

THE NOVEL IN FRANCE. By Martin Turnell. (Hamish Hamilton; 18s.)

This book is a valuable contribution to the study of French literature. Obviously the fruit of years of work, it displays a wide knowledge of the subject rarely granted to English critics. Mr Turnell bases his critical method on the best in French tradition. Instead of presenting the somewhat abstract enumeration which one might expect in a book of this length on such a subject, Mr Turnell limits himself to a study of typical novelists (Mme de la Fayette, Laclos, Constant, Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust), and even, in some cases, to certain characteristic novels. Any such list is, naturally, controversial; one may, for instance, regret that François Mauriac is not included. The choice, however, must remain an individual matter. This method has, of course, the defects of its qualities: French criticism has a tendency to be better in analysis than in synthesis; this seems to apply, admittedly to a very limited extent, to Mr Turnell's book; for example, his approach to *La Princesse de Clèves*, admirable from a stylistic view-point, appears rather over-simplified when dealing with the general trend of the novel. On the other hand, Mr Turnell's generalisations on French literature and style are, even if we occasionally disagree, invariably stimulating; sometimes they are masterly as, to mention but one instance, his remarks on the use of the adjective (pp. 223-4).

Mr Turnell's main preoccupation is with the evolution of the language of the novel. One may, at times, be inclined to cavil at his dismissal of Romantic prose as 'large and blurred effects', but the admirable analysis of that prose in his study on Flaubert reveals his awareness of the new elements which, despite its flaws as a medium, it introduced into French.

The numerous quotations from the novels, given in French and followed by a translation, are analysed from the stylistic, psychological and personal view-points, and the whole is placed against the wider backcloth of French life. Only copious extracts could do justice to the insight which provides us here with the purest critical delight. Mr Turnell's books shows what a wonderful instrument is the French *explication* method when properly handled. He reveals unsuspected aspects of novels with which we thought ourselves reasonably familiar, and we return to them with infinitely greater understanding.

It might be argued that Mr Turnell does not deal sufficiently with the moral and social implications of the novel. It appears unfair, however, to rewrite a book mentally, and then to criticise the original for its non-conformity with its somewhat intangible rival. We should be suitably grateful for what we receive: a work which is, perhaps, the finest piece of scholarly criticism of French literature ever written in English.

K.O'F.