

FRENCH LITERATURE IN ENGLAND

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THE study of English Literature, which now occupies a foremost place in our universities, was late in coming into its own, and there are students who can remember the days when there was no faculty of English at Oxford. And even to-day our English universities come far behind the Sorbonne of Paris in the place which they assign to the important branch known as Comparative Literature. Apart from Prof. Saintsbury and a few of his ilk, there have not been many prominent teachers and there are almost no authoritative text-books of the subject. Yet the story of the relationship between the literatures of England and France is intensely interesting and vastly informing. The story is a long one, carrying us back through a thousand years; but it demands careful study from those who would appreciate the mutual indebtedness of poetry and fiction to-day between the two great literary countries of the civilized world.

Little purpose is served by seeking traces of indebtedness before the Conquest. Although Saxon nobles sent their sons to the monastic schools of France, there was virtually no such thing as a French literature to demand their attention. The conflict between the *langue d'oc* and the *langue d'oïl* had not yet resulted in a national speech, and real literature made its first modest appearance in France only with the *Chant d'Eulalie* in the tenth century. But when in 1066 Norman chivalry triumphed on the field of Senlac, it was the *Chanson de Roland* that sounded amid the roar of battle, and for the second time England was conquered to the sound of song. Henceforth for three centuries the language of France became in England the language of statesman and courtier, of scholar and ecclesiastic. None but the illiterate spoke the vernacular; and as late as 1400 we find John Gower apologizing, *Pardonnez-moi de ce que je forvoie; je suis anglois*. Meanwhile from France there came the great Romance Cycles, the *Fabliaux* and the *Pastourelles*, calling for facile imitators; and English bards learned of Chrétien de Troyes and of Lambert le Tort how to write in polished couplets and fluent alexandrines. While they read *Troilus et Cresside* of Benoît de Sainte-Maure and

revelled in the Chronicles, the potent influence of the *Roman de la Rose*—that composite product of Jean de Meung and Guillaume de Lorris—came to dominate English poetic life until long after Chaucer ceased to sing. And a careful examination of French influence in the English literature of the Middle Ages shows how shallow is the dictum of Taine that the three centuries which followed the Conquest saw nothing more than a French literature domiciled in England. On the contrary, French influence and French models entered deep into our national literature.

When Chaucer's mighty genius asserted itself, it was from France that he derived his earliest inspiration. Ransomed from captivity in France, he brought back to the court of Edward III an intimate acquaintance, not only with the *Roman de la Rose*, but with the work of Deguileville and Deschamps, of Guillaume de Machault and Froissart. These writers became his masters in metrical form and in material. Though there may be an element of truth in the words of the French critic, Legouis:—"même parmi les romans en vers, les plus beaux lui échappèrent; rien ne permet de supposer qu'il ait connu Chrestien de Troyes", yet Chaucer appears to have profited from almost the entire range of contemporary French literature. In the *Canterbury Tales* we find him showing acquaintance with even such recondite writers as Nicolas Trivet, Jean de Boves, Marie de France, Geoffroi de Vinsauf, Jehan de Vigny and Frère Laurens. Chaucer moved in the literary world of France as one who spoke its tongue, thought its thought, fraternized with its writers and breathed its atmosphere. At his death the muses took their flight to Scotland. But when, in the sixteenth century, the Renaissance threw its mighty spell over the writers of the court of Elizabeth, it exerted its influence not from Italy but by way of France. The first indication of a coming literary revival appeared when Lydgate of Bury produced those lyrics and composed those couplets which betray his mastery of the language and literature of France; and Mallory, too, is under heavy obligation to the *Morte d'Arthur*. The epoch-making work of Wyatt and Surrey is not infrequently attributed to their assumed residence in Italy; but almost the whole of their indebtedness to Petrarch and the Italians actually came through France. Both these pioneer poets resided in Paris and attended the court of Francis I. Surrey never at any time resided south of the Alps, and if he and Wyatt reaped from Italian sonneteers and metrists, it was by way of the Florentine, Luigi Alemanni, who had found refuge at the French court. Wyatt is indebted both to Clément Marot and to Mellin de Saint Gelais. At the same time that versa-

tile group known as the *Pléiade* is mainly responsible for the rise of the Senecan tragedy in England. Much, too, might be said of the influence of "wicked Rabelais" whose impress is discernible even in Shakespeare; but the great essayist of Bordeaux became so popular in England that he outdid Rabelais, leaving his mark upon Bacon's style and forcing from Jonson the avowal that "all our England will deign to steal from Montaigne". Every student is aware of the popularity of the *Divine Weeks* of the Huguenot noble, Du Bartas, to whom Spenser, Daniel, Donne and Drayton evidence discipleship. "The reverent shade of Du Bartas" appears in the dramatic work of Ben Jonson and disappears only after Dryden's day.

During the seventeenth century the English classical movement sprang up as a purely indigenous growth under the pioneer work of Edmund Waller; but Waller had not blazed the trail far before he found a fellow pioneer in Malherbe, whose new setting forth of the classic ideal ran counter to that of the *Pléiade* and gave an impulse to his native literature which endured for two centuries and made it the wonder of Europe for correctness and elegance—and Malherbe became a potent source of influence for our classic poets. During the stern days of the Commonwealth the devotees of the Muses found a refuge at the court of France and made their homes at Paris or Rouen. At that time the famous *Académie*, founded in 1634 by the great Cardinal, was exerting its control over cultured life, and the literary hostess of the Hôtel de Rambouillet was patronizing the debutant talent of Paris. Corneille and Bossuet were the idols of the hour, and the comic genius of Molière was being loudly acclaimed when the "exile poets" of Stuart England gathered in the salons of France. These "exile poets" were a sufficiently large group to make literary history, including such men as Cowley, Davenant, Hobbes, Killigrew, Shirley, Fanshawe, Cleveland, Crashaw, with the later addition of Wycherley, Vanbrugh and others. At once these susceptible poets fell to the influence of the school of Corneille and Molière. And when, in 1660, they flocked back to England in the wake of the Merry Monarch, they were already pledged to the use of the rhymed couplet and the observance of the *Unités*. Thereafter for two generations English playwrights seem to have deliberately set themselves to reproduce the French stage for the "edification" of the court of Charles II. From the time of Davenant and Etheredge to the day of Congreve and Cibber, France was the main fount of dramatic inspiration. But all the tendencies operating during the last forty years of the seventeenth century found

expression through a poet whose ability to champion the winning cause and discern the rising taste in the literary world has never been equalled. John Dryden—"glorious John"—became the outstanding spokesman of French classicism on the English stage. Breaking away from his earlier adhesion to the Spanish school of Lope de Vega and Calderon, he gave his maturer allegiance to the French stage and in some dozen comedies shewed how well his versatile genius could manipulate material, imitate style and borrow characters from Scudéri and D'Urfé, Molière and Quinault, *Le Pais* and *La Calprenède*, D'Ouville and Corneille. Dryden ranged over the entire gamut of French dramatic verse, translated, pillaged and plagiarised from every writer he could lay hands upon, and then declared "We have borrowed nothing from them; our plots are weaved in English looms"! *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse*.—He was caught redhanded by even so unscientific a critic as old Gerald Langbaine of Oxford. A careful examination of Dryden's works reveals the fact that he assumed every attitude towards the drama of France, from that of ardent admirer to that of shameless plagiarist. Whether in this he contributed anything of permanent value to our literature may be questioned. Certain it is that when an adequate trial had been given to the classic style, which had well-nigh made itself a permanent thing in the French drama, it was unregrettingly abandoned in England for a type more congenial to the national genius.

Discipleship to France ran into the eighteenth century. Wycherley, Otway, Shadwell and Cibber openly translated and plagiarised. French influence is evident in the prose of Temple, Addison's *Cato* derives from French dramatists, the *Spectator* imitates Mme. de Sévigné. The novel of adventure that arose in England under Fielding and Smollett was by no means wholly indigenous. Spanish influence lay behind it; but Spanish influence was mediated through Scarron. Moreover it was Mme. de la Fayette who, by way of Marivaux, led Richardson to present the character-analysis of Pamela. Then the influence of Richardson swept back over France like a tidal wave, till Diderot dared to rank him with Homer and Euripides. Be it noted that Smollett reflects Le Sage in *Roderick Random*, that Sterne adopts the graces of French prose, that Sheridan is indebted to Molière, and that Burke and Goldsmith were familiar with Montesquieu. Pope and his school were saturated with Boileau. And it would be idle to imagine that the influence of France ceased when the *Lyrical Ballads* set the pace for modern Romanticism. There is no little truth in the contention that the Lake Poets derive largely from

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, through whom they hark back to dark Rousseau's nature worship. Indeed the eighteenth century shews innumerable points of contact between the two literatures. Byron, Scott and Dickens each in turn made a conquest of literary France. But while a Scott or a Dickens would almost have been mobbed by eager admirers on the streets of Paris, French romantics were beginning to exert a reflex influence upon English writers. Renan and Taine were guiding our thinkers and critics, Sainte-Beuve found a ready disciple in Matthew Arnold, Victor Hugo was making an easy conquest of the English reading public. Already George Eliot had contracted her passionate admiration for French culture, and, falling to the lure of George Sand, she was to persist in her discipleship to the "shameless Frenchwoman" till outclassed by Octave Feuillet.

There are points of inter-relationship at every decade of the nineteenth century; and they lead us to the threshold of the twentieth with the real beginning of modern literature. When we cross that threshold, we find the measure of indebtedness more difficult to gauge and more arduous to follow. As we commence an examination of the two literatures since the year 1900, we at once realize that there has been a well-marked parallel between their courses and that they have very frequently mingled their streams. But our perspective is too shortened to allow of a really correctly critical appreciation of the degree of mutual indebtedness. Our authors are still living. Yet this disability of the modern critic is no excuse for shirking the task. And as we address ourselves thereto, we may find cause to dissent from the statement of so able a writer as Mr. H. C. Harwood, that the English novel has rarely been influenced by foreign examples, though we are prepared to admit that France has been the far greater debtor in the wide realm of fiction. Still, England has by no means maintained an attitude of insularity in the development of the novel. Her fiction, without being under tutelage to writers from across the Channel, has since 1900 passed through various stages closely resembling the dominant phases of French fiction. There has been a community of thought, a common responsiveness to extant modes of emotionalism, a similar quickening to contemporary movements in life and thought, in both literatures. Someone has remarked that to-day there are but two novelists in France—one dead and the other living—Proust and Gide. But we must look to wider fields than this, for the terrain to be examined is really so vast that certain critics have even suggested that we limit our enquiries to those members of the *Académie* who have

had contact with English fiction. The *Académie*, however, has rarely been representative of the best of French literary life. In the late nineteenth century it excluded from its membership Balzac and Stendhal, Flaubert and Baudelaire; and in the present day it has closed its door to Proust and Gide, to Claudel and Maurras. We should rather begin by recognizing that French literature has passed through almost kaleidoscopic stages during the past half century, each of which has been associated with outstanding names, and has exerted its own impress upon the writers of England. The French romantic movement held the field during the central portion of last century, until the name of Hugo was ultimately eclipsed by the ascendancy of Zola. Meantime English fiction, which had discarded the romanticism of Scott for the realism of Dickens, returned after the death of George Eliot to its allegiance to the romantic spirit in the work of R. L. Stevenson and his successors. The influence of French romanticism may be traced upon the late Victorians long after its decline in France. The sway of Victor Hugo had been challenged in France before 1890; but the English romantic school suffered no decline in its exuberance before 1910. During these two decades there were no more popular authors for English readers than Hugo and Dumas, with the later addition of Pierre Loti. A whole galaxy of romancers gathered round these great names, and the majority of them were read with avidity by our countrymen, both in the original and in the translations which issued from the English press. Their influence is clearly discernible in the contemporary works of Stevenson and Weyman and Conan Doyle, in Anthony Hope and Arnold Bennett. And if Hugo and Viaud lost something of their earlier prestige by 1900, yet Alexandre Dumas actually had an enhanced vogue amongst our minor writers of fiction after the dawn of the new century. Here it should be noted that after 1900 Conrad captivated the public with his fascinating romances of the sea, all wrought out in the French tradition, which came to him as second nature. Mr. Belloc is too thoroughly French to let his indebtedness escape any reader. Arnold Bennett has left it on record: "French literature has been the great passion of my life and the chief influence of my literary youth. I can never say enough about what I owe to Stendhal"—while his enthusiasm is equally marked for Flaubert, Rimbaud, Huysmans and Gide. If there were any further need for Arnold Bennett to prove his devotion to France, he surely gave it when in 1912 he married an attractive French actress, Marguerite Hébrard. Again, Ford Madox Ford, though of German origin, is so imbued with French

literature that he has spoken of his habit of thinking his novels in French before he writes them in English. Aldous Huxley, one of our most gifted modern writers, is an able composer of verse in French—thus attaining his first hand contact with the literary inspiration of France. And as for James Joyce—he studied medicine in Paris, where he has since made his home. The work of Joyce—at least his *Ulysses*—is tabooed in England and the States; but the student will recall how he describes a day in the life of the sensual, easy-going advertiser, in a work that has proved to be amongst the most prominent of the century. Later on, in his *Work in Progress*, he has given us a unique illustration of how time and space may be laid under constraint to contribute towards the present, in a way that reminds one very much of Proust. No one has done more to bridge the gulf between the two literatures than André Maurois, writing as a Frenchman who is a master of English biography and a fluent lecturer in either language. Even the unspeakable Bernard Shaw devours no small amount of French literature. Galsworthy, too, and H. G. Wells are no strangers to the spell of French romance; and I venture to think that we may even find traces of indebtedness in the popular work of Priestley's long and sentimental novels. Of Crockett and Hall Caine and Philpotts one would have much to say, did space permit. But we must go back on our traces to recall the fact that at the close of the last century there had appeared a remarkable work which created the "Life novel" type in modern fiction. Samuel Butler in *The Way of all Flesh* gives, with unabashed realism, under an autobiographical disguise, a type of writing that was to determine the trend of English fiction for two decades and lead, by way of Hugh Walpole and J. D. Beresford and Gilbert Carman, to the days of that remarkable work of Romain Rolland, *Jean Christophe*, of which the influence was felt throughout Europe and which has by no means come to an end. It seems to be the case that Rolland gave an added impulse to later adherents of the school of Butler.

Meanwhile we must look back to the fact that French literature had entered upon a new period of activity with the brilliant work of Paul Bourget, the disciple of Renan and Taine, who became the protagonist of faith and liberty, who from the time when he published *Le Disciple* consecrated his genius to the defence of the Catholic Church and the monarchist creed. For a while Bourget was a name to conjure with amid English readers; but he has ceased to exercise his early force, having fallen too hopelessly beneath the currents of conformity. He was compelled to cede his popu-

larity to such writers as René Bazin, the Catholic lawyer, to Henri Bordeaux, to Maurice Barrès and to Pierre Loti, each of whom could claim a cohort of admirers and imitators—while, of course, Romain Rolland never ceased to speak with oracular authority to the ranks of younger writers.

With the decay of romanticism in France, the naturalistic school had leapt into vigorous life with Emile Zola and his disciple, Maupassant, sweeping resistlessly over Europe with its materialistic and epicurean tendencies, and reaching the high-water mark in the pornographic school under certain writers in the United States. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the unabashed naturalism of Zola proved to be one of the strongest motives in our literature, and fiction continued to treat of the questionable in theme and character in the minor novelists of England. In America, Dreiser proved to be its foremost exponent, and for some years his novels were the best sellers. Yet French naturalism never really gripped the favour of the English reading public. Our leading writers shared the openly expressed repugnance of Stevenson; and Zola's only genuine disciple amongst them was an Irishman, George Moore, whose *Esther Waters* may claim to be the outstanding experimental novel in our literature of the century. Doubtless Maupassant is still popular, both with those who read him for the excellence of his stories and with those who read him "with a leer", but, as a recent critic has put it, "the English are not profoundly fond of smut". There were other writers in France who were attracting English readers and influencing our authors. Henri Bordeaux and Paul Bourget, René Bazin and Georges Ohnet found a host of admirers and imitators; and even Henry James had drunk deeply of the inspiration offered by writers so far removed in tone as Flaubert and Maupassant.

Before 1900 the French naturalistic school was on the wane of popularity, and was about to be replaced by a strongly contrasted movement. The recoil set in under the Symbolists—a company of brilliant writers with genuine poetic gifts who endeavoured to escape from the shallow naturalism of the epoch by giving rein to the spirit of revolt under the garb of mysticism. The movement eventually made a brilliant conquest in Maeterlinck, and then spent its force before the opening years of the century had passed. Not all of the Symbolists can be indicted for prim morals—witness the fact that much of their popularity is due to the advocacy of Verlaine; but there was much of value in their untiring quest of the absolute and their passion for inward beauty. Mainly known for their contribution to the poetry of the day, they stood supreme-

ly for eloquence in music of verse. But before 1910 French prose found itself equally tired of the obtrusive naturalism of Zola and the lofty sentimentalism of the Symbolists. A new school arose, actuated by the desire to find a mode of expression alike for sentimentalism, for worldliness and for the social spirit. They displayed a certain lingering sympathy for both the naturalistic and the symbolist exponents which enabled them at the same time to project into their work some of the best elements of the earlier romantics. The popular idol amongst them was none other than Pierre Loti, whose creative work continued until 1922. Maurice Barres came an easy second; and Charles Maurras, by his *Amants de Venise*, indicated the way to break free from the growing tyranny of sentimentalism and mysticism. The literature of the first fourteen years of the century was, therefore, highly eclectic, under the hands of the writers of fiction, while poetry, mingling the last traces of Symbolism with a mystic devotion to the Catholic faith, has persisted in its loyalty to the best traditions of the French muse in the persons of Péguy and Claudel. But as the Symbolist movement gradually declined, there arose a new movement known as Cubism, finding expression mainly in verse, yet exerting no little influence upon prose. Endeavouring to break free from the tyranny of the external, and seeking to present the subtlety of inward impressions in artistic form, the school culminated in the work of Max Jacob (*Défense de Tartuffe*, 1914) and found a brilliant representative in Blaise Cendrars (*Plan de l'aiguille*, 1929). Towards 1917 the literary currents again veered round and Cubism gave place to Dadaism, deriving its name from the curious collaboration known as *Dada*, aiming at representing a poetic world strongly contrasted with the material environment. In prose, Dadaism found voice in such writers as Louis Aragon (*Le Libertinage* 1929), and culminated in the forceful style and penetrating vision of Marcel Jouhandeau.

Across these movements of French literature of the present century there swept the cataclysm of the Great War in 1914. For a while the fields of literature were destined to remain sterile while the nation drained its life blood in the maintenance of liberty. Then came the latest period of French literature, which simply means the novel; for, while it has continued to produce brilliant work in every field save that of the drama, its supreme excellence has lain in the realms of fiction. First of all we should note the series of war novels, which found contemporary representatives in England in the work of Ford Max Ford, (*Last Post*), and his colleagues. But we must not forget that it was in the very year

of the outbreak of the war that Marcel Proust produced his *Temps Perdu*! And at length the post-war period dawned amid the desolation wrought by the appalling upheaval. Then it was that three prophets of a new era lifted up their voices in the literary wilderness. Marcel Proust, of Jewish race and sickly body, of keen, refined tastes and a passionate demand for pleasure, began to express his mental curiosity and his titanic appetites, his wonderful gift for observation and his remarkable ability to isolate impressions, which culminated in the *Temps Perdu*. Here was a work which gave men furiously to think—revealing an author who was equally far from being moral and anti-moral. And certainly a new era had dawned when the second spokesman of the age, Paul Valéry, destined ere long for the *Académie*, could express his attitude towards earlier schools, saying *La sentimentalité et la pornographie sont deux jumelles; je les déteste*. And then came Gide! It has been the mission of André Gide to combine and give final expression to the two tendencies that have dominated French literature for over fifty years—the quest of sensations and the yearning after the absolute. Gide, *facile princeps* amid contemporary writers of French fiction, stands for the great body of men who are persuaded that man cannot live without bread and is equally incapable of living by bread alone.

By way of Gide we turn back again to our own English literature—for Gide is a devotee to our literature, a translator of Spenser and Shakespeare and Walt Whitman. Much of what we have indicated to be the dominant feature in the novelists of France can be detected in our own fiction writers. It has not proved difficult to indicate the successive phases of thought and temperament which have characterized French fiction during the past fifty years. The analysis of our own English fiction during the same period furnishes the critic with results which can less easily be tabulated; and it is scarcely possible to indicate distinct schools of thought such as can be designated by the terms Symbolism, Cubism and Dadaism. Doubtless these movements within the literary life of France have been the expression of varying attitudes to both the world invisible and the world visible, which finds representatives in the contemporary literature of all western lands. It were a daring thing to profess to find indebtedness to all these varied phases and forces within our modern writers, and to claim the ability to quote chapter and verse in proof of such indebtedness as we allege; yet each decade of national history is characterized by its own peculiar features which cannot fail to seek expression in national literatures. It would be irrational to treat the

Channel as a barrier impassible to literary influence and sentiment. In the literary world there are neither frontiers nor tariffs, and even England has never been able to maintain an attitude of "splendid isolation" in its fiction. One cannot even throw a pebble into the ocean of literature without creating waves which will beat upon the furthest shores of thought and influence its literary expression, and every one of the great literary movements of France has surged up against the shores of British fiction and left its mark.

The field of enquiry thus opened is remarkably wide and uniquely fascinating. It is, of course, scarcely possible to gauge the degree of mutual indebtedness between contemporary writers; and it will be the task of later critics to estimate what England of to-day owes to France's living authors. For while we may instance community of motive, we can scarcely establish the fact of literary discipleship. Certainly French fiction is being read with avidity to-day in England, and it is undoubtedly leaving its mark on the mentality of our writers. It may be said of both literatures that they have passed through romanticism to realism, on to naturalism and to sentimentalism, and are now emerging into a period noted for the expression of the spirit of enquiry and revolt. It must be clear that in these successive phases one should not expect to discover a marked British discipleship to Cubists and Dadaists. One can well understand that Bernard Shaw would take umbrage if he were called a Dadaist, and H. G. Wells would protest if labelled a Cubist. Dreiser, of the American world, would have less cause to object if described as a disciple of Balzac and a follower of Maupassant. But our fiction, only slightly deflected from its magnetic north by the currents of Cubism and Dadaism, is pointing strongly still in its allegiance to the romantic spirit. Its favourite exponents are still of the type of Eden Philpotts and John Galsworthy and, above all, Hugh Walpole. It is Hugh Walpole, moreover, who in 1930 correctly appreciated the largest development in the British novel when he wrote "There is an upsurge of the romantic spirit...with a new emphasis on the worth of the individual".

Whither, then, are we drifting? Under what influences are we advancing? Who are our masters? In the new fiction, following in the same channels as that of France, Proust and Gide find their representatives more or less well defined in the works of such writers as Joyce. H. G. Wells is plowing his lonely furrow of scientific romance and the criticism of life, with a prophetic vision into the mists of the hereafter. In the States, we see the rise of

a remarkably sensible and imaginative fiction in the work of Virginia Wolff. Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence still stand for the unabashed representatives of sex-obsession. But in his critical essays Hugh Walpole has done well to point to the work done in the new direction by the younger writers on both sides of the Atlantic, such as Martin Armstrong, Gerald Bullett and Priestley. Certainly Priestley is typical of the new romantic school, more thoughtful, more addicted to the life-novel type.

The novel—and here its *motif* is in tune with that of France—completely overshadowing every other literary species in every modern literature, is advancing with its deep interest in life-problems and its returning loyalty to spiritual verities, towards a fresh expression of the spirit of exuberant youth. Thrilling with the energies inherited from its British ancestry and enriched by the inspiration derived from the romances of France, it is venturing out into new fields, conscious of its vast popularity with all who frequent the realms of literature.