

A Letter from France

By ABEL CHEVALLEY

THE Editor of this Review once noted that France is curiously uncurious, as witness the apathy of her provincial press and her ignorance of contemporary philosophies. The first part of his remark cannot apply to the newspapers of our bigger towns: Lyons, Toulouse, Lille, Rouen. The second is apt enough if, by "ignorance" is meant "mistrust." We have no belief, for instance, in "Schools of Wisdom." And, perhaps, are we too busy removing a complete old stock of ideas, to notice mere adaptations of some of its constituents.

I have just read the "Anthology of Recent French Philosophy," published by the Editions du Sagittaire (Pierre Quint, Anciennes Editions Kra) in the same series, but not quite on the same principle as their anthologies of new French poetry, of foreign poetry, of new French prose, and of French essayists. Philosophy does not lend itself to a selection of short and brilliant pieces readily separable from the bulk of the author's work. Hence, the necessity of substantial introductions and extracts, and the consequent exclusion of whatever, although fine or refined, cannot be considered as actual and efficient. This anthology is not a museum, but a living room. Rauh, Boutroux, Lachelier, Renouvier are absent from its pages though still active through their disciples. Many worthy professors remain unnamed, most of whom specialized in historical questions. The efficiency of a philosopher (which does not mean his popularity) is the criterion adopted. His impact on the problems of actual life is stoutly held as the measure of his "spirituality." What is, after all, the true sense of "spirit" if not "breath," "breathing power"?

From this undocctrinal point of view, the French philosophers of the present time can be considered as falling into three groups. Sorel, Lucien Poincaré, Hamelin, Durckheim are dead, but their several influences remain as strong (and divergent) as ever. From a period of universal action, Bergson has passed, with growing prestige, through that phase of national reaction which leaves only the

greatest unscathed. Loisy can see, striking roots on all sides, the layers detached from his views on the history of religions, especially sacrificial rites—"action sacrée." Lucien Levy Bruhl's "Studies in Primitive Mentality" (mystical, pre-logical) and his insistence on the "law" of participation, have opened new roads to modern psychology. This review has already done justice to Emile Meyerson's work, a great part of which runs counter to the hotch-potch of doctrines and logomachies, laboriously "conciliated," which still go under the name of philosophy. He is doing more to reawaken, single-handed, the spiritual acumen of this generation than whole brigades of professors.

These are the prophets and inspirers of most of our contemporary "clercs." The abundance of quotations from their works and the special quality of the Introductions devoted to them in the new "Anthologie" bear witness to their vitality.

I am aware that the average English or American student (not the German, better informed) derives his idea of present-day philosophy in France from the second group. Does it not include the representatives of the predominant schools and the methods used in our universities, institutes, academies, and teaching bodies? There, again, the doctrines are widely different. You find Brunschvieg, one of the most universal minds of our time, re-integrating intuition into the enlarged notion on intelligence, and you find there Maritain, the neo-Thomist, Pierre Janet and George Dumas, both eminent masters of psychiatry, have extracted psychology from its philosophic bog of abstraction and fertilized early pragmatism. Then there are Maurice Blondel, the metaphysician of catholicism; Charles Maurras, the positivist champion of reason, action, and order, political catholic, but not catholic politician; Paul Langevin, the great physicist who, in spite of its present theoretical confusion, stoutly holds science to be the key of all future progress and happiness; Edmond Goblot, perhaps the least known in America, whose attitude towards the essence of

reality, and the purely "constructive" value of science, anticipated Husserl's, and was a healthy ferment among our younger logisticians. . . . What a diversity of men and systems! Yet a subtle link unites the majority, those who are perhaps the best known teachers of "pure" philosophy. They are more or less in reaction against Bergsonism. They are busy readapting Cartesianism to the conditions created by the devaluation of reason and science. And they are strangely scholastic in their methods. A curious state of things when you remember the long struggle between the old Sorbonne and Descartes's spirit.

It is of course inevitable that those in official positions or formed into churches, chapels, schools, organized groups, obtain abroad more attention than isolated thinkers. But the authors of the "Anthologie" are evidently convinced that officialism and corporate organization spell conservatism, conformity, or, at best, serve reactions more readily than action. They have, in consequence, devoted more space than was to have been expected to those independent thinkers who, in all times and nations, are the more active instruments of philosophic inquiry.

I have already mentioned Emile Meyerson in this connection. But, amongst younger and lesser men, have you heard of Dr. Eugene Minkowski, Joseph Baruzi, Louis Rougier, Jean Wahl, Georges Politzer? If you have not, this new anthology will introduce them. Minkowski is a "psychiatre" whose study of "schizophreny" (loss of vital contact) is now informing all branches of criticism. In the same spirit as Husserl and Heidegger he seems to be making for a new phenomenology of time and space. Joseph Baruzi published in 1911 "La Volonté de Métamorphose," the first chapter of which is called "La Décadence des Songes." Significant titles. Freud was then comparatively unknown, and Proust totally. Baruzi is the foe of abstraction and of that kind of intellectual work which severs man from his "dream-root." He is now over fifty and has lived "on the road" for many years, tramping over Western Europe. Louis Rougier (born 1889) is the philosopher of this generation who best deserves, and represents, universality. And he can write. I will not attempt a review of his multiform activity. Loisy said of his books on the fallacy of both rationalism and Thomism that they mark a date in history. Of all the contemporary French philosophers he is the most accessible to non-specialists, and the most informing. Jean Wahl is probably better known in your universities as the historian and critic of English and American pluralists and neo-realists. But the gist of his important contribution to modern philosophy is of a later date. "Étude sur le Parménide" and "Le Malheur de la Conscience dans la Philosophie de Hegel" are of a tragi-logical intensity.

Georges Politzer, the most radical critic of "Les Fondements de la Psychologie," has exposed the fallacy of that personification of mental functions which makes us forget that memory, intellect, will, do not exist in themselves, but only in relation to single and unique individuals, and also the fallacy of so-called "scientific" psychologies, still more abstract, which translate experiments into formulae and merely replace a mythology by a symbolism. The substitution of an impersonal for a personal drama, of an abstract for a concrete affair, such is, according to Mr. Politzer, the main business of all psychologies. He wants them to get rid of their law-finding manias, that is to abolish them as science, experimental or not. If Mr. Politzer had his way, psychology would become an unmeasurable description of personalities, an immense dramatic criticism. We are certainly moving in that direction and craving a natural history of man; note the vogue of biographies; but we still call it literature, not philosophy.

I make no apologies for insisting upon minor prophets. These letters are not meant to bring owls to Athens. Sparrows scatter more seeds. And the choice was not mine. I simply follow the "Anthologie." One only of the young philosophers quoted I abstain from mentioning. He is, to my feeble mind, quite unintelligible. The book is comparatively short, but the extracts are so well selected, the bibliographies so thorough, that it manages to be as representative as could be expected in spite of its comparative briefness and ridiculously small price. The general Introduction is by Leon Pierre Quint; the Preface and keynote of the whole thing by Arnaud Dandieu, chief selector, and

author of most of the Introductions (others by J. Audard, P. Biquard, R. Gilbert, Lecomte, F. Joliot, A. Lautman, E. Montel, R. Vaillant, J. Wehrle). God be praised. We still have some good "packers" in this country. A much bigger anthology could, of course, be made of the philosophers omitted from this one. Its range is small by comparison with similar books, for instance the two big works on British and on American philosophers recently published in London. But the unity and clarity of this French conspectus make it important. It has a personality. In a way, it is a tendentious book, a young men's anthology, but this makes it all the more significant. The reader must be warned of its tendentiousness, but he will probably discover that its tendencies are those of whatever is truly alive in contemporary philosophy. These younger philosophers of France are against formalism, scholasticism, against separation, that is, abstraction. They do not sever man thinking from man feeling, guessing, changing, active, struggling. They include even politics and economics in philosophy. They make for integrity.

Have you read "Chine," by Marc Chardourne (Plon)? It is the timeliest, most intelligent, and most readable account of Chinese affairs that I have come across. And its incisiveness and picturesqueness leave nothing to be desired. He has spent fifteen months inquiring into the present state of the Chinese riddle. If he had spent only fifteen days, he would probably have brought back a bigger book and a clearer solution. Let him be thanked for his comparative brevity and inconclusiveness.

Foreign Notes

OUR Swiss correspondent advises us that the first French translation of Gottfried Keller's "Der Grüne Heinrich," which he recently announced was about to be published, has now come out. The translation is accurate and expressive and will be appreciated by all who cannot read in the original German Gottfried Keller's masterpiece, one of the great novels of the nineteenth century. The translation (Henri le Vert, Editions des Lettres de Lausanne), is in two well-printed, paper-covered volumes and costs fifteen Swiss francs (about three dollars).

Three books have recently come out in France, in Germany, and in Switzerland which testify to the interest that Amiel's personality and work still provoke today.

One is a collection of critical essays by Amiel ("Essais Critiques d'Amiel," Paris, Stock), now collected for the first time. The editor, Professor Bernard Bouvier of Geneva, the editor of the 1923 new edition of the "Journal," and the foremost authority on Amiel, provides competent introductions and notes. The substantial essays on Mme. de Staël and Rousseau are particularly worthy of note.

Readers interested in Alsace, and the many political, cultural, and social problems involved by the change from German rule to French, will like to read "Et Voici la France," the last volume in a trilogy of novels ("Nous Sommes Forts-Suspects"—"Et Voici la France," Paris, Payot) which portray the fate and fortune of Alsace from 1870 to the present day. The author, Benjamin Vallotton, is a Swiss writer who has lived in Strasbourg all through the difficult years that have followed the return of Alsace to France. He has humor, observation, insight, and warm sympathy both for France and for her newly-recovered, and sometimes recalcitrant, province.

This is a good year for admirers of Vinet, the Swiss theologian and critic. Mlle de Mestral Combremont, whose remarkable life of Vinet was mentioned in the Letter from Switzerland (published in one January 9th number), has now put us further in her debt by publishing a selection of Vinet's best pages ("Les plus Belles Pages d'Alexandre Vinet: Edification," Lausanne: Payot). The new collection of Amiel's essays ("Essais Critiques d'Amiel," Paris: Stock) has a very fine passage on Vinet. There has even come out an enthusiastic testimony to Vinet, "the champion of truth, love, and liberty of conscience," written by Fritz Wartenweiller, a German-Swiss writer, known hitherto as the biographer of Nansen ("Vinet," Erlenbach-Zürich & Leipzig, Rotapfel-Verlag). Perhaps some English or American writer will eventually be found who will make Vinet accessible to the Anglo-Saxon reader.

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The New Books

The books listed by title only in the classified list below are noted here as received.

Fiction

THE FORTNIGHT IN SEPTEMBER. By R. C. SHERIFF. Stokes. 1932. \$2.

To all intents and purposes, this may be acknowledged "a good book." Mr. Sheriff is a skilled practitioner of his craft—he possesses considerable insight into his characters and a sympathetic outlook that would do credit to a better novelist.

But while "The Fortnight in September" presents many undeniable virtues—while it is a sincere and forthright endeavor, its many virtues only succeed, in some paradoxical fashion, in boring the reader. A novelist might conceivably utilize an even more slender theme than Mr. Sheriff's—the yearly vacation of a clerk and his family—and make of it something permanent, illuminating, and stirring. Frank Swinnerton's "Nocturne" immediately comes to mind as the perfection of this particular technique and content. In this instance, however, the reader finds himself nodding over an almost minute-by-minute recital of the fortnight at Bognor. At no point does the novel reach a climax—at no point is the reader stirred to a deeper emotion than the "emotion of recognition." The petty concerns of Mr. Stevens and his family, while presenting parallels at every moment with the life of the average human being, never illuminate the reader's experience, never stir him to a deep concern for the eventual fate of the middle-class family here presented.

THE PROUD HOUSE. By ANNETTE ESTY. Harpers. 1932. \$2.

A double achievement must be credited to this interesting and appealing book. Many of us have looked askance at the Polish invasion of New England, failing to bridge the gap to these aliens with any sympathy or understanding or even interest. No one can thus fail, or at least not completely, after reading a story which is written so simply and dramatically through the Polish eyes and from the Polish heart, and which brings out so appealingly the strength and steadfastness of these squatters on our soil (for so we think of them) with their clumsy bodies and poetic souls. Miss Esty has known well how to portray them and what simple and dramatic methods to use in doing so. She has not omitted a glimpse also of the younger Poles—over-Americanized, hardened, and unattractive in their half-baked state. But since they are here we shall do best to assimilate them, and better acquaintance is one method.

Secondly, no reader can fail to get a more vivid realization of the flood that recently laid waste New England, and especially of its terrors and devastation when brought to bear upon these aliens with their hoarded possessions on small, hardly bought homesteads. The "Polacks'" sufferings at that time probably impressed us far less than did our own New Englanders'; but as we read we feel keenly for them, terrified, struck down in a strange land, ruined in body and soul until our merciful Red Cross (a mysterious beneficent Prince, old Jozefa thinks he must be) reconstructs their lives.

Miss Esty possesses an excellent style as a vehicle for her imaginative understanding of her characters. Her high points are perhaps reached in the quaint delightful letters in which old Jozefa pours out to her brother in Poland her cryptic but poetic accounts of her alternating sufferings and joys as she struggles to establish her family and win her coveted "Proud House." Both as a story of a flood washing away life and property and as an interpretation of alien lives the book is markedly successful. It should be said also that there is here no feeling of an echo of Edna Ferber's recent novel. The emphasis, the point of view, and the style are all different, and there is no connection beyond the fact that one book is an interesting supplement to the other.

THE MASTER OF CHAOS. By IRVING BACHELLER. Bobbs-Merrill. 1932. \$2.

In this timely novel, Irving Bachelier has written a story of George Washington and the American Revolution. The same author's "A Man for the Ages" is, as every one knows, a perennially popular romance of Abraham Lincoln and Civil War days. The reader's attitude toward either

book is apt to depend on his liking for history when it is generously interlarded with fiction. "The Master of Chaos" is a competent novel, but its chief interest lies in its treatment of historical characters and situations.

A young Harvard graduate and a pretty girl living in Boston are the chief characters in the book. The boy answers the call to join the rebel army and serves under Washington, as his secretary and later as a recruiting officer. He makes journeys to the North and to the frontier, takes part in several battles and is almost completely separated from Patricia. The story ends, however, in the accepted manner for popular romances, with their reunion.

The figure of Washington is presented indirectly, through the boy's impressions of him and numerous enthusiastic letters of description. The portrait is well-rounded, and both it and the picture of the times are based on extensive research—the author informs us that he gathered 60,000 words of notes before he began to write. We could wish the characters more fully alive, and the style more finished. The author uses words quite carelessly—an example of this (an extreme one) is, "The British officers had frankly conferred upon her the fatal gift of beauty."

THE LADY AND THE MUTE. By JOHN LINDSEY. Morrow. 1932. \$2.50.

This is an original and disturbing book, powerful and yet unsatisfying—one that has heights and depths, abilities and crudenesses, in striking combination. Its author manifests in surprisingly diverse ways that he can write,—sometimes natural and penetrating dialogue either of English bourgeois or of drawling country yokels, sometimes sensitive description of countryside beauty or harshness, sometimes savage and painful narrative of the cruelty and lust of life against which his book as a whole seems to be a protest. It is a protest which the reader can only wish were more articulate and consistent. Poetic prose of much power and beauty this writer has at his command, though its alternation with cruder elements leaves one with a partly unjust sense of purple patches and undigested motivation. In the same way the repetitive method used in the recurring theme of the horrors that hinge upon the cruelty of man and beast defeats part of its own end by creating repulsion and a sense of over-emphasis and lack of fair play. Thus the weaknesses of the book detract very directly from its power over its reader. If one is to be fair one must admit great strength and imagination and descriptive ability felt through a sometimes muddled thought and over-weighted style.

There is no question that the conception of the book and its setting and characters are unusual and poignant. A pottering old lady, living alone in a harsh and unsympathetic English hamlet, repressed and finally defrauded by life of all that would have meant fulfilment of her potentialities, fixes at last in her increasing loneliness and bewilderment, upon the salvage of an abused deaf and dumb creature, himself long defrauded and maltreated by life. Mingled with their story and its resultant complications is the background theme of a desire to torment, a sensual lust for blood and for the infliction of cruelty, shown as an outgrowth of fear and impotence,—whether on the gay hunting field, in the village butcher's back yard, or in the deaf-mutes' tormentors and his retaliations against them. English sport, incidentally, fares ill in this category, as rabbits and foxes are slaughtered for a morning's amusement. Set against this violence and savagery is a blind reaching after the compensating mercies of loving-kindness, in the mind of old Miss Agatha and even of her bewildered protégée; but the reader's senses are too deeply marked with horrors to react to the author's wishes as fully as is intended.

Mr. Lindsey, however, can write with effect. He is particularly successful in feeling the pitifulness and power underlying the commonplaceness of simple lives, and in a sort of elliptical indirect discourse in following his characters' trains of thought—except occasionally where his deaf-mute (fast becoming maniac) thinks his way through mazes which only a

(Continued on next page)

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