

A Letter from France

By ABEL CHEVALLEY

THE Goncourt Prize has just been awarded to M. Constantin Weyer for his novel "Un Homme Se Penche sur Son Passé." I was, I believe, among the first to call attention to his work, for I was long ago convinced that he deserved the recognition which he has now received. But how spectacular is the northern Canada of his prize-novel! It introduces us to a cowboy who reads Pascal, and is chock full of metaphysical problems. The sentimental anecdote that binds together his vivid descriptions is of the flimsiest order. The spirit of Jack London hovers around the whole performance.

This is not the first time that the Goncourt prize has been awarded, not to what is most deserving in a given author, but to what passes for the moment as "modern" in the minds of the multitude of this country, however antiquated and worn-out in others.

I do not believe in literary prizes. They do more harm than good, at least in France. They encourage sensationalism and mercantilism. Literary talent is no longer in danger of being left unrecognized. It overflows. It is as plentiful as turnips in Beauce, and the demand at least equals the supply. When old Goncourt endowed his ten-member Academy, the situation was very different. He wanted the young dare-devils to have their chance. Now, since the war, dare-devils have been constantly at a premium, and we are getting sick of devilry. The only artists that are not encouraged are those who have the courage to learn their business. Flaubert, Anatole France, the Goncourts themselves served a long apprenticeship before fame and money came their way.

Genius is not necessarily revelation; it is also work and patience. In order to be faithful to the Goncourt spirit, the Goncourt Prize ought to go, not to the most revolutionary, but to the most traditional of our young novelists. They are the only real dare-devils of the so-called "modern generation."

What is really "modern" in French contemporary literature? The word itself is ambiguous. In its literal sense it means "of to-day." Etymologically speaking, our grandmothers are as modern as ourselves. They belong to their generation, which has just as good a right to exist in this world, and make a splash, too, as our own. And in their time they were probably not only modern, but modernist. In that sense all contemporary writings are modern, even the epic poems and five-act rhymed tragedies which provincial academies are still crowning with laurels. Even Nobel Prize literature is modern.

But from the same Latin origin is also derived *mode*, i. e., manner, or fashion. A modern novel is not only novel, but it is fashionable. It has a manner of being novel which makes it fashionable. On the other hand, if it is too widely accepted and fails to cause surprise, to come as something of a shock, it ceases at once to be modern. We are in a labyrinth.

In his "Initiation à la Littérature d'Aujourd'hui" (Renaissance du Livre), M. E. Bouvier does not quite find the way out. He is so systematic and cocksure that one is tempted to challenge him at every turn. But his notion of what has been considered as modern, say since the war, is strictly consonant with the one aspect of modernity that has been the most evident in contemporary literature, that of *surprise, shock, discordance*. Guillaume Apollinaire used to say: *La surprise est la grande ressource de l'esprit nouveau* (surprise is the mainspring of the new spirit). Hence the vogue of unexpected metaphors: dry, crooked, pungent mannerisms falling like boomerangs on the reader's mind—inexplicable happenings, sub-conscious, marvelous, unconnected—premeditated audacities of thought and expression. But the effect of surprise is surprisingly short-lived. We have got to the point at which we expect the unexpected. The element of shock, being discounted, is destroyed. You cannot petrify people already turned into pillars of salt.

What is the consequence? The word *modern* rapidly ceases to be a synonym of *jarring, startling, or lurid*. There is a noticeable movement of public taste towards those writers who, eschewing the element of shock or surprise, have been content to work slowly, before and since the war, on strongly coherent themes, producing closely-knit series of volumes, hardly noticed when they first appeared, but now coming into their own.

Marcel Proust was one of these men. His

industry hastened his death, and his death, his fame. But it is no exaggeration to say, with the good German critic Curtius, that, even if he were still alive, his work would mark a turning point in the history of the novel. Roger Martin du Gard, author of "Les Thibaut," who was the main subject of one of my recent letters, is another case in point. And if you have not yet heard of René Béhaine, you will soon be asking yourself why he also has become modern without trying to be discordant. He began, twenty years ago, his "Histoire d'une Société" and has recently published the sixth volume under the title, "Avec les Yeux de l'Esprit" (Grasset). The original first volume, "Les Nouveaux Venus," is now out of print. It bore the imprint of Fasquelle. Bernard Grasset bought the copyright, together with the remains of the first edition. It is now being reprinted. Success came with the fourth volume. René Béhaine has some fanatical admirers, among whom Léon Daudet, a great discoverer of hidden treasure. I do not share their enthusiasm. René Béhaine is too portentous for my taste. But let us give him his due: he sets a great example of conscience and thoroughness. His province is the generation of 1900, and especially the catholic and provincial girl of France.

The progressive weakening of the element of surprise in what is considered as *modern* has had another effect. We are not following with a renewed admiration the work of men like Jean Schlumberger, who are silently recasting what was once called the novel of introspection. Of the five stories contained in "Les Yeux de Dix-huit Ans" (N. R. F.), one, "Au Bivouac," is a triumph of technique, and I cannot adequately describe the sense both of mystery and mastery which it arouses, even in a blasé reader of fiction like myself. It has been hailed as a masterpiece by Edmond Jaloux, an excellent critic, and himself a novelist of no mean distinction. Edmond Jaloux has been granted "Le Grand Prix de Littérature," that is, the highest award that the Academy can confer on a living writer, pending his election. "La Branche Morte" (Plon) contains three long stories, written, one in 1924, the second in 1911, the third in the author's youth, about 1900. The development of his talent, the progress of his harmonious career, are epitomized in "La Branche Morte." I entirely share his admiration for the sort of work which the name of Jean Schlumberger represents.

Jacques de Lacretelle's "L'Âme Cachée" is also one of those books where the hidden soul of men and things is, as it were, illuminated from within, independently of external and surprising invention. It consists of four tales, one of which, "La Mart d'Hippolyte," deserves to become, and is in a fair way of becoming, a classic. Lacretelle's novels "Silberman" and "La Bonifas," and especially the latter, are with good reason considered as absolutely sure to survive as models of the French novel in this decade.

"Le Miroir à Deux Faces," by Jacques Boulanger (N. R. F.), bears a felicitous and significant title, which could be equally well applied to several other novels published this year (for instance, "Climats," by André Maurois, and "Blèche," by Duné La Rochelle). They are all "double-faced mirrors," where the same people, the same events, are seen through two opposed minds and temperaments.

As often as not, they consist of conjugal diaries, where the refracted images of the wife in her husband's mind and the husband in his wife's heart are successively presented. The situations are not new, but the *technique* of these diptychs has been surprisingly refreshed and renewed. For lightness of touch, vivacity, agreement, give me Jacques Boulanger. The two faces of his mirror close upon each other, bright and fit, like those hinged writing tablets, waxed on the inner side, which ancient poets have used and loved. And that, again, is *modern* work without modern aggressiveness.

Gerhardt Hauptmann's new novel, "Wanda" (Fischer Verlag) is, according to reports from Berlin, creating considerable of a sensation in Germany. It is the story of a sculptor, a man sprung from the people who has attained to great success, and who in the provincial town where honors are about to be bestowed upon him, meets a young girl model, member of a traveling show. The girl, completely soulless, enslaves the man, and works his ruin through his passion. The story is told with skill.

CAPITAL AND FINANCE IN THE AGE OF THE RENAISSANCE. By RICHARD EHRENBERG. Translated by H. M. LUCAS. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1928. \$4.50.

The sixteenth century appears in history as a broad economic and political hiatus which separates—and yet joins—the Middle Ages and modern times. Looked at in the perspective which four hundred years have given us, its very incoherence is its most eloquent characteristic. Politically considered, its greatest importance consists in the final supremacy of the nation state and the absolute monarchy. Its economic concomitants are the wider area of exchanges, the growth of the great bourses, the expansion of the money economy—in brief, the commercial revolution. In these enormous processes there were few participants equal in importance to the members of the House of Fugger.

Jakob Fugger II supplied the funds with which Philip V bought his election as Holy Roman Emperor. The Fugger family financed princes, established extensive foreign agencies and branches, carried on enormous transactions (for that time) in international exchanges, participated in the business of the bourses, and lost most of its collective fortune through the series of Spanish state bankruptcies. Dr. Ehrenberg's account of the Fuggers and their times is scholarly without being tedious, and penetrating without too meticulous a consideration of alternatives and potentialities. While written chiefly for historians, it should prove to be a most valuable economic treatment of the sixteenth century for lay readers of history.

"A thousand numbered copies of an im-

portant work on art, in two volumes, has lately been published," says the London *Observer*. "It is 'Storia dei Pittori Italiani dell'Ottocento,' by Enrico Somarè. (Milan: L'Esame. Edizione d'Arte Moderna. Lire 700.) There are hundreds of fine reproductions, some in color, and the clear type and sober magnificence of the leather binding make it a welcome addition to the library. Signor Somarè gives a lucid account of the different regional schools of art in Italy during the nineteenth century, and his biographical notices of the artists are helpful to students of a period too little known."

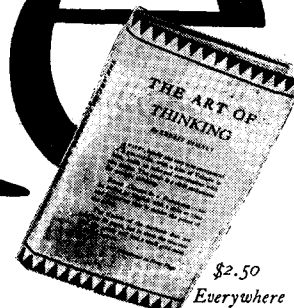
Leon Daudet, who as a child was frequently in the home of Victor Hugo, and who, after the death of the novelist, helped to class and examine the notes and papers left to his heirs and executors, has written a brief but excellent essay upon him in his new volume entitled, "Les Pèlerins d'Emmaus" (Paris: Grasset). The life of Victor Hugo was of so dramatic a character as to hold as much interest as romance. Raymond Escholier, Keeper of the Victor Hugo Museum in the Place des Vosges, has conveyed much of its picturesque quality, for all that he is confining himself to straight biography, in a life he has just issued under the title, "La Vie Glorieuse de Victor Hugo" (Paris: Plon). It is a seasoned, judicious study, of genuine value.

The fourth volume of "Cose Viste" (Treves), by Ugo Ojetti, has recently appeared. Like the books that preceded it, it is full of vivid incident and brilliant description, and its reminiscences of such figures as Carducci, Matilde Serao, and Count Volpi, to mention but a few, are rich in interest.

The ART OF THINKING

was written for

me



—for me, who miss the pleasure of knowledge because of the imagined terror of thought . . . for me, whose day-dreams, rightly directed, would build on fact my most fantastic Castle in Spain . . . for me, so poor a companion to myself, that I prey on others to make life endurable; and, looking within, find a void that Hollywood must fill.

For me this book was written. It shows me clearly the possibilities latent in my own mind, awaiting to be aroused. It puts me in William James' gallery of those who use but a fraction of their mental powers, who know not the incomparable thrills of intellectual adventure.

But, happily, THE ART OF THINKING, this new book, witty and wise, by ABBÉ ERNEST DIMNET, points the way in which I may make my life more full, my mind more effective, my thoughts more meaningful.

For, whoso touches this book touches a man; whoso opens these pages swings open the door of a new adventure for the mind; whoso enjoys that noblest pleasure, the joy of understanding, will read this book with profit and delight.

The ART OF THINKING

By ABBÉ ERNEST DIMNET

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What French Children Read

By LOUIS MORGAN SILL

THERE is no lack of children's books in France. Look at Hachette's catalogues, and then the smaller ones of Larousse, Garnier Frères, Mame, Flammarion, and you will turn away confused as you do from our American lists of juveniles.

First, there are all the French classics, bound as gift books, with and without illustrations, or as books for school prizes, an immense proportion of these, and at prices to suit everybody's purse; then a large number of the best later and even modern books for the older children; and for the youngest children many copies of what the French publishers call "albums," consisting chiefly of pictures accompanied by a paragraph or two of very simple text relating adventures of children or very often the domestic animals. There are alphabet books and trick books of various sorts, and there are books so cheap that they consist of the bound pages of a badly printed magazine done up in a gaudy cover, which depressing productions can only be found in department stores.

French publishers issue collections of books in uniform bindings and call them "Bibliothèques." Hachette, the most important publisher of children's books, issues a "Bibliothèque Rose" which is the best known of them all. The subjects in this series are carefully chosen, and range from Don Quixote and the immortal tales of Charles Perrault to Captain Mayne-Reid. The binding is a cheerful red, and the books are illustrated and well made, and, according to the paper and cloth, can be bought for eight francs or thirteen francs (about thirty-five or fifty-five cents). Hachette also has a Blue, Green, and White "Bibliothèque," with modern authors included.

Jules Verne is still very widely read, and no one has taken his place. The list of his books is very long. There are the agreeable tales of the Comtesse de Ségur, still beloved of young French children, and of Mlle Zénaïde Fleuriot, whose "Le Petit Chef de Famille" everybody still reads, along with many other stories by the same author. There are books of science made easy, many books of voyages and adventures, mechanical books for boys, books for small children to color, and all the usual things which we know in America.

Among the most amusing and widely sold books for quite young children are the famous series of the "Bécassine" stories (Gautier et Languereau). These consist largely of funny illustrations by Pinchon with a text running around and among them, by Caumery, relating the adventures of a good-natured and stupid Breton housemaid and nurse in Paris and elsewhere. Her foolishness is lovable, and she adores the children. Benjamin Rabier's "Clémentine," who is a humanized goose living on a farm, is funny and popular.

In the schools, lyceums, and colleges books are given very extensively for prizes, and include a great variety of authors and bindings, carefully chosen, from La Fontaine's Fables down to the most modern writers. The bias is, of course, towards the classics, but not in the least confined to them.

I was surprised to find how many translations enter into the juvenile production in France. There are Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels, the "Swiss Family Robinson," Don Quixote, already mentioned, Sir Walter Scott's wonderful historical romances—somewhat abbreviated for youthful consumption—Fenimore Cooper's ravishing tales, Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, "Helen's Babies," "Little Women" (very much adapted), Kipling's "Jungle Book," Anderson's and Grimm's Tales, Canon Schmid's stories from the German, some of Selma Lagerlöf's books, "Alice in Wonderland," and even "Buster Brown," "Little Lord Fauntleroy," and "Peter Rabbit!"

French parents complain, in spite of all the good material, that their children are not provided with enough good books, and that too many are deleterious. There are certainly books on flashy cinematographic subjects which cannot be recommended. However, an effort has been made to improve conditions, and a small group of people founded in 1920 the "Bibliothèque de nos Enfants," of which the Comtesse de Pange is now President. They print once a year a carefully selected list of books for children of all ages, and young people, in which there is a note describing the story and giving other details. These lists are on sale at the Musée Sociale in the rue Las Cases, at the nominal price of one franc, and armed with these no buyer of children's books can go astray with regard to the sort of influence wielded by the publications. These lists are very eclectic and not at all insipid, as might be feared. The 1928 list includes Bordeaux's "Vie de Guynemer" (Plon), Mary Duclaux's "Victor Hugo" (Plon), Mme Bonnafous's "Les Plus Belles Chansons de France," illustrated, with accompaniment for rounds and games (Larousse), Octave Feuillet's "Vie de Polichinelle" (Hachette), Gauthier-Villars's "Le Petit Roi de la Forêt," (tales of chivalry in the tenth century, Hachette), even "Rabelais pour la Famille," adapted by Marie Butts (Larousse), and authors as modern as Pierre MacOrlan and Mme Gerard d'Houville, and even pages chosen from Mme Colette (Larousse).

Hachette publishes an attractive paper-bound edition entitled "Encyclopédie par l'Image," each number consisting of photographic illustrations on every page of cathedrals, châteaux, costumes, as the title may be, with interesting bits of description and historical information, and selling for only four francs each, though both paper and print are good. While not made especially for children, these books interest and instruct them.

It is interesting to know that the best

loved stories of our childhood—Blue Beard, Little Red Ridinghood, Puss in Boots, Cinderella, Tom Thumb, etc.—come from the French of Charles Perrault, who gathered them from folk tales and from tradition; and that this charming writer was also a physician and an architect capable of building the colonnade of the Louvre Museum; and that "The White Cat" and "The Blue Bird" were written by Mme d'Aulnoy, and "Beauty and the Beast" by Mme Leprince de Beaumont.

Reviews

THE WHITE CAT and Other Old French Fairy-Tales. By MME LA COMTESSE D'AULNOY. Arranged by RACHEL FIELD and drawn by E. MACKINSTRY. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1928. \$3.

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS. By CLEMENT C. MOORE. With Pictures by E. MACKINSTRY. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1928. \$2.

Reviewed by MARGERY BIANCO

A NEW MacKinstry book is always something to look forward to with a thrill as one used to look forward to the Christmas stocking, confident that its contents, whatever form they may take, will be magical and exciting. But there are reasons why "The White Cat" especially has been awaited with eagerness, for it represents the collaboration of an artist absolutely in her chosen element, an editor, herself a poet and fine imaginative writer, who has known how to adapt the text to perfection, and a publisher with the rare insight to realize that the very best work can only result from an artist doing the particular thing he or she most wants to do. To anyone steeped, as Elizabeth MacKinstry is, in the spirit and atmosphere of eighteenth century France, the d'Aulnoy tales are a perfect vehicle; one can readily see how their wit, grace, and delicate sophistication would be irresistible. They are of the essence of a civilization to which Miss MacKinstry's own work dates back in spirit and inspiration. The pale bright colors of her drawings suggest the fragile tints of old porcelain, her figures move to the tinkling measure of flute and harpsichord, but beneath all is the robustness of contour, never lost sight of, which gives them force and vitality. For, however fanciful, deliberately elegant, as in these ladies with their drooping curls and garlands of pink roses, there is something militant in Miss MacKinstry's work, almost a challenge, shown in the cavalier fling of a line, the unexpected placing of a color. The little occasional drawings are as delightful as the color pages, and shape, size, and type have been chosen to make a well-balanced and harmonious book.

"The Night Before Christmas" is in some respects not so fine a piece of work or of printing as the d'Aulnoy book, but in its blaze of color it is a veritable "picture book" of the real old kind. Here are the strong pinks and reds and greens that carry one back to the picture sheets of many years ago, to the *images d'Épinal* and the paste-board theatre, and are a welcome challenge to much of the over-delicate tinting of today. The drawings are reproduced by offset lithography, a process one would like to see more widely used in this country, as nothing else can quite take its place for effect in a book of this kind. The title-page is particularly good. Miss MacKinstry draws toys as one who really enjoys them; her dolls and wooden soldiers and Noah's Ark figure are the genuine thing, and children will particularly delight in the little sleepy white mouse on the first page, with his scarlet nightcap and bedtime candlestick. Clement Moore's much-loved poem has never worn such appropriate and spirited garb.

THE WONDERFUL LOCOMOTIVE. By CORNELIA MEIGS. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1928.

Reviewed by ANNE T. EATON
Lincoln School

PETER, a small boy who "loved no sound quite so well as the puff-puff of a steam engine," makes friends with Nels Stromberg, once an engineer, but who now spends his time helping to mend engines and doing other repair work in his house near the railroad yards. Many happy hours does Peter spend in this little one-room house, full of bits of machinery, nuts, bolts, and screws, and other delightful playthings. Most wonderful of all, in the yard, close to Nels's doorstep, stands a real locomotive, the remnant of former glory. The railroad men said that "44," once a fine engine, had made its last run and would stand on the side track until Nels sold it for junk, but Nels and Peter thought differently. Old

"44" was the delight of Nels's heart, and while Peter watched him, he tinkered away hopefully, insisting that some day "44" would show them all what she could do. Then one night—and here the story really begins—Peter is waked from a sound sleep; Nels is calling him and "44" is ready to start. Alone, except for the puppy he rescues on the way, Peter makes a dashing journey from coast to coast, across the desert, over the mountains, helping a circus to reach a town on time, rescuing a party of children from a forest fire, and then triumphantly home again to tumble into bed.

This is one of the books that will find its readers from six to sixty. Out of curiosity I sent the story to a young railroad man who, fourteen or fifteen years ago, was another Peter, and I quote from his letter in reply. He says: "Miss Meigs has written a book that fills a long empty space in the children's libraries. I only wish she had written it years ago. She has taken a wonderful plot and made the most interesting story about railroads for little children that I have ever read. It carries out the ideas, rules, and the true spirit of railroads. It is as near perfect in the details of railroading as could be to make the engine 'magic.' It is geographically correct."

Adults need not be disturbed because of the combination of real and unreal, for it will not disturb the child reader. The locomotive is a real locomotive, and what the youthful engineer does is what the child who loves engines dreams of doing. Fairy tales, which supply the element of wonder, that most necessary element in a child's experience, are not always concerned with elves and dragons. In the fairylands of some children their places are filled by trains and shops, glorified but still actual and practical. This book will not conflict with the books of information, but will provide an outlet for the imagination along other lines than those of giants and fairies. The illustrations by Berta and Elmer Hader are delightfully satisfactory; they have caught the "go" and zest of the story.

SOKAR AND THE CROCODILE. By ALICE WOODBURY HOWARD. Illustrated by COLEMAN KUBINYI. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1928.

Reviewed by CATHERINE WOODBRIDGE

THE problem of conveying some sense of the past to modern American childhood absorbs the interest of many writers to-day. The field of history has yielded material for a long time, but the more specialized one of archaeology has been handled gingerly as being too technical. That it can be made, however, quite as interesting as history, is proved by Alice Woodbury Howard's "Sokar and the Crocodile." She has managed to write an authoritative work on ancient Egypt for ten-year-olds. The information is conveyed through the delightful medium of a fairy tale which the author modestly calls "archæologically impossible." She means simply that her picture is composite. The facts that she mentions are all sound enough. While she may have telescoped the history of Egyptian culture so as to have the whole field at her disposal for illustration, the combination can scarcely be misleading. Her aim is to convey the habit of mind which pervades the whole span of the art and there is time enough later to mark off into periods and dynasties.

Mrs. Howard's position on the staff of the Cleveland Museum, where she has actual experience in teaching the subject, gives her a right to speak. "Sokar and the Crocodile" was, in fact, written as a nucleus on which to center this instruction. No illustrations were to be found by the children themselves in the museum exhibits. That Egyptian art thus approached through a fairy story becomes a most absorbing picture book, is evinced by the children's own illustrations which testify to real observation.

But the book is not merely an interesting experiment in teaching. The story stands on its own merits. It is simply and directly told and moves with the rapidity that the age of ten demands. There is so much action that one is scarcely aware of the amount of information conveyed. Moreover, the story stays completely within its frame. Although entirely the invention of the author, it gives the impression of being the sort of tale that might have been told to a little boy of ancient Egypt. Anthropology went hand in hand with archaeology when Mrs. Howard made the important discovery that the ease with which children pass from fact to fairy tale is not unlike the concrete attitude of mind of the Egyptian who pictured the immediate details of everyday life as continuing on into the spirit world. Thus, without pretending

Edna Bryner wins the Dutton Book of the Month Prize for January with

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