

LITERARY PROBLEMS

Modern literature, viewed superficially, presents two phenomena that attest its vitality rather than its decline, at least in our Western countries: the abnormal development of the novel and the advent of criticism as a genre.

The novel today appears to be omniscient and does not always succeed in disguising its didactic intent. Formerly, the various disciplines—once their methods were acquired and their end discerned—detached themselves from literature, leaving to it exclusively the domain of fiction. Devoured by the voracity of the novel, not only the young and as yet uncertain sciences such as psychoanalysis, ethnology, and criminology, but older ones as well, like philosophy, history or law, come back to it and use it readily in maintaining their theses and in emphasizing their needs. Thus the novel takes over their diverse ambitions.

When E. R. Curtius¹ alludes to “the marked desire of all French writers since 1830 to be considered qualified and indispensable collaborators in the civilizing work of the nation, if not of humanity,” he certainly has in mind, above all, the novelists. For it is quite true that the novel recognizes no formal obstacle, that it concerns itself with everything, takes over everything, and that the gravest questions owe their extension, and often their

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

1. *Kritische Essays zur europäischen Literatur* (Bern, A. Francke, 1950); French ed.: *Essais sur la Littérature européenne* (last chapter: *Remarque sur le Roman français*) (Paris, Grasset, 1954).

disfigurement, to it. It is very true that mingling as it does the false with the true in a flood of analyses, the newest among the literary genres has proceeded to confuse history and psychology, to touch upon aesthetics, education, propaganda, the sciences and politics, to usurp their prestige, and to imitate their techniques, but above all to delude the reader by offering him cheap compensations for the mediocrity and the immobility of his daily life.

This is the indictment which Roger Caillois,² as early as 1942, framed against the novel. But although inclined toward condemnation, he finally opened up more encouraging prospects, maintaining that the same fatality which had led the novel to shake our confidence would, in following its course, lead it to separate all that it had imprudently confused.

In *Les Abeilles d' Aristé*,³ Wladimir Weidlé is even more critical. It is, in fact, in the novel of the “*passe-partout* category” that he first observes “the threat of a disintegration of the spirit” and the decline of the imagination’s creative faculty. He shows that from Balzac to Sartre, the novelists gradually abandoned Romantic conventions and espoused all the forms of reality and of experience in their techniques, restricting more and more the role of invention. Hence, according to him, the distortion of the novel or its evolution in the direction of autobiography, reporting, and documentation. Hence, further, “the victory of information over comprehension, of the written or photographed document over the re-creation of the real through the imaginative effort of the writer or of the artist.”

Describing the artificial procedure which the modern novelist has adopted in the elaboration of his work, Weidlé compares Gide’s formula: “to express the general by the particular; to make the particular express the general” to Goethe’s formula, which is an implicit criticism: “For the writer there is a great difference between contemplating the general in the particular and seeking the particular in order to match it with the general.”

The imagination alone, Weidlé affirms, makes the difference between the imaginary and the real indistinguishable; only in a single vision could it conceive the close interpenetration of the two which constitutes art. The withdrawal of imagination reduces the novel to hopeless poverty; for any novel that has repudiated fiction and is satisfied with analysis or with statement becomes what Weidlé calls “a romanticized *montage*.” Its characters, without the attribute of presence, experiencing a “curious regression of

2. *Puissance du Roman* (Marseille, 1942).

3. Three times as long in this, its second edition (Gallimard, 1954) as in the first (1936).

vitality," can no longer be seen "from all sides at once," as "integrated and autonomous characters" and become merely specimens.

In reality, the influence of scientific or pseudo-scientific methods tends to impute such and such a feature, mania, or obsession to the romantic character, to the detriment of his vital complexity. Thus he represents no more than a diminished, distorted, degraded human image, no more than the specimen of a class, of a nation, of a function, a disease, a vice, or of whatever other impoverishment. Psychoanalysis is in reality open to accusation when, instead of confining itself to clinical investigation whose results must be judged by the doctor—he should be more than just a scientist—it aims to make itself applicable to literature insofar as it is a method of exegesis. "The laic confession," as Wladimir Weidlé says, can relieve the repressed person if he has confidence in his interrogator. But it cannot serve as the explication of a work of art, neither of its genesis nor of its quality, since such a work is literally not comparable.

"The paradox of creativity," he adds in one of his happiest formulas, "is that in its élan it is invention and in its nature, discovery"; but, disdainful of the élan, obsessed by discovery, the modern artist, in order to discover at all costs, does not attempt to create characters that become people. Discovery, within themselves, is of first importance: hence the abundance of subjective analyses, of confessions, of so-called intimate diaries. To discover the slightest bit of truth in defiance of the enviroing truths, sometimes more banal, sometimes more important.

Thus the modern novel is able to offer only a list of anormal, curious, exceptional cases. In them Weidlé, seeking the image of man in vain, claims to find only his caricature.⁴

Regardless of whether one considers its evolution progressive or regressive, the novel, in its documentary form, has made a great advance over its fictional form: success is the right word for its immense diffusion. The success of the novel today more than ever places it among the surest and most effective means of spreading the ideas which saturate and sustain modern society. It is the average man's avenue of culture if not his moral

4. It is rather noteworthy that some special studies terminate with conclusions quite similar to those of Weidlé. For instance, Yvette Delétang-Tardif who, in *Les Romans d'Edmond Jaloux* (Paris, La Table Ronde, 1948), studied the dramatic and psychological forces that animate these works, also is led to explore the deterioration of the novel of character-portrayal as contrasted with easier or more fast-moving kinds of fiction. Above all, she reproaches the modern novel for its almost complete lack of romantic invention, its lack of composition and "its general tendency to become increasingly indifferent to any symphonic and architectural pursuit."

guide. Yet it is perhaps about to be supplanted (another source of lament from the mentors that we are) by the movies in this educational role.

The second feature which characterizes modern letters—the growing role of criticism—is even more symptomatic of a coming transformation, or at least of an important turn in literary evolution. The invasion of criticism, however, entails no danger. Poor criticism is without consequences. It can err only through ignorance or triviality.

Good criticism is identified in the reader's opinion with the evidence. It bears within itself the remedies for the inaccuracy or the paucity of its judgments; it condemns itself if it must. In contrast to other literary genres, it does not evolve into a work of art only to languish and remain silent. It always functions, it is forever breathing. It does not offer itself, proudly, as a definitive explanation; docile, yet bold, it follows the broken line, the diagram of the curves which literary production traces. Scarcely formulated, it can turn against itself, something which the poem, the novel, and the play can never do.

We are speaking, it is understood, of the kind of criticism worthy of the name, as far removed from compliance as from quick impressionism or partisanship. Nor has it anything in common with the spirit of detraction or of skepticism, those easy ways of appearing intelligent. It is a positive spirit of support and of orientation. It is essentially a spirit of clear thinking, which often owes its insight to admiration, whose lucidity is at least as relentless as the lucidity of disdain.

Criticism therefore accomplishes one of its more trivial tasks when it limits itself "to purely external relationships, to erudite comparisons." The keyboard of feelings and of themes is not infinite, nor are the means of expressing them. One can always recognize a thesis that has been used before. Art does not lie therein.

Through analysis the critic experiences a kind of intoxication which the artist himself has not felt, as if the novelist's novels, the poet's poems were born out of an unconscious symbiosis and as if it were the critic's task to consciously dissociate these elements for the sake of his own edification.

Actually, the happy period for criticism is just beginning. With it, no more corruption, no more deceits, no more despotism may go unstigmatized. Criticism protests against or pleads for. It is free. It is in its nature to be free.

Considered in this way, it becomes a constructive judgment and an attitude toward life. The concern that one feels regarding the role of literature is centered upon its beneficent or maleficent power. And it is in the name of

this morality, in nowise restricted, aerated by all the winds of the world, that criticism assumes the responsibility of directing contemporary thought toward the attractive points upon the horizon. However, its freedom and its mobility did at first compromise its prestige. At the end of *Fleurs de Tarbes*, Jean Paulhan contrasted almost without comment contradictory opinions about a same work believing that this juxtaposition was in itself eloquent. Professor I. A. Richards made an actual experiment at Oxford in a similar vein, recording the results in his book, *Practical Criticism*,⁵ which ran to at least ten editions between 1929 and 1954. He chose thirteen poems, without naming the authors and for each he elicited and recorded entirely opposite opinions. Without lingering, in perplexity or contempt, over these radical differences, he studied the causes, the modalities, the mainsprings, the elements of a kind of biology of criticism. This was already taking criticism very seriously.

In a remarkable and substantial book, *Les Sandales d'Empédocle*,⁶ Claude-Edmonde Magny goes even further. She accords, naturally, a lesser place to criticism than to philosophy, but a higher one to criticism than to creative works. This is certainly bold because until then criticism was looked down upon by those who called themselves "creators," who held their creations to be unique, sacred, untouchable, absolute; who never had enough sarcasm to level at these parasites, capable of praising, attacking, analyzing, commenting and even—ridiculous claim—of classifying.

In Claude-Edmonde Magny's opinion—one recognizes here and there the fortunate influence of Bachelard—the hierarchy is reversed. According to her, in the face of the enigma of life, man almost instinctively invents myths: these in their ensemble constitute literature and the arts. Then comes the explanation and the interpretation of the myth; this is criticism. Finally there is philosophy, a privileged stage which, in an effort to harmonize everything, manages to perceive the naked truth. We see that these three stages correspond to the three successive degrees of abstraction and of lucidity. The hierarchy, in reality, is a chronology of the progressive efforts of the mind to spiritualize the expression of its supreme solutions. "Thus literature, criticism and finally philosophy represent three steps of the human ascent toward the light" (p. 33).

One can well imagine, however, that in placing criticism so high, Claude-Edmonde Magny demands a great deal of it. "The judicial and

5. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

6. "Collection *Etre et Penser*" (Neuchâtel, Editions de la Baconnière, 1945).

doctrinal function” of criticism—the effort to comprehend, elaboration of the norms in the name of which one weighs and judges—in reality subordinates it to a general purpose in conformity with the complexity of our times: “One of the first tasks of criticism is to effectuate the psychoanalysis of an epoch, to elucidate its profound preoccupations as they crop out in literary works, and thus to hasten the unification of the collective conscience. In this way, literary criticism will tend toward a kind of sociology” (p. 17).

With grandiloquent coquetry, Claude-Edmonde Magny mentions three examples of this superior criticism; they represent, it is true, three models of their kind. The fundamental problem that she raises in the masterly passages devoted to Charles Morgan, J.-P. Sartre, and Kafka is the incidence of metaphysics in Romantic literature. Does man attempt to rise above himself or to fall? This is an essential question which could easily divide history in two: on the one hand the shameful history of wars, and on the other the glorious but slow-paced history of an effort to overcome initial cruelty. And beings—the metaphysicians and the thirsters for blood. There are, when one thinks about it, only these two kinds of men.

Magny’s criticism of the novels of the three writers who are cited above is basically a study of the human condition considered from the social point of view, as well as of the reciprocal relations of the subjective and the objective, either in individual or in universal life.

This metaphysical criticism is not what a vain group of authors would wish, an “objective,” anonymous criticism and, in its desire to be self-effacing, an amorphous one. She alone has the right to be partial, Magny claims. And she recalls Baudelaire’s phrase in regard to painting: “To be fair, in other words to justify its existence, criticism must be partial, passionate, political.” This makes it easy for us not to subscribe to her admiration for Kafka. We believe that this work—this epic of impotence—is based not upon metaphysics but upon the painful and monotonous awareness of his personal complexes. This restricts its significance as well as its audience. Because of the sterile ambivalence of his outmoded symbolism, it contributes not a little to the destruction of the living forces of modern man. Claude-Edmonde Magny has a good deal of admiration for Kafka, and it is possible that the pathos of the individual case (obligingly stressed by Kafka himself) is a factor that influenced her critical judgment. Moreover, it is the only one of her analyses that makes a point of biographical data. Of the three forms of asceticism that she describes, Kafka’s is the purest in her opinion. Nevertheless, she perceives in him, too, a departure, “a

trickery," a deliberate effort toward integral despair; we might call it a predilection for, a cultivation of, despair.

Also, the example of Kafka, like that of Morgan and Sartre, represents the portrayal of a certain kind of literature which despairs of itself. Unable to resign itself to remaining a mere means of interpretation, it set itself up, little by little, as "a privileged knowledge."

However—and this is the ultimate conclusion of *Sandales d'Empédocle*—if the partial stalemating of literature springs from a confusion, for which the authors themselves are responsible, between their works and the spiritual life, its eminent dignity is due to the fact that it nevertheless encompasses "the stages of human becoming; therefore, it is quite naturally criticism's responsibility to maintain the rights of a vivifying pluralism; while philosophy's task is the assimilation by man and the complete domination of these two functions of the moral conscience which are science and literature."

In fact, one encounters the traditional conflict between the critic's warm awareness of his passions and the entirely cold intelligence of his analyses in the unfriendliness which the artists feel toward him, anxious as they are to protect the secret of their inspiration or of their experiments. Faced with a work that stirs our feelings, we cannot help oscillating between enjoyment and evaluation of it, gradually transforming an innocent love into a loving evaluation.

This judgment has played a part in the artistic emotion and intervenes to justify and reinforce it. The work, the object offered to our sensibilities, soon becomes a subject for meditation. On this very role and this intervention Gaëton Picon based his treatise on aesthetics, *L'Ecrivain et son Ombre*,⁷ an excellent title, which reminds us of Democritus' phrase: "Word, shadow of the work." In the beginning of his book we find a sentence that is in agreement with Magny's thesis: "A work, and particularly a literary work, appeals irresistibly to the critical conscience as soon as it is glimpsed; this conscience accompanies it as our shadow follows our footsteps." The conflict between the writer and the critic, or, as Gaëton Picon says, "the conflict between the creation and the conscience,"—for this glimpse from which the author flees, he sometimes finds, searching within himself—has many facets. Picon turns them over, one by one, convinced that each one reflects a part of the truth or, if you will, a real aspect of probability; but that is the same thing. Truth resides only in the aspect of things. Where would it otherwise be found?

7. Paris, Gallimard, 1953.

Therefore Picon studies a work at times in the light of its initial purpose, at times in terms of its definitive expression—its language. Sometimes, “the nocturnal and subterranean occurrence,” more often sensitivity and intelligence, the result of a long internal dialogue, preside in turn or simultaneously at its troubled birth. Knowledge, this “genius of dissatisfaction,” creates the meditated work, abandoned, resumed, and finally determined at the very moment when “a form stronger than his power to deny it” takes hold of its author. We can see where he is taking us. Examining the relations between aesthetic experience and judgment, he denies that aesthetic experience is the reaction it was considered to be for two centuries—that of affectivity alone. A work, according to him, is not addressed to sensitivity alone, which the worst commonplace, at certain times or deliberately, can elicit, but—this is a privilege of the mind—“to a particular aptitude for discerning the forms created” (p. 37); yet our aesthete acknowledges that to love a work is to go much further than to give an evaluation of it, even a competent one.

One essential chapter, “L’Esthétique et la Philosophie de l’Art,” demonstrates at the start that the aesthetics of the past was so much in harmony with the forms of the real that classical art did not imagine “the absolute in any other form than that of the real, magnified” (p. 127). On the other hand, modern aesthetics links the work of art “with subjectivity, with the social, the historic; it is psychological, psychoanalytical, biological, sociological.” Both classical and modern aesthetics, however, are more akin to philosophies of art than to pure aesthetics because of their search for causes and finalities. Our theorist makes a distinction between philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art, and aesthetics which inquires into the art value of the work. Question of nature, question of value, to confuse them is to misunderstand both—and to attribute to the intentions of the artist—legitimate, of course, whether selfish or generous—a necessary issue that appertains to its profound singularity.

“A man is an artist if he experiences as content, as the thing itself, what non-artists call form.” This sentence of Nietzsche’s is used as a turn-table in *L’Ecrivain et son Ombre* to orient its author’s remarks toward the analysis of forms. This is a fascinating chapter in which the example of Mallarmé is often preponderant and probing. It tends to demonstrate that the novel, poem or painting today seems to be an attempt to make it “a creation of language far more than an expression of the world.” Picon takes this occasion to challenge German theories like those of the *Einfühlung* or of the

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Kunstwissenschaft, to which he adds the subsidiary questions of the rhythm, of the prestige, "of the beauty of nature."

By way of the detour of uncertain and slow historical judgment, he comes back to the criticism which judges judgment, which alone dares to give an opinion and to acknowledge the absence or presence of a value in a work.

Ever since classical criteria of appreciation have gone out, the critic's task has become increasingly more difficult: he moves about amid confusion; he trips over false sincerities, he comes up against literature's secret penchant for suicide. He runs behind the artist who is always ahead of him and who leads him astray. And yet his breathlessness is the price he pays for his worth. "The critic," says Gaëton Picon, "is one who pits his strength against the productivity of an epoch, who tests a concept of the whole of literature in constant contact with actuality." Glancing at contemporary criticism, he deplures its inadequacy and realizes that this concept of the whole has many flaws. This is because criticism, grown prudent, or docile, or too accepting, eludes the only problem that concerns it, that of selecting, of weighing, of judging and of orienting. Extra-aesthetic criticism, which he calls "criticism of content and of surroundings," doubtless can contribute impressive or enlightening information, but it does not in any way explain the existence of the work in terms of an immortal object; only aesthetic criticism is in a position to do this. It alone can outline the features of the mobile and ever fresh countenance of beauty. It alone assesses what is irreducible in a work. It guards against the illusion which, "attributing everything to the truth of a certain trend in art, bids us to minimize the importance of individual talent." Thereupon Gaëton Picon closes the circle of his meditations and returns to his initial point, the conflict between the one and the all, between the happy life and the cold appraisal which gauges it, between love and resistance to love, between creation and conscience.

If to create is to appeal to enigmatic forces, it is at the same time to subject them to the control of the intelligence which fertilizes and endows them, multiplying their effectiveness. Only those works are great in which the authors have reconciled within themselves the two forces that some imagine to be enemies: the obscure and the crystal clear. Picon is bent upon proving the legitimacy of an aesthetics which, in the last analysis, is merely the acknowledgment of this rare reconciliation. According to him, aesthetics is "a methodology of the aesthetic experience lived," which, in the face of a work of art, the fount of emotion, elicits almost simultaneously delight and judgment, contemplation and commentary.

Lucidity, the clear understanding of motives, and consequently the importance of critical judgment, are not always well received.

We have seen what Vladimir Weidlé had to say about the writer in regard to his novel; he deplored the author's excessive premeditation, claiming he was more concerned with interpreting his concept of the world than of illustrating his concept of the work of art. Going on to speak of poetry, he is even more indignant at the all-too-conscious choice of means.

Anxious to innovate and hence to astonish, the poet, Weidlé asserts, is led "in regard to versification" to outbid the new; he has an exaggerated fear of the commonplace, of the *déjà vu*. This results in both a systematic and a feverish exploitation of all the possible metric and strophic forms which, in turn, can only accelerate the decomposition of verse by impoverishing its subject-matter to the extreme limit, separating it from life, from living language, from living man."⁸ A dangerous statement that constitutes the condemnation of a whole line of poets who, since Edgar Allan Poe, took pride in the knowledge of what they were doing. This condemnation reminds us somewhat of Roger Caillois' concern for the anarchical aspect of modern poetry. In *Imposture de la Poésie*,⁹ it is true that he mainly attacked Surrealism, without realizing that if incoherence never has value as a method, it can be useful as an expedient.

He recognized in the manifestoes of this school only the ferments of disorder, attributing no value to the wings with which these very extravagances endowed the imagination. But it is best not to force a comparison between these two authors in regard to the role of reason; their theories are almost diametrically opposed.

Nothing serves better to prove that lucidity is neither inhibiting nor destructive than a comparison of the three versions of *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*. It was not the first draft, full of sage and facile verses which Mendès and even Banville would not have disavowed, that inspired Debussy, but rather the third, mature, duly transformed, obscured, restored, I would say, in all its lucidity, to mystery.

As for Mallarmé's unproductivity, we know that it has many causes, a few of which were entirely independent of his own degree of awareness of them; others were inherent in the high standard of his concepts, particularly the idea—to which the eminent dignity of poetry clings—which is

8. *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

9. Gallimard, 1948.

that the universe conceives of itself in a superior manner only in the verbal form.

The example of Valéry suffices to challenge the quasi-mythical, in any case religious concept which Weidlé entertains of artistic creativity. In Valéry we find weariness of lucidity, weariness of the tension that it demands and which makes him terminate his poems and finish just to finish. No longer pleasing himself, he pleased the public in this way, a public that inevitably misunderstood; in *Cimetière Marin* it remembered mainly the last strophe which, to the poet's ear, was merely a return to the familiar refrain.

It is true that Weidlé portrays Valéry almost as the victim of the combined and pernicious influences of Leonardo da Vinci and Edgar Allan Poe. Valéry, he says in substance, inherited from those two spiritual ancestors the pride of discovering, then that of knowing, and finally of maneuvering the powers of artistic creation. This gave him such intense satisfaction that he found it sufficient in itself, as if the fact of possessing the reins of government excused one from governing or impelled one to refuse to govern. "Leonardo and after him Edgar Allan Poe, each in his own manner, believed they could reconcile art and pride, but Valéry chose alternately art and pride, productivity and silence."

Schematized for the purpose of illustration, this alternative was no alternative at all. Valéry's periods of silence and of publication succeeded one another. It would be presumptuous to enumerate the various reasons for this since Valéry has explained it himself.

Undoubtedly Weidlé is correct in believing that for the man of art it is the whole man who conceives and executes. But he goes too far when he asserts that to know oneself to be creative is precisely what prevents creativity today.

It is not only "by reasoning rather than imagining" that one produces a failure, but often by imagining more than reasoning. Furthermore, we must retort that reasoning and reason are also part of man. Putting all of himself into his work does not in any way prevent the artist from being aware of his powers and consequently of his intent. This awareness, in turn, does not preclude his having faith in his previous and personal inspiration without which, it is true, a work of art would not exist. In our opinion there is no contradiction between awareness and inspiration: everything depends upon the artist's vitality.

With what marvels of intelligence and lucidity—a rather striking paradox—Weidlé rebels against the supervision of the critical conscience!

With what enthusiastic perspicacity he analyzes and synthesizes the techniques of these poets (techniques confused with their poetics)! Mallarmé, Valéry, Rimbaud, Joyce—capable and guilty of pure poetry—whose works, though he admits that they have a transient or limited value, have led poetry into the impasse where it languishes at present.

In the face of the abundance of poetic production, we personally refuse to speak of an exhaustion of the artistic imagination. Not everything is at the level of a regenerating work. However, should a genius appear, he would put to use all that one is tempted to call the remains of beauty. He would take hold of them and revive them; he would reform, innovate and, through his works, clear a path in the thick forests of the future, a path of wide avenues which others could tread. There is no decadence in art, merely a momentary lack of creative spirits. This is a question of generation.

The problem of lucidity occupies a greater place than one would think. It does not spring solely from artistic technique. At the core of the process of creativity, awareness of motives enlightens the writer in regard to his purpose; on the other hand, it informs the public about the path that one is determined to make it follow. The irritating controversy over involvement springs from the clarity of ends—or if you prefer, from the morality of ends.

Whoever says “ends” in reality says “duty.” The writer is a man who has two duties to perform: one toward himself, that is to say toward his work, the other toward the reader for whom, in the last analysis, it is intended. Upon these two duties, upon their conflict, their convergence or hierarchy, depends the solution advocated by every writer whose conscience challenges him.

As Julien Benda has shown, the question of involvement, raised ever since writers have existed, answered in the negative during the period of ivory towers and most often in the affirmative during our harassed times, derives essentially from an influence upon public opinion which is assumed, feared, or desired. It is based upon the authority and the prestige that one attributes to a writer. This implies, we might mention in passing, that literature is a force which cannot be disregarded. In short, the problem exists whenever one inquires into the author’s psychological and social relationship with his readers, whenever one is concerned with what today is called the sociology of art.

As defended by its partisans or attacked by its enemies, the question of

involvement contains a fundamental and implicit postulate which is the connection of ethics with aesthetics. For this reason some condemn free literature in the name of morality and others condemn the literature of involvement in the name of a higher morality of literature and of art.

Yet it would seem that the problem of involvement is a false kind of problem, that the artist cannot be torn apart by inimical duties; that all that must reside in him is coincidence, absorption, integration of his duty as a man with his duty as an artist. The obstacles of art exist within art and it is there that the writer is aware of bonds; it is there that he is not free to commit evil, a certain evil against himself, that is to say, against man.

This is the opinion of Gaëton Picon, among others, who, in his well-titled last chapter, "L'Art comme Remords Joie," asserts that "art cannot obey any laws save its very own, that it has no human significance unless it ventures to be all that it can be: a proud and indestructible language, an uncompromising gamble in which men will learn to acknowledge, for the benefit of their common strength, this image of their wrested and redeemed life."

We cannot terminate this discussion on involvement without referring to a book, *Problemática de la Literatura*¹⁰ in which it is examined at length and in which the author's personality demands our serious attention. Untiring in his efforts and impervious to all innovations regardless of their place of origin, amply informed about ideas and works, inclined and trained to define and also to define himself, Guillermo de Torre discerns in the heavens of the mind not only the handful of stars that one is content to contemplate, but also their outline and their destiny. Nothing fascinates him so much as this orbit that he would like to anticipate.

His doctrine might be associated with Taine's if it did not compensate for determinism by means of all the endowments of the most authentic Spanish humanism, particularly his faith in the individual. Although man on the whole is determined by geographical and historical factors, Torre believes that each man's personal genius itself becomes determinative, the equivalent of a natural force that runs counter to the natural order, and moves in the direction of more or less advanced states of civilization. Yet he firmly believes that the writer is created and shaped by the historical and cultural circumstances of his times. This explains the space allotted in his book to political problems like those of Hitlerism and Communism, or to questions of artistic morality like that of involvement.

10. Buenos Aires, Editorial Losada, 1951.

The twentieth century, Torre says correctly, will appear to future historians as the century of contradictions which are nowhere so flagrant as in the domain of literature and of the arts. Writers and artists, alternately accepting and resisting their destiny, at times intoxicated with initiative, at other times yielding to obedience, have risked everything for everything for the sole purpose, not of preserving or of reviving their youth, but of making the youthfulness of their works unpredictable and absolute. In order to be supremely themselves they have not hesitated to gamble their lives and their art by placing their bets on the adventure that they conceived as an experiment, in imitation of the sciences.

Strange adventures, indeed, from which recklessness and gratuitousness are banished and which speculate upon profits and discoveries, safeguarding in the wake the avenues of celebrity. Overcome with vertigo, literature descended unknown slopes toward that which is the least free in man: the unarticulated, the obscure, the dreamt of, the irresponsible, the unconscious . . . where compulsions are no less powerful for being unnamed. The question today is to speculate whether or not the time has come for the re-ascent and whether, from the depths of the most unrelenting rashness, fresh incarnations might not spring up.

As for the matter of involvement, Torre has no difficulty in demonstrating (p. 208) that aesthetic grace illuminates pure and disinterested works, which in the end seem to be the most representative of a period, the richest in repercussions and in consequences. On the other hand, works elaborated with an eye to an external finality, independent of the artistic necessity, avid to prove, quickly lose not only their actuality but even their value as proof.

Therefore there is no anti-literary literature, Torre concludes. There cannot be a literature of involvement that is valid in regard to art, nor even in regard to involvement. One senses that Torre, who has certainly read and remembered everything, found real delight in *La Littérature déçagée*,¹¹ a book full of verve and courage in which Etiemble, using concrete examples and writing in a different spirit, deals with analogous problems. In the beginning he quotes Montaigne to his reader: "I do not know how to become so profoundly and wholly involved. When my will recommends that I do something it is not with such a violent obligation that my understanding is tainted by it. . . ."

Where is literature going? The Argentinian author wonders about this

11. Paris, Gallimard, 1953.

in his lengthy meditations upon the vicissitudes of art during the last few decades. Toward the loss of all substance, all content, thanks to excessive affectation? Toward its “artistic denaturalization” thanks to excessive purpose? Toward a synthesis that integrates the best of these two tendencies, thanks to a reassessment of values?

Without answering these questions in a precise fashion, above all without wishing to prophesy, Torre (and I join him in this) can only remark upon the vitality of literature in the face of the worst upheavals—its survival, its perpetual rebirth, as if it enjoyed the privilege of breathing life into its own death.

G. de Torre’s book encourages us to penetrate a little further, to identify the fundamental stake in so many polemics: the notion of liberty. It is this notion which political schools and religions oppose in the end; it is this notion whose benefits or abuses are constantly described. Analysis inevitably is made on two levels, essential and functional, and it is not always possible to separate the one from the other.

For in truth this notion of liberty lives, deteriorates or evolves in man’s conscience; deep within him it is unique, but it is sometimes twofold in its aspect and in its action. Unfortunately, man has divided himself, and his professional dignity does not always coincide with his political dignity. An inauspicious dualism, this, which results in the fundamental paradox of our epoch: the clamor for absolute liberty at the very moment when, for good or for evil, the wisest regimes restrain the freedom of each of us.

Thus we experience to the limit this phenomenon which is not at all rare: men of extreme individualism placing themselves in the service of extreme enslavement, in the very name of the full flowering of their total potentialities. This was an error of orientation which many men were led to correct. The result, literally speaking, has been the great number of confessions, of *mea culpas* in which repentance circles around a definition and, curiously enough, finally abandons the rather murky term “liberation” to readopt precisely that of liberty—that time-honored word which smacks of culture in its classical form and which is the basis of European history.

After all, our inspection of the horizon was not as disappointing as one might have expected. Only Weidlé believes that the future of literature appears to be compromised along with that of civilization.

Although the pertinence and the wealth of thought in *Les Abeilles d’Aristé*, the contagious forcefulness, the happy formulas, the luster and clarity of its sentences make it a rewarding and exciting book, yet its theme

seems an attempt to illustrate Spengler's thesis regarding the supposed decadence of Europe.

For Weidlé believes that the position of artistic creation is peculiarly precarious and threatened today, indicating that the next civilization will be an inferior one, despite the tested techniques which should insure its smooth functioning. Just as the sea, our foster-mother, leaves behind it as it ebbs only the sterile sands of an uninhabitable desert, so art, ebbing from our world, leaves behind it only aridity and harshness.

The third section of the book is a veritable lament over our civilization, that "Descente aux Enfers" which is merely the gloomy reflection of our literature. Although the final chapter, "Convalescence ou Résurrection," presents a dilemma which is not discouraging in terms of either of these two alternatives, nevertheless one perceives in reading it that Weidlé is thinking of a third solution. This is why his conclusion, though it is admirably written, inevitably adopts the tone of a funeral oration. Yet his pessimism has a comforting side because it is a kind of ironical illustration of the importance of letters, because he predicts that the decline of their prestige, their want of teachings, their lack of enchantment are followed by more sordid losses.

With the exception of the author of *Les Abeilles d'Aristée*, the essayists whom we have discussed are in agreement. The disappearance of literature and of art would deprive man of his own light, as necessary to him as the solar light that awakens him each morning along with his hunger for happiness, his thirst for inquiry. Each of the essayists perceives in literature the conscience of humanity.

"A life dedicated to art," says Gaëton Picon, "is one of the finest devotions of man." And Claude-Edmonde Magny says: "Literature is one of the functions of the human conscience." Even Weidlé in his negative fashion asserts: "Man stripped of art is quite as inhuman as art deprived of man. For the measure of a man, of his grandeur as well as of his misery, is art." Let us add to this Marcel Arland's statement which attributes "all the dangers and the weaknesses from which it (literature) suffers to a lack of love and of faith." He considers it "the purest expression of man and his finest creation."¹²

These converging affirmations authorize one to believe either that there is no crisis in letters or that letters are in a permanent state of crisis.

Furthermore, nothing proves that the sense of the absurd, so alive and so widespread today, even maintained and stimulated by our modern

12. *La Grâce d'écrire*, Chap. I, p. 19, "Sur la Condition littéraire" (Paris, Gallimard, 1955).

anguish, has triumphed over our will to recover; that the horror of the real has been victorious over the zest for living, the mania for wordy disputes over reading. The spectacle of a kind of literature that despairs of itself does not negate the fact that what it attempts and what it proclaims as its failure to achieve, tend to restore to letters their true function—to interpret a moment of civilization and to herald its next stage.

The characteristic of literature, Ezra Pound seems to say, is to incite men to the continuance of life and also to free their spirit while nourishing it; finally, unceasingly to buttress and reinforce their *élan vital*. If this élan, this initial impulse, this survival, does not follow the path that some would wish it to, it is nonetheless, although faltering and uncertain, a step forward.

Whether or not they like it, those whom we call the men of culture, for want of a better term, give it its rhythm. And it is their words—disapproval or praise—which alone lend it its significance. Compelled to harmonize the needs of the spirit with the evolution of events which the people slowly drive forward, they proclaim, albeit reluctantly, the power possessed by the awareness of literature and by its expression in the face of the instinctive and mute will to survive.

Literature continues. Certain indications (particularly the appearance of all those works that feel the need to make the point) lead us to deduce that the period of disorder is yielding, little by little, to one which will be guided by entirely new criteria.

“We go toward the future by walking backwards,” Valéry used to say. Is it impossible for us to face this future brusquely, a future which after all depends upon us? Is it impossible that at the height of scientific progress our will to conquer might prove the equal of our sterilizing fear of being duped?

Evil is certainly inherent in man, but collective evil, that bogey, let it retreat! . . . There is nothing sanctimonious in this hope that springs from the midst of horror and of contempt. There is nothing blind in it. Rather, with smiling eyes and a stiff upper lip, it embraces the certainty that confidence in man is, after all, productive and inspiring.

Thus the present upheaval, the probing of the ends and means of art, its impregnation by new sciences, could be the indication of a way of thinking, and of adding the literature that some call foreign to the weight of total knowledge. This literature could presage a new humanism about to take shape which, ever better informed on the true nature of man, would have as its foundation as much respect for his sorrows as for his nobility.