

Meeting Minutes of The Novel Club

March 2019

The March meeting of the Novel Club met at the lovely home of Jay and Toby Siegel in Lyndhurst on March 5. The guests partook of the delicious treats and beverages of all sorts. After enjoying some social time, the meeting was called to order around 8:15 p.m. In the absence of Louise Mooney, the meeting was led by Jennie Kaffen. The minutes for the February meeting will be presented for approval at the April meeting. No guests were in attendance, but it was mentioned that there are several prospective members who have previously attended and continue to be interested in membership. After brief reports from the Treasurer (the club's bank account remains at about \$1,600) and the Membership and Program Committees, we began the substantive discussion. Our book was *The Counterfeiters*, by André Gide.

The biographical paper was delivered by Linda Sandhaus. Gide lived an interesting and unconventional life, even by the standards of an early 20th century literary figure. He was born in France but his family had roots in Italy. He had a somewhat isolated childhood due to chronic illness. He began writing at an early age and published his first novel at 21. He was very sociable, serving as mayor of his small town and

Gide's homosexuality was a significant factor in his life and writing. He developed his own moral code for relationships between men and young boys, the details of which Gide elaborated in his journal. In his journal, Gide distinguished between adult-attracted "sodomites" and boy-loving "pederasts", categorizing himself as the latter. Gide travelled extensively and became known in literary circles in France and many other European countries. In 1895, after his mother's death, he married his cousin Madeleine Rondeaux, but the marriage was unconsummated. In 1923, he had daughter with Elisabeth van Rysselberghe, a woman much younger than him whom he had known for a long time. This was possibly his only sexual liaison with a woman. Elisabeth, the mother of his daughter, eventually left her husband to move to Paris and manage the practical aspects of Gide's life. They had adjoining apartments built for each other. His legal wife Madeleine died in 1938.

Gide was a prolific writer, although he considered *The Counterfeiters* his only true novel. He wrote many shorter works of fiction and kept an extensive journal throughout his life. He also wrote thousands of letters to family and friends.

Gide received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1947. He was honored to receive the award, but he was unable to travel to Stockholm to accept it in person due to his frail health. His acceptance speech was read by the French ambassador to Sweden. He devoted much of his last years to publishing his journal, which ran 1300 pages. He died in Paris in February 1951.

The critical paper was delivered by Bob Brody. Bob described the overarching theme of the book as the distinction between the genuine and the artificial. The relationships between several of the principal characters reflect this theme. For example, the genuine friendship between Edouard and Bernard is contrasted with the false relationship between Comte Robert de Passavant and Olivier. Bob observed that many characters seem to be struggling to discern reality from their perceptions of the world. He cited this illuminating passage from Gide: "I am beginning to catch sight of the deep subject of my book, the rivalry between the real world and the representation of it we make to ourselves. We try to impose on the outside world our own interpretation. This is the drama of our lives. The persistence of facts invites us to transport our ideal construction into the realm of dreams, of hope, of belief in a future life which is fed by all

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the disappointments and disillusion of our present one. Realists start from facts. Bernard is a realist. I am afraid we shall never understand each other.”

Bob asked to consider four questions. First, Bob asked whether Edouard’s notebook added a meaningful dimension to the novel as one character’s view of the other characters and narrative?

Most felt that Edouard’s notebook provided an effective method to allow the reader to understand Gide’s view of the characters, their motivations and their various predicaments.

Bob’s second question asked us whether Edouard’s chapters on the purpose and style of novel writing enhance or detract from the reading experience?

Reactions to this issue were mixed. Several observed that these portions of the book were interesting from a technical, as well as a cultural and historical perspective. Understanding Gide’s views on these topics helped the reader to understand what Gide was trying to do in how he approached the structure and narrative of the book. It was noted, however, that Gide seemed to violate some of his own prescriptions in *The Counterfeiters*. Others felt that the dissertations on novel writing were a distraction from the narrative and not particularly interesting to a modern-day reader.

Bob’s third question elicited the most lively discussion, including some animated, good-natured disagreement about the quality and significance of *The Counterfeiters* as a novel. Bob asked: Does Gide succeed in demonstrating the difference between reality and the principal characters’ perception of reality?

There was disagreement on this point. Although many acknowledged that Gide did present situations that highlighted the distinction between reality and the characters’ perceptions of reality, others felt that the book did not provide enough insight into the characters and their circumstances to make this meaningful. They also found the asides by Gide to be more distracting than illuminating. The analogy to a cubist painting was repeated by several of our members. They suggested that Gide portrayed different perspectives on reality, from the actions and statements of various characters and from the standpoint of an omniscient (or “semi-omniscient”) narrator, and that the reader was left to make sense of all of the various perspectives. An example of this approach is Gide’s refusal to provide a physical description of any of his characters – the reader is left to “fill in” these details based on his/her own interpretation of the narrative. Some of our group found the “cubist” effect to be compelling and enlightening, while some found it confusing and pretentious.

It was noted that the English translation of the text may not have captured some of the subtle meaning intended by Gide, including his use of ironic language in many places. It was suggested that the English translation by Dorothy Bussy was largely a literal translation, which did not seek to express the subtle meaning often conveyed by Gide’s French text. There were also aspects of the translation that were awkward. For instance, it was noted that in the scene in which the characters hide under the dinner table when gun is fired, Dhurmer insults Olivier for being the last to come out. The French text

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reflects the statement as, essentially, “He has behaved like a woman!”, or, perhaps, “He has behaved like a coward!” However, the English translation portrays it as, “He’s as funky as a girl!” This apparently inapt translation makes the ensuing altercation between Olivier and Dhurmer less understandable.

Several of our members frankly disliked the novel and found it dull, incomprehensible and pretentious. Among the remarks in this regard was the sentiment that, whatever merit the book may have as innovative in terms of structure and subject matter, it ultimately failed because it did not engage the interest or emotion of the reader. It was further noted that Gide seemed to be embracing the concept that absolute moral judgments were not appropriate where people held different perceptions of reality, yet in the end all of the “good” and “bad” characters seemed to get what was coming to them from an old-fashioned moral perspective.

Others, however, expressed genuine fondness for the book, finding Gide’s approach unique and enlightening, the renditions of the characters compelling and the overall effect very beautiful. It was argued that Forrester’s review failed to appreciate the different cultural context in which *The Counterfeiters* was written, and that if one could encounter the book outside of the English/American frame of reference it was easier to appreciate its merit.

Some within this faction acknowledged that while the book may have been difficult to enjoy as entertainment, the innovative structure, the actions of the characters and Gide’s dissertations on novel writing and other topics, provided an interesting study of the French “mind,” which is very different from the traditional English/American view of the world.

We concluded with a brief discussion of Bob’s fourth question: Which characters have evolved the most over the course of the novel? It was agreed that Bernard seemed to have the greatest evolution.

Overall, we had a fascinating, sometimes spirited (but always civil), discussion of the many facets of the novel and its historical and literary context. While as noted, there was a wide divergence of opinion on *The Counterfeiters*, it seemed that the majority of The Novel Club were not fans of the novel. Nevertheless, thanks to the impressive efforts of our hosts and our presenters, an enriching and enjoyable evening was had by all.