

HUGO—AND THE REST

MODERN FRENCH LITERATURE, 1870-1940, by Denis Saurat (Dent, 12/6).

Professor Saurat's introduction is entitled 'Inside Conditions' and 'Inner Development', but its real theme is 'Mallarmé may be Proust's father, but Zola is Proust's mother, and perhaps this applies to the whole period'. This curious statement is elaborated in a series of unrelated portraits, none of which is sharply defined, for Professor Saurat does no more than compare, in the most general terms, one writer with another—or with several others—without ever coming to grips with any of them. A style which seems to be continually striving after the easy formula only serves to emphasize this crude approach. A few examples will suffice:

'“André Chamson is a sort of home Malraux”, “Ramuz might be called the Hémon of Switzerland”, “Fernand Gregh is a virile counterpart of Madame de Noailles”, “Gide comes out as the Chateaubriand of the twentieth century”, Duhamel also is born out of Zola by Mallarmé, and Céline and Malraux”, Montherlant is the Rimbaud of the novel of the 1920's; he is to Proust what Rimbaud had been to Mallarmé”, “Anatole France, Barrès: nineteenth century: in colour a blend of Hugo and Stendhal”'

When Professor Saurat does attempt more detailed analysis, the result is this:

'Here is a true synthesis of Barrès: “le Jardin de Bérénice” is “sur l'Oronte”, but also the knight is obviously a “Déraciné” who should have stayed on “la Colline inspirée”, or perhaps managed to bring back his eastern lady to Lorraine. Worse things have happened. Thus Barrès ends on an ironical note and we are the richer for it'.

Professor Saurat is even less successful when he covers an extensive field and deals with a group of writers. The chapter 'Literary Critics' illustrates his black and white approach to literature. Sainte-Beuve is dismissed in two sentences as a 'bad literary critic' because he was 'always wrong' in his decisions about his contemporaries. Sainte-Beuve had faults and, as everyone knows, his judgments about his contemporaries—many of whom were mediocre and didn't deserve the attention he gave them—were less reliable than those on his predecessors. But Professor Saurat omits all mention of Sainte-Beuve's positive achievements as a critic and gives no valid reasons for his pronouncement. He is clearly speaking from a prejudice. Hugo is behind this particular one, as he is behind most of the others.

After dismissing Brunetière, Faguet, Lemaître and Rémy de Gourmont (who was intelligent but a 'failure', Professor Saurat

then turns to Péguy who, because he wrote an excellent book on Hugo 'Victor-Marie, Comte Hugo', is 'a model to critics' and is 'intellectually much higher than Brunetière and Rémy de Gourmont or any of the others'. He is, in fact, 'the best critic of the Third Republic'.

If these statements were derived from a serious study of the critic in relation to his age and the literary tradition, and led on to a revaluation of French criticism—a field in which, at least until 1939, the French have tended to be conservative and unadventurous—they might be of some value. As they stand, they are irrelevant and misleading.

It would, however, be unfair to suggest that Professor Saurat does not take himself seriously. He is admittedly insensitive to the literature of this period, and especially to its poetry; but he has two standards—all the more insidious because never clearly stated—by which he judges every writer. Péguy conforms to both of them: he admires Hugo and he is an 'honest man'. These two criteria are really one and the same because, in Professor Saurat's view, you cannot be an honest man and not admire Hugo. Their application leads him to the following conclusions.

Rimbaud, although a portent, and doubtless a bad one, is turned into the first of Hugo's many children: 'his maternal origin is only Victor Hugo; in Rimbaud's brain a fusion of Baudelaire and Hugo took place'; and he wrote 134 immortal lines most of which 'could have been written by Victor Hugo'. They were not of course, but that doesn't seem to matter. This count of immortal lines does not include anything from the *Illuminations* or from the *Saison en Enfer*. In short, Professor Saurat does not see Rimbaud's individual greatness nor his significance in the development of French poetry—which perhaps explains why the 'poète maudit' is not entirely damned. Corbière on the other hand is, no doubt because his reply to 'Océano Nox' was a better poem than Hugo's, and he, with Lautréamont and Laforgue, is classed as a poet who does not 'really count'. Mallarmé had many shortcomings, the chief being that his conception of poetry was new, and totally different from that of Hugo. He preferred, we are told, 'silence to thunder', with the result 'out goes Hugo'. No condemnation can therefore be too severe and we learn that Mallarmé's great handicap is that he cannot write either in prose or in poetry'. His poems are 'mostly bad', and Professor Saurat calculates that, at a generous estimate, only some thirty lines in all are 'genuinely immortal'.

He applies the same standards to the theatre and discovers that Edmond Rostand—in his view more important than Claudel and Giraudoux—is the 'last of the great dramatists'. Cyrano de Bergerac is really 'Victor Hugo's Don César de Bazan' who 'wishing to become the central character of a play . . . makes Rostand write the play'. The other plays *L'Aiglon* and *Chantecler* are failures but they are 'great failures'. It is salutary to compare this opinion about Rostand with that of a young contemporary French

critic who, although not great, is at least sensitive and intelligent and does not suffer from 'Hugolâtrie'. *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *l'Aiglon*, *Chantecler* sont des modèles achevés de fausse poésie, de faux lyrisme et de fausse grandeur . . . la langue et le vers français y sont bafoués avec insolence par un écrivain au-dessous du néant. On rougit à l'idée que ces pièces ont passé et passent encore pour des chefs-d'œuvre aux yeux du peuple qui se prétend le plus spirituel de la terre'.

In the chapters on the novel, the established classics—Zola, Loti, Anatole France, Barrès, Duhamel—are treated with indiscriminate reverence while Romain Rolland is shown to be a writer of the nineteenth century close to 'the spirit of Hugo'. He even transcends with his book on Péguy (who, remember, wrote a book on Hugo) the 'best critic of the Third Republic'. So he is acclaimed one of the three greatest novelists since Proust—the others being Barrès and Anatole France. Proust, however, is not a 'normal human being' and clearly not an honest man; hence 'let no one attempt to imitate Proust'.

Professor Saurat, who states that 'Poetry is by its very essence a failure', becomes progressively more unreliable as he approaches the poetry of our time. Here, apart from his chapters on Valéry and Supervielle, it is clear that he has read little and is not well-informed. With Valéry, he can still refer back with some effect to one of his standards; 'In a better period, in one that had a more constructive spirit. Valéry could have been another Hugo'. His 'song' is 'thinner as well as less fantastic (sic) than Hugo's' but none the less he is the greatest poet since Hugo. With Supervielle, he can refer to his other standard, honesty; for Supervielle is 'a normal human being'.

The chapter on Supervielle will be useful if it draws attention to a poet who is comparatively little known in this country. Professor Saurat stresses the obvious aspect of Supervielle's work, the 'strength and confidence'; qualities which, it is important to note, are found mostly in poems about animals and children where Supervielle can forget the complexities of mature experience and recapture moments of a lost innocence. He does not see, however, the other and more significant aspect of Supervielle; the expression in delicate and subtle poetry of his failure to find any remedy for man's isolation and distress in the contemporary world. Supervielle's friend, Henri Michaux, has explored more deeply not only the implications of our present predicament but also the possibilities of 'exorcising' it through poetry, and his 'Plume' is a figure as representative of this age as 'le Dandy' was of Baudelaire's. Michaux, who published his first work in 1922, is now one of the most important—and certainly the most original—of the contemporary French poets. Yet Professor Saurat refers to him only once in the meaningless phrase 'his name is enough'. As might be expected, Professor Saurat prefers the obvious Aragon, the patriotic

¹Kléber Haedans: *'Une Histoire de la Littérature Française* (p. 424).

poet of 1942, to the surrealist, and better, Aragon of 'le Paysan de Paris'; and he prefers him to Eluard. Of Eluard, whom he does not understand, he speaks with some contempt, and quotes as if it were a complete poem—to which he has added his own punctuation—what is in fact only the beginning of 'Sans Age'. Fargue and Jouve are likewise dismissed with contempt, and there is no mention of Reverdy (who is essential to an understanding of Eluard), St. John Perse, Max Jacob, and nothing at all about the younger poets.

The Bibliography is interesting as an indication of Professor Saurat's approach to literature and of his equipment. Three of the eight books listed are by Professor Saurat. The rest can be useful for reference if the reader knows that 'Academic criticism in the best sense' means potted comments in the form of a literary digest. Professor Saurat characteristically finds it necessary to qualify his recommendation of Thibaudet's book which, although occasionally superficial, shows a grasp of literary tradition since the Revolution, and is stimulating and well written. It is significant that, like his own book, none of those mentioned contains an informed and balanced appreciation of Surréalisme which, although dead as a movement, is still pervasive as an influence, and must be taken into account if we are to understand contemporary French poetry.

No bibliography of this period would be complete which did not include the following books:

Initiation A La Litterature Francaise D'aujourd'hui. Émile Bouvier. (La Renaissance du Livre, 1928).

Inquietude et Reconstruction. Benjamin Crémieux. (Corrêa, 1931).

De Baudelaire au Surrealisme. Marcel Raymond. (Corti, 1933).

Les Fleurs de Tarbes. Jean Paulhan. (Gallimard, 1941).

Faux Pas. Maurice Blanchot. (Gallimard, 1943).

Histoire du Surréalisme. Maurice Nadeau. (Ed. du Seuil, 1945).

Axel's Castle. Edmund Wilson. (Scribners, 1931).

It is a pity that Professor Saurat's book, which he no doubt intended as a serious study, should add so little to our knowledge or to our appreciation of a period about which so much yet remains to be discovered.

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INTERPRETER OR ORACLE?

THE CROWN OF LIFE : ESSAYS IN INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S FINAL PLAYS, by G. Wilson Knight
(Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 18/-).

In this book Mr. Wilson Knight has returned to the interpretation of Shakespeare. After *Principles of Shakespearean Production* he ranged widely over the rest of English literature in *The Burning Oracle* and *The Starlit Dome*. Later his rôle as apocalyptic prophet was extended on patriotic lines and we were given the Messages of Shakespeare and Milton for democracy at war. More recently even the pretence of critical control has been abandoned and the literary texts have been treated simply as material from which to extract the prophetic wisdom: in *Hiroshima* this is almost admitted in so many words. The cloudy verbosity of these later works may be left to fade into oblivion as soon as possible, but *The Crown of Life* seems to be offered as criticism, and it is a sad example of the deterioration brought about by bad habits persistently indulged—sad, because there is also sufficient genuine insight to remind us that Mr. Knight also wrote *The Wheel of Fire*.

Not that even *The Wheel of Fire* was free from disquieting signs that its author's mind was functioning under an altogether inadequate critical discipline. Nor are they lacking in the even earlier essay *Myth and Miracle* (1929), now reprinted as the first chapter of this book. It contains a brief statement of the principles later expressed more adequately in the introductory essay on Shakespeare Interpretation in *The Wheel of Fire*, and an outline of the significance of the last plays as a group. But there are already a number of wide gestures in the direction of Tolstoy, Goethe, Dostoievsky and Keats, and such comments as this:

'It need not be a progress stretched across a span of years: in Shakespeare I have traced an exact miniature of the succession of great plays to follow in the thought-sequence of one speech in *Richard II*; and the same sequence is separately apparent in some of Tennyson's early poems'.

The main objection to Mr. Wilson Knight's methods of interpretation is precisely that whatever there may be in common between the thought-sequences of *Richard II*, the mature plays and early Tennyson, it is clearly not experience concretely realized in verse. For the most elementary sensibility to language and its uses it is the *difference* between these works that counts—the obvious conclusion being that Mr. Knight is not concerned with particular realization at all, only with quite superficial resemblances of sense,