

'THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS':

A LETTER

The Editor, HORIZON.

SIR—It is gratifying to every admirer of France and French culture to read Philip Toynbee's article in the November issue of HORIZON, and to know that the hopes we have entertained that France's literary traditions were too strong to be withered by the defeat of 1940 have been so amply justified in the event. It is indeed an impressive balance sheet of literary activity that Mr. Toynbee draws up; but it is perhaps permissible to regret that he found it necessary to introduce a comparison to the disadvantage of British literary output during the same period. Without any attempt to list the works that would make it so 'agonizing' for him to contemplate a French investigator's research in London, he sweepingly declares that 'In the literature of these four years France has been incomparable and undeniably superior'. I do not think I am being unfair to Mr. Toynbee, if I take leave to doubt whether, during the few weeks he had been in Paris when he wrote the article, he had read more than a fraction of the French works he enumerates; it would overtax the energies of even the fastest reader, even if he had no official duties. And if he has not read them, how can he risk such a rash statement? I have not had the good fortune to come by more than a handful of recent French works, but I *have* read a high proportion of the outstanding works published over here, and noting them as I look round my library I am forced to challenge Mr. Toynbee's view. I do not claim that we are *better*; but that our record is so good that it would be foolish to attempt to judge between it and the French record. Mr. Toynbee says that in literary criticism France has the more distinguished war record: do such books as C. M. Bowra's *Heritage of Symbolism*, Jackson Knight's *Roman Vergil*, Lord David Cecil's *Hardy the Novelist*, William Gaunt's *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy*, E. M. W. Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*, Dover Wilson's *Falstaff*, J. C. Smith's *Wordsworth*, W. H. Gardner's *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, and J. Bronowski's

A Man Without a Mask count for so little? Mr. Toynbee continues 'France has also been more productive in the essay', and cites five names. I will reply with five for Britain: Virginia Woolf's *The Death of the Moth*, Raymond Mortimer's *Channel Packet*, V. S. Pritchett's *In My Good Books*, Sir Osbert Sitwell's *Sing High, Sing Low*, Palinurus's *The Unquiet Grave*. Mr. Toynbee speaks, with just respect, of the period of 'privations, obstacles and tragedies' with which French writers had to contend; but for a period which in Britain was marked by similar difficulties, accentuated—as most of our French friends will agree—by total mobilization for the continuance of the war (and the liberation of France) it seems to me a matter of legitimate pride to be able to point to such works of outstanding scholarship, original thought and literary brilliance as R. G. Collingwood's *The New Leviathan*, G. M. Trevelyan's *English Social History*, A. L. Rowse's *Tudor Cornwall*, J. M. Thompson's *The French Revolution*, F. M. Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*, Rebecca West's *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, V. Sackville-West's *The Eagle and the Dove*, C. V. Wedgwood's *William the Silent*, Duff Cooper's *David*, Peter Quennell's *Byron in Italy*; and such notable works of autobiography and reminiscence as William Plomer's *Double Lives*, Harold Nicolson's *The Desire to Please*, Elizabeth Bowen's *Seven Winters*, F. D. Ommamney's *The House in the Park*, Richard Hilary's *The Last Enemy* and Sir Osbert Sitwell's *Left Hand, Right Hand* (already published in the U.S.A. though delayed in London). Others, no doubt, would add other names; and would vary the list of memorable fiction, which for me includes Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, Elizabeth Bowen's *Look at All Those Roses*, Rosamond Lehman's *The Ballad and the Source*, Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome*, Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear*, Henry Green's *Caught*, Rayner Heppenstall's *Saturnine*, Nigel Balchin's *The Small Back Room*, L. P. Hartley's *The Shrimp and the Anemone*, Evelyn Waugh's *Put out More Flags*, Sir Osbert Sitwell's *Open the Door*, William Sansom's *Fireman Flower*, C. S. Forester's *The Ship*, J. B. Priestley's *Daylight on Saturday*, F. L. Green's *Music in the Park*, H. E. Bates's *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, Anthony Thorne's *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, Gerald Kersh's *They Die with Their Boots Clean*, and Mr. Toynbee's own *School in Private*. Mr. Toynbee hesitates when he comes to poetry; and yet in the final balance poetry must weigh heavily, and English poetry has

nothing to fear with T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Edith Sitwell's *Street Songs* and *Green Song*, Laurence Binyon's *Burning of the Leaves*, Edwin Muir's *The Narrow Place*, C. Day Lewis's *Word Over All*, Stephen Spender's *Ruins and Visions*, Louis MacNeice's *Springboard*, David Gascoyne's *Poems*, and many other volumes of achievement and high promise from such young poets (several of whom were killed while they wrote) as Sidney Keyes, Terence Tiller, Alun Lewis, Roy Fuller, Kathleen Raine, Peter Yates, Laurie Lee, Vernon Watkins, Anne Ridler, Lawrence Durrell and John Heath-Stubbs. These lists could, obviously, be much further extended, and no one will forget that the war has not impeded the literary productivity of our two G.O.M. of literature, Shaw and Wells. In drama alone would a Britisher be prepared to consider that Mr. Toynbee had proved his case, for in Jean Paul Sartre (two of whose brilliant stories I had the honour of publishing in English translation some time before the war) it is clear that an altogether original theatrical genius has arisen; yet I seem to remember that though the British wartime stage has been more remarkable for superb revivals than original works, the latter have included witty and arresting pieces by Sean O'Casey, James Bridie, J. B. Priestley, Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan, Peter Ustinov and Rodney Ackland—not to mention the experiments in radio drama of Louis MacNeice and Edward Sackville-West. Mr. Toynbee has done a great service in producing such an animated and up-to-date piece of research as *The Literary Situation in France*; but I do not think that the so much to be desired cementing of cultural links between our two great countries is forwarded by turning a blind eye to what has been achieved in the country which for one fateful year survived alone in this hemisphere and fought on alone against barbarism. I confess that I can contemplate a French investigation of the matter without any sensation of being 'agonized'.—Yours, etc.

JOHN LEHMANN

[This letter may be regarded as the prelude to further attempts to elucidate the literary situation in both France and England. The Editor of HORIZON is now in Paris in search of fuller accounts of the French achievement and HORIZON will also shortly publish a tentative list of the hundred best books that have appeared in England since the war, which should be of interest both here and in France. That the French should think our books better than theirs, and that we should hold the opposite opinion is part of the sweet mirage of propinquity which is such a fortunate symptom in two countries who in culture, and in historical predicament, are really one.]

DYLAN THOMAS
VISION AND PRAYER

Who
Are you
Who is born
In the next room
So loud to my own
That I can hear the womb
Opening and the dark run
Over the ghost and the dropped son
Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone?
In the birth bloody room unknown
To the burn and turn of time
And the heart print of man
Bows no baptism
But dark alone
Blessing on
The wild
Child.

I
Must lie
Still as stone
By the wren bone
Wall hearing the moan
Of the mother hidden
And the shadowed head of pain
Casting tomorrow like a thorn
And the midwives of miracle sing
Until the turbulent new born
Burns me his name and his flame
And the winged wall is torn
By his torrid crown
And the dark thrown
From his loin
To bright
Light.