of course it is never the surface of Gide's work that gives it its peculiar fascination. Despite their consummate finish, we do not read these novelettes as objective art, but as examples of the psychology of guilt. The inner story of each begins with the moral task which Gide has set himself. In "Isabelle" it consists in the revelation of the antecedent material—that is, Isabelle's character. Ordinarily this would be an esthetic problem, but in Gide's hands it becomes a moral one. Every coincidence, every opportune discovery, everything that throws light on Isabelle, therefore, becomes sinful, forbidden; and the reader's pleasure corresponds not, as usual, to the author's skill in story-telling—for the truth is that no one believes in the story—but to the harassment of the author's conscience. The same is true of "The Pastoral Symphony," but that, though shorter, is more complex than "Isabelle." Into it enter, besides, a number of ethical and religious questions, and there is also a strong note of self-castigation; using his pastor as a mouthpiece, Gide seems to be trying to make himself realize, among other unpleasant things, that his own face is "full of care" and his own heart "arid."

Gide's American reader is seldom a moralist or a psychologist, however; he is more apt to be the man who sets up as a literary connoisseur. Such a person should be pleased with "Two Symphonies." In both of them the author's famous Protestant style, since he is gifted with one of the best of translators, retains its singular effectiveness. And his incomparable ingenuity is at its height in "The Pastoral Symphony," which, in externals at least, approaches perfection. It is true that his ingenuity seems to be at the service of something that he fundamentally does not believe, a situation which makes for a kind of hypocrisy. But there are some connoisseurs, like those gourmets who prefer their game high, who say that this taint of hypocrisy is what gives the bird its flavor.

GERALD SYKES.

Isabelle

Symphonie
Pastorale

May 1931