

## SOME FRENCH BOOKS OF 1921

THE experience of the Great War seems so far to have left little mark on French literature, and the reader of current French novels, poetry and drama will often find himself wondering what the cause of this may be. He will discover in French political and social life enough evidence of the fact that France in the last seven years passed through a terrible war and emerged devastated, robbed of hundreds of thousands of her sons, but unbroken and proud. In literature, however, so the observer will often think to himself, all this appears to have changed nothing. On the stage, in fiction and poetry, we might be in 1914, before the shadow of the disaster was to be seen or thought of. England, Italy, Germany even, have, in their imaginative and intellectual life, 'reacted' more thoroughly to the war than has France, most terribly stricken of them all.

Without criticising this 'stationary' character of contemporary French literature or in any way assuming that it will be permanent, we can readily find a reason for it. More than any other of the belligerents France lost her young intellectuals in the great struggle. The men through whom she speaks to-day, in her art and literature, are very often those who were accepted classics already in 1914, incapable of radical change or departure from the style they have made their own. The young writers who should now be writing alongside of them, and eventually succeed them, are dead. When one thinks of the intellectual sacrifice France made, three names spring at once to the mind—Charles Péguy, Ernest Psichari and Emile Clermont. All three have come once more to the notice of the regular reader of French literature during the past year: the first with a re-issue, by the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, of his *Mystère de la*

## Blackfriars

*Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*,<sup>1</sup> long inaccessible, the second in a new volume of biography, that by Mlle. A. M. Goichon,<sup>2</sup> the third in an original work not long since added to the collection of 'Cahiers' now appearing under the editorship of Péguy's friend Daniel Halévy, the 'Cahiers verts,' *Le Passage de l'Aisne*.<sup>3</sup>

*Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc* first appeared in Péguy's *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* in 1912. In form it is a prose dialogue, first between Jeanne, the simple shepherdess, and her friend Hauviette, then between Jeanne and a religious named Madame Gervaise, in whom she confides. There are long passages where this last-named tells the story of our Lord, where Jeanne replies or makes her own meditations on the sufferings of the Saviour and His Mother and on the woes of her beloved France. Many pages are of extraordinary eloquence, showing Jeanne's doubts and misgivings, the way in which Madame Gervaise attempts to reassure her and convince her of the reality of her vocation. The climax of the book comes in the middle, with the story of the Passion, which that great French Catholic, the Comte Albert de Mun, was never able to read without tears. The fervour as well as the literary atmosphere of the Ages of Faith are in this recital :

Elle pleurait, elle pleurait, elle en était devenue laide.  
Elle la plus grande Beauté du monde.  
La Rose mystique.  
La Tour d'ivoire.  
*Turris eburnea.*

. . . . .

<sup>1</sup> *Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne D'Arc*. By Charles Peguy. (*Nouvelle Revue française*).

<sup>2</sup> *Ernest Psichari d'après des Documents inédits*. By A. M. Goichon. (*Editions de la Revue des Jeunes*).

<sup>3</sup> *Le Passage de l'Aisne*. By Emile Clermont. (Bernard Grasset).

## Some French Books of 1921

Elle avait vieilli d'une éternité.  
Elle avait vieilli de son éternité.  
Qui est la première éternité après l'éternité de Dieu.  
Elle était devenue la Reine des Sept Douleurs.

The book about Ernest Psichari, grandson of Renan, but fervent Catholic after his return to the Faith shortly before the war, is a series of biographical pages with some new quotations from writings by him throwing particular light on his conversion. The following extract will show one of the ways in which he approached conviction:—

Que cette nef elle-même de Notre Dame soit rasée à tout jamais si Marie n'est pas vraiment Notre Dame, et notre très véritable Impératrice. Que cette France périsse, que ces vingt siècles de chrétienté soient à jamais rayés de l'histoire, si cette chrétienté est mensonge.

What was lost to the Church in France by the death of Psichari in the first months of the war will be better gauged from this book than anywhere else. Emile Clermont, unlike Psichari, spent long months in the trenches before he fell in action. He was a coming novelist in 1914, and what he might have become may be seen in an interesting Memoir by his sister, published in 1919.\* The new work to which we have referred is an account of the struggle in which the French Army forced the passage of the Aisne in September, 1914. It is a closely-observed piece of military history, written by the order of the Colonel of Clermont's battalion. It is a last monument to a man who, had he lived, would have gained glory for France in a field other than the field of battle.

One of the younger French writers who did survive the Great War to the gain both of France and of the Church is Henri Ghéon, who told the story of his

\* *Emile Clermont, sa Vie, son Oeuvre.* By Louise Clermont. (Bernard Grasset).

## *Blackfriars*

conversion at the Front in a book which appeared shortly after the Armistice. In more than one recent work he has translated his faith into literature, not by writing propagandist work, but by the revival, highly effective from the point of view of pure literary art, of the mediaeval mystery. This he has accomplished in two plays, *Les trois Miracles de Sainte Cécile* and *Le Pauvre sous l'Escalier*.<sup>5</sup> The first is a poetical dramatisation of incidents in the life of St. Cecilia, her husband and his brother. It has been performed by Catholic players in Paris. The second play, which is in prose, is based on the story of St. Alexis, who left his wife immediately after marriage, to return and live and die in her house, an unknown beggar, only recognised after his death. Mr. Ghéon's rendering of the familiar story is of a beauty he is not afraid to relieve, on appropriate occasions, with touches of humour and realism. The Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, of Paris, a repertory theatre whose standard of production is well known, gave it a successful performance last year.

From the best known French Catholic writer living to-day, Paul Claudel, came one new play during 1921. This was his *Le Père humilié*.<sup>6</sup> Readers will not fully understand it unless they have read its two predecessors, the famous *L'Otage* and *Le Pain dur*, but there are many scenes where the beauty of language needs no antecedent knowledge for complete appreciation. The time of the play is 1869, the place Papal Rome, over which the shadow of invasion was shortly to come. The two nephews of the Pope, Orso and Orian de Homodarmes, fall in love with

<sup>5</sup> *Le Pauvre sous l'Escalier*. By Henri Ghéon. (*Nouvelle Revue française*).

<sup>6</sup> *Le Père humilié*. By Paul Claudel. (*Nouvelle Revue française*).

## Some French Books of 1921

Pensée, a Jewish girl who is blind, but possessed of a remarkable clairvoyance. They consult the Pope, who at first opposes the marriage of either, for Pensée is of free-thinking parents and an enemy of the Papacy. Finally, however, he gives his consent to Orian. Then Rome is captured and Orian called away to the Franco-Prussian War. He is killed, and Orso comes back, bringing his head concealed in a basket of magnolias. He promises to guard Pensée and the child she is about to bear the dead brother. With this the strange drama ends. We feel an allegory must be behind it, and the symbolism which seems to hover over it gives it an air of unearthliness. There is no one who more than Claudel can carry the most modern scene away into timelessness by the sheer beauty of his imagery and eloquence, although he is not remote from this world all the time. The dialogue, in particular, between the Pope and his confessor, a Franciscan friar who is able to reduce the Pontiff's pride and defiance to humility and resignation, contains a passage which has more than a hint at actuality. The friar says:—

Saint-Père, le monde devenait trop exigeant, une machine trop compliquée. Qui veut s'en occuper, il faut qu'il en soit l'esclave. Jamais le fardeau ne fut plus lourd, réjouissez-vous parce qu'il a plu à Dieu de vous en soulager. Vous voilà comme un pauvre curé réduit à son presbytère. Vous voici un vrai Franciscain comme nous. Voici le Seraphin d'Assise qui a obtenu la Pauvreté pour le Pape de Rome.

What is called the 'Catholic novel' in France often fails from a deficiency of reality and true psychology. Paul Bourget's *Un Drame dans le Monde*,<sup>7</sup> for example, which appeared in 1921, is too much a work with a moral to be a sincere work of art and carry conviction to the imagination. Quite different is M. René Boylesve's novel *Elise*,<sup>8</sup> the story of a

<sup>7</sup> *Un Drame dans le Monde*. By Paul Bourget. (Plon).

<sup>8</sup> *Elise*. By René Boylesve. (Calmann-Lévy).

## *Blackfriars*

French girl whose parents married her to a man with whom she was not really in love, only to see her unfaithful to him, and, failing to find happiness, commit suicide. There is, of course, a moral in all this, but it is never obviously pointed, and the book impresses itself on the mind as an impartial, beautifully-drawn sketch of a typical French family, with centuries of traditional Christian and Catholic morality behind them, or rather, in their very marrow. All the characters live and take up their places naturally in our minds, whose understanding of the foundation of the French character will be all the more accurate and sympathetic from reading the novel. Two other French novels of the past year will make an especial appeal to Catholic readers—M. Emile Baumann's *Le Fer sur l'Enclume*<sup>9</sup> and M. Camille Mayran's *L'Épreuve du Fils*.<sup>10</sup> The first is the story of a man who sinned grievously but found his way back to God through suffering, and eventually is among the missing at a bombardment of the Dardanelles. 'Il avait médité souvent cette parole insondable: "L'abîme appelle l'abîme." La mer, c'est le ciel renversé. Il s'y précipita comme dans le sein immense de Dieu. Son épreuve temporelle était consommé; il ne lui restait qu'à s'élaner au coeur du mystère et à disparaître, tel qu'un nuage au fond de la nuit.' The psychology of this novel is as credible and as appealing as the style is natural and restrained. Camille Mayran's novel will interest readers for its subject. It is a carefully-written study in the training and career of a priest, the Abbé Augustin Morlat.

This account of some French books of 1921 must end with mentioning two representative examples of work in the categories of lyric poetry and autobio-

<sup>9</sup> *Le Fer sur l'Enclume*. By Emile Baumann. (Perrin).

<sup>10</sup> *L'Épreuve*. By Camille Mayran. (Plon).

## Some French Books of 1921

graphy. For the second we would select *De l'Age divin à l'Age ingrat*,<sup>11</sup> in which the well-known French Catholic novelist and poet, Francis Jammes, has set down his earliest impressions. The religious interest is slight, but the picture of the poet's childhood and youth is engaging, and certainly enables us to appreciate better the charming artist he afterwards became. The volume of poetry to which reference is made is René Salomé's *Vers la Maison du Père*,<sup>12</sup> a great part of which appeared in the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*. In a series of admirable poems the poet 'evokes' the figures of the past, his father, his uncle, the house of his childhood, also the recent past, the dead on the battlefield, of whom he says:—

Soyons dignes de ceux qui moururent en guerre  
Sans gloire et simplement, comme on prie à l'aurore,  
Et au soir, comme on fait son travail, comme on dort.

The soul of Péguy is alive in lines like these; the spirit of high-minded nationalism and devotion with which Péguy's name is associated is far from being exhausted. In spite of her losses there is a vitality in the contemporary literature of France which no one can mistake or afford to overlook, and most of the works described in this article—selected more particularly from the Catholic point of view—are sufficient proof of the truth of this assertion.

<sup>11</sup> *De l'Age divin à l'Age ingrat*. By Francis Jammes. (Plon).

<sup>12</sup> *Vers la Maison du Père*. By René Salomé. (Editions de la Revue des Jeunes).

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