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Post Dispatch

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A Literary Fugue?

THE COUNTERFEITERS. By Andr. Gide. (Knopf.)

ANDRE GIDE and Marcel Proust are generally held to be the two most important figures in contemporary French literature, and both have chosen the novel for their individual contributions. Proust, intrigued by the old aristocracy, has given us such characters as the Duchess de Guermantes, Madame de Villeparisis, Robert de St. Loup and the Swanns. The protestant Gide deals with bourgeois society.

"The Counterfeiters" is Gide's first novel. The author prefers to call his other works narratives and farces.

The story is woven around a group of interesting persons, all of whom undergo metamorphosis in some way or other in the course of three months' time. Bernard Profitendieu, a rather high-spirited but inexperienced youth, suddenly discovers the fact of his illegitimacy, and leaves the luxurious home of the man who was ostensibly his father. Edouard, the novelist, who is in many ways a self-portrait of the author, is writing a book which he plans to call "The Counterfeiters." It is to be a novel purged "of all those elements which do not specifically belong to the novel." He intends to make an original contribution in the field of fiction by the fact that his book is not to be "a novel of ideas or of manners"; nor is it "to preach a thesis, or make propaganda for a cause." He best expresses his purpose in his own words: "What I should like to do is something like the art of fugue writing. And I can't see why what is possible in music should be impossible in literature."

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In Edouard Gide has portrayed the idealist—the man of ideas and the true "child of Dionysus." He tells us that ideas interest him more than anything else. "They live; they fight; they perish like men. Of course, it may be that our only knowledge of them is through men, just as our only knowledge of the wind is through the reeds that it breaks." The account of his love for his nephew, Olivier, the weak and impressionable, but lovable youth, is deftly done. There is the Comte Robert de Passavant, the gay and dissolute writer, who is, incidentally, a character drawn from reality. Brilliant, perverted and superficial, Passavant exemplifies Gide's strange power of creating contrasts. For what is a better example of extravagant hyperbole than a Passavant drawn from the same pen that created an Alissa Bucolin? There is little wonder that the author has been called "a cross between a bacchant and the Holy Ghost."

There are many interesting characters in "The Counterfeiters." The ironical account of the old La Perouse couple reads like a page from Anatole France. Then there is Laura, Armand and Rachel, victims of a puritanical environment and of these the author can write with an understanding strengthened by bitter experience.

M. Gide's venture to set a new stage in fiction is not wholly successful. There is something of Fielding in "The Counterfeiters," and a great deal of Dostoevski. The book is, in spirit, not unlike the later compositions of Sebastian Bach. There is the same abstract and elusive harmony that is the delight of the initiated few. "The Counterfeiters" possesses a rare beauty—a beauty similarly expressed in the sculptured symphonies, or perhaps I should say the "Fugues" of Metrovich.

JOHN BLACK.