

Foreign Literature

A Learned Tome

LA PENSÉE FRANÇAISE AU XVIII^{SIÈCLE}. By DANIEL MORNET. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin. 1926.

Reviewed by ALBERT SCHINTZ
Smith College

AS in the other volume of the Collection Armand Colin, the aim of this work is to react against the tendency of recent years to be satisfied with the pigeon-holing of facts without much attempt at finding the significance and value of these facts. A constructive synthetic view of all the data on hand up to this day on the French eighteenth century is suggested.

One can probably say that no period of French literature and thought has been so much studied in the last decade, and so much studied with the searching new methods of severe scholarship;—the reason being, it would seem, that the eighteenth century was a period of social unrest similar to ours in many respects. Moreover, of this eighteenth century in France, it can safely be said that no one has a broader knowledge than the learned Sorbonne professor. Mr. Mornet's command of facts is simply appalling;—and even discouraging to those who try to work in the same field. To classify within a little over two hundred pages this prodigious erudition was certainly a task, and it must have cost the author great effort to prevent his own mind from being submerged under the stream of the cards. He seems not to be submerged . . . but the writer would not dare to assert too positively that some of his readers will not be. At any rate, it is impossible to read many pages at a time: every point made is illustrated by such an array of names, and titles, and dates, that one gets dizzy.

Mr. Mornet's volume would make a splendid work of reference; but to answer this purpose, it ought to be provided with an index, and the index would have to be so voluminous as almost to duplicate the size of the book. Certain it is that it will not be advisable hereafter to publish any work of any scope on the French eighteenth century, without consulting this little volume, in order to make sure that what one wanted to say had not been found out before, in order to complete one's own information, and in order to ascertain how far other aspects of the point in question had been studied.

Columbus Demoted

LA VÉRIDIQUE AVENTURE DE CHRISTOPHE COLOMB. By MARIUS ANDRÉ. Paris: Plon. 1927.

Reviewed by CLIFFORD S. PARKER

THIS professedly "true" story of Columbus may shock those whose notions of the great discoverer are based wholly on what they learned in school books or on what they have read in the works of adulatory historians like Prescott and Washington Irving. Unfortunately M. André is as partial and prejudiced in minimizing the importance and defaming the character of the Admiral as others (especially those French writers who campaigned for his canonization) have been in eulogizing him. His book is an attempt to popularize, through the use of a partly fictional form, the discoveries of the "higher criticism" that for the last forty years has been actively directed upon the career of Columbus. Though M. André, who for ten years was a French consul in Spain, has read for himself the original documents, he adds little or nothing to what can be found in a scholarly and detailed work like Justin Winsor's "Christopher Columbus."

That the character of Columbus was made up largely of vanity, stubbornness, avarice, and despotism, that he was an adventurer, a visionary, and a prevaricator, cannot obliterate the fact that he and he alone instigated and led the expedition that first crossed the Atlantic Ocean. As he was searching for the islands and the continent of India (which to his dying day he thought he had found), his discovery of the West Indies was a blunder. But it was a fact; it opened the way to further exploration; it remains true that in spite of all his faults, "no man" (to quote Professor Mussey) "has done more to change the course of human history than Christopher Columbus."

M. André's readers should be warned against his book's presumption of veracity, its thesis that the reputation of Columbus is merely a matter of legend, its presentation of the hero as a man to be despised. How much better it would have been to have fictionalized his life sympathetically as a

tragedy of pitiful delusions and disappointments—a climax of honor and glory—a catastrophe of obscurity, insanity, and death!

Les Romantiques

LE ROMANTISME. By LOUIS REYNAUD. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin. 1926.

Reviewed by FREDERICK E. PIERCE
Yale University

FOR years French critics have been insisting that the natural spirit of their literature is classic, that romanticism was a foreign importation, never really incorporated into the national thought. Professor Reynaud reiterates this thesis with the enthusiasm of a patriot, and in the main with the thoroughness of a scholar. He ranges over a wide field, and in foreign literatures, German and English, is guilty of a few trifling inaccuracies; but they are not such as to impair his general conclusions. As far as the human mind can judge, a France isolated from the world would never have generated romanticism, and a France less infatuated with the traditions of its ancient enemies would never have persisted in romanticism when once developed.

There are, however, certain minor by-paths of thought in this book which go wandering into debatable country. Any careful student of comparative literature knows that the influence of one country on another is often an influence working through misunderstanding. So at times the debtor nation copies, not the real essence of the literature supposed to be its model, but a mistaken conception of that literature existing only in its own mind. And even where it copies accurately, it often chooses the worst of a foreign literature, instead of the best. So it is not fair to judge the model by the copy. Professor Reynaud is right in saying that the French romantic movement was often materialistic, and that this materialism was stimulated by English and German influence. But he is not right in implying that the English and German movements, as wholes, were materialistic. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Keats and Shelley in England, Hölderlin, Novalis, Eichendorff, and Kleist in Germany, were definitely at war with the prevailing materialism of their age. Professor Reynaud does not distinguish sharply enough between the popular authors of the day, catering to the weaknesses of their age, and the great unpopular idealists, who often traveled in a very different direction. He also emphasizes too strongly his point that romanticism was a Protestant movement, hostile to Catholic tradition. The movement covered a vast and varied territory. Sometimes its influence was anti-Catholic, as in Mrs. Radcliffe, sometimes pseudo-Catholic, as in Friedrich Schlegel, sometimes nobly Catholic, as in Eichendorff. But a movement which sent half a dozen New England Transcendentalists into the Roman communion, which helped to start the Tractarian agitation, which in Germany was considered by Eichendorff as an instrument for bringing the Teutonic world back to the ancient faith—such a movement cannot be dismissed as simply Protestant. It ramified through all countries, theologies, and philosophies. It belonged to all creeds and no creed. Much as we admire his scholarship, we do at times suspect Professor Reynaud of patriotic prejudices, of trying to prove, not only that the French brand of poetry, but also the French brand of Catholicism is the best. The romantic and Catholic poets of Ireland might object.

But, in spite of some prejudices, the book is of unquestionable value. It develops with insight and elaborate evidence a conception of literary history in which we have always believed. One after another, the leading nations of Europe have assumed the literary hegemony, and stamped the literatures of their neighbors with their own national stamp. The renaissance was the literary hegemony of Italy, the neo-classic period that of France, the romantic period that of England and Germany. Monsieur Reynaud's book simply deepens our conviction that this is the true conception of history. Romanticism was the natural spirit of the north. When the nations of the north took the literary leadership, all Europe, superficially at least, became romantic. Now France is trying to free herself from a foreign tradition, inimical to her own best artistic development, however it may favor such development in her northern neighbors. Such is the main message of Professor Reynaud's book, and it is a noble and true one.

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Points of View

More About Gissing

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

Happening to see a recent number of your paper, I find in it a foot-and-mouth attack on George Gissing by Mr. McFee.

McFee seems particularly annoyed because Gissing knew Latin and Greek. He could "spout" the classics, he says, and implies that on account of this Gissing was a "superior person" to be despised by all horny-handed sons of toil. This uneasiness before classical culture, this self-assertive swagger in the presence of it, is no doubt an indication of the fact that Mr. McFee's own instruction has a good number of gaps; for no civilized man could be such a fool as to think that such a profound knowledge as Gissing had of the great writers of Greece and Rome is anything but a benefit. Just the trouble with Gissing is that he forgot altogether the lessons in art to be derived from the Latin and Greek classics when he sat down to write his novels.

I never knew Gissing, but I met him once in rather a numerous company. Anybody less like Mr. McFee's Superior Person—using this phrase as McFee does in a disparaging sense—it would be difficult to imagine. It was at the end of his life. He looked ill and seemed shy—not with the surly shyness of some, but anxiously shy, as a man not sure of his ground or even of himself. This I thought odd, for by that time he was become well known and had many admirers, some of whom placed him very high indeed, while they agreed that his books were "depressing." Well yes, depressing, but not dull, or only dull when he strayed from his real nature and tried to copy Dickens and to be blithe and light-some.

Not only "New Grub Street," to which Mr. McFee gives reluctant praise, but "In the Year of Jubilee," "The Odd Women," "Denzil Quarrier," "Demos," "The Nether World," are all remarkable books, here and there great in their way. "The Whirlpool," the last important book he wrote, is a masterpiece which may be placed beside other masterpieces of his period, such as "Tess of

the D'Urbervilles" and "Evan Harrington." While the general novel of the time dealt with the Hall and the Rectory and the love affairs of the young squire, while even the best of them, George Eliot's for instance, never got beyond the story of individuals, Gissing took sections of English life presented impartially, thus offering them for criticism. Compared with the books mentioned, how insignificant appear the novels which George Moore was offering about the same time, "A Mummer's Wife," "Mike Fletcher," etc., or to get even lower down, "As in a Looking-Glass," by F. C. Phillips, a book which sold by thousands at a time when Gissing was all but starving. Meredith and John Morley have it to their credit that they were not obfuscated by the small success of Gissing's books: they saw in him the recorder of their time—not completely, of course, nor on the whole, saliently, but of that part turned to shadow.

One may object to the theory—the philosophy if you like—of Gissing's books, as one may object to the theory of Trollope, Disraeli, Thackeray—especially Thackeray. It were too long to explain here what that theory was, but I am ready to do it in an article for any editor who asks me. What I would say now is that Gissing did with one section of Victorian society what Trollope did with another. Trollope has lately been revived with much praise in England. Gissing is more profound, more scientific, and living, while Trollope is archaic, for the reason that the poor we have always with us, but Bishops and Cathedral clergy not always. Only the English can appreciate writers like Trollope and Jane Austen, but Gissing's books will come home to any foreigner. Why should he not swim if Trollope does? Has any one else rendered the dingy, frowsy, drab middle-class English as he?

There is of course surplussage in most of his novels, even deliberate padding. In his time the old three-decker—the three-volume novel, sold at a guinea and a half; and owing to the circulating libraries this system of book-production was hard to kill. The unfortunate author was obliged to spin out to the prescribed length, just as a generation earlier Dickens and Thackeray were obliged

to pad out their "Number." Gissing survived into the time of the one-volume novel sold at six shillings, and that is certainly one of the reasons why his later novels are in many respects his best.

It is easy enough to sneer at Gissing's "amorous weaknesses" and all that. It is not easy to overestimate his courage in writing as he did. He was paid a small sum by Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co. for each novel, and on this miserable pittance he had mainly to live and keep his wife and children living till the next novel was finished. Now, I have been told that Smith, Elder & Co. were constantly holding a threat over his head to drop him, and they suppressed whatever did not please them. Till near the end of his life, when he fell into more liberal hands, Gissing believed that if they did drop him he would never find another publisher. In this extraordinary torment he passed his days, depending on Meredith's admiration to keep him well with the firm in Waterloo Place. Oh, yes, he was "a literary man," as Mr. McFee says, sneeringly.

He speaks with cruel satisfaction of Gissing's failure in the United States. But this failure is more to the discredit of the U.S.A. than of Gissing. A country which could not otherwise utilize a man of Gissing's immense qualifications (for these, cf. the Dictionary of National Biography, Supplement 1) than to make him a plumber's and gas-fitter's mate was still in the pioneer stage. When Gissing assembled a little money he fled in horror from the U. S. A. and passed with perfect ease from the state of plumber's mate in Utica, N. Y. to the state of a highly esteemed *privat-docent* at Göttingen. Could Mr. McFee, could many of the rest of us, do that? Gissing knew German well and liked Germany. It is a pity he could not have managed to stay there. He would have been happier. But he was thoroughly English on both father's and mother's side. It may be said that the misfortunes of his life were due to an English understanding of the laws of life. In other countries his life would have shaped otherwise. Such mistakes as wrecked him in England would have found their solution very easily elsewhere.

I must add, that if I write to praise and defend Gissing, it is because I regard him objectively as a considerable figure in the English literature of the nineteenth century. But his kind of literature, realism in the manner of Goncourt, Zola, George Moore, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and a horde of others, is to me the most detestable literature in the world, and I rejoice that it is now dead everywhere except in America. At his best, when he was really inspired, Gissing shook off the encumbering chains. The last chapters of "The Whirlpool" are an example of what he could do when he did. And it is to his credit that while other eminent authors have produced mechanical books, or books which are mere repetitions of their most popular effort, he erred only on the side of the distressing detail.

It is a mistake to put him, as Mr. McFee does, among the writers of the eighteen-nineties in English, if by that is understood those writers who contributed to the earlier *Yellow Book* and then to *The Savoy*. On these he had no influence whatever. What could be less like a fiction of Gissing's than a fiction of Max Beerbohm's? Mrs. Craigie may be taken as a representative novelist of the eighteen-nineties, and she never suggests Gissing. He belonged to the preceding generation, Aubrey Beardsley and Gissing died within four years of each other, but Gissing was forty-eight and Beardsley only twenty-five.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN.

Paris, France.

The Eugenists

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

In his very interesting review of the Autobiography of Hans Christian Andersen, Mr. Colum says, "Back of this poverty there was feeble-mindedness on the side of Andersen's father. Indeed if the eugenists of our day could have had power then, Hans Andersen would never have been allowed to come into the world at all. His father for all that, was a remarkable man." It seems a pity that very intelligent men should so misinterpret the objects of the eugenists, because the advocates of eugenic reform must depend on the help of the intelligent to educate the less intelligent. In every movement there are enthusiasts whose views are extreme, and lacking in common sense, but if one wishes to know what the eugenists are trying to do he need only read the article on "The Survival of the Unfit" in the August number of the *Forum* by Leonard Darwin, one of the recognized heads of the movement.

CHARLES HERRMAN, M.D.

New York.

A Retort Courteous

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

It takes a bold and reckless soul to dash between a man, his Maker, and his friends.

But today is the day of boldness. And I, like the whole world, admire it.

I trust, however, my swearing may not have disturbed the Scottish Dialects Committee, whose meeting I burst in on so informally.

Charleston, S. C.

JOHN BENNETT.

Editor's Note—Mr. Bennett refers in this good-humored and humorous epistle to the rudeness with which the printer thrust him into the midst of the proceedings of the Scottish Dialects Committee by inserting a dash before the last line of his "Epitaph," thereby adding the line to the following note. We have already made acknowledgment of this error in our issue of July 30. We reprint Mr. Bennett's letter as evidence of the gallantry with which he has accepted the mishap.

The Romanticist

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

In his communication to your issue of July 16, Mr. J. Hamilton gently condemns my article, "Perennial Romanticism," for failing to give "any clear-cut definition of the word 'romanticism.'" The omission is evident and it was quite deliberate. I had no intention of adding one more to the innumerable definitions of romanticism already available. Descartes, indeed, seems to have supposed that it was possible to give a clear-cut definition of practically any old idea and that a correct definition embodied the truth of the idea. Modern science, however, with modern philosophy in its wake, has abandoned the notion of "correct" definition and adopted the more modest attitude that a definition is of value, not in itself, but in proportion as it leads toward facts. With abstract concepts, relatively sharp definitions are possible: a triangle or a circle may be clearly defined because there is so little to say about it and the facts to which it leads are all of geometrical character. With historical concepts, on the other hand,—paganism, humanism, Christianity, romanticism,—each of which comes saturated with a thousand varying illustrations—the thing is no longer possible. The facts to which our word is to lead—in each case an immense group of highly complex and varying individuals—will only be indicated by a word of complex and varying meanings. The definition of such a word requires, not a single sentence, as my Cartesian critic seems to suppose, but volumes.

All that I attempted to do in the offending article was to point out in my unsystematic way certain characteristics frequently found in those whom we are pleased to call romanticists, with special reference to three particular writers who possess some of these characteristics. In conclusion my point may be illustrated by the definition of romanticism which Mr. Hamilton wonders if I would accept: "the romanticist has and expresses an emotion in relation to his subject: he kneads his own personal reactions into his work, so that it is never purely objective." This, it seems to me, might perhaps be elaborated, properly qualified, into a helpful lead, but just as it stands it would include among romanticists Dryden, Pope, Molière, Thackeray, Trollope, and, in the last analysis, every writer of literary merit, since literature differs from science precisely in this addition of subjective reactions to objective fact. It is, indeed, "a clear-cut definition," but it is hardly useful.

ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES.

Washington, D. C.

C. W. Eliot Letters

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
SIR:

The family of the late Charles W. Eliot and I are desirous of obtaining as many as possible of his letters to correspondents both at home and abroad, for use or reference in connection with a biography or biographical collection of letters which I have agreed to prepare for publication. Mr. Eliot's life covered such a long span and his correspondence was so wide that we are trying to take every means of reaching what may be interesting. Letters may be sent to me at 10 East 10th Street, New York City, or if sent to the Eliot family they will be forwarded to me.

HENRY JAMES.

Westbrook, L. I.

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