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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

The article presents a previously unpublished lecture on French literature, given by Sylvia Townsend Warner to the Lewes Literary Society on 28 November 1960, prefaced by a letter from Warner to William Maxwell, enclosing a copy of the lecture. She surveys five centuries of French literature, starting with Villon and Rabelais and continuing up to Proust and Sartre, with a particular perspective on the relations between religious authority and French culture, and on 'the lurking theologian in French writers'.

Keywords French literature; theology; literary societies; protest; engagement; homosexuality; Sylvia Townsend Warner; William Maxwell.

Editorial note: Warner gave this lecture on French literature to the Lewes Literary Society on 28 November 1960, and she sent a typed fair copy to William Maxwell the following July.[1]

> *Dear William,*
>
> *By now you must have forgotten that I promised to send you this – my acceptance of Leonard's dire command to lecture 'on French literature' – to add to your archives. Some of the audience wanted copies, and these had to be fitted into the spare time and spare typists at Chatto and Windus, and that is why it has taken so long.*[2]

She received the 'dire command' in June 1960 from Leonard Woolf, with whom she became friends after he chaired her lecture on 'Women as Writers' at the Royal Society of Arts in 1959. He was the president of the Lewes Literary Society (established in 1948) from 1954 to 1969. A diary entry suggests that far from finding the invitation dire or daunting she was excited and enthused by it from the first:

> *this morning I had an invitation from Leonard Woolf to talk to his Literary Society about French Literature. And instantly my mind began to dance and invent, and see the red-haired scabby shabby youth in his provincial boots entering the Salon Bleu to have some of the Seneca shaken out of him. I accepted it as instantly as I instantly refused a Foyle lunch – C. Day Lewis, poor wretch – in an interminable telegraph invitation for June 25th.*[3]

The lecture itself is both a whistle-stop tour and a tour de force. It compasses five centuries of French literature, seen especially in the context of France's religious history and of 'the lurking theologian in French writers'. Within the decisively compressed overview there are some arrestingly vivid moments. With Balzac, one of Warner's favourites, for instance: 'if a notary's sister in a dirty neckfrill is eating a dish of prunes at the beginning of a conversation, one feels that by the end of it Balzac knows just how many prune-stones are left on the rim of her plate'; or with Nerval: 'Nerval had fits of mental derangement, and perhaps this accounts for the quality of something apart and solitary, and for the unanalysable beauty of his sonnets – as though they had been written a little inattentively by some variety of angel'.

Note on annotation: As Warner names and discusses a great many French authors and works in her lecture it seems most helpful to provide a single list of names and dates at the end as against interrupting the essay with repeated superscript numbers. These are listed in the order they appear in the lecture.[4] *The typescript is accurate and reliable, but the text below corrects a few obvious slips, regularises names and dates, and adds the missing French accents which the Chatto & Windus English typewriters didn't help with.*

A few days ago I mentioned to a friend that I was going to lecture to the Lewes Literary Society on French Literature. After a pause, he enquired: What are you going to leave out? Fortunately, I can do something to atone for these deficiencies. I can immediately draw your attention to *The Oxford Companion to French Literature*, by Harvey and Heseltine.[5] Some of you I am sure have got this book already. To the others I will repeat the title. *The Oxford Companion to French Literature*. Get it, and you will not have come here on this winter evening in vain. It covers, not only the whole subject, but everything that is entangled in the fringes of the subject: 764 pages in double columns, beginning with Abailard and ending – for it is in alphabetical order – with Les Zutistes: 'a short-lived literary society remembered for its associations with Les Decadents and

the beginnings of the Symbolist movement.' One must be on one's guard against the persuasions of alphabetical order. Abailard and Les Zutistes are only alphabetically the Alpha and Omega of French literature. But as it happens, they are both representative of forces in French literature which, as they are not equally forceful in English literature we call typically French. I say it with deference, since I am addressing a literary society – but English literature has not been much affected by literary societies. These take their responsibilities quietly. They are not renowned for fanatic zeal. French literary societies have a great deal of fanatic zeal – perhaps because they contain an unbalancing proportion of writers, who feel strongly and professionally about new movements and new developments and form into societies as purposefully as if they were combatting abuses or forwarding philanthropies.

A history of these societies would provide a pretty good framework for a history of French literature. True, such a history would omit the thief and murderer and rapscallion who was also one of the greatest poets of France. Villon was an individualist, a lone wolf. He blazes out, and is almost accidentally immortal, and not till five centuries later, not till Baudelaire and Rimbaud, is there anything to corroborate him. Rabelais too was an individualist, though unlike Villon he was a respectable member of society. The date of his birth placed him on the threshold of the modern world; but as a writer, he turned back to the old, he was a medievalist, and associated himself with a decadence of which Villon was actually representative. Their voices echo against the ruins of the medieval structure. They assert themselves against a decaying system that they can't forsake. Rabelais, being further away in date from the medieval structure, is more antiquarian. He pillages the learning of the schoolmen, and frisks with the Philosophical Kettle and the Trivet of Good Thought.[6] Villon comes out of the ruins brandishing an old woman's simple faith in hellfire. But they are both writers of a decadence, as much as Skelton is. And they too have the easy untrammelled style that corresponds with the easy untrammelled movements of people wearing very old clothes, clothes that have lost their stiffening and shed their buttons.

It was in protest against such old clothes, such unseemly bagginess, that the first French literary society assembled itself, and named itself out of the classics, La Pléiade.[7] They were humanists and reformers. They held that themes should be compact, simple, dignified, that versification should be polished, that odes and sonnets should replace the old metrical jogtrot, that language should be unaffected and moderate – though it

might be a little learned (it was the Pléiade, incidentally, that introduced the word *patrie* – strange to think of the French language without it).

One might not expect that such exemplary theories should result in beautiful poetry. But the miracle took place. Such miracles were a mark of the times; Il Tempietto, Bramante's small, sober masterpiece in the Doric style, is one of them.[8] Du Bellay, a member of the Pléiade, spent some years in Rome, and must certainly have gone to see the Tempietto – it was a newish building then. What he saw was an architectural counterpart of his sonnets – but I suppose he didn't have the pleasure of realising this.

Perhaps no other French poets have settled so naturally into our English hearts as Ronsard and du Bellay. If our English hearts rebel against the thought that poems which seem to unfold and spread their scent like flowers were supported, like button-hole carnations, on a wire of theory, we can remember that the Pléiade were stern because they were innovators. Our literature has had plenty of innovators; but pledged and ardent fellow-innovators have not crystallised round them to the same extent. And the material of our literature, the language itself, has been left either to the care of voluntary guardians like Fowler, or left to sort itself out unsupervised. The French language has been under official supervision since 1634, when Richelieu set up the Académie Française. The Académie was founded as a working body, to sift and improve the French language, and to record this work in a dictionary. Since then, other functions have accrued to it. It approves, it withholds approval. It gives prizes, it bestows a cachet (sometimes it also bestows an inverted cachet of not bestowing its cachet). But it was founded to look after the French language, and it is still doing it. The last time I read of its deliberations, it was considering whether or no the term 'a Cerberus', should be admitted to the dictionary as a synonym for a concierge. It was rejected on two counts. First, grammar. Cerberus is a masculine term, a concierge is usually a female person; second, manners. The Academy would not be a party to fastening an impolite name on a respectable section of the community. Cerberus is not admitted to the *Dictionnaire d'usage*. You may use the word, but you will be talking slang, not the language of Racine and Valéry. Richelieu was a founder but not an originator. The nucleus of his Academy was there already, a group of men of letters meeting for critical discussions. And in the blue drawing-room of the Hôtel de Rambouillet literature and language were being discussed and analysed from the angle of discriminating society. No doubt some of this was elegant trifling – fiddle-faddle and namby-pamby, and far too much deference to *Il Pastor Fido*[9] (Mme. de Sévigné often reflects the fashionable Italianism of her

youth). But I don't think we should out of hand reject the traditional picture of the French language entering the blue drawing-room like a vigorous gawky young man, with his mouth full of pedantries and mud on his boots, to be taught elegance and propriety. Molière is said to have exposed the absurdities of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. In fact, this is not quite true. He laughs at the gentlemen in labour with a small madrigal; but they could be found all over Paris, they were not peculiar to the Hôtel; and his Précieuses Ridicules are young ladies from the provinces aping the genuine Parisian article. In any case, he was indebted to the vogue for more than some comic material. If literary French had not been subjected to this process of combing and cleaning, *Le Misanthrope* would scarcely be what it is: a shining example of the French language engaged in rational conversation – without pomposity, without ostentation, without muddle or twaddle or false emphasis.

In Saint Simon's *Mémoires* there is an account of some prolonged picnic of Louis XIV's, for which every luxury and elegance was gathered together: silk tents, gold plate, wines, feats of cookery and confectionery, rose-water – and water. The water was brought from some quite distant place because that place was considered to have the best drinking water in France. If life were not so short – if Saint Simon were not so long – I could have looked this up and given you date and names; as it is, you must please take my word for it. I am citing it because it seems to me so expressive of the splendid achievements of French literature during the Great Century. For the splendid achievements included a splendid plainness, plainness, like the drinking water, of the very best quality. Sometimes the plainness tempers the wine; sometimes it is offered unmixed; and sometimes it is, so to speak, dashed in one's face in all its coldness and purity. At the end of Racine's *Bérénice*, when the lovers finally admit the incompatibility between private love and dynastic duty, and tear themselves apart, the last word is left to Antiochus. It would seem an opportunity for a fine closing speech, a summary and an elegy. He says one word; *Alas!* It is important to realise that this is a stroke of art, not just a device. It is even more important to realise that this is plainness, not simplicity. For all the plainness that enforces the drama of the Great Century, there is never a breath of simplicity. The thinking and the expression are unwaveringly adult. Even in Molière's masques and entertainment pieces, the charming trifling is the trifling of grown-up people unbending. And there is another thing one does not find: verbal wit. There is acuteness, and wit *in petto* – the wit that shines through a situation or a remark; but there are no witticisms, no ornamental sparkle.

Only La Fontaine sparkles. But then, he was not aiming at splendour. As much an individualist as Villon, though a fortunate and well-cared-for individualist, he was aiming at La Fontaine.

But where, you may ask, is Abelard all this time? Abelard has been up my sleeve. Clearing our minds of biography, what do we associate with Abelard? Force of argument, an implacable clear-mindedness. It was in Latin that he out-argued the Realists, one can scarcely include him among French men of letters. For similar reasons, I must leave out Calvin – only remarking that a lurking theologian inhabits many French writers. Arguing and clarifying have been dominant preoccupations in French literature. The carefulness for the language was never intended merely to embellish it. It was to make it an exacter medium for saying what you meant. When one has come to the end of all one's other admirations for Racine, one is left marvelling at his plain statement of conflicting wills and conflicting emotions. Will Titus dismiss Berenice? What answer will Andromache bring back when she goes in her extremity to consult the tomb of Hector? We know already, it is a foregone conclusion; but the conflict is so actual that we hang on the result as if we did not know. This is the force of argument applied to drama. Ten years before *Andromache*, the force of argument had been applied to a conflict in real life. Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales* had entranced, delighted, exasperated and outraged society, had travelled like a torpedo through the Jesuit pretensions, and roused so much feeling against the persecution of the Jansenists and Port Royal that they were put on the Index and sentenced to public burning. The *Lettres Provinciales* came too late to save Port Royal. But they had shown what could be done, and how to do it.

It is a pleasingly tidy coincidence that the year of their publication, 1657, was also the year of Fontenelle's birth. Pascal was a Catholic, and a deeply religious man. It was as a Christian that he attacked the Jesuits. Fontenelle too was a Catholic, but it probably meant more to him that he was a member of the London Royal Society. It was as a modernist that he attacked the pretensions of the Church. His attacks were exceedingly unfair, because they were oblique. In the most spirited of them, the *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes*, he takes a lady into a garden at night. His intentions of polite gallantry are thwarted by the lady, who persists in talking about the moon. Since the lady is so bent on the heavens, he explains to her that the sun does not circle round the earth. In succeeding conversations he leads her on through the solar system, with speculations as to whether or not the planets also have inhabitants on them. From the solar system, he passes to the probable existence of

other solar systems. By the end of these interviews the lady has become aware that the earth, the theatre of God's intercourse with man and the peculiar object of his attentions, is a very small part of the universe. She and Fontenelle's readers are then left to draw their own conclusions. The strategy is Fontenelle's. But the tactics – the cumulative force of argument, the lucidity, the air of demure harmlessness – are those of the *Lettres Provinciales*.

Pascal said of the heavens, 'The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me'. When Fontenelle's lady exclaims: 'What? All that vast expanse which contains our sun and our planets, only a small piece of the universe? It makes me feel stupefied, bewildered, appalled', Fontenelle replies, 'For myself, it sets me at ease'.

This change of outlook hinges on the teaching of Descartes, who maintained that by applying logical reasoning to truths intuitively known (I think. Therefore, I am) all knowledge is open to man. The rationalist philosophy which coloured French literature of the eighteenth century is, so to speak, an inversion of Cartesianism. By applying logical reasoning to facts accurately ascertained, man can arrive at the truth. It was this that set Fontenelle at ease as an individual under the infinite heavens. As a social being, he was diverted to a slightly different objective. By applying logical reasoning to facts accurately ascertained, man can do away with error and superstition. There were plenty of errors and superstitions with consequent abuses and cruelties to be done away with. These were much too valuable as perquisites to church and monarchy not to be savagely defended against frontal attack. But against thinking …? People must therefore be encouraged to think. In order to think, they must be supplied with information. Information about the nature of the universe, information about the methods of government and the legal codes of other countries. Information about their own country too, as seen through the astonished eyes of visiting Persians. Information about inoculation for smallpox, information about silkworms, information about the psychology of those born blind, who cannot see nature rejoicing in providential rainfalls but are aware of getting wet and catching colds. This literary movement for what one might call the Promotion of un-Christian Knowledge centred round the production of an Encyclopedia, which was to give a scientific, rational and systematic account of up-to-date knowledge. The performance did not equal the project. For one thing, knowledge is always getting out of date. For another, in order to get published at all, the Encyclopedia had to include a good deal of pious conformity. Its great gift to France was the incentive it gave to a

precise, logical, and animated way of writing – to the liveliest tracts, in short, which have ever been composed. Some of the tracts, like Voltaire's *Candide*, have no relevance to the letter of the Encyclopedia, but they are perfectly relevant to its spirit. In the end, that spirit was quenched, not by the adversaries but by the converts. Abjuring belief in church and monarchy, the converted turned to Deism, mesmerism, the bosom of nature, sentimental philanthropy, sentimental virtue, the Greuze picture of the Village Patriarch dying in an abundance of clean bed-linen. A fair case could be made out that the French Revolution was sparked off, not by the tyranny of the ruling castes but by the ineptitude of their good intentions. Nevertheless, it was the Goddess of Reason who was enthroned in Notre Dame.

When church and monarchy came back after Waterloo, it was to an appropriate atmosphere of Gothic Revival and romanticism. Chateaubriand had earlier breathed life into the revival by his *Génie de Christianisme* – a queer farrago of legend, orthodoxy and balderdash, lit by flashes of poetical sensibility. Chateaubriand was a Breton with a Celt's eloquence and talent for being agin the government. His *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* relate his career as an inverted Vicar of Bray.[10] It is a fascinating work, sombre and melancholy and worldly-wise. Chateaubriand was disillusioned by the society of the Restoration, that hotch-potch of the old and the new – the returned aristocracy bent on recovering their former riches and power, the newcomers bent on establishing themselves as rich and powerful, or on making the career which is open to talent. Balzac was one of the many young men who came to Paris from the provinces with this ambition. He intended to make a great fortune almost immediately and then retire on the proceeds in order to write and collect works of art. Instead, he accumulated a mountain of debts. But he wrote. 'There is the sea, and there goes that Leviathan whom thou hast made to take his pastime therein.'[11] Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* is exactly that: the France of his day, a turbulent sea of tides and cross currents and hidden reefs and whirlpools, and Balzac charging about in it, enormous, noisy, snorting and splashing, floundering but unsinkable, graceless but infallible, with an insatiable energy and insatiable appetite. No writer has ever swallowed so much information as Balzac. True or false, significant or worthless, he pouches it for future use. Sometimes the use is odd. There is that mysterious reference to Lancashire, where women are so passionate that they die of love.[12] One might think that this was an example of Balzac's unstemmable imagination. But there was an opera of that date called *Emily da Liverpool*. I know no more than its title, but I am

prepared to bet that Emily dies of love.[13] Balzac often introduced real live celebrities of his day, doctors, scientists, politicians and so forth, among their fictional fellows. It was a way of enlivening the crowd of supers at the back of his enormous stage. He had no need to turn to real life for his acting characters. They are completely his. In a way, they are him. They are forms of Balzac's existence. He is the young man from the provinces and the Parisian dandy, he is the dupe and the cheat, he is the jealous wife and the rapacious mistress and the husband they tear to pieces between them. This sort of stereoscopic vision, this simultaneous creating and self-embodying, gives a particular roundness to Balzac's characters. They stand out from the narrative, and seem to pull it after them, rather than being a part of it. Writing incessantly, Balzac was nevertheless writing against time, with the project of another book hot on his heels. In the main, too he was writing for money, pestering his publishers for advances and maddening them by his expensive habit of writing half his story on the proofsheets. Yet for all this rush and distraction, he never lets go, he accounts for the uttermost farthing – so much so that if a notary's sister in a dirty neckfrill is eating a dish of prunes at the beginning of a conversation, one feels that by the end of it Balzac knows just how many prune-stones are left on the rim of her plate.

It is almost impossible to speak of Balzac without using hyperboles. Stendhal forbids them. He insists on his readers knowing their place. One must sit still, keep quiet and attend. In fact, though his manner is studiously dry and reserved and his characters denied any cloak and dagger trappings, he leads those characters into situations that are positively operatic. This may have been deliberate. Stendhal was fond of opera. Certainly opera would be a suitable medium for the scene in the *Chartreuse de Parme* when Clélia, the prison governor's daughter, wishing to communicate with her father's prisoner in his cell at the summit of the tower, rushes to her piano and extemporises a recitative in which she explains that he is in danger of being poisoned by a vindictive jailor, gives her reasons for suspecting this, implores him to eat nothing, and promises that if, by the grace of heaven, he has a length of string – if not, he can make a rope by tearing up his linen – and will lower it from his window at nine o'clock that evening, she will tie some bread and chocolate to it. However much one may admire Stendhal – I admire him devotedly – it is hard to find a clue to one's admiration. His style is so clear, so close-fitting, that it scarcely interposes itself between the reader and the narrative; yet when one comes to recall the narrative it does not flow into one's mind as a consecutive whole. He takes on the minimum

of ballast; there is no sensuality, no morality, not much characterisation, and a great deal that is improbable; yet he persuades one that he is a solid realist. He hasn't a grain of mediocrity yet manages to seem prosaic. He hasn't much intellect, yet his mind is searching. He is essentially a man of his time and can't be matched in it.

Now I run into a personal disability. Stendhal's controlled romanticism puts my eye out for the recognised French romanticists – particularly for Victor Hugo. It is embarrassing to be aware of such a large object lying across one's path, and to see so little in it. Others are in the same case. 'I remember enjoying that chapter about the Paris sewers in *Les Misérables*,' they say, or 'that octopus in *Les Travailleurs*.' Or, 'Some of his short poems are beautiful.' Here it is usual to cite *Gastibelza, l'homme à la carabine*, who was driven mad by the wind from the mountain.[14] When, for the sake of this lecture, I re-read some of Victor Hugo's poems, two surprises lay in wait for me. At their beginning I was surprised that they were so much more beautiful than I had supposed; by their end, that they went on so much longer than I had remembered. He was enormously competent. Perhaps that is what is wrong.

He was also very eloquent. From Chateaubriand onward, a kind of pulpit echo haunts the French romanticists, a sort of booming accumulation of all these vocative Os addressed to Nature, Heaven, Liberty and so forth. But Gérard de Nerval, though it was he who imported the second infection of romanticism, the German romanticism of violence and mystery, was totally free from boom and eloquence. His short novel, *Sylvie*, has the transparence and lucidity of a dream, and the lucid inconsequence of a dream, too. Nerval had fits of mental derangement, and perhaps this accounts for the quality of something apart and solitary, and for the unanalysable beauty of his sonnets – as though they had been written a little inattentively by some variety of angel. He had no influence on his own time – apart from the imported German infection. There are echoes of him in Mallarmé, and Alain-Fournier's *Grand Meaulnes* is of the same genre as *Sylvie*, with the same dreamlike evasive narrative – but dusky where the other is transparent, and weighted with the author's specific gravity. *Sylvie* is almost weightless.

Take eloquence and wring its neck, said Verlaine. The urgency of this duty brought together the literary society called the Parnassians. Like the Pléiade, the Parnassians came to purge and prune. Poetry should be classically correct in form, succinct, impersonal, impassive. Any emotion should be in the theme, and not in the treatment. To make surer of this, it was best to choose one's theme from a time and place remote from

nineteenth-century France. Like the Pléiade, they could be learned, provided they were neither clever nor obscure. Tricks, charm, and appeal, were anathema. The supreme exponent of Parnassianism was Heredia. The rules were a perfect fit for him. The misfortune of the Parnassians was that they were too late to cage Baudelaire, who was already writing the kind of poetry they intended at, with the addition of genius and passion.[15] His Parnassianism was personal to him, so he could allow himself liberties which they could not. He could avail himself of idioms and phrases from the Bible, and dye his garments in the wine-vats of Bozrah, and be none the less Parnassian for it.[16] And instead of searching history and geography for themes with emotion in them to be treated impassively, he took them from contemporary Paris and from his own heart.

But, like all perfectionists, the Parnassians disregarded a vital salt. They didn't experiment.

It was the will to experiment that unified the group that followed them: the Symbolists. Their name is a stumbling-block. If they had called themselves Impressionists, it would have been much nearer the mark – but that name had already been taken by the painters whose will to experiment had come to the boil some ten years earlier. The symbolism of the Symbolists has nothing to do with parables or hidden meanings, or the mystical extension of a word – as when cricketers say, A Maiden Over. It was a method based on corresponding associations – a form of sensibility which Baudelaire had described in the sonnet called 'Correspondances', where he speaks of scents and sounds and colours responding to each other, of scents 'dulcet as oboes, green as meadows'. Thus, associating autumn with fruits, with richness of colour, with a tang of bittersweet melancholy, one could speak of *pineapple autumn*. In practice, this is a tricky business. It corrupts so easily into metaphor. Even so, it raises the metaphor to a higher power. It gives it speed and incandescence, and fastens it into the context. Examine Mallarmé's metaphors, they never dangle. Mallarmé and Rimbaud are the high lights of this aspect of Symbolism, but as a movement of enfranchisement it was set going by Verlaine. In the directive poem where he prescribes neck-wringing for eloquence (Symbolists and Parnassians were as one in detesting eloquence) he also urges poets to free the line from rigid scansion, to weaken the strong beats, to cultivate *rubato* and metrical imprecision. In the event, the Symbolists went considerably further, and wrote in free verse. But their charter came from Verlaine.

The poets have swept me on to the brink of this century. But there is still another rejection of the much-rejected romanticism – a rejection that is also an accusation. Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*, is almost a clinical

study of what the romantic infection can lead to. Emma Bovary is a *Précieuse Ridicule* of the nineteenth century. She is a farmer's daughter, married to a country doctor. And her head is full of lakes and castles and bells tolling at midnight and guitars and gondolas and heroes who are as brave as lions, gentle as lambs, and tearful as funeral urns – all of which she has picked up while being educated at a convent. She cannot strike root in real life. Even in her two adulteries, reality still eludes her because she cannot reconcile her sensuality with her romancing. When she has poisoned herself and lies dying, her husband says, 'But weren't you happy?'. This sad, grim story, so commonsensically moral, involved Flaubert in a prosecution for publishing a book that offended against decency and religion – (he got off). There is this to be said for the prosecution. Flaubert was running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. He had a violently romantic side to his character, and while he mocked at Emma's romantic notions he described her romantic emotions with the intimacy and fervour of fellow-feeling. This dichotomy between head and heart gives his books a kind of cold electricity – like the clear windless calm of extreme frost. His narrative is rigidly narrative – no expression of opinion, no hint of autobiography is allowed into it. But it is the control over himself that one feels, not his control over the story. To judge by his letters, he was a natural stylist; but he compelled himself to write with difficulty in order to re-achieve a style, and subjected his imagination to a penitential amount of researching and verifying – so much so that one might think that writing a book was such an odious process to him that he postponed it while there was still a fact to check or an authority to consult. The charge of offending against religion was based on two episodes: Emma's attempt, between the two adulteries, to romanticise herself as a heroine of piety, and the death scene where she 'presses the most passionate kiss of a life-time' on the crucifix held out to her by the priest. An impartial prosecution would have admitted that any out-and-out attack on romanticism at that date must contain an attack on catholicism too.

Chateaubriand had made the church romantic, and pious observance aristocratic – and the church, very naturally, encouraged these ideas. I spoke earlier about the lurking theologian in French writers. He has not many parallels in English writers, one must go into Scotland for such fine specimens as Burns and Carlyle; for it is only in countries where the church is a daily power that he develops. In a catholic country, the church is exactly that: a daily power, a continual presence. Whether or not you attend it, you can't fail to be aware of it. If you disagree with it, you become more aware of it. If you have had a pious education (and

till this century, French education had been almost entirely in the hands of the religious orders – it is notable, incidentally, how many of the eighteenth-century Encyclopedists were educated by the Jesuits) your disagreement develops a theological acrimony, the *odium theologicum*. The lurking theologian in Diderot and Voltaire was mellowed by having a plan. He was combative and hopeful. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the meliorism of the encyclopedists was an exploded hope, and socialism was slow to replace it – partly because of the silliness of its first, half-baked manifestations, which included coats buttoning down the back to stress the interdependence of man, partly because of its spurts of violence and the counterviolence with which they were put down. French nineteenth-century literature, so rich and brilliant and versatile, is traversed by disillusionment and cavilling and a kind of irreligious religious melancholy. Pascal's near-Jansenism is positive Jansenism in Baudelaire. Then, in 1898, Zola published *J'Accuse* – a literary landmark as well as an historical one, a proof that one is not a writer for nothing; and the Dreyfus case suddenly became the *Affaire*, and a national issue.

It showed something rotten in the state of France that Dreyfus had been accused of treason, tried, sentenced and sent to the penal settlement of Devil's Island, and the first allegation made against the justice of his trial, four years before this. The case was an army scandal, and hushed up, even when the real criminal was found and tried, this too was hushed up, and a court-martial acquitted him. It was after the acquittal that Zola published *J'Accuse*, a categorical accusation of the army authorities. Writers and intellectuals were the first to muster behind him. At first, they were a small group, but the habit of literary grouping made them instantaneously effective. In defending Dreyfus, many of them felt that they were attacking an old foe. Dreyfus was a Jew. The officer class of the army was traditionally Catholic. Though the church was not directly implicated, it was believed to be an *Eminence Grise* behind the army and the hushing-up policy. Zola was prosecuted, sentenced to imprisonment, and fled to England. This brought in more writers, and made them fight even harder. But they had a further importance. Their names were known in other countries beside their own, and this ended all hopes of hushing-up and made the Affair a matter of international concern.

When I was young, I used to hear people arguing about the Dreyfus affair. By then, it was over, but the argument continued, and reached only one point of agreement: that France would never be the same again. In the matter of French literature, I believe this to be true. Literature, a glory of France, had shown that it could also be a power.

The immediate reaction was almost like an act of oblivion. Literature became more literary, more decorative. It was during this reaction that a young man whose literary ambitions seemed no more than an adjunct to his ambition to get into the best society began that extraordinary silkworm process which produced *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, one of the most powerful, most intricate works in French literature, and the outstanding achievement of French literature in our time. Proust was a man of one book. But the tag is equally true in inversion. Proust was the one book's man. The book transformed a very sensitive, not very intelligent, highly observant little snob into the dedicated solitary, who overcame bodily and temperamental handicaps, who was at times too weak to write, too breathless to dictate, but who never let go of his purpose and in his last moments tried to note down the sensations of oncoming death because, if he should survive, they would enrich his account of a dying man.

No great work of art seems an innovation. It arrives, and takes its place. But the *Recherche* has something quite unprecedented: the unaffected freedom and amplitude of Proust's treatment of the theme of homosexuality. There is neither discretion nor daring – both such odious qualities. There was no prosecution either; and I doubt if anyone has ever read it as a dirty book. Most significant of all, *La Recherche* is totally without rancour. I don't think I am belittling Proust's achievement if I suggest that this was partly a question of social climate, and an instance of the probability that after the Dreyfus case French literature was never the same again. The explosion had cleared the air. (I have not forgotten that there is no rancour in the *Comédie Humaine* either. I think the cases are different, because of Balzac's own personality. He had such an appetite, and such a digestion. Incidentally, the theme of homosexuality did not come amiss to it; but in Balzac it appears as one of the things he made use of, and might just as well have been Egyptology or the umbrella trade.)

A change of climate – but the contours of the landscape persist. This century has produced two literary group *isms*, a fascinating specimen of lurking theologian, and a hark-back to the spirit of the Encyclopedists. The first *ism* is the Surrealism of the twenties. Like Symbolism, it was an experiment with what words can do. But Freud had come in between, and the aim of the surrealists was to conquer for literature the dream language of the subconscious mind, where words behave on their own, so to speak, unsupervised and unpropelled by conscious thinking. Picasso was experimenting as a surrealist when he painted those canvasses where a visual surreality floats two eyes on to one cheek, or a knife and fork on to a lady's hat. We see images before we understand words, and

surrealism is easier to accept in painting than in writing; though the writers began it. Ten years later, when the surrealists were campaigning, much as the encyclopedists did, Picasso could use surrealist technique in painting a propaganda picture – his *Guernika*. The writers had to abandon surrealism and use plain French for their new purpose. This sacrifice gave rise to the idea that the surrealist movement had never been serious; that it was a writer's whim, flippant, and meant to annoy, and never a serious attempt to conquer a new field for art. But it is inappropriate to be conquering new fields for art when the necessary pre-conditions for art's mere existence are menaced. Though in the event, the pen was not as mighty as the sword, the impulse that carried so many French writers into the struggle against fascism was correct. But where the encyclopedists had had half a century, these had less than ten years – and an actively developing foe, instead of an established and dormant one.

During these two decades a quiet, aging, consistently inconsistent writer had been pursuing his serpentine career, and cherishing one of the most remarkable lurking theologians in French literature. I mean Gide, of course. His theologian was of the protestant persuasion – Grace not Works – schooled and suppled into a sort of libertine detachment. It was not for nothing that Gide was so immensely taken by James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Gide's reputation came rather late, and then was enormous; partly because his writings were so various that one or other of his books was bound to be congenial to some particular set of readers, partly because he wrote uncommonly well, partly because he was so obviously above seeking fame or popularity. Having attacked the French colonial system after his travels in Africa, he went to the Soviet Union, full of sympathetic interest in communism. Disappointed, he came back and said so. The book was published in 1936, and did considerable damage to the anti-fascist front. But it was impossible to dispute his good faith, or the high-minded aim with which he threw a spanner into the works.

Gide was nearing the end of his life, and the last pages of his Journal, when Sartre published in 1946 his philosophical essay, *L'Engrenage*. *Engrenage* is a technical term for being in gear, for the engagement of one cog-wheel with another, – for being, in other words, what Gide thought one had better not be. To be thus engaged is the negation of the negation in Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism. It is the means by which man can emerge from his state of mere existence into existing. The human lot is to be born and to die, to exist because existence is imposed upon you, to perish when the imposed existence is withdrawn. We are contained in a nothingness, a non-existence. It is only by a terrific act of will, and

one which exposes him to the painful consciousness that he is alone, that man can reach positive existence. By bearing to realise that he is alone, he realises that he *is*. From there, by further effort, he grows able to realise that others are. It is then possible for him to engage himself (since now he is a self) in a shared intention or action. He is in gear, he is part of an intercommunication. This is only the practical aspect of Existentialism and I have simplified it far too much. Thus simplified, it carries a resemblance to certain theosophical systems – a false resemblance. It might be truer to say that the theosophical systems resemble it, that existentialism goes beneath them to a deeper human strata, and that the notion of the engagement of undifferentiated existence into existing has something in common with the surrealist attempt to engage the dream language into literature. But I can only suggest this. It is too soon to say. We are in the present, and I am at my end.

Notes

1 The typescript is in fact untitled.

2 Letter to William Maxwell, 23 July 1961; Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive, Dorset History Centre, DHC reference number D/TWA/A70.

3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Diaries*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), entry for June 1960, pp. 262–3.

4 Writers and books referred to in the lecture: François Villon (1431– after 1463), poet; Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), poet; Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), poet; François Rabelais (*ca.* 1493/4–1552), author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (published in five volumes between 1532 and 1564); John Skelton (*ca.* 1460–1529), poet; Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85), poet; Joachim du Bellay (*ca.* 1522–60), poet; H. W. Fowler (1858–1933), grammarian, author of *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926); Jean Racine (1639–99), playwright, works include *Andromaque* (1667) and *Bérénice* (1670); Paul Valéry (1871–1945), poet; Madame de Sévigné (1626–96), best known as a writer of letters; Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known as Molière (1622–73), playwright, works include *Les Précieuses Ridicules* (1659) and *Le Misanthrope* (1666); Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755), historian and memoirist, known for his many volumes of *Mémoires*; Jean de La Fontaine (1621–95), poet; Peter Abailard (or Abelard) (1079–1142), philosopher and theologian; Jean Calvin (1509–64), theologian; Blaise Pascal (1623–62), mathematician and philosopher of religion, author of the *Lettres Provinciales* (1657) and *Pensées* (written 1657–58); Bernard Le Bovier, sieur de Fontenelle (1657–1757), scientist and man of letters, author of *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes* (1686); René Descartes (1596–1650), philosopher; The *Encyclopaedia*, or *Encyclopédie*, in 35 volumes (1751–80), of which the chief writers and editors were Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1713–83) and Denis Diderot (1713–84); François-Marie Arouet, known as Voltaire (1694–1778), writer and philosopher, author of *Candide* (1755); François-Auguste-René Chateaubriand (1768–1848), writer and historian, author of *Génie de Christianisme* (1802) and *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* (published 1849–50); Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), novelist, author of a series of

novels known collectively as *La Comédie Humaine*; Marie-Henri Beyle, known as Stendhal (1783–1842), novelist, author of *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839); Victor Hugo (1802–85), poet and novelist, author of *Les Misérables* (1862) and *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (1866); Gérard de Nerval (1808–55), poet and novelist, author of *Sylvie* (1853); Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98), poet; Henri-Alban Fournier, known as Alain-Fournier (1886–1914), author of *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913); Paul Verlaine (1844–96), poet; José-Maria de Heredia (1842–1905), poet; Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), novelist, author of *Madame Bovary* (1857); Emile Zola (1840–1902), novelist, author of *J'Accuse* (1898), an open letter denouncing the French government and army for their conduct in the Dreyfus Affair; Marcel Proust (1871–1922), novelist, author of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (published from 1913 to 1927); André Gide (1869–1951), novelist, author of *Return from the USSR* (1936); James Hogg (1770–1835), novelist, author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824); Jean-Paul Sartre (1904–81), philosopher, author of *L'Engrenage* (1946).

5 *The Oxford Companion to French Literature*, compiled and edited by Paul Harvey and Janet E. Heseltine (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

6 The typescript reads 'Trivet of Good World', but this makes no sense and must be a slip, either Warner's or a Chatto typist's. Chapter 2, Book VII of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais is titled 'How Pantagruel came to Paris, and of the choice books of the Library of St. Victor'; the choice books include *The Trivet of Good Thoughts* and *The Kettle of Magnanimity* (tr. Urquhart and Motteux; Rabelais has 'Le Tripier de bon Pensement' and 'Le Chaulderon de Magnanimité').

7 La Pléiade: a group of sixteenth-century poets whose principal members were Pierre de Ronsard, Joachim du Bellay and Jean-Antoine de Baïf.

8 The Tempietto is a small commemorative tomb in the courtyard of San Pietro in Montorio in Rome; it was designed by Donato Bramante and built around 1502.

9 *Il Pastor Fido* (in English *The Faithful Shepherd*) (1593) by Battista Guarini, a hugely influential pastoral drama of Arcadian nymphs and shepherds.

10 Vicar of Bray: from an eighteenth-century song about a vicar who keeps adapting his principles to conform with the changing times.

11 Alluding to Psalm 104:26: 'There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein' (King James version).

12 It comes from Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée* (*The Lily of the Valley*), published in 1835.

13 *Emilia da Liverpool* (1824) by Donizetti. Warner would have lost her bet. Emilia survives to marry Federico, her formerly faithless but now penitent lover.

14 Hugo's poem 'Guitare' starts 'Gastibelza, l'homme à la carabine, / Chantait ainsi:'.

15 Warner's 'Nine Translations from Baudelaire (1959)' were published in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 17, no. 1 (2017), pp. 20–34.

16 Isaiah 63:1: 'dye his garments in the wine-vats of Bozrah': 'Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength?' (King James version).

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