STRACHEY LYTTON

LANDMARKS IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Lytton Strachey

Landmarks in French Literature

Strachey L.

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Содержание

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TO

J.M.S

CHAPTER I
ORIGINS—THE MIDDLE AGES

When the French nation gradually came into existence among the ruins of the Roman civilization in Gaul, a new language was at the same time slowly evolved. This language, in spite of the complex influences which went to the making of the nationality of France, was of a simple origin. With a very few exceptions, every word in the French vocabulary comes straight from the Latin. The influence of the pre-Roman Celts is almost imperceptible; while the number of words introduced by the Frankish conquerors amounts to no more than a few hundreds. Thus the French tongue presents a curious contrast to that of England. With us, the Saxon invaders obliterated nearly every trace of the Roman occupation; but though their language triumphed at first, it was eventually affected in the profoundest way by Latin influences; and the result has been that English literature bears in all its phases the imprint of a double origin. French literature, on the other hand, is absolutely homogeneous. How far this is an advantage or the reverse it would be difficult to say; but the important fact for the English reader to notice is that this great difference does exist between the French language and his own. The complex origin of the English tongue has enabled English writers to obtain those effects of diversity, of contrast, of imaginative strangeness, which have played such a dominating part in our literature. The genius of the French language, descended from its single Latin stock, has triumphed most in the contrary direction—in simplicity, in unity, in clarity, and in restraint.

Some of these qualities are already distinctly visible in the earliest French works which have come down to us—the *Chansons de Geste*. These poems consist of several groups or cycles of narrative verse, cast in the epic mould. It is probable that they first came into existence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and they continued to be produced in various forms of repetition, rearrangement, and at last degradation, throughout the Middle Ages. Originally they were not written, but recited. Their authors were the wandering minstrels, who found, in the crowds collected together at the great fairs and places of pilgrimage of those early days, an audience for long narratives of romance and adventure drawn from the Latin chronicles and the monkish traditions of a still more remote past. The earliest, the most famous, and the finest of these poems is the *Chanson de Roland*, which recounts the mythical incidents of a battle between Charlemagne, with 'all his peerage', and the hosts of the Saracens. Apart from some touches of the marvellous—such as the two hundred years of Charlemagne and the intervention of angels—the whole atmosphere of the work is that of eleventh-century France, with its aristocratic society, its barbaric vigour, its brutality, and its high sentiments of piety and honour. The beauty of the poem lies in the grand simplicity of its style. Without a trace of the delicacy and variety of a Homer, farther still from the consummate literary power of a Virgil or a Dante, the unknown minstrel who composed the *Chanson de Roland* possessed nevertheless a very real gift of art. He worked on a large scale with a bold confidence. Discarding absolutely the aids of ornament and the rhetorical elaboration of words, he has succeeded in evoking with an extraordinary, naked vividness the scenes of strife and heroism which he describes. At his best—in the lines of farewell between Roland and Oliver, and the well-known account of Roland's death—he rises to a restrained and severe pathos which is truly sublime. This great work—bleak, bare, gaunt, majestic—stands out, to the readers of to-day, like some huge mass of ancient granite on the far horizon of the literature of France.

While the *Chansons de Geste* were developing in numerous cycles of varying merit, another group of narrative poems, created under different influences, came into being. These were the *Romans Bretons*, a series of romances in verse, inspired by the Celtic myths and traditions which still lingered in Brittany and England. The spirit of these poems was very different from that of the *Chansons de Geste*. The latter were the typical offspring of the French genius—positive, definite,

materialistic; the former were impregnated with all the dreaminess, the mystery, and the romantic spirituality of the Celt. The legends upon which they were based revolved for the most part round the history of King Arthur and his knights; they told of the strange adventures of Lancelot, of the marvellous quest of the Holy Grail, of the overwhelming and fatal loves of Tristan and Yseult. The stories gained an immense popularity in France, but they did not long retain their original character. In the crucible of the facile and successful CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES, who wrote towards the close of the twelfth century, they assumed a new complexion; their mystical strangeness became transmuted into the more commonplace magic of wizards and conjurers, while their elevated, immaterial conception of love was replaced by the superfine affectations of a mundane gallantry. Nothing shows more clearly at what an early date, and with what strength, the most characteristic qualities of French literature were developed, than the way in which the vague imaginations of the Celtic romances were metamorphosed by French writers into the unambiguous elegances of civilized life.

Both the *Chansons de Geste* and the *Romans Bretons* were aristocratic literature: they were concerned with the life and ideals—the martial prowess, the chivalric devotion, the soaring honour—of the great nobles of the age. But now another form of literature arose which depicted, in short verse narratives, the more ordinary conditions of middle-class life. These *Fabliaux*, as they were called, are on the whole of no great value as works of art; their poetical form is usually poor, and their substance exceedingly gross. Their chief interest lies in the fact that they reveal, no less clearly than the aristocratic *Chansons*, some of the most abiding qualities of the French genius. Its innate love of absolute realism and its peculiar capacity for cutting satire—these characteristics appear in the *Fabliaux* in all their completeness. In one or two of the stories, when the writer possesses a true vein of sensibility and taste, we find a surprising vigour of perception and a remarkable psychological power. Resembling the *Fabliaux* in their realism and their bourgeois outlook, but far more delicate and witty, the group of poems known as the *Roman de Renard* takes a high place in the literature of the age. The humanity, the dramatic skill, and the command of narrative power displayed in some of these pleasant satires, where the foibles and the cunning of men and women are thinly veiled under the disguise of animal life, give a foretaste of the charming art which was to blossom forth so wonderfully four centuries later in the Fables of La Fontaine.

One other work has come down to us from this early epoch, which presents a complete contrast, both with the rough, bold spirit of the *Chansons de Geste* and the literal realism of the *Fabliaux*. This is the 'chante-fable' (or mingled narrative in verse and prose) of *Aucassin et Nicolete*. Here all is delicacy and exquisiteness—the beauty, at once fragile and imperishable, of an enchanting work of art. The unknown author has created, in his light, clear verse and his still more graceful and poetical prose, a delicious atmosphere of delicate romance. It is 'the tender eye-dawn of aurorean love' that he shows us—the happy, sweet, almost childish passion of two young creatures who move, in absolute innocence and beauty, through a wondrous world of their own. The youth Aucassin, who rides into the fight dreaming of his beloved, who sees her shining among the stars in heaven—

Estoilette, je te voi,
Que la lune trait à soi;
Nicolete est avec toi,
M'amiete o le blond poil.

(Little star, I see thee there,
That the moon draws close to her!
Nicolette is with thee there,
My love of the yellow hair.)—

who disdains the joys of Paradise, since they exclude the joys of loving—

> En paradis qu'ai-je a faire? Je n'i quier entrer, mais que j'aie Nicolete, ma très douce amie que j'aime tant.... Mais en enfer voil jou aler. Car en enfer vont li bel clerc et li bel cevalier, qui sont mort as tournois et as rices guerres, et li bien sergant, et li franc homme.... Avec ciax voil jou aler, mais que j'aie Nicolete, ma très douce amie, avec moi. [What have I to do in Paradise? I seek not to enter there, so that I have Nicolette, my most sweet friend, whom I love so well.... But to Hell will I go. For to Hell go the fine clerks and the fine knights, who have died in tourneys and in rich wars, and the brave soldiers and the free-born men.... With these will I go, so that I have Nicolette, my most sweet friend, with me.]

—Aucassin, at once brave and naïf, sensuous and spiritual, is as much the type of the perfect medieval lover as Romeo, with his ardour and his vitality, is of the Renaissance one. But the poem—for in spite of the prose passages, the little work is in effect simply a poem—is not all sentiment and dreams. With admirable art the author has interspersed here and there contrasting episodes of realism or of absurdity; he has woven into his story a succession of vivid dialogues, and by means of an acute sense of observation he has succeeded in keeping his airy fantasy in touch with actual things. The description of Nicolette, escaping from her prison, and stepping out over the grass in her naked feet, with the daisies, as she treads on them, showing black against her whiteness, is a wonderful example of his power of combining imagination with detail, beauty with truth. Together with the *Chanson de Roland*—though in such an infinitely different style—*Aucassin et Nicolete* represents the most valuable elements in the French poetry of this early age.

With the thirteenth century a new development began, and one of the highest importance—the development of Prose. *La Conquête de Constantinople*, by VILLEHARDOUIN, written at the beginning of the century, is the earliest example of those historical memoirs which were afterwards to become so abundant in French literature; and it is written, not in the poetical prose of *Aucassin et Nicolete*, but in the simple, plain style of straightforward narrative. The book cannot be ranked among the masterpieces; but it has the charm of sincerity and that kind of pleasant flavour which belong to innocent antiquity. The good old Villehardouin has something of the engaging *naïveté*, something of the romantic curiosity, of Herodotus. And in spite of the sobriety and dryness of his writing he can, at moments, bring a sense of colour and movement into his words. His description of the great fleet of the crusaders, starting from Corfu, has this fine sentence: 'Et le jour fut clair et beau: et le vent doux et bon. Et ils laissèrent aller les voiles au vent.' His account of the spectacle of Constantinople, when it appeared for the first time to the astonished eyes of the Christian nobles, is well known: 'Ils ne pouvaient croire que si riche ville pût être au monde, quand ils virent ces hauts murs et ces riches tours dont elle était close tout autour à la ronde, et ces riches palais et ces hautes églises.... Et sachez qu'il n'y eut si hardi à qui la chair ne frémit; et ce ne fut une merveille; car jamais si grande affaire ne fut entreprise de nulles gens, depuis que le monde fut créé.' Who does not feel at such words as these, across the ages, the thrill of the old adventure!

A higher level of interest and significance is reached by JOINVILLE in his *Vie de Saint Louis*, written towards the close of the century. The fascination of the book lies in its human qualities. Joinville narrates, in the easy flowing tone of familiar conversation, his reminiscences of the good king in whose service he had spent the active years of his life, and whose memory he held in adoration. The deeds, the words, the noble sentiments, the saintly devotion of Louis—these things he relates with a charming and ingenuous sympathy, yet with a perfect freedom and an absolute veracity. Nor is it only the character of his master that Joinville has brought into his pages; his book is as much a self-revelation as a biography. Unlike Villehardouin, whose chronicle shows hardly a trace of personal feeling, Joinville speaks of himself unceasingly, and has impressed his work indelibly with the mark of his own individuality. Much of its charm depends upon the contrast which he thus almost

unconsciously reveals between himself and his master—the vivacious, common-sense, eminently human nobleman, and the grave, elevated, idealizing king. In their conversations, recounted with such detail and such relish by Joinville, the whole force of this contrast becomes delightfully apparent. One seems to see in them, compressed and symbolized in the characters of these two friends, the conflicting qualities of sense and spirit, of worldliness and self-immolation, of the most shrewd and literal perspicacity and the most visionary exaltation, which make up the singular antithesis of the Middle Ages.

A contrast no less complete, though of a different nature, is to be found in the most important poetical work of the thirteenth century—*Le Roman de la Rose*. The first part of this curious poem was composed by GUILLAUME DE LORRIS, a young scholar who wrote for that aristocratic public which, in the previous generation, had been fascinated by the courtly romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Inspired partly by that writer, and partly by Ovid, it was the aim of Lorris to produce an *Art of Love*, brought up to date, and adapted to the tastes of his aristocratic audience, with all the elaborate paraphernalia of learned disquisition and formal gallantry which was then the mode. The poem, cast in the form of an intricate allegory, is of significance chiefly on account of its immense popularity, and for its being the fountain-head of a school of allegorical poetry which flourished for many centuries in France. Lorris died before he had finished his work, which, however, was destined to be completed in a singular manner. Forty years later, another young scholar, JEAN DE MEUNG, added to the 4000 lines which Lorris had left no fewer than 18,000 of his own. This vast addition was not only quite out of proportion but also quite out of tone with the original work. Jean de Meung abandoned entirely the refined and aristocratic atmosphere of his predecessor, and wrote with all the realism and coarseness of the middle class of that day. Lorris's vapid allegory faded into insignificance, becoming a mere peg for a huge mass of extraordinarily varied discourse. The whole of the scholastic learning of the Middle Ages is poured in a confused stream through this remarkable and deeply interesting work. Nor is it merely as a repository of medieval erudition that Jean de Meung's poem deserves attention; for it is easy to perceive in it an intellectual tendency far in advance of its age—a spirit which, however trammelled by antiquated conventions, yet claims kinship with that of Rabelais, or even that of Voltaire. Jean de Meung was not a great artist; he wrote without distinction, and without sense of form; it is his bold and voluminous thought that gives him a high place in French literature. In virtue alike of his popularization of an encyclopedic store of knowledge and of his underlying doctrine —the worship of Nature—he ranks as a true forerunner of the great movement of the Renaissance.

The intellectual stirring, which seemed to be fore-shadowed by the second part of the *Roman de la Rose*, came to nothing. The disasters and confusion of the Hundred Years War left France with very little energy either for art or speculation; the horrors of a civil war followed; and thus the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are perhaps the emptiest in the annals of her literature. In the fourteenth century one great writer embodied the character of the time. FROISSART has filled his splendid pages with 'the pomp and circumstance of glorious war'. Though he spent many years and a large part of his fortune in the collection of materials for his history of the wars between France and England, it is not as an historian that he is now remembered; it is as a writer of magnificent prose. His *Chroniques*, devoid of any profundity of insight, any true grasp of the movements of the age, have rarely been paralleled in the brilliance and animation of their descriptions, the vigour of their character-drawing, the flowing picturesqueness of their style. They unroll themselves like some long tapestry, gorgeously inwoven with scenes of adventure and chivalry, with flags and spears and chargers, and the faces of high-born ladies and the mail-clad figures of knights. Admirable in all his descriptions, it is in his battle-pieces that Froissart particularly excels. Then the glow of his hurrying sentences redoubles, and the excitement and the bravery of the combat rush out from his pen in a swift and sparkling stream. One sees the serried ranks and the flashing armour, one hears the clash of weapons and the shouting of the captains: 'Montjoie! Saint Denis! Saint George! Giane!'—one feels the sway and the press and the tumult, one laments with the vanquished, one exults with the

victors, and, amid the glittering panoply of 'grand seigneur, conte, baron, chevalier, et escuier', with their high-sounding titles and their gallant prowess, one forgets the reverse side of all this glory—the ravaged fields, the smoking villages, the ruined peasants—the long desolation of France.

The Chronicles of Froissart are history seen through the eyes of a herald; the *Memoirs* of PHILIPPE DE COMMYNES are history envisaged by a politician and a diplomatist. When Commynes wrote—towards the close of the fifteenth century—the confusion and strife which Froissart had chronicled with such a gusto were things of the past, and France was beginning to emerge as a consolidated and centralized state. Commynes himself, one of the confidential ministers of Louis XI, had played an important part in this development; and his book is the record of the triumphant policy of his crafty and sagacious sovereign. It is a fine piece of history, written with lucidity and firmness, by a man who had spent all his life behind the scenes, and who had never been taken in. The penetration and the subtlety of Commynes make his work interesting chiefly for its psychological studies and for the light that it throws on those principles of cunning statecraft which permeated the politics and diplomacy of the age and were to receive their final exposition in the *Prince* of Machiavelli. In his calm, judicious, unaffected pages we can trace the first beginnings of that strange movement which was to convert the old Europe of the Middle Ages, with its universal Empire and its universal Church, into the new Europe of independent secular nations—the Europe of to-day.

Commynes thus stands on the brink of the modern world; though his style is that of his own time, his matter belongs to the future: he looks forward into the Renaissance. At the opposite end of the social scale from this rich and powerful diplomatist, VILLON gave utterance in language of poignant beauty to the deepest sentiments of the age that was passing away. A ruffian, a robber, a murderer, haunting the vile places of Paris, flying from justice, condemned, imprisoned, almost executed, and vanishing at last, none knows how or where, this extraordinary genius lives now as a poet and a dreamer—an artist who could clothe in unforgettable verse the intensest feelings of a soul. The bulk of his work is not large. In his *Grand Testament*—a poem of about 1500 lines, containing a number of interspersed ballades and rondeaus—in his *Petit Testament*, and in a small number of miscellaneous poems, he has said all that he has to say. The most self-communicative of poets, he has impressed his own personality on every line that he wrote. Into the stiff and complicated forms of the rondeau and rondel, the ballade and double ballade, with their limited rhymes and their enforced repetitions, he has succeeded in breathing not only the spirit of beauty, but the spirit of individuality. He was not a simple character; his melancholy was shot with irony and laughter; sensuality and sentimentality both mingled with his finest imaginations and his profoundest visions; and all these qualities are reflected, shifting and iridescent, in the magic web of his verse. One thought, however, perpetually haunts him; under all his music of laughter or of passion, it is easy to hear one dominating note. It is the thought of mortality. The whining, leering, brooding creature can never for a moment forget that awful Shadow. He sees it in all its aspects—as a subject for mockery, for penitence, for resignation, for despair. He sees it as the melancholy, inevitable end of all that is beautiful, all that is lovely on earth.

Dictes moi où, n'en quel pays
Est Flora, la belle Rommaine;
Archipiada, ne Thaïs—

and so through the rest of the splendid catalogue with its sad, unanswerable refrain—

Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

Even more persistently, the vision rises before him of the physical terrors of death—the hideousness of its approaches, the loathsomeness of its corruptions; in vain he smiles, in vain he weeps; the grim imagination will not leave him. In the midst of his wildest debauches, he suddenly remembers the horrible features of decaying age; he repents; but there, close before him, he sees the fatal gibbet, and his own body swinging among the crows.

With Villon the medieval literature of France comes at once to a climax and a termination. His potent and melancholy voice vibrates with the accumulated passion and striving and pain of those far-off generations, and sinks mysteriously into silence with the birth of a new and happier world.

CHAPTER II
THE RENAISSANCE

There is something dark and wintry about the atmosphere of the later Middle Ages. The poems of Villon produce the impression of some bleak, desolate landscape of snow-covered roofs and frozen streets, shut in by mists, and with a menacing shiver in the air. It is—

sur la morte saison,
Que les loups se vivent de vent,
Et qu'on se tient en sa maison,
Pour le frimas, près du tison.

Then all at once the grey gloom lifts, and we are among the colours, the sunshine, and the bursting vitality of spring.

The great intellectual and spiritual change which came over western Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century was the result of a number of converging causes, of which the most important were the diffusion of classical literature consequent upon the break-up of the Byzantine Empire at the hands of the Turks, the brilliant civilization of the Italian city-states, and the establishment, in France, Spain and England, of powerful monarchies whose existence ensured the maintenance of order and internal peace. Thus it happened that the splendid literature of the Ancient World—so rich in beauty and so significant in thought—came into hands worthy of receiving it. Scholars, artists and thinkers seized upon the wondrous heritage and found in it a whole unimagined universe of instruction and delight. At the same time the physical discoveries of explorers and men of science opened out vast fresh regions of speculation and adventure. Men saw with astonishment the old world of their fathers vanishing away, and, within them and without them, the dawning of a new heaven and a new earth. The effect on literature of these combined forces was enormous. In France particularly, under the strong and brilliant government of Francis I, there was an outburst of original and vital writing. This literature, which begins, in effect, what may be called the distinctively *modern* literature of France, differs in two striking respects from that of the Middle Ages. Both in their attitude towards art and in their attitude towards thought, the great writers of the Renaissance inaugurated a new era in French literature.

The new artistic views of the age first appeared, as was natural, in the domain of poetry. The change was one towards consciousness and deliberate, self-critical effort. The medieval poets had sung with beauty; but that was not enough for the poets of the Renaissance: they determined to sing not only with beauty, but with care. The movement began in the verse of MAROT, whose clear, civilized, worldly poetry shows for the first time that tendency to select and to refine, that love of ease and sincerity, and that endeavour to say nothing that is not said well, which were to become the fundamental characteristics of all that was best in French poetry for the next three hundred years. In such an exquisite little work of art as his epistle in three-syllabled verse—'À une Damoyselle Malade', beginning—

Ma mignonne,
Je vous donne
Le bonjour,

we already have, in all its completeness, that tone of mingled distinction, gaiety and grace which is one of the unique products of the mature poetical genius of France. But Marot's gift was not wide

enough for the voluminous energies of the age; and it was not until a generation later, in the work of the *Pléiade*—a group of writers of whom RONSARD was the chief, and who flourished about the middle of the sixteenth century—that the poetical spirit of the French Renaissance found its full expression.

The mere fact that the *Pléiade* formed a definite school, with common principles and a fixed poetical creed, differentiates them in a striking way from the poets who had preceded them. They worked with no casual purpose, no merely professional art, but with a high sense of the glory of their calling and a noble determination to give to the Muses whom they worshipped only of their best. They boldly asserted—in Du Bellay's admirable essay, *La Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française*—the right of the French language to stand beside those of the ancients, as a means of poetical expression; and they devoted their lives to the proof of their doctrine. But their respect for their own tongue by no means implied a neglect of the Classics. On the contrary, they shared to the full the adoration of their contemporaries for the learning and the literature of the Ancient World. They were scholars as well as poets; and their great object was to create a tradition in the poetry of France which should bring it into accord with the immortal models of Greece and Rome. This desire to imitate classical literature led to two results. In the first place, it led to the invention of a great number of new poetical forms, and the abandonment of the old narrow and complicated conventions which had dominated the poetry of the Middle Ages. With the free and ample forms of the Classics before them, Ronsard and his school enfranchised French verse. Their technical ability was very great; and it is hardly too much to say that the result of their efforts was the creation of something hitherto lacking in French literature—a poetical instrument which, in its strength, its freedom, its variety of metrical resources, and its artistic finish, was really adequate to fulfil the highest demands of genius. In this direction their most important single achievement was their elevation of the 'Alexandrine' verse—the great twelve-syllabled rhyming couplet—to that place of undisputed superiority over all other metres which it has ever since held in French poetry.

But the *Pléiade's* respect for classical models led to another and a far less fortunate result. They allowed their erudition to impinge upon their poetry, and, in their eagerness to echo the voice of antiquity, they too often failed to realize the true bent either of their own language or their own powers. This is especially obvious in the longer poems of Ronsard—his *Odes* and his *Françiade*—where all the effort and skill of the poet have not been enough to save his verse from tedium and inflation. The Classics swam into the ken of these early discoverers in such a blaze of glory that their eyes were dazzled and their feet misled. It was owing to their very eagerness to imitate their great models exactly—to 'ape the outward form of majesty'—that they failed to realize the true inward spirit of Classical Art.

It is in their shorter poems—when the stress of classical imitation is forgotten in the ebullition of individual genius—that Ronsard and his followers really come to their own. These beautiful lyrics possess the freshness and charm of some clear April morning, with its delicate flowers and its carolling birds. It is the voice of youth that sings in light and varied measures, composed with such an exquisite happiness, such an unlaboured art. The songs are of Love and of Nature, of roses, skylarks and kisses, of blue skies and natural joys. Sometimes there is a sadder note; and the tender music reminds us of the ending of pleasures and the hurrying steps of Time. But with what a different accent from that of the dark and relentless Villon! These gentle singers had no words for such brutalities.

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle—

so Ronsard addresses his mistress; and the image is a charming one of quiet and refined old age, with its half-smiling memories of vanished loves. What had become, in the hands of Villon, a subject for grim jests and horrible descriptions, gave to Ronsard simply an opportunity for the delicate pathos of regret. Then again the note changes, and the pure, tense passion of Louise Labé—

Oh! si j'étais en ce beau sein ravie
De celui-là pour lequel vais mourant—

falls upon our ears. And then, in the great sonnet sequence of Du Bellay—*Les Antiquités de Rome*—we hear a splendid sound unknown before in French poetry—the sonorous boom of proud and pompous verse.

Contemporary with the poetry of the *Pléiade*, the influence of the Renaissance spirit upon French literature appeared with even more striking force in the prose of RABELAIS. The great achievement of the *Pléiade* had been the establishment, once and for all, of the doctrine that literature was something essentially artistic; it was Rabelais who showed that it possessed another quality—that it was a mighty instrument of thought. The intellectual effort of the Middle Ages had very rarely clothed itself in an artistic literary form. Men laughed or wept in the poetry or prose of their own tongue; but they thought in scholastic Latin. The work of Jean de Meung was an exception; but, even there, the poetical form was rough and feeble; the artistic and the intellectual principles had not coalesced. The union was accomplished by Rabelais. Far outstripping Jean de Meung in the comprehensiveness and vigour of his thought, he at the same time infinitely surpassed him as an artist. At first sight, indeed, his great book hardly conveys such an impression; to a careless reader it might appear to be simply the work of a buffoon or a madman. But such a conception of it would be totally mistaken. The more closely one examines it, the more forcibly one must be struck alike by its immense powers of intellect and its consummate literary ability. The whole vast spirit of the Renaissance is gathered within its pages: the tremendous vitality, the enormous erudition, the dazzling optimism, the courage, the inventiveness, the humanity, of that extraordinary age. And these qualities are conveyed to us, not by some mere conscientious pedant, or some clumsy enthusiast, but by a born writer—a man whose whole being was fixed and concentrated in an astonishing command of words. It is in the multitude of his words that the fertility of Rabelais' spirit most obviously shows itself. His book is an orgy of words; they pour out helter-skelter, wildly, into swirling sentences and huge catalogues that, in serried columns, overflow the page. Not quite wildly, though; for, amid all the rush and bluster, there is a powerful underlying art. The rhythms of this extraordinary prose are long and complex, but they exist; and they are controlled with the absolute skill of a master.

The purpose of Rabelais' book cannot be summed up in a sentence. It may be described as the presentment of a point of view: but *what* point of view? There lies the crux of the question, and numberless critics have wrangled over the solution of it. The truth is, that the only complete description of the point of view is to be found—in the book itself; it is too wide and variegated for any other habitation. Yet, if it would be vain to attempt an accurate and exhaustive account of Rabelais' philosophy, the main outlines of that philosophy are nevertheless visible enough. Alike in the giant-hero, Pantagruel, in his father, Gargantua, and in his follower and boon-companion, Panurge, one can discern the spirit of the Renaissance—expansive, humorous, powerful, and, above all else, alive. Rabelais' book is the incarnation of the great reaction of his epoch against the superstitious gloom and the narrow asceticism of the Middle Ages. He proclaims, in his rich re-echoing voice, a new conception of the world; he denies that it is the vale of sorrows envisioned by the teachers of the past; he declares that it is abounding in glorious energy, abounding in splendid hope, and, by its very nature, good. With a generous hatred of stupidity, he flies full tilt at the pedantic education of the monasteries, and asserts the highest ideals of science and humanity. With an equal loathing of asceticism, he satirizes the monks themselves, and sketches out, in his description of the Abbey of Theleme, a glowing vision of the Utopian convent. His thought was bold; but he lived in a time when the mildest speculation was fraught with danger; and he says what he has to say in the shifting and ambiguous forms of jest and allegory. Yet it was by no means simply for the sake of concealment that he made his work into the singular mixture that it is, of rambling narrative, disconnected incident, capricious

disquisition, and coarse humour. That, no doubt, was the very manner in which his mind worked; and the essential element of his spirit resides precisely in this haphazard and various looseness. His exceeding coarseness is itself an expression of one of the most fundamental qualities of his mind —its jovial acceptance of the physical facts of life. Another side of the same characteristic appears in his glorification of eating and drinking: such things were part of the natural constitution of man, therefore let man enjoy them to the full. Who knows? Perhaps the Riddle of the Universe would be solved by the oracle of *la dive Bouteille*.

Rabelais' book is a history of giants, and it is itself gigantic; it is as broad as Gargantua himself. It seems to belong to the morning of the world—a time of mirth, and a time of expectation; when the earth was teeming with a miraculous richness, and the gods walked among men.

In the Essays of MONTAIGNE, written about a generation later, the spirit of the Renaissance, which had filled the pages of Rabelais with such a superabundant energy, appears in a quieter and more cultivated form. The first fine rapture was over; and the impulsive ardours of creative thought were replaced by the calm serenity of criticism and reflection. Montaigne has none of the coarseness, none of the rollicking fun, none of the exuberant optimism, of Rabelais; he is a refined gentleman, who wishes to charm rather than to electrify, who writes in the quiet, easy tone of familiar conversation, who smiles, who broods, and who doubts. The form of the detached essay, which he was the first to use, precisely suited his habit of thought. In that loose shape—admitting of the most indefinite structure, and of any variety of length, from three pages to three hundred—he could say all that he wished to say, in his own desultory, inconsecutive, and unelaborate manner. His book flows on like a prattling brook, winding through pleasant meadows. Everywhere the fruits of wide reading are manifest, and numberless Latin quotations strew his pages. He touches on every side of life—from the slightest and most superficial topics of literature or manners to the profoundest questions that beset humanity; and always with the same tact and happiness, the same wealth of learned illustration, the same engaging grace.

The Essays are concerned fundamentally with two subjects only. First, they illustrate in every variety of way Montaigne's general philosophy of life. That philosophy was an absolutely sceptical one. Amid the mass of conflicting opinions, amid the furious oppositions of creeds, amid the flat contradictions of loudly-asseverated dogmas, Montaigne held a middle course of calm neutrality. *Que Sçais-je?* was his constant motto; and his Essays are a collection of numberless variations on this one dominating theme. The *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, the largest and the most elaborate of them, contains an immense and searching review of the errors, the incoherences, and the ignorance of humanity, from which Montaigne draws his inevitable conclusion of universal doubt. Whatever the purely philosophical value of this doctrine may be, its importance as an influence in practical life was very great. If no opinion had any certainty whatever, then it followed that persecution for the sake of opinion was simply a wicked folly. Montaigne thus stands out as one of the earliest of the opponents of fanaticism and the apostles of toleration in the history of European thought.

The other subject treated of in the Essays, with an equal persistence and an equal wealth of illustration, is Montaigne himself. The least reticent of writers, he furnishes his readers with every conceivable piece of information concerning his history, his character, his appearance, his health, his habits and his tastes. Here lies the peculiar charm of his book—the endless garrulity of its confidences, which, with their combined humour, suavity, and irresponsibility, bring one right into the intimate presence of a fascinating man.

For this reason, doubtless, no writer has ever been so gushed over as Montaigne; and no writer, we may be sure, would be so horrified as he at such a treatment. Indeed, the adulation of his worshippers has perhaps somewhat obscured the real position that he fills in literature. It is impossible to deny that, both as a writer and as a thinker, he has faults—and grave ones. His style, with all its delightful abundance, its inimitable ease, and its pleasant flavour of antiquity, yet lacks form; he did not possess the supreme mastery of language which alone can lead to the creation of great works

of literary art. His scepticism is not important as a contribution to philosophical thought, for his mind was devoid both of the method and of the force necessary for the pursuit and discovery of really significant intellectual truths. To claim for him such titles of distinction is to overshoot the mark, and to distract attention from his true eminence. Montaigne was neither a great artist nor a great philosopher; he was not *great* at all. He was a charming, admirable human being, with the most engaging gift for conversing endlessly and confidentially through the medium of the printed page ever possessed by any man before or after him. Even in his self-revelations he is not profound. How superficial, how insignificant his rambling ingenuous outspokenness appears beside the tremendous introspections of Rousseau! He was probably a better man than Rousseau; he was certainly a more delightful one; but he was far less interesting. It was in the gentle, personal, everyday things of life that his nature triumphed. Here and there in his Essays, this simple goodness wells up clear and pure; and in the wonderful pages on Friendship, one sees, in all its charm and all its sweetness, that beautiful humanity which is the inward essence of Montaigne.

CHAPTER III
THE AGE OF TRANSITION

In the seventy years that elapsed between the death of Montaigne (1592) and the accession to power of Louis XIV the tendencies in French literature were fluctuating and uncertain. It was a period of change, of hesitation, of retrogression even; and yet, below these doubtful, conflicting movements, a great new development was germinating, slowly, surely, and almost unobserved. From one point of view, indeed, this age may be considered the most important in the whole history of the literature, since it prepared the way for the most splendid and characteristic efflorescence in prose and poetry that France has ever known; without it, there would have been no *Grand Siècle.* In fact, it was during this age that the conception was gradually evolved which determined the lines upon which all French literature in the future was to advance. It can hardly be doubted that if the fertile and varied Renaissance movement, which had given birth to the *Pléiade*, to Rabelais, and to Montaigne, had continued to progress unbroken and unchecked, the future literature of France would have closely resembled the contemporary literatures of Spain and England—that it would have continued to be characterized by the experimental boldness and the loose exuberance of the masters of the sixteenth century. But in France the movement *was* checked: and the result was a body of literature, not only of the highest value, but also of a unique significance in European letters.

The break in the Renaissance movement was largely the result of political causes. The stability and peace which seemed to be so firmly established by the brilliant monarchy of Francis I vanished with the terrible outbreak of the Wars of Religion. For about sixty years, with a few intermissions, the nation was a prey to the horrors of civil strife. And when at last order was restored under the powerful rule of Cardinal Richelieu, and the art of writing began to be once more assiduously practised, the fresh rich glory of the Renaissance spirit had irrevocably passed away. Already, early in the seventeenth century, the poetry of MALHERBE had given expression to new theories and new ideals. A man of powerful though narrow intelligence, a passionate theorist, and an ardent specialist in grammar and the use of words, Malherbe reacted violently both against the misplaced and artificial erudition of the *Pléiade* and their unforced outbursts of lyric song. His object was to purify the French tongue; to make it—even at the cost of diminishing its flavour and narrowing its range—strong, supple, accurate and correct; to create a language which, though it might be incapable of expressing the fervours of personal passion or the airy fancies of dreamers, would be a perfect instrument for the enunciation of noble truths and fine imaginations, in forms at once simple, splendid and sincere. Malherbe's importance lies rather in his influence than in his actual work. Some of his Odes—among which his great address to Louis XIII on the rebellion of La Rochelle deserves the highest place—are admirable examples of a restrained, measured and weighty rhetoric, moving to the music not of individual emotion, but of a generalized feeling for the beauty and grandeur of high thoughts. He was essentially an oratorical poet; but unfortunately the only forms of verse ready to his hand were lyrical forms; so that his genius never found a full scope for its powers. Thus his precept outweighs his example. His poetical theories found their full justification only in the work of his greater and more fortunate successors; and the masters of the age of Louis XIV looked back to Malherbe as the intellectual father of their race.

Malherbe's immediate influence, however, was very limited. Upon the generation of writers that followed him, his doctrines of sobriety and simplicity made no impression whatever. Their tastes lay in an entirely different direction. For now, in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, there set in, with an extreme and sudden violence, a fashion for every kind of literary contortion, affectation and trick. The value of a poet was measured by his capacity for turning a somersault in verse—for constructing ingenious word-puzzles with which to express exaggerated sentiments; and

no prose-writer was worth looking at who could not drag a complicated, ramifying simile through half a dozen pages at least. These artificialities lacked the saving grace of those of the Renaissance writers —their abounding vigour and their inventive skill. They were cold-blooded artificialities, evolved elaborately, simply for their own sake. The new school, with its twisted conceits and its super-subtle elegances, came to be known as the 'Precious' school, and it is under that name that the satire of subsequent writers has handed it down to the laughter of after-generations. Yet a perspicacious eye might have seen even in these absurd and tasteless productions the signs of a progressive movement —the possibility, at least, of a true advance. For the contortions of the 'Precious' writers were less the result of their inability to write well than of their desperate efforts to do so. They were trying, as hard as they could, to wriggle themselves into a beautiful pose; and, naturally enough, they were unsuccessful. They were, in short, too self-conscious; but it was in this very self-consciousness that the real hope for the future lay. The teaching of Malherbe, if it did not influence the actual form of their work, at least impelled them towards a deliberate effort to produce *some* form, and to be content no longer with the vague and the haphazard. In two directions particularly this new self-consciousness showed itself. It showed itself in the formation of literary *salons*—of which the chief was the famous blue drawing-room of the Hôtel de Rambouillet—where every conceivable question of taste and art, grammar and vocabulary, was discussed with passionate intensity; and it showed itself even more strongly in the establishment, under the influence of Richelieu, of an official body of literary experts —the French Academy.

How far the existence of the Academy has influenced French literature, either for good or for evil, is an extremely dubious question. It was formed for the purpose of giving fixity and correctness to the language, of preserving a high standard of literary taste, and of creating an authoritative centre from which the ablest men of letters of the day should radiate their influence over the country. To a great extent these ends have been attained; but they have been accompanied by corresponding drawbacks. Such an institution must necessarily be a conservative one; and it is possible that the value of the Academy as a centre of purity and taste has been at least balanced by the extreme reluctance which it has always shown to countenance any of those forms of audacity and change without which no literature can be saved from petrifaction. All through its history the Academy has been timid and out of date. The result has been that some of the very greatest of French writers—including Molière, Diderot, and Flaubert—have remained outside it; while all the most fruitful developments in French literary theory have come about only after a bitter and desperate resistance on its part. On the whole, perhaps the most important function performed by the Academy has been a more indirect one. The mere existence of a body of writers officially recognized by the authorities of the State has undoubtedly given a peculiar prestige to the profession of letters in France. It has emphasized that tendency to take the art of writing seriously—to regard it as a fit object for the most conscientious craftsmanship and deliberate care—which is so characteristic of French writers. The amateur is very rare in French literature—as rare as he is common in our own. How many of the greatest English writers have denied that they were men of letters!—Scott, Byron, Gray, Sir Thomas Browne, perhaps even Shakespeare himself. When Congreve begged Voltaire not to talk of literature, but to regard him merely as an English gentleman, the French writer, who, in all his multifarious activities, never forgot for a moment that he was first and foremost a follower of the profession of letters, was overcome with astonishment and disgust. The difference is typical of the attitude of the two nations towards literature: the English, throwing off their glorious masterpieces by the way, as if they were trifles; and the French bending all the resources of a trained and patient energy to the construction and the perfection of marvellous works of art.

Whatever view we may take of the ultimate influence of the French Academy, there can be no doubt at all that one of its first actions was singularly inauspicious. Under the guidance of Cardinal Richelieu it delivered a futile attack upon the one writer who stood out head and shoulders above his contemporaries, and whose works bore all the marks of unmistakable genius—the great

CORNEILLE. With the production, in 1636, of Corneille's tragedy, *Le Cid*, modern French drama came into existence. Previous to that date, two main movements are discernible in French dramatic art—one carrying on the medieval traditions of the mystery-and miracle-play, and culminating, early in the seventeenth century, with the rough, vigorous and popular drama of Hardy; and the other, originating with the writers of the Renaissance, and leading to the production of a number of learned and literary plays, composed in strict imitation of the tragedies of Seneca,—plays of which the typical representative is the *Cléopâtre* of Jodelle. Corneille's achievement was based upon a combination of what was best in these two movements. The work of Jodelle, written with a genuinely artistic intention, was nevertheless a dead thing on the stage; while Hardy's melodramas, bursting as they were with vitality, were too barbaric to rank as serious works of art. Corneille combined art with vitality, and for the first time produced a play which was at once a splended piece of literature and an immense popular success. Henceforward it was certain that French drama would develop along the path which had been opened out for it so triumphantly by the *Cid*. But what was that path? Nothing shows more strikingly the strength of the literary opinion of that age than the fact that it was able to impose itself even upon the mighty and towering spirit of Corneille. By nature, there can be little doubt that Corneille was a romantic. His fiery energy, his swelling rhetoric, his love of the extraordinary and the sublime, bring him into closer kinship with Marlowe than with any other writer of his own nation until the time of Victor Hugo. But Corneille could not do what Marlowe did. He could not infuse into the free form of popular drama the passion and splendour of his own genius, and thus create a type of tragedy that was at once exuberant and beautiful. And he could not do this because the literary theories of the whole of the cultivated society of France would have been opposed to him, because he himself was so impregnated with those very theories that he failed to realize where the true bent of his genius lay. Thus it was that the type of drama which he impressed upon French literature was not the romantic type of the English Elizabethans, but the classical type of Senecan tragedy which Jodelle had imitated, and which was alone tolerable to the French critics of the seventeenth century. Instead of making the vital drama of Hardy artistic, he made the literary drama of Jodelle alive. Probably it was fortunate that he did so; for he thus led the way straight to the most characteristic product of the French genius—the tragedy of Racine. With Racine, the classical type of drama, which so ill befitted the romantic spirit of Corneille, found its perfect exponent; and it will be well therefore to postpone a more detailed examination of the nature of that type until we come to consider Racine himself, the value of whose work is inextricably interwoven with its form. The dominating qualities of Corneille may be more easily appreciated.

He was above all things a rhetorician; he was an instinctive master of those qualities in words which go to produce effects of passionate vehemence, vigorous precision, and culminating force. His great *tirades* carry forward the reader, or the listener (for indeed the verse of Corneille loses half its value when it is unheard), on a full-flowing tide of language where the waves of the verse, following one another in a swift succession of ever-rising power, crash down at last with a roar. It is a strange kind of poetry: not that of imaginative vision, of plastic beauty, of subtle feeling; but that of intellectual excitement and spiritual strength. It is the poetry of Malherbe multiplied a thousandfold in vigour and in genius, and expressed in the form most appropriate to it—the dramatic Alexandrine verse. The stuff out of which it is woven, made up, not of the images of sense, but of the processes of thought, is, in fact, simply argument. One can understand how verse created from such material might be vigorous and impressive; it is difficult to imagine how it could also be passionate—until one has read Corneille. Then one realizes afresh the compelling power of genius. His tragic personages, standing forth without mystery, without 'atmosphere', without local colour, but simply in the clear white light of reason, rivet our attention, and seem at last to seize upon our very souls. Their sentences, balanced, weighty and voluble, reveal the terrors of destiny, the furies of love, the exasperations of pride, with an intensity of intellectual precision that burns and blazes. The deeper these strange beings sink into their anguish, the more remorseless their arguments become. They prove their horror in

dreadful syllogisms; every inference plunges them farther into the abyss; and their intelligence flames upward to its highest point, when they are finally engulfed.

Such is the singular passion that fills Corneille's tragedies. The creatures that give utterance to it are hardly human beings: they are embodiments of will, force, intellect and pride. The situations in which they are placed are calculated to expose these qualities to the utmost; and all Corneille's masterpieces are concerned with the same subject—the combat between indomitable egoism and the forces of Fate. It is in the meeting of these 'fell incensed opposites' that the tragedy consists. In *Le Cid*, Chimene's passion for Rodrigue struggles in a death-grapple with the destiny that makes Rodrigue the slayer of her father. In *Polyeucte* it is the same passion struggling with the dictates of religion. In *Les Horaces*, patriotism, family love and personal passion are all pitted against Fate. In *Cinna*, the conflict passes within the mind of Auguste, between the promptings of a noble magnanimity and the desire for revenge. In all these plays the central characters display a superhuman courage and constancy and self-control. They are ideal figures, speaking with a force and an elevation unknown in actual experience; they never blench, they never waver, but move adamantine to their doom. They are for ever asserting the strength of their own individuality.

> Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers,
> Je le suis, je veux l'être,

declares Auguste; and Médée, at the climax of her misfortunes, uses the same language—

> 'Dans un si grand revers que vous reste-t-il?'—'Moi!
> Moi, dis-je, et c'est assez!'

The word 'moi' dominates these tragedies; and their heroes, bursting with this extraordinary egoism, assume even more towering proportions in their self-abnegation than in their pride. Then the thrilling clarion-notes of their defiances give way to the deep grand music of stern sublimity and stoic resignation. The gigantic spirit recoils upon itself, crushes itself, and reaches its last triumph.

Drama of this kind must, it is clear, lack many of the qualities which are usually associated with the dramatic art; there is no room in it for variety of character-drawing, for delicacy of feeling, or for the realistic presentation of the experiences of life. Corneille hardly attempted to produce such effects as these; and during his early years his great gifts of passion and rhetoric easily made up for the deficiency. As he grew older, however, his inspiration weakened; his command of his material left him; and he was no longer able to fill the figures of his creation with the old intellectual sublimity. His heroes and his heroines became mere mouthing puppets, pouring out an endless stream of elaborate, high-flown sentiments, wrapped up in a complicated jargon of argumentative verse. His later plays are miserable failures. Not only do they illustrate the inherent weaknesses of Corneille's dramatic method, but they are also full of the characteristic bad taste and affectations of the age. The vital spirit once withdrawn, out sprang the noisome creatures from their lurking-places to feast upon the corpse.

Nevertheless, with all his faults, Corneille dominated French literature for twenty years. His genius, transcendent, unfortunate, noble in endeavour, unequal in accomplishment, typifies the ambiguous movement of the time. For still the flood of 'Precious' literature poured from the press —dull, contorted epics, and stilted epigrams on my lady's eyebrow, and learned dissertations decked out in sparkling tinsel, and infinitely long romances, full of alembicated loves. Then suddenly one day a small pamphlet in the form of a letter appeared on the bookstalls of Paris; and with its appearance the long reign of confused ideals and misguided efforts came to an end for ever. The pamphlet was the first of Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales*—the work which ushered into being the great classical age —the *Grand Siècle* of Louis XIV.

In the *Lettres Provinciales* PASCAL created French prose—the French prose that we know to-day, the French prose which ranks by virtue of its vigour, elegance and precision as a unique thing in the literature of the world. Earlier prose-writers—Joinville, Froissart, Rabelais, Montaigne—had been in turns charming, or picturesque, or delicate, or overflowing with vitality; but none had struck upon the really characteristically French note. They lacked form, and those fine qualities of strength and clarity which form alone can give. Their sentences were indeterminate—long, complex, drifting, and connected together by conjunctions into a loose aggregate. The 'Precious' writers had dimly realized the importance of form, but they had not realized at all the importance of simplicity. This was Pascal's great discovery. His sentences are clear, straightforward, and distinct; and they are bound together into a succession of definitely articulated paragraphs, which are constructed, not on the system of mere haphazard aggregation, but according to the logical development of the thought. Thus Pascal's prose, like the verse of Malherbe and Corneille, is based upon reason; it is primarily intellectual. But, with Pascal, the intellect expresses itself even more exactly. The last vestiges of medieval ambiguities have been discarded; the style is perfectly modern. So wonderfully did Pascal master the resources of the great instrument which he had forged, that it is true to say that no reader who wishes to realize once for all the great qualities of French prose could do better than turn straight to the *Lettres Provinciales*. Here he will find the lightness and the strength, the exquisite polish and the delicious wit, the lambent irony and the ordered movement, which no other language spoken by man has ever quite been able to produce. The *Lettres* are a work of controversy; their actual subject-matter—the ethical system of the Jesuits of the time—is remote from modern interests; yet such is the brilliance of Pascal's art that every page of them is fascinating to-day. The vivacity of the opening letters is astonishing; the tone is the gay, easy tone of a man of the world; the attack is delivered in a rushing onslaught of raillery. Gradually, as the book proceeds, there are signs of a growing seriousness; we have a sense of graver issues, and round the small question of the Jesuits' morality we discern ranged all the vast forces of good and evil. At last the veil of wit and laughter is entirely removed, and Pascal bursts forth into the full fury of invective. The vials of wrath are opened; a terrific denunciation rolls out in a thundering cataract; and at the close of the book there is hardly a note in the whole gamut of language, from the airiest badinage to the darkest objurgation, which has not been touched.

In sheer genius Pascal ranks among the very greatest writers who have lived upon this earth. And his genius was not simply artistic; it displayed itself no less in his character and in the quality of his thought. These are the sides of him which are revealed with extraordinary splendour in his *Pensées*—a collection of notes intended to form the basis for an elaborate treatise in defence of Christianity which Pascal did not live to complete. The style of many of these passages surpasses in brilliance and force even that of the *Lettres Provinciales*. In addition, one hears the intimate voice of Pascal, speaking upon the profoundest problems of existence—the most momentous topics which can agitate the minds of men. Two great themes compose his argument: the miserable insignificance of all that is human—human reason, human knowledge, human ambition; and the transcendent glory of God. Never was the wretchedness of mankind painted with a more passionate power. The whole infinitude of the physical universe is invoked in his sweeping sentences to crush the presumption of man. Man's intellectual greatness itself he seizes upon to point the moral of an innate contradiction, an essential imbecility. 'Quelle chimère,' he exclaims, 'est-ce donc que l'homme! quelle nouveauté, quel monstre, quel chaos, quel sujet de contradiction, quel prodige! Juge de toutes choses, imbécile ver de terre, dépositaire du vrai, cloaque d'incertitude et d'erreur, gloire et rebut de l'univers!' In words of imperishable intensity, he dwells upon the omnipotence of Death: 'Nous sommes plaisants de nous reposer dans la société de nos semblables. Misérables comme nous, impuissants comme nous, ils ne nous aideront pas; on mourra seul.' Or he summons up in one ghastly sentence the vision of the inevitable end: 'Le dernier acte est sanglant, quelque belle que soit la comédie en tout le reste. On jette enfin de la terre sur la tête, et en voilà pour jamais.' And so follows the conclusion of

the whole: 'Connaissez donc, superbe, quel paradoxe vous êtes à vous-même. Humiliez-vous, raison impuissante; taisez-vous, nature imbécile … et entendez de votre maître votre condition véritable que vous ignorez. Écoutez Dieu.'

Modern as the style of Pascal's writing is, his thought is deeply impregnated with the spirit of the Middle Ages. He belonged, almost equally, to the future and to the past. He was a distinguished man of science, a brilliant mathematician; yet he shrank from a consideration of the theory of Copernicus: it was more important, he declared, to think of the immortal soul. In the last years of his short life he sank into a torpor of superstition—ascetic, self-mortified, and rapt in a strange exaltation, like a medieval monk. Thus there is a tragic antithesis in his character—an unresolved discord which shows itself again and again in his *Pensées*. 'Condition de l'homme,' he notes, 'inconstance, ennui, inquiétude.' It is the description of his own state. A profound inquietude did indeed devour him. He turned desperately from the pride of his intellect to the consolations of his religion. But even there —? Beneath him, as he sat or as he walked, a great gulf seemed to open darkly, into an impenetrable abyss. He looked upward into heaven, and the familiar horror faced him still: 'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie!'

CHAPTER IV
THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV

When Louis XIV assumed the reins of government France suddenly and wonderfully came to her maturity; it was as if the whole nation had burst into splendid flower. In every branch of human activity—in war, in administration, in social life, in art, and in literature—the same energy was apparent, the same glorious success. At a bound France won the headship of Europe; and when at last, defeated in arms and politically shattered, she was forced to relinquish her dreams of worldly power, her pre-eminence in the arts of peace remained unshaken. For more than a century she continued, through her literature and her manners, to dominate the civilized world.

At no other time have the conditions of society exercised a more profound influence upon the works of great writers. Though, with the ascendancy of Louis, the political power of the nobles finally came to an end, France remained, in the whole complexion of her social life, completely aristocratic. Louis, with deliberate policy, emphasized the existing rigidity of class-distinctions by centralizing society round his splendid palace of Versailles. Versailles is the *clou* to the age of Louis XIV. The huge, almost infinite building, so stately and so glorious, with its vast elaborate gardens, its great trees transported from distant forests, its amazing waterworks constructed in an arid soil at the cost of millions, its lesser satellite parks and palaces, its palpitating crowds of sumptuous courtiers, the whole accumulated mass of piled-up treasure and magnificence and power—this was something far more significant than the mere country residence of royalty; it was the summary, the crown, and the visible expression of the ideals of a great age. And what were these ideals? The fact that the conception of society which made Versailles possible was narrow and unjust must not blind us to the real nobility and the real glory which it brought into being. It is true that behind and beyond the radiance of Louis and his courtiers lay the dark abyss of an impoverished France, a ruined peasantry, a whole system of intolerance, and privilege, and maladministration; yet it is none the less true that the radiance was a genuine radiance—no false and feeble glitter, but the warm, brilliant, intense illumination thrown out by the glow of a nation's life. That life, with all it meant to those who lived it, has long since vanished from the earth—preserved to us now only in the pages of its poets, or strangely shadowed forth to the traveller in the illimitable desolation of Versailles. That it has gone so utterly is no doubt, on the whole, a cause for rejoicing; but, as we look back upon it, we may still feel something of the old enchantment, and feel it, perhaps, the more keenly for its strangeness—its dissimilarity to the experiences of our own days. We shall catch glimpses of a world of pomp and brilliance, of ceremony and decoration, a small, vital passionate world which has clothed itself in ordered beauty, learnt a fine way of easy, splendid living, and come under the spell of a devotion to what is, to us, no more than the gorgeous phantom of high imaginations—the divinity of a king. When the morning sun was up and the horn was sounding down the long avenues, who would not wish, if only in fancy, to join the glittering cavalcade where the young Louis led the hunt in the days of his opening glory? Later, we might linger on the endless terrace, to watch the great monarch, with his red heels and his golden snuff-box and his towering periwig, come out among his courtiers, or in some elaborate grotto applaud a ballet by Molière. When night fell there would be dancing and music in the gallery blazing with a thousand looking-glasses, or masquerades and feasting in the gardens, with the torches throwing strange shadows among the trees trimmed into artificial figures, and gay lords and proud ladies conversing together under the stars.

Such were the surroundings among which the classical literature of France came into existence, and by which it was profoundly influenced in a multitude of ways. This literature was, in its form and its essence, aristocratic literature, though its writers were, almost without exception, middle-class men brought into prominence by the royal favour. The great dramatists and poets and prose-

writers of the epoch were in the position of artists working by special permission for the benefit and pleasure of a select public to which they themselves had no claim to belong. They were *in* the world of high birth and splendid manners, but they were not of it; and thus it happened that their creations, while reflecting what was finest in the social ideals of the time, escaped the worst faults of the literary productions of persons of rank—superficiality and amateurishness. The literature of that age was, in fact, remarkable to an extraordinary degree for precisely contrary qualities—for the solidity of its psychological foundations and for the supreme excellence of its craftsmanship. It was the work of profound and subtle artists writing for a small, leisured, distinguished, and critical audience, while retaining the larger outlook and sense of proportion which had come to them from their own experience of life.

The fact, too, that this aristocratic audience was no longer concerned with the activities of political power, exercised a further influence upon the writers of the age. The old interests of aristocracy—the romance of action, the exalted passions of chivalry and war—faded into the background, and their place was taken by the refined and intimate pursuits of peace and civilization. The exquisite letters of Madame de Sévigné show us society assuming its modern complexion, women becoming the arbiters of taste and fashion, and drawing-rooms the centre of life. These tendencies were reflected in literature; and Corneille's tragedies of power were replaced by Racine's tragedies of the heart. Nor was it only in the broad outlines that the change was manifest; the whole temper of life, in all its details, took on the suave, decorous, dignified tone of good breeding, and it was impossible that men of letters should escape the infection. Their works became remarkable for clarity and elegance, for a graceful simplicity, an easy strength; they were cast in the fine mould of perfect manners—majestic without pretension, expressive without emphasis, simple without carelessness, and subtle without affectation. These are the dominating qualities in the style of that great body of literature, which has rightly come to be distinguished as the *Classical* literature of France.

Yet there was a reverse to the medal; for such qualities necessarily involved defects, which, hardly perceptible and of small importance in the work of the early masters of the Classical school, became more prominent in the hands of lesser men, and eventually brought the whole tradition into disrepute. It was inevitable that there should be a certain narrowness in a literature which was in its very essence deliberate, refined, and select; omission is the beginning of all art; and the great French classicists, more supremely artistic, perhaps, than any other body of writers in the history of the world, practised with unsparing devotion the virtue of leaving out. The beauties of clarity, simplicity, and ease were what they aimed at; and to attain them involved the abandonment of other beauties which, however attractive, were incompatible with those. Vague suggestion, complexity of thought, strangeness of imagination—to us the familiar ornaments of poetry—were qualities eschewed by the masters of the age of Louis XIV. They were willing to forgo comprehensiveness and elaboration, they were ready to forswear the great effects of curiosity and mystery; for the pursuit of these led away from the high path of their chosen endeavour—the creation, within the limits they had marked out, of works of flawless art. The fact that they succeeded so well is precisely one of the reasons why it is difficult for the modern reader—and for the Anglo-Saxon one especially, with his different æsthetic traditions—to appreciate their work to the full. To us, with our broader outlook, our more complicated interests, our more elusive moods, their small bright world is apt to seem uninteresting and out of date, unless we spend some patient sympathy in the discovery of the real charm and the real beauty that it contains. Nor is this our only difficulty: the classical tradition, like all traditions, became degenerate; its virtues hardened into mannerisms, its weaknesses expanded into dogmas; and it is sometimes hard for us to discriminate between the artist who has mastered the convention in which he works, and the artisan who is the slave of it. The convention itself, if it is unfamiliar to us, is what fills our attention, so that we forget to look for the moving spirit behind. And indeed, in the work of the later classicists, there was too often no spirit to look for. The husk alone remained—a finicky pretentious framework, fluttering with the faded rags of ideals long outworn. Every great tradition has

its own way of dying; and the classical tradition died of timidity. It grew afraid of the flesh and blood of life; it was too polite to face realities, too elevated to tread the common ground of fact and detail; it would touch nothing but generalities, for they alone are safe, harmless, and respectable; and, if they are also empty, how can that he helped? Starving, it shrank into itself, muttering old incantations; and it continued to mutter them, automatically, some time after it had expired.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.