

La Symphonie pastorale

A. Gide

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This short novella, published relatively late in the life of Gide (he was fifty) tells the story about a pastor who takes under his wings a blind girl, who is given the name of 'Gertrude'. He becomes obsessed with her and her purity and innocence, which he tries to preserve and protect her from all sinful influences. This provokes the ire of his wife, whom he finds joyless and strict, because as a result he neglects his own children. When he accidentally becomes privy to the attentions of his son Jacques to her, and later hears his confession that he is in love with her and wants to marry her, his own jealousy is awakened, although he does not realize it as such, with its inevitable carnal elements. He manages to discourage his son and sends him away on a long vacation. He also gives way to the commands of his disapproving wife and has his charge moved to a neighbor who teaches her music. Still he visits her every day and is gratified by the importance he exercises in her limited world. Gertrude is of course touching, telling her guardian that one should never lie to the blind. Then it turns out that she may be operated on and given sight. Given enough encouragement he decides to take the risk. Maybe he secretly hopes that she will remain blind, and thus dependent on him, but of course he has no choice once there is a real opportunity. The operation is successful, she is given sight, but shortly afterwards she falls into a river and is nearly drowned. Is it an accident, due to the fact that she is unused to seeing and coordinating her movements accordingly, or is it an attempted suicide? She is rescued by contracts pneumonia and dies shortly thereafter, allowing Gide to indulge in a touching death scene, a recurrent theme in classical literature. One may very well interpret the opening of her eyes to sight having the consequences that she falls out of love with the pastor whom she had pictured as young like his son. Now this touches upon the question of how much the mere visual appearance of an individual plays a role in our love. Does it play a crucial role, as testified by the obsession as to beauty and being good-looking that guides the search for partners. If you loved me when you were blind, will you still love me when you see?

More crucially, and less indulgent of Gide, is the question whether anyone congenitally blind can have any real idea of appearance, and when given physical sight, can he or she really 'see'. Is there not necessarily a long process of making sense of visual stimuli, and one which in addition has to take place at a young tender age when your brain is still malleable. If Gertrude had been blind since birth, could she really have an idea of appearances at all? In fact some of her questions put to the pastor about how things really looked like, indicates an inability to indeed imagine, and hence a deep fascination with a world hidden from you. Here the author Gide shows more prescience than he is qualified to do. Incidentally something mysterious which is sometimes attributed to the creative writer being able to transcend himself. Goethe often referred to this uncanny ability of his when writing his early dramatic works of being able to know how the world really is, without having had the necessary experience of the same to really know.

Gide is known as a religious writer, at least his Protestant background in a Catholic France, is considered important. There is of course, given the *metier* of the main character, discussions of religious nature. Such as the nature of love, if its essence is charity, or something more sinister? The pastor is made to reflect upon the distinction between the teaching of Christ and that of Paul, and that the Christian church is really more influenced by the latter than to the former, much to its detriment. Now the earnest holding forth on matters of life and death by theologians, as pastors are trained to be, invariably invites mild ridicule. How can they talk about real life in such abstract, if impeccable, sentiments. Are they not fools, as the pastor turns out to be?

And as to the pastoral symphony? Gertrude is once taken to a performance of it, which touches her deeply, after all, if blind is not the world of sound made so much more important? This is a natural thought, yet you almost never hear about blind musicians, even less that being blind would be an advantage. Then of course the novelette is presented, ironically at least, as the kind of idyll, supposedly evoked by Beethoven's Sixth symphony, and as such standing apart from the others, more or less of a 'Sturm und Drang' character.

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