

## Books and Things

AT Harvard, near the end of the eighteen-eighties some of us came for the first time into contact with the rumor that art in England and America was not free. We took the rumor with a gravity proper to its implications and to our age, examined it and found it true. In England, for example, the novelist's art had lost the freedom which once was hers. It was Taine who pointed out that Thackeray had omitted the one fact his readers most needed to learn about Mrs. Rawdon Crawley. To reread *Vanity Fair* was to become convinced not only that Thackeray had not told us whether Mrs. Crawley's temperament was fire, ice, or something between the two, but also that Thackeray didn't know himself, and would have thought such knowledge unfit for a gentleman, even a creative gentleman. Of such grave internal injuries was a habit of reticence the cause. By contrasting Thackeray's suppressions and evasions with Fielding's plainness of speech, which a few of the more optimistic among us called a noble plainness, we reached the conclusion that the moment had come for striking the fetters from the English-speaking novelist's stunted limbs.

Timidity had dealt yet more devastatingly with the English-speaking dramatist. He was extinct. It had killed him. To find him alive and strong we had to go back, far back, past Shelley, who had treated in *The Cenci* a subject forbidden on our contemporary stage, back to the early eighteenth and late seventeenth centuries, to Vanbrugh, Farquhar, Congreve and Wycherley, since whose day there had been no drama in English. Their obtruded indecency might seem monotonous, their drama might not move as life moved, but it did keep going. Leaving them we marched further up the stream of time, and pitched our tents upon the wide Elizabethan tableland, refreshed by all the winds of the world. The greatest spaces, the darkest passions, the earthliest laughter, the loveliest gaiety, color, music, ruin and will—it was to these that freedom led the Elizabethan right party.

From England and the past we turned to the continent and the present, to the dramatists and novelists of France. The briefest excursion was long enough to assure us that art, in France, was free. So liberating was their liberty that at first we did not notice how close they came to saying all of them only one forbidden thing, or how differently they said it. At first we lumped Théophile Gautier and Flaubert, Zola and de Maupassant together as men who were not afraid to speak the truth, and whose art no authority made tongue-tied. An equal frankness gave feature to the French stage of that period, as we saw it then through opening eyes. Francillon had just been born, Denise was only a few years old, Suzanne d'Ange, although past thirty, had not lost her youth. But our divine omnivorousness could not last. We could not remain forever blind to Flaubert's want of joy, to Zola's longness and heaviness, to Maupassant's sober cruelty, to the fact that Dumas fils, in spite of all his wit, took his morality with a preacher's seriousness. One of our feebler spirits, looking for somebody who was frivolous and light-hearted, happened upon Meilhac and Halévy, and was quick to spread the good news that even free artists could be care-free.

Thirty years ago we thought what we were told to think. Writing only a few years later than the date I have in mind, writing of a Meilhac and Halévy revival at the Variétés, Jules Lemaitre said that *La Petite Marquise*, for all its lightness, its ease, its air of having been made

out of nothing and with no effort, was nevertheless a remarkably complex work. It was an ironic comedy and a comedic comedy, although irony and the comic were supposed to be mutually exclusive. "Mots de nature" were so plentiful in the dialogue that here and there, fifteen years before Antoine's time, *La Petite Marquise* was a Théâtre Libre play; this impression being contradicted by the occasional artifice which brought on the comic effects, and by Meilhac and Halévy's elegance and self-pleasing fancifulness. The characters had often an air of self-mockery, yet they were very sincere, very natural, very true, with a truth which liked to be daring, which seemed now and then to be on the point of turning dismal and cruel, but which was never either. The authors were indulgent in their wisdom. They did not ask too much of mankind or of life, for all they asked was a little gentleness.

A week or two ago, after an evening at the Vieux Colombier, where they were giving *La Petite Marquise* and *l'Amour Médecin*, and where I had been interested and amused by the contrast between Molière's broad brush, and the younger men's brittle slimness, I reread Lemaitre's article. Very sincere, very natural, very true in spite of their self-mockery—nowadays no one would think of applying these words to the characters in *La Petite Marquise*. These men and women have a top-layer naturalness, to be sure, and they are true each to his own surface, but surface is their only attribute, two dimensions are all they possess. They are light soils. They are lean ores. They are figures taken out of vaudeville, in the French sense, and put into a story which does illustrate human nature, but throughout which they keep their vaudeville nature. Their clear feelings are on the tiniest scale. Marionettes they are, the work of an indulgent and tolerant creator, who keeps their strings out of sight, their motions almost life-like.

A friend who had seen *La Petite Marquise*, and whom I asked to tell me why the play had aged, said the right answer was the war. Another friend's explanation began further back. We live, he went on to assure me, in a democratic age. From any representative art we demand pictures of lives as modest and as busy as our own. We demand above all the discussion on the stage of problems that must be solved, and solved soon. What have we to do with the lives of idle men and women in love, with little marchionesses and the little adulteries that they take under advisement, shy at, renounce and postpone? At this point he laid a hand on my sleeve, gave me a cosmic look, and remarked that we live in an age of transition. Then I realized sadly and gloomily what I might have known all along, that from this man no son of Adam would ever get an explanation small enough to fit anything smaller than this universal frame of things.

I have reserved for my own use, as is the custom of all writers, the correct explanation. Time, in ageing *La Petite Marquise*, has had help from French playwrights who have succeeded Meilhac and Halévy, and from Maurice Donnay most of all. Today, to the generation which had just grown up in 1890, some of Lemaitre's words read less like a description of *La Petite Marquise* than like a forecast of *Amants* or *La Douleureuse*. Donnay gives us so much more than Meilhac and Halévy, and all that they give us except one thing—that sense of a tradition observed, of a given space being filled exactly, of design, of proportion, which pleased me so much, the other night, at the Vieux Colombier.

P. L.

## Rebecca West's First Novel

*The Return of the Soldier*, by Rebecca West. New York: The Century Company. \$1.

**T**HIS book is like a golden cup of some best period, beautifully designed, graven with details one cannot look at often enough, covered with a patina such as nobody but Rebecca West gets, and filled with a curious wine of unfamiliar vintage.

The beauty Miss West gives us is a beauty of observation. She has an eye that can see, as if no one had seen them before, many things dear to England and England's visitors, English hills and trees, an English season, times of day, different kinds of day on the earth and in the clouds. It is a beauty of imagery, of phrases like "alchemy turning to gold all the dark metals of events," of imagery lovely and expressive, coming all the while and never too often, coming at the right moment and unsought. It is a beauty of English prose, of sentences shaped so that one would like to run one's fingers along the fineness of their curves and the delineative sharpness of their angles.

In a sense *The Return of the Soldier* is both contemporary and modern. Chris Baldry, thirty-six, a captain, serving on the French front, suffers concussion and forgets the last fifteen years of his life. The moment at which his memory stops short is fixed by a suppressed wish. Since the day when his father handed over to him, a boy of twenty-one, the management of the family business, Chris did his work well as a man of large affairs. He married. He made his wife as happy as he could by giving her kindness and ease and whatever money and her taste could buy. But Chris himself was not happy. He had never been happy since the day when he quarreled foolishly with his first love, Margaret Allington, the daughter of an innkeeper who lived on an island in the Thames. When Chris wakes to consciousness in a hospital, near Boulogne, he has forgotten his marriage, his wife, their baby who died five years ago, the war, his own age, everything that has happened since just before his quarrel with Margaret. It is to Margaret that he telegraphs and writes from hospital.

And in a sense this modern and contemporary story has no date. Upon his return to England, to the wife he cannot remember, Chris tells her that if he does not see Margaret he shall die. His wife sends for Margaret, married and middle-aged, with a face and figure that life has aged and blurred. Will his love change where it finds change? No, he joyfully accepts Margaret as she is, and then we come upon days of first love remembered, recreated, lived into the present, he believing in the present and taking it for real, she contrasting it, this strangely near and incarnate might have been, with the reality it effaces for Chris, the reality of their separation, their two defeated lives. She knows that their hour will end when his illness is over, that his cure will divide them, and send each back into an unloved existence, she longs for and dreads this cure.

While reading this part of the story I looked for a suggestion that to Chris and Margaret, had they married when they were young, ironic life would have brought something very different from the unshadowed happiness which their youth looked forward to. No such suggestion is made, and to have desired it was stupid of me, for Miss West has painted her picture of a golden age with another and more tonic irony; with a conviction which subtly pervades

all her exaltation of love over success, all her faith that life without love is not life, the conviction that we must always choose to see things as they are, whatever serene visions are shattered by the choice, whatever towers fall.

Miss West does not insist upon this conviction. She does not insist upon any conviction. Before beginning *The Return of the Soldier* I could have sworn she would load her story with tendency. Into the stream of her narrative I was afraid she would discharge so many opinions that they would check its flow and threaten to change its course. I was sure all these opinions would be set down with pugnacious emphasis. These predictions were wide of the mark. *The Return of the Soldier* is singularly free from all kinds of affirmation except one, not just wiped clean of affirmations, but deeply otherwise conceived. My guess as to the story's first-beginnings, a guess I record because it helps to account for an impression left by the story, is that its author, intending to write a novel and looking about for a subject, hit upon loss of memory caused by concussion and defined by a suppressed wish, put this subject into her imagination and kept it there until she saw it as a beauty of human relation, of the unilluded woman's attitude toward the man who has forgotten all his life since just before the day when she went out of it. To this end, the portrayal of a relation, loss of memory and suppressed wish are only means. So imaginatively has this relation been conceived that almost nothing is told us of the past which does not qualify the present, and yet no part of the past strikes one as being withheld.

It was not Miss West's imagination, I should say, but her laboring will that did her dramatis personæ. That is what is the matter with her men and women. She is not yet a creator of character. An English clergyman, Chris's cousin Frank, draws his own likeness in one long letter, and the cleverness of this caricature, the author's parti pris, her pleasure in scoring too easily off her victim, are oddly out of place in this story, where all the other characters have few details, have little existence except as points in a relation. Miss West works hard over them. It is only when she hopes to make them come alive that she cannot refrain from affirmation.

Even the simplest story presents difficulties which its inventor must try to overcome, and which Miss West has not overcome. Of these I shall mention only the two that matter. Here is Margaret Allington, as she is when Chris loses his memory: "Well, she was not so bad. Her body was long and round and shapely, and with a noble squareness of the shoulders; her fair hair curled diffidently about a good brow; her gray eyes, though they were remote, as if anything worth looking at in her life had kept a long way off, were full of tenderness; and though she was slender, there was something about her of the wholesome, endearing heaviness of the ox or the trusted big dog. Yet she was bad enough. She was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty, as even a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed for a day or two is repulsive when the chambermaid retrieves it from the dust and fluff." The fear of the teller of Miss West's story, a cousin who has always been in love with Chris, is that he will not be able to accept this Margaret as his Margaret. It was my fear, and Chris's immediate acceptance of her is left unexplained. I am sceptical, and my scepticism keeps me company all the rest of the way.

Another feeling I have all along is wonder that neither Chris's wife, nor his cousin, nor Margaret, nor any of