

Two Novelists in The Counterfeiters:  
Gide and Edouard

One of the most intriguing aspects of André Gide's novel, The Counterfeiters, is its characteristic "layering," the effect created by including a novel within a novel within a still larger novel. Gide writes about Edouard, a novelist who is writing about another novelist who is writing a novel entitled The Counterfeiters. This complex texture should suggest to the reader entering the world of The Counterfeiters the danger of losing track of the overall effect and meaning intended by Gide. One of the first pitfalls encountered is the tendency to equate Gide and Edouard. Either because Edouard's novel appears as a miniature imitation of Gide's--the same title, similar characters and based on observations of the same events--or because Edouard's thoughts regarding his novel sound much like Gide's thoughts and actually supply the material for a large part of Gide's novel, this tendency to equate the two is tempting.

But a better understanding of the entire novel can be achieved by exploring similarities and differences and, in the end, differentiating as clearly as possible between the intents and accomplishments of Gide, the master novelist, and Edouard, the fictional novelist. Moreover, issues arising from such an exploration lead us to consider Gide's views of reality, art and the human condition. These issues are related to the heart of Gide's novel--the problem of counterfeit, as well as being related to the novel's broader context--twentieth-century literature as it deals with the modern consciousness in crisis.

Germaine Brée and Margaret Guiton begin their

book, An Age of Fiction: The French Novel from Gide to Camus, by focusing upon one aspect of the crisis confronting Gide's generation: the reintegration of two different realms of reality, the subjective consciousness and the external environment.<sup>1</sup> Awareness of this problem stems from the general trend toward phenomenology and the "sudden and violent rejection of all external standards of reality" as exemplified by the French novels of the twentieth century (Brée and Guiton, p. 5). The impelling quest for knowledge, together with the impossibility of returning to an unenlightened state regarding the powers of the human psyche, has contributed to a continuing study of the inner world of individual consciousness. The problem of reintegrating the inner and outer worlds has remained a persistent and perplexing concern of modern man. In the hope of touching upon this general problem as well as the problem of counterfeit, I return to the exploration of similarities and differences between Gide and Edouard.

The similarities that I perceive between Gide and Edouard focus upon the following three topics: first, the conception of the novel as the conflict between the reality of life and a person's vision of life; secondly, the choice of "counterfeit" as the theme of their individual novels; and lastly, a basic agreement concerning the necessity for a novelist to become "depersonalized." Apparent similarities between statements made by Gide and Edouard relevant to these three topics are explained by the fact that Edouard often voices ideas actually expressed by Gide in his journals, letters and less directly in his soties and récits. Gide acknowledges in The Journal of "The Counterfeiters" that he is lending much of himself to Edouard.<sup>2</sup> He often prefixes or concludes an exposition of an idea in it with a notation that Edouard should be made to say these words (Journal,

pp. 429 and 433).

But a problem arises. Towards the end of the "First Notebook" of the Journal, Gide admits that "this journal must become to some extent Edouard's novel" (Journal, p. 418). It is very difficult to establish to what extent this daily record is Gide's and to what extent it is Edouard's. Even a limited fusion of the journal with Edouard casts doubt upon its reliability as a tool for comparing Gide and Edouard.

In her book entitled Gide, Brée emphasizes this unreliable aspect of The Journal of "The Counterfeiters." She quarrels with the opening of the "Second Notebook" (where Gide admits that he no longer understands what he wants) by pointing to a "hidden, guiding intent" discernable in the novel.<sup>3</sup> Also in the "Second Notebook" Gide identifies the subject of the novel as the "effort of the novelist to make a book out of it all": "it all" being the event, the fact, the external datum (Journal, p. 425). While recognizing that this subject is one of Gide's main concerns, Brée clearly states that it is not the main subject of Gide's novel; rather, it is the subject of Edouard's never-to-be-written novel (Brée, p. 215). By considering the overall structure and character development of The Counterfeiters, Brée distinguishes the heart of Gide's novel from that of Edouard's novel and establishes the ways in which Gide's novel encompasses, and even extends beyond, Edouard's attempts.

I recognize the need to question the reliability of The Journal of "The Counterfeiters" and support Brée's assertion concerning the need to look beyond both the Journal and Edouard's "novel" in order to comprehend more fully the meaning of The Counterfeiters. But I do not agree with her overall suggestion that the Journal does not accurately convey Gide's thoughts and intents. She underplays the extent to which the Journal is

consistent with Gide's thoughts about life, reality, art and the novelist's task. I also see clear similarities between some of Edouard's statements and Gide's thoughts as expressed in the Journal. But by following Brée's suggestion to consider the overall structure, one begins to see the differences between the directions that Gide and Edouard take from similar theoretical premises.

The most obvious difference between Gide and Edouard is the final outcome of their separate attempts--Gide successfully completes his novel, whereas the first sentence of Edouard's novel will most likely never be written. The reasons for Edouard's inability to write touch upon the three topics mentioned earlier. Edouard falls short of the requirements laid out by the concept of the novel, the demand for authenticity and the necessity for "depersonalization"--ideas subscribed to by both Gide and Edouard.

Edouard reveals the "deep-lying subject" of his never-to-be-written novel as "the rivalry between the real world and the representation of it that we make to ourselves."<sup>4</sup> In other passages in The Counterfeiters, Edouard repeats the same idea in different words: he speaks of the struggles between "the facts presented by reality and the ideal reality" (p. 188), between what reality offers and what one desires to make of it (p. 188) and between the world of outside appearances and one's interpretations of that world (p. 205). Although "struggle" is presented as the problem of the artist, its import extends into the lives of all human beings. Edouard points out that this rivalry is "the drama of our lives" (The Counterfeiters, p. 205).

The journals, letters and other fictional works of Gide demonstrate his awareness of the discrepancy between outer reality and inner perception. Thus, the serious theme that Gide plays with in Les Caves du Vatican illustrates "the

basic discordance introduced into life by human consciousness" (Brée and Guiton, p. 33). Moreover, Gide's works often deal with the "psychological effects caused by the discovery of an autonomous outer reality" (Brée, p. 215). Gide acknowledges the reality of the autonomous workings of the world around us as well as the reality of the individual self. The essential characteristic of this autonomous reality is the unaesthetic and ambiguous aspect of events and facts that continually undermine man's attempts to form absolute ideas by which to govern the external environment. Absolute ideas limit a person's expectations and therefore distort his perceptions of reality.

Gide also recognizes the reality of the individual self with its uniquely human capacity for perceiving, ordering and representing outside reality all somewhat independently of that reality itself. Because they must perceive and order the external world of facts, events, objects and people, all humans are potential fabricators of fiction. The manner in which a person perceives and reintegrates the self and outer reality is open to evaluation in terms of authenticity. His perception is judged when he is brought face to face with the ambiguous and autonomous reality. Preconceived notions and absolute ideas produce counterfeit living, because they limit a person's view of reality, perhaps blinding him even to the existence of a reality beyond his personal or culturally implanted ideas. Gide criticizes civilization for presenting "a screen of beliefs and rules" that separates the individual self from the world of reality, thereby producing a counterfeit image of reality in the individual's mind. It is possible for an individual to reject this counterfeit image of reality, if he can detect the fictional element in this representation of reality.

The use of these words--fiction, representa-

tion, appearance, reality, counterfeit--becomes very difficult when I turn to consider imaginative literature. Novels are traditionally referred to as fiction and novelists are thought to be people who transform experience into fiction. But for Gide, the real novelist is a destroyer of fictional worlds; he strips away distorted representations of reality that are based only on appearances from a limited viewpoint. The word "fiction" for Gide often refers to a way of living and connotes a certain quality of counterfeit. Therefore, I must distinguish between Gide's concepts of art and of fiction.

In criticizing fictional modes of living, Gide is by no means negating the possibility of art and imaginative creation. In his own life he tended to equate outer reality or appearances with fiction and struggled with this "incapacity to feel life as real" (Brée and Guiton, p. 21). For Gide, "life was really subsidiary to literature" (Brée, p. 13). Literature is a more effective means of approaching the real world--more effective than superficial interpretations ordinarily encountered in one's life. Literature provides the opportunity for experimenting with innumerable ways of living. The adventures of the imagination and mind can be pushed to their limits, governed only by artistic and intellectual requirements. Brée writes that for Gide, "art simply plays with the substance of life; it proposes, whereas life 'disposes'" (Brée, p. 6). The work of the imagination is to propose possibilities. For Gide this is not equivalent to the fabrication of fiction because imaginative creation does not necessarily imply counterfeit. At one point Gide states that "there is really no possible counterfeit in art" (Brée, p. 250). In this sense Gide is clearly distinguishing between the realms of art and of life. The results of following a preconceived notion or absolute idea in art are not nearly as disastrous as the

consequences of doing so in real life. Life does not tolerate counterfeit; it always presents the individual with a puzzling and uncompromising reality that is capable of demolishing fictions.

Even though Gide never confused the realms of literature and of life, he did not deny that the two realms interact in complex and subtle ways. Reality is the raw material of art; the facts are its starting points. The imagination, after all, must play with something. The raw materials undergo great transformations in the hands of the artist. An analogy based on this concept of the novelist's task demonstrates several subtle connections that Gide makes between life and literature. The novelist is searching for a form in which to arrange the materials that he has abstracted from reality; similarly, every human being organizes his perceptions of outer reality in order to reintegrate his individual consciousness with the external environment. The analogy serves to illustrate Gide's notion of authenticity. The ultimate criterion for authenticity is the test of reality. Brée notes that for Gide "to live, as to write a novel, is to undergo the test of reality" (Brée, p. 249). A worthwhile novel should show the inadequacy of fiction when confronted with life, just as life itself demonstrates the inadequacy of an individual's preconceived notions and ideas when confronted with uncompromising facts and events.

The Counterfeiters measures up to Gide's own demands for a worthwhile novel. Gide challenges the various fictions created by each of his characters with the reality of facts and events. In the process he masters an authentic reconstruction of reality; the novel's overall structure reproduces the essential characteristics of reality: the ambiguous and unaesthetic qualities. This structural imitation of the nature of reality contrasts markedly with representations

that merely describe appearances of reality.

Brée distinguishes between Edouard and Gide on the basis of what they each do with their recognition of the rivalry between reality and interpretations of that reality. Edouard is content to use the rivalry as the subject of his novel, whereas Gide actually reconstructs this aspect of the human condition by disclosing "little by little...a real situation despite its fictional, one might almost say mythic, transformation in the characters' minds" (Brée, pp. 216-17). Because Gide in a sense rises above the struggle by accepting it as the basic structure of human experience, he is freer to experience a special joy in the discord between the real and the imaginary" (Brée, p. 6). But, as Bernard remarks, Edouard becomes increasingly worn by the struggle to reconcile two incompatible requirements when working with his novel (The Counterfeiters, p. 189).

Gide is also distinguished from Edouard by the criterion of authenticity. The two novelists do not equally withstand the test of reality; they do not equally demonstrate awareness of the essential characteristics of reality. The raw material constituting the two central events of Gide's novel was taken from reality. The two events are described in separate newspaper clippings which drew Gide's attention: one dealing with the manufacture of counterfeit coins and the other with the atrocious suicide of a schoolboy (The Counterfeiters, pp. 455-56).

Edouard, in contrast, refuses to deal with these two central events. He belligerently dismisses reality, even while explaining to Bernard that he will not allow his fictional novelist to abandon reality. Edouard prefers the idea of a counterfeit coin to the disturbing reality of an actual counterfeit coin presented by Bernard. Edouard opposes himself to Bernard, a realist who suggests starting from the fact and allowing the



idea "to come of its own accord" (Counterfeiters, pp. 192 and 205). During this incident Bernard more accurately reflects Gide's own thoughts concerning the necessary confrontation of art with the facts of real life.

Edouard's reaction to the suicide of Boris is even less justifiable than his refusal to consider Bernard's counterfeit coin. He dismisses the reality of this by stating that it is "not accounted for by a sufficiency of motive." Because he was not expecting and cannot understand Boris' suicide, he denies its reality. He admits, "I accept reality coming as a proof in support of my thought, but not as preceding it" (Counterfeiters, p. 394). Once again Edouard insists on starting with an idea and clinging to it despite contradictions posed by factual events. He refuses to incorporate this one event in his "pure" novel. Purity excludes compromises with the ambiguities of life.

Brée describes the contrasting treatment of this event in the overall context of Gide's novel as follows:

Gide planned his novel so that it might approximate his view of how a great many events come about, not through a straight, relatively simple interplay of chance, situation and motivation. An event such as the death of Boris combines innumerable chance factors and, in each, a share of human weakness. Boris' fate is not the consequence of any one set of circumstances. It is made possible by the conjunction of several disparate and random series of activities. (Brée, p. 246)

Her choice of words in this passage is revealing. She acknowledges that Gide had a certain view of

life that he was attempting to convey: it involves his concept of reality as an ambiguous substance that requires many viewpoints in order to be more fully comprehended. In this respect Gide develops the idea of "depersonalization" as a necessary trait for a novelist. If one extends the analogy between literature and life to include the idea of "depersonalization," any human being who desires to comprehend reality more fully needs to develop this quality. Depersonalization is related to Gide's notion of dialogue which includes a perpetual state of open-mindedness, objective availability and curiosity in regard to all points of view. In The Journal of "The Counterfeiters" as well as in the words given to Edouard throughout the novel, Gide elaborates upon the concept of depersonalization. He speaks of the artistic value of multiple viewpoints and of a relativity of viewpoints. Brée states that the relativity of viewpoints contained in The Counterfeiters is "more essential to the work than any given character and was eventually transferred to Edouard" (Brée, p. 225).

Although the goal of depersonalization (which is the creation of authentic reconstruction of reality) seems valid, I find that the ideas of depersonalization and relativity of viewpoints, as demonstrated by Edouard, contribute to self-destructive behavior. Whatever the case, Edouard ultimately fails in his attempts toward self-abnegation and depersonalization. This is illustrated by his comment on the suicide of Boris: his main contention is that he was not expecting it. Edouard's relativity of viewpoints is reduced to his singular viewpoint of reality, his personal expectations of what reality should be.

Edouard's counterfeiting serves to accentuate the authenticity of Gide's novel. The greatness of The Counterfeiters lies in Gide's ability to bridge the gap separating the realms of literature and

life. In a tightly controlled, aesthetic form, Gide is able to capture the essential ambiguous and unaesthetic qualities of real life. Equally amazing is the fact that, while acknowledging that the novel is only a view of reality shaped by his own individual perception, Gide enriches this view by interweaving a multiplicity of viewpoints throughout the novel. The Counterfeiters is an unusually authentic representation of reality, because it incorporates the essential characteristics of reality and provides an intriguing multiplicity of views by which the reader is able to consider the facts and events presented.

KRISTEL J. SHELTON  
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Germaine Brée and Margeret Guiton, An Age of Fiction: The French Novel from Gide to Camus (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1957), p. 15. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> André Gide, The Journal of "The Counterfeiters," trans. Justin O'Brien, in "The Counterfeiters," with "The Journal of 'The Counterfeiters'" (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), p. 434. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Germaine Brée, Gide (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 227. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>4</sup> André Gide, The Counterfeiters, trans. Dorothy Bussy, in "The Counterfeiters," with "The Journal of 'The Counterfeiters'" (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), p. 205. All further references to this work appear in the text.