

A Letter from France

By ABEL CHEVALLEY

THESE letters from France do not aim at being a periodical epitome of our literary output. The books which everybody has read or heard of can be left to take care of themselves. I am more concerned about those which run the risk of being overlooked in spite of their intrinsic worth. I do not believe that literary justice is always and inevitably done; while the task of crowning the victors will never be left undone.

It is true that success—even purely commercial success—is a fact that we are all bound to take into consideration. But even achievement, as distinct from mere success, depends upon a consensus. The world of letters lives in a state of permanent referendum: "Who is supreme in this or that department of literature?" My business is not to say "Vote for X or Z," but only to whisper: "I am an outsider. If I were a voter, a full-fledged citizen, I would consider the claims of Y. And you shall know why."

M. Floris Delattre is the Y that I have at present in mind. If you come across "L'Angleterre et le Conflict Houiller," (Colin) you will discover that it is not necessary to erect a dangerous scaffolding of generalizations, even cemented by elastic statistics, in order to account for the parlous state of the English economic situation at the present time. M. Floris Delattre was an eye-witness of the General Strike in 1926 which ended in a fiasco. From that concrete experience, he has extracted all the elements of the ensuing situation, still fraught with danger. A big book, solid, leisurely, not reducible to formulae.

I sometimes feel that all the "national psychologies" and "sociologies" at present published do no good except to their authors. They all start from the point of view not of humanity but of nationality, and exacerbate instead of attenuating that feeling of irreducible "difference" between states which is at the root of most of our troubles.

The reception of Marshal Pétain by the French Academy was as free from that feeling as could be hoped under the circumstances.

He is not only a great man of war but a great man. His power lies in his intense "humanity." He not only saved Verdun in 1916, but also saved, in 1917, the soul and mind of the French army, then terribly shattered by wanton attacks, unnecessary hardships, and senseless mutinies. He reconciled two million men with themselves and restored their self-respect. Pétain reconquered at that time more than a fortress or a province. The sense of justice, the intense feeling of love for the common soldier that inspired him at that time, are infused into his speech, and though he is neither eloquent by nature nor versed in the art of literary expression, it was one of the best ever heard under the Cupola.

Paul Valéry, who replied to Marshal Pétain's speech, rose to equal heights of reason and eloquence. But it was from another side and by other ways. Some of his admissions are worth noting, coming from the most purely "intellectual" poet of this time; for instance. . . . "The true value of intelligence consists in the faculty of allowing oneself to be taught by facts." The end of his speech, on the stupidity of expecting concord from politics and peace from war, was drowned in applause. He stigmatized the spirit of national contention and rivalry, gently rebuked those "who think that we French have too much gold, too many guns, too much territory," and that we are perversely wrong to be what we are. He appealed to all that is human in humanity to save us from a new disaster. "Is man, though lucid and reasonable, incapable of sacrificing his hatreds to his sufferings? Shall we always behave like a swarm of senseless and wretched insects, hopelessly attracted by a flame?" You will perceive a feeling of wistful doubt and apprehension in these last words of his speech.

Literary critics are getting tired of registering, year after year, the decisions of more or less competent juries awarding prizes which confer on the laureates a more or less durable measure of celebrity. Maurice Bedel has just published "Phillippine" (Gallimard), an amusing skit on Fascism. It is rather thin broth though full of fun, and, in some places, quite in the manner of dear, forgotten Anatole France. But who remembers that Maurice Bedel was once a Goncourt laureate?

There are perhaps half a dozen novelists whose names are pretty sure to reach posterity. Roger Martin du Gard is, I think,

one of them. André Gide is another. Not less than three score have been "discovered" and made famous within the last ten years by literary juries such as the Goncourt Academy, Femina, Renaissance, etc., and about three hundred prizes are awarded annually. At this rate, immortality will be at a discount among our great grand-nephews. The Goncourt laureate of 1931 was Henri Fauconnier. He is now about fifty and has lived a long time in the Malay States, growing rubber. His book "Malaisie" (Stock) is not so much a novel as a romantic essay on the life and mind of Malay, so far as it is accessible to white people; a disquisition on the weakness and torments of post-war mentality in the Occident, revealed by contact with the Orient.

In this respect, André Malvaux's "Voie Royale," (Grasset) is a greater, stronger, more dramatic effort, and recalls Conrad at his best. But I prefer "Les Conquerants" by the same author, published two years ago. André Malvaux has been through some of the dangerous adventures which he relates. He and Fauconnier are men of action whose books were lived before being written.

The latest book by Jean Giraudoux, "Les Aventures de Jérôme Bardini" (Emile Paul) is the story of a man who tries to escape not only from all social ties but from the prison of his own self. He emigrates to New York in order to get rid of the last shreds of what was once his personality. A double-edged compliment to your great city, but I know New Yorkers who settle in Paris for the same purpose. The theme of "L'Evasion" is now trite. But Giraudoux's incredible aptitude to invent new metaphors renovates whatever he touches. The book is made up of an introduction and two episodes: Stephy and the Kid. The girl Stephy is ready to accept all the social ties from which Bardini has shaken himself free, provided that once only she can satisfy her lifelong yearning for adventure and mystery. But these two falling in love with each other awake in themselves the slumbering forces of tradition. They must unite, marry, and in consequence reveal their outer as well as their inner identity. Love takes them back to the prison of family and society. Love does not emancipate. Stephy withdraws.

Then Bardini meets the Kid, a mere boy, an orphan, alone, hungry, desperate, hating life and men. Here is at last the perfect, the absolute outcast. Jerome adopts the Kid. But once more society interferes. The Kid is wrenched from Bardini. One of the last episodes, near Niagara Falls, is especially dramatic. The conclusion seems to be that escape is only a dream to be dreamt. All men born of woman are prisoners both of themselves and others. If you know Giraudoux at all, if you have read were it only a single page from his pen, you know that this bald analysis is misleading. It is useless to try and sum up his stories. Their charm, their power, their freshness, the iridescence of their texture, is un conveyable. He is not a mere artist in words, an inventor of preciosities. His faceted style is but the result of his faceted view of life. He belongs to a world of delightful unreality, "un monde de rapports sans supports"; he is the true representative of relativity in today's literature.

La Nouvelle Revue Critique has published two series each containing twelve short biographical and critical studies of living authors: Claudel, Farrère, Gide, Giraudoux, Valéry, Dorgelès, Duhamel, etc. These series can be recommended to whoever wishes to become acquainted, more closely than by occasional reviews, with the characteristics of the best and most widely known among French writers. They are neither panegyrics nor disparagements of the authors concerned. Most of them breathe that interested detachment which is the proper attitude of criticism.

"La Découverte des Américains," by René Puaux, is to America what "The French at Home," by Philip Carr, is to France: an intelligent, friendly and, on the whole, successful attempt to picture, instead of the abstract nation, those living, concrete, and various units that constitute a given nation. René Puaux's book was first published in *Le Temps*. He had been invited, like many others, by the Carnegie Peace Endowment on a long trip across the Atlantic, and all through the States, and he evidently enjoyed the treat. Though he was not forced to write the usual "Account of Your Holiday," he did it, and did it well, and bagged as an extra the Strassburger Prize. I have read with great interest his good-humored

and unpretentious but not unimportant book. It is refreshing to find somebody who has not a ready-made system of America to force down your throat. Scientific "explanations" of a country are like all others. They contain nothing that was not there before, at least in essence; that has not been postulated, or introduced. They bring nothing new. You cannot pull a cat out of the bag without first having the cat, and, what is worse, bagging her. There is an element of jugglery in all these "explanations." They are, by nature, mere ex-tensions, un-foldings, developments. That is one of the reasons why my heart goes to a Discovery of Americans,

rather than a Discovery of America. In men only lies the imprevisible. If you merely want to make him understand, you can bamboozle your reader. If your object is to make us feel, I can't be fooled. I shall or shall not answer your impulse. But if I do, nothing can shake me. What I have felt I cannot un-feel. A thing felt is a thing conquered.

Men like Mistral who have really no great intellectual or factual importance will keep alive a long time because of their conjuring power. We have just been celebrating his centenary.

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Points of View

Book Reviewing

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

The article by Mr. James Truslow Adams on book reviewing in America indicates one important evil but omits another probably of equal significance. Those of us who have resigned ourselves to the honorarium that is our meager pay for a review have still another limitation to combat: the scant space that even the most liberal of editors is willing to give us. How is the reviewer to write a review that will be critical, informative, and exact when he is allowed only 500 to 800 words for a book? Is it any wonder that, when one is confined to 600 words in which to review, say, the collected poems of Edith Sitwell, one must either lapse into general statements that indicate an attitude for or against the poet without attempting to substantiate the position by concrete references; or become crabbed in the attempt to be specific by quoting stray lines that one hopes will indicate the critic's reasons for his judgment? In the reviewing of fiction, criticism, or biography the difficulties are similar. One almost never has space concretely to develop one's critical statements. The result is that most reviews consist of a brief summary and a terse statement that, if one had time, one would object to such and such a point, but "despite these minor deficiencies, the book is, on the whole, worth reading." Reviews that do not do even that, however, are more common, and consist of meaningless, because unsupported, adjectives; for these we have an undignified but very expressive term: the vulgar apocopation of the word *crapulous*.

Author, public, and reviewer are all harmed by this space limitation. The author receives nothing except flattery or blame: the flattery he may absorb, but the blame he usually cannot understand because the reviewer has not been exact in his criticism. The public that reads reviews is compelled to accept the general criticism of the reviewer without knowing upon what standards of scholarship or sensitivity his judgment is founded. And since even reviewers have been known to disagree, that part of the public that reads more than one review is often nonplussed by contradictory statements from various critics. Had the reviewer, however, had the space to develop his criticism by furnishing evidence for his opinion, the public might itself evaluate the evidence. At present the public is denied the privilege of forming its own standards because it seldom sees any critical canon in operation. As for the reviewer, he crams, compresses, counts syllables, and longs for the days of the British quarterlies, when the reviewer could advance his judgment with all the necessary support by quotation or reference and depend upon his readers to decide, if they desired or were capable, whether his argument was valid.

Incidentally, too, and with more definite pertinence to Mr. Adams, were the reviewer allowed more space, he would also receive higher pay.

New York. MORRIS U. SCHAPPES.

[Longing for the days of the British quarterlies is to long for the days of fewer books! We agree that in many instances the long review is the only just one, and try to arrange for such reviews whenever possible. However, we are unhappily impressed by the number of 800 word reviews that say in that space what with more careful writing could have been readily packed into 300 words.—The Editors.]

"The Bar Sinister"

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

Mr. W. S. Hall in *Points of View* of January 24, 1931, in discussing the inexactness of the expression "the bar sinister" says he has a vague recollection of the use of that term as the title of a novel. Can I assist him by mentioning that some twenty-five years ago there appeared a delightful dog story by Richard Harding Davis under the title of "The Bar Sinister?"

Louisville, Ky. R. E. GRINSTEAD.

Anonymous Authors

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

Re. *Reluctant Reviewers* in issue of 10 inst. "Who hath not owned—the magic of a name?" Due to this books and reviews are too often judged by the name appended to them. Why not anonymous authors as well as reviewers?

San Diego, Calif. E. K. CORMACK.

Anonymous Review

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

At least one of your readers was somewhat depressed by the implications contained in your recent editorial inviting approval of a policy of publishing book reviews anonymously.

Your conviction—based presumably on actual difficulties encountered in making up the *Saturday Review*—that only under the cloak of anonymity will competent critics in general submit their honest, mature opinions about the new books, is a shocking indictment of present-day intellectual America. If your estimate of the situation is correct, it means that there is no place in this country for a journal of literary criticism worthy of the name.

In these times when almost anyone can get a book published on any imaginable subject, and can depend on getting a favorable review somewhere, your magazine has seemed to me to perform a peculiarly valuable public service. Whether a reader is seeking diversion, or information, or orientation among current trends in fields apart from his own special preoccupation, he turns gratefully to a journal in which the commentaries on notable new books are signed by men and women whose competence—and whose bias—such reader has independent means of judging.

It is only to people possessing an intelligent interest in books, and, at least potentially, a critical appreciation of what contemporary writers are doing and trying to do, that a magazine of the caliber of the *Saturday Review of Literature* can appeal. To such readers a sequence of signed reviews expressing divergent opinions on certain aspects of important books is far more illuminating and stimulating than any number of editorially indorsed pronouncements written by depersonalized critics. (One cannot imagine following with rapt attention a spirited debate between Anonymous and Anonymous.)

I write not as one of the Inner Circle. But it is my firm belief that the intelligent portion of the American public is prone to suspect the intellectual integrity of a writer who is unwilling to assume responsibility by publishing his signature or some recognizable pen name. I find it difficult to regard as a trustworthy guide or faithful servant of truth any reviewer who is willing to publish deprecatory comments on a book provided his identity is withheld and not otherwise: whether his "timidity" be justified on the ground of soft-heartedness, or of stage-fright—not to mention other possibilities.

Conceivably, if they would mediate over a few of George Santayana's sentences (*Sat. Rev. of Lit.*, Vol. VII, No. 26, p. 534, the second column) your able but retiring critics might gain heart. If those reviewers whom you have in mind cannot even then resolve to allow us the benefit of their valuable opinions in *propria persona*, may one not hope that others equally gifted will come forward in time to relieve you of any lingering temptation to change the character of your magazine?

MARY ADA UNDERHILL.
Washington, D. C.

Why Not "Space and Time?"

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

To Mr. Ficke's unforgettable sonnet, "Ab-solution," in your issue of December 20, the pagan heart of man would say a fervent amen. But why, in the sixth line ("No guilt of yours with time and space conspired"), did he not use the words "time" and "space" in reverse order?

New York. DE WITT C. WING.

"The Pot of Caviar"

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

In your issue of today I find a letter from Mrs. Kermit Roosevelt, asking for help in locating a story of the Boxer Rebellion, in which an old scientist poisons his white guests at a banquet rather than have them fall into the hands of the Boxers.

This story occurs in one of two books by Arthur Conan Doyle, both of which made a vivid impression on me when I first read them, but are a little mixed in my mind now. It occurs in "Round the Fire Stories,"* which was published by Doubleday in 1908, and is now out of print. The name of the particular story in question is, I think, "The Pot of Caviar."

New York City. HERBERT MCANENY

*This story is contained in Helen Ferris's anthology, "Adventure Waits."