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THE FRENCH NOVEL TODAY

ANYONE WHO HAS FOLLOWED the vast output of the French literary critics since the end of the war and occupation will have no doubt detected the existence of a key word: *audace*, or daring. It is applied in general to novels and especially to the works of young writers who have not yet established a secure place for themselves and must still be judged according to some common criterion. Sooner or later they are found either to have, or to lack, *audace*, and if they lack it they will have little chance of sending their sales up to the 100,000 mark by winning one of the big literary prizes, or even of being considered by the general public as members of the French literary team. The result is that French novelists today tend more and more to be judged by much the same standards as those applied to boxers—the harder they hit, the better they are.

It may be said at once that the younger French writers are responding bravely to what is expected of them. The punches rain so thick and fast that it seems as if each must produce the final knockout by making it impossible to go further or say more. Here, for the sake of example, are some of these literary uppercuts from a few novels chosen almost at random among those that have received special praise from critics during the last few years.

René Etiemble's *L'Enfant de Choeur* appeared shortly before the war, so it is something of a pioneering effort. It describes the life of a boy who, when the book begins, is a boarder in a provincial school, where he has a number of unpleasant and carefully described sexual experiences. At the age of fourteen he returns home to spend his vacation in the company of his widowed mother, whom he finds in bed, suffering from a venereal disease with extremely repulsive physical symptoms. He is thereupon raped by her and, discovering the nature of her malady just too late, is not unnaturally alarmed for his own health, and, indeed, ends up as something of a psychological wreck. However, the author weakens a little at the end, since

Jean does not catch the disease himself. The knockout punch the reader has been expecting is withheld at the last moment.

Hervé Bazin followed this up, some years later, with another study in family life, *Vipère au Poing*, in the course of which two little boys make a well-planned though unsuccessful attempt to murder their mother. As in *L'Enfant de Choeur*, the *audace* of this novel is enhanced by the fact that it is undisguisedly autobiographical.

George Arnaud's *Le Salaire de la Peur*, which has reached a wide public, since it was made into a film, belongs more to the upper-cowboy school of pure toughness. It is situated in a South American desert town. The down-and-outs who have drifted there have one single purpose—to find enough money to get away from it—and are ready to serve this purpose with total courage and total unscrupulousness. Two years later, the same author tried a new type of punch in *Lumière de Souffre*, throughout the whole course of which the development of the hero's buccal cancer is described in minute clinical detail. Disease proving a fruitful line in *audace*, Hervé Bazin sprang back into the ring with a study in paralysis, *Lève-toi et marche*, in which the girl who recounts the story is slowly rotting away, her fingers plopping one by one on to the floor in an odour of decaying cadaver. Jean-Charles Pichon has discovered, in *Il faut que je tue Monsieur Rumann* and *Sérum et Cie*, the possibilities of sadism and masochism as romantic themes. Pierre Klossowsky, in *Roberte ce Soir*, tells of a theologian, Octave, who obliges his wife, in the name of a complicated philosophical theory, to show the most comprehensive kind of hospitality to all his guests, and persuades their schoolboy nephew and adopted son of the moral necessity of sexual intercourse with his aunt. (However, it must be admitted that *Roberte ce Soir* can hardly be considered tough, since its astonishing obscenities are enveloped in language so obscure that the reader who has not taken a degree in philosophy would risk missing some of the choicest bits, if the critics had not provided some useful pointers.)

Surely all this reminds us of something . . . ? Pre-war America . . . Henry Miller . . . Dos Passos . . . Hemingway . . . all the hard-hitters of the Far West and Deep South during the thirties . . . They made a tremendous impression on French writers, and, indeed, it is interesting to speculate just where these would be today if Henry Miller had never existed. However, the effect has lasted long beyond its original cause, for American novels since the war seem to be growing increasingly dreamy or analytic. Hemingway has been superseded by Truman Capote; the world of strong, laconic men who speak with their fists in the intervals of downing their

whiskey has given place to the shadowy universe of William Goyen. The French novel, in so far as the examples quoted can be considered typical, approximates much more closely to the contemporary American film. The absence of censorship allows it far wider scope than even the most daring of films can hope to have, but the two are about on the same level of toughness.

It would, however, be a great mistake to imagine that there is not often a fundamental seriousness at the back of all this *audace*. Several of the novelists mentioned are men of intellectual eminence. Klossowsky, for instance, is the principal commentator and interpreter in France of the philosophy of negation invented by the Marquis de Sade, and Etiemble is the author of an immensely learned and destructive thesis on Rimbaud. So it is not surprising that once we have recovered our breath after so much incest and murder, rape and disease, we should begin to detect a number of trends and preoccupations that have little in common with Hollywood.

Nearly all the French novelists of the *audace* school express, either directly or indirectly, a hatred for established society, and many of them reveal a religious nostalgia they cannot satisfy because they consider that religious institutions have capitulated to the bourgeois social order. The good priest comes high on the list of habitual characters in the "daring" novel and indeed almost rivals the wicked mother for top place. Etiemble's choirboy is almost saved through such a priest, who ranges himself on the side of the child against the established order of society and seems to indicate that religion may be only apparently, but not fundamentally, implicated in the upholding of that order. The same idea is stated much more explicitly in Gilbert Cesbron's novel about the worker-priests, *Les Saints vont en Enfer*, in which the hero brings about a synthesis between the world of toughness and daring and that of religious experience, and opposes that synthesis to the values of bourgeois society and the religious institutions that reflect them. Georges Arnaud, whose picaresque life and picturesque personality seem at first sight in tune with the ostentatious daring of his novels, is really describing, less the odyssey of the truck drivers with their load of explosives or the efforts of an art-lover to get his Van Gogh authenticated before he is destroyed by cancer, than the voluntary renunciation of hope. Pichon's violence covers the repeated and hopeless attempts to solve the problem of the true relationship between man and woman. This type of novel is rarely materialistic, though it often appears to be so on the surface. It very often conceals either a mystical anarchism or a non-materialistic atheism, in which sacrilege is obviously only the reverse side of belief.

If we go deeper still, it seems as though what many of these writers are essentially trying to do is to express a sort of despair both in the human condition and in the situation of the novel, which is their chosen form of expression. Sartre and Camus have left little to be said about the "absurdity" of human life, which seems, for some reason, to be felt much more strongly in France than in most countries. As for the novel *en soi*, a great deal is being talked and written in France about its imminent decease, and it is fashionable to suppose that, as a form of art, it is already in its death pangs. This assumption, of course, is by no means confined to France or the present day, since people have been predicting ever since Fielding and the Abbé Prévost that the form was doomed by its own inviability. However, the problem does seem to be acutely present in the minds of contemporary French novelists, and to give them an added sense of insecurity, or even guilt. A brilliant article by E. M. Cioran in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* recently analysed the position:

Every modern novelist descends into himself to search for what he himself has projected there, inventing a personal life and with it innumerable secrets in which no one believes, least of all he who claims to possess them

Then he explains that it is inevitable that the modern novel should concentrate on personal problems important only to the writer, because we live in an age of intelligence rather than feeling:

At the present stage of man's mental evolution, no one can escape from this exacerbation of the intellect, accompanied by a corresponding decrease in instinct. That which is grandiose, monumental or unguarded has become impossible. There has never been a time when the "creative artist" has been so conscious of his personality.

All this is specially true of the French, who are probably the most "intelligent" people in the world and the most highly civilized, and thus the most conscious of their own individualities. Others before Cioran have put their fingers on this weak spot in the novelist's conscience and forced him to ask himself whether he is merely the serpent biting his own tail, circling endlessly around petty problems that have become obsessive only since Freud. Malraux was reacting even before the war against this preoccupation with the individual. He has demonstrated repeatedly that man learns to know himself not by thinking but during moments of intense action. For two literary generations he has symbolized the man of action, the literary adventurer, the heir of T. E. Lawrence. His declared aim is to make men conscious of the unsuspected greatness within them. "In my eyes," he has said, "the

modern novel constitutes a privileged form for expressing the drama of mankind, not an elucidation of the individual."

Malraux is the man who does first and writes after, and writes about doing rather than being. He is the conscience of the younger writers, just as Gide was that of the elders. And his role, like the role of every conscience, is to accuse. Just as the voice of the Gide-conscience used to murmur: "You are failing in lucidity, your examination of your own mainsprings and motives is not pitiless enough", so the Malraux-conscience demands: "Why do you continue to circle endlessly round petty personal problems of interest only to yourselves, dressing them up as literature and forcing them on the attention of your readers?" In fact, Malraux is accusing contemporary novelists of helping to bring about the death of the novel — and not by any fine, explosive end, but by lingering anaemia.

The young writers listen uneasily and resolve to do their best, but they know that all the preaching in the world will not change the fact that they have become irrevocably conscious of themselves as individuals and that no one will ever recover the sublime unconsciousness of the Greeks or Shakespeare. Each of them is the centre of his own universe, and every novelist is the heart of his own novel. Whatever problem he deals with, whether it is social or religious, it will always be his personal problem, centred, whether he likes it or not, on his own personality. The result is that, especially if he has been listening to Malraux or Cioran, there will always be a gnawing doubt as to whether it is really of interest to anyone except himself. In fact, he has become terrified of boring his readers.

Luckily, the Americans are there—or, at least, they used to be. Sex and violence are the finest camouflage for introspection, and there is nothing like *audace* as a cure for boredom. The novelist may suspect that his public will not be deeply interested in his metaphysical doubts, but he knows it will respond to the stimulus of rape, murder, and so on. Jolting readers out of their apathy has proved to be both a way of sending up sales and of alleviating the guilty Malraux-conscience that protests against the habit of portraying life in minute detail and "degrading our stupefactions to the level of anecdotes." Etiemble, Arnaud, Pichon and the rest are engaged in operating an *apparent* substitution of the act for the individual.

The *audace* of the French novel covers a multitude of things, from the metaphysical despair of Etiemble to the underlying "rose-water" morality of Hervé Bazin. Sometimes it covers nothing at all, being there for its own sake. This seems to be the case with an epidemic of novels by very young girls that have been amusing and scandalizing the French for the last couple of years. In *Le Rempart des*

Beguines, Françoise Malet tells of a fifteen-year-old girl who has a Lesbian affair with her father's mistress. In *Bonjour Tristesse*, Françoise Sagan's Cécile manoeuvres her father's mistress into suicide so that she herself may be free to pursue a liaison which she foresees will be the first of many; Danielle Hunebielle's heroine attaches herself to a married couple in the hope of appropriating the husband for herself, but failing to do so, breaks up the marriage by taking the wife instead. These, and a few other terribly competent eighteen-year-olds, are exploiting all the possibilities of *audace*, and the very fact that they have fundamentally nothing to say makes their punches even more efficacious than those of their elders.

One thing is certain: the gap between the tastes of the French and the English reader has never been wider. The typical English novel of the Bowen school, with its delicate analysis of sentiment and building up of effects from apparently insignificant details, appears merely insipid to readers who have been weaned on Malraux and reared on Sartre. Perhaps that is the explanation of the immense success of Graham Greene, who approximates much more, with his philosophical and mystical preoccupations and their overlay of violence, to what the French are used to. In France itself, a number of quieter novels are overlooked for the same reason. Excellent writers such as Jacques Perry, Marguerite Duran, and Jacques Lemarchand appear a little tasteless to palates accustomed to so much strong meat. However, it rather looks as though a reaction is impending. *Audace* really seems to have been stretched to a breaking point. There is very little to invent in that line, and the era of futile repetitions seems likely to set in at any minute. It may be that the French novel has reached the same turning point that the American novel arrived at some years ago. There is a reaction ahead, but it would be hard to prophesy what form it will take. Will it rejoin that strange nihilistic literature represented today by Maurice Blanchot, in which there are neither characters nor situations, neither beginning nor end, but an atmosphere, a bizarrerie, in which the known world seems to dissolve as if in a bath of acid? Or will it return to the uninhibited introspection of pre-war days? Or become a sort of mixture of the eighteen-year-old cynics and Peter Cheyney, an English novelist who is a tremendous bestseller at practically all intellectual levels throughout France? Anything might happen now.