

THE HEROIC CENTURY

ONE effect of the very strong French habit of self-assessment and self-appraisal is that foreigners are often mildly surprised to see the literature of the French survive and continue to renew itself. We are apt to take our neighbours' introspection for granted; we cannot get used to their vitality. They have summarised themselves so often that we expect this to go on almost automatically, and we expect little else. In fact there is much else, a constant renewal of creative effort; but it never or hardly ever gets detached from the critical reason. And this constant exercise of reason, on the part of the creative writers just as much as of anyone else, tends to make the work of the literary historian easier; for he finds, already in being and ready to hand, defined points of view and definite groupings and loyalties. It must be rather easy to write manuals—bad, facile manuals—of French literature. The "clear idea" is everyone's property and nobody's earnings, once it has been made clear. It becomes, in a word, cliché.

M. Gonzague de Reynold, fortunately, is no dealer in clichés. His recent work on the 17th century⁽¹⁾ is not even a manual, but a lucid summary thrown into a series of short essays, each of which represents a real and powerful effort to understand. It is a good introduction because it is lucid and alive, even if it does, at times, remind one of the commonplace manual, much as a man's face may remind you of a caricature of him. For M. de Reynold is so sure of himself. From the first page he raps out questions which he is perfectly prepared to answer and to answer immediately; and this speed and this assurance go on for 300 pages. It is charming, stimulating, and sometimes brilliant. Here, for example, are a few of his crisp phrases: "Le génie greco-latin se perd volontiers dans le précis, comme dans l'imprécis le génie germanique;" "l'Ecole Française vise au sublime comme le classicisme, et tout, comme lui, sans effort apparent;" "le roi de France est le premier gentilhomme du royaume, et gentilhomme avant d'être roi;" and this on Pascal, "il ne se piquait de rien . . . Si j'avais à écrire sa vie, je choisirai pour titre; la vie simple de Blaise Pascal." Certainly, M. de Reynold is not dull.

On first reading everything seems beautifully clear: all the terms are defined, the whole terrain mapped out. You have only, it seems, to remember the argument. But first impressions are not enough. This book can bear re-reading and a great deal of pondering. The ideas it so dextrously sets out are rich both in content and implication, as I hope to indicate a little, with these few re-

(1) *Le XVIIe Siècle: le Classique et le Baroque*. G. de Reynold. (Ed. de l'Arbre, 1944).

marks.

“Décidément . . . on les a trop laicisés : de Reynold is speaking of the classical writers of the Grand Siècle and of their classical theory; but the influence of the “Catholic Reform” (he prefers not to call it the Counter-Reformation) pervades, he insists, the century from end to end; it is “le grand courant”. A half of his book treats of phases and figures in this immense religious development; the rest being divided between studies of the passionate, wayward temperament of the epoch (the Baroque) and its attempt at cool, severe self-discipline (Classicism). For the culture of the 17th century was more Christian, and its Christianity less jansenist, than used to be supposed. Nineteenth century critics and historians over-emphasised the jansenist affinities or connections of some of the greatest writers—Pascal, of course, Boileau, Racine, even Bossuet—just as they envisaged too narrowly the whole culture of the time. They ignored the Baroque contribution. They missed the importance—the historical importance—of Catholic humanism. They passed over the “Ecole Française”, the great mid-century Oratorian school of spirituality. To put it crudely, they jumped from St. Francis of Sales—himself underrated, patronised, *excused*—to Bossuet by way of Port Royal,—itself over-rated. The latter exaggeration can be placed, chiefly, to Sainte Beuve’s account. Henri Bremond, whose mental temper and predilections fitted him to understand⁽²⁾ most intimately his subtle precursor, has put the young Sainte Beuve’s enthusiasm for Port Royal in its proper perspective: “c’était son premier pèlerinage”, he writes, “son premier rencontre avec la vie intérieure du chrétien”.⁽³⁾ No wonder he was enchanted. Bremond, with his vastly greater experience of Catholicism, both in books and in life, can easily “place” Sainte Beuve, and so supersede him. Scarcely aware of the massive background and setting of the little group that was Port Royal, Sainte Beuve came almost to identify it (as it would itself have wished) with all that was truly Christian in France at the time. If we are wiser now we owe it chiefly to Bremond. He immensely enlarged the background to the greater figures, merely by revealing, with a wealth of detail and unparalleled zest, the general Catholic vitality of that extraordinary age. To a large measure he has corrected the proportions of French historiography in this field. Again and again one feels the effect of his volumes. One feels it palpably in de Reynold’s book. Twenty-five years ago Bremond wrote: “On parle toujours comme s’il n’y avait pas de milieu entre humanisme dévot et jansénisme. On se contente d’opposer François de Sales à Saint-Cyran, les

(2) See the long essay in *Pour le Romantisme*. It is very good Bremond.

(3) *Histoire du Sentiment Religieux*, etc. Vol. IV p.7.

jesuites à la famille Arnauld. On oublie l'entre-deux si riche, un demi-siècle de sainteté, l'école française.''(4) These words could not be written to-day.

The originality of de Reynold's work comes out rather in his treatment of the more secular aspects of the period, and especially in the use he makes of his particular interest in the Baroque. His analysis of this style and culture, though too rapid and, no doubt, too abstract to please everybody, is a considerable help to the ordinary reader, to those at least who like to start with general ideas which they can test, if they wish, for themselves. We are, most of us, apt to take the term "Baroque" too narrowly. De Reynold maintains that it covers a number of qualities, artistic, emotional, social, religious, characterising more or less distinctively the whole life—at least in externals—of Catholic Europe for about a century and a half: from the mid-sixteenth century to the old age of Louis XIV. It had also its influence overseas, especially in the Spanish Americas, as well as across the main religious frontiers in Europe. In a way, too, it continued to impose itself, though with lessening assurance, on the architecture, painting, music and manners of the eighteenth century. So complex a pattern could only gradually fall apart. Rationalism threatened it, yet Voltaire had his Baroque side. The Romantic spirit, in Rousseau for instance, was its still more open enemy, yet the Romantics who followed Rousseau recognised, across the dead academic classicism they despised and across the great classics of the latter half of the seventeenth century, whom they honoured with their defiance, something akin to themselves in the air of the mid and early century. They put their gloves on to assault Racine, but Corneille they saluted; they vindicated his genius for exaggeration, reversing the verdict of the eighteenth century which followed Voltaire in preferring Racine. Corneille was too old when Boileau wrote to be tamed by him. Racine, one might add, had too great a reserve of power to be cowed by Boileau and too much flexibility not to profit by him. But to call Corneille a Romantic (as Faguet does) begs a lot of questions. De Reynold holds that romanticism proper begins in the eighteenth century (largely derived from England) and that the germ of unrest in "le puissant, volontaire et parfois outré Corneille", and in the Baroque generally, was a thing essentially different.

However that may be, it is worth while dwelling a little on this "germ of unrest". In Corneille it springs, evidently, into an appeal to heroism, an exaltation, extraordinarily definite, of the personal will; and something akin to it we see reappearing throughout

(4) *Histoire* . . . Vol. IV, p.25.

the century, an acute moral tension, an effort towards the pure and perfect in deed and expression and the chivalrous in manners. This élan is linked, by de Reynold, with the Baroque generally; and, in the particular conditions of France, with the survival of knightly manners in the feudal class, tempered by a strong classical culture and the intercourse of a polished society to a fine rational balance. Common-sense reasserted itself, but it did not blunt the edge of that chivalrous effort. Reason insisted on clarity, and Christianity, still close to the heart of the ruling class and the bourgeoisie, drew that exaltation Godwards and kept humanism continually under fire. The target of the moralists was still *amour-propre*; in the next century their fire was to be turned outwards against the great institutions, against the Church and Monarchy.

While the great moment lasted the strands were very closely interwoven, as in every phase of high culture. Four such strands might be distinguished, representing four aspects of the "heroic" attitude to life. We may concede, by the way, that it was in the upper classes of society, alone directly reflected in the literature of the time, that the heroic *attitude* prevailed; but it would be rash to deny, though impossible to prove, that this attitude answered to something permanent in the French character generally. A recent writer speaks of the "goût qu'ont toujours montré les Français pour une certaine tension morale aimée pour elle-même et sentie".⁽⁵⁾ And Péguy, who honoured only what seemed to him heroic, distinguished between *petites gens* and *gens du commun*: "j'ai horreur des gens de commun. J'adore les petites gens". Besides, one of our four strands is sanctity, which is bounded by no social barriers.

I would suggest, then, a four-fold distinction of the heroic temper according to the way it appears in Corneille, in Racine, in S. Francis of Sales, and in the conception of the "honnête homme". Anything like an adequate analysis would of course require a much longer essay than this; but the subject is interesting enough to justify even a rather tentative sketch.

In Corneille the heroic element is active, dominant and successful. He is the poet of the undefeated human will. In his plays the will is set from the start between contrasted motives; it has to choose; it does choose; and its choice is in line with 'honour' or 'virtue'. Each play represents an achievement, a conquest. That the choice is often unplausible and the triumphant virtue very doubtfully virtuous does not matter; it seemed virtuous to the Cid or Camille or Cinna or whoever it might be. And it seemed so, and unmistakably so, right from the start of the action; the cour-

(5) *Rencontres*, No. 2. *Les Traditions de Notre Culture*, pp.10-11.

age, which is the core of this drama, is conscious of itself from the start, of its own reason why as well as of the danger that faces it. The whole dramatic tension springs from this presupposed clarity in the mind. Corneille's characters reason from a pre-supposed clarity in order to find the perfect antithetical expression of the division within themselves. The current throbs between two brilliant poles. The poet's effort is to express as sharply as he can a disunity *within the unity of the same soul* (this is the root of the Cornelian antithetical style). He has to show the soul divided in such a way that each division is *all but* the whole soul, and yet each is utterly distinct from the other. At the maximum of division-within-unity the dilemma becomes charged with heroism, the heroic ordeal comes to the point—*point d'honneur*. The Cid is completely and honourably in love with Chimène; as a lover everything in him belongs to her, excepting that 'point' wherein he is linked to his ancestors and through which his father's outraged 'honour' works upon him to the ruin of his love. Conversely, as the son of those ancestors, as a grandee, everything in him belongs to his race (and so to his father), except that point wherein he is linked to Chimène. He is, at once, all but this 'point' and all but that one; and these points, thus united in him—and even in a sort of common 'honourableness',—and thus kept precisely apart from each other, become the two poles of a heroic tension. While the one represents, chiefly, *passion* and the other, chiefly, *virtue*, the tension is not yet at its maximum. It is when their common honourableness reaches a point where both appear as 'virtue' that the strain reaches its utmost. Virtue now fights virtue. Thus the Cid's passion for Chimène becomes a passion of fidelity able to fight, on its own level, with his loyalty to his father. Thus the conspirator Cinna can reach back, behind the passion for Emilie, which has made a conspirator of him, to a 'virtuous' republican motive able to fight, on its own level, with the motives of fidelity and gratitude which still bind him to Augustus. At this point, then, heroism demands the sacrifice not of 'passion' but of virtue itself. As a man, not merely as an animal, the hero must die to himself, to his own virtue, or rather to one of his virtues. And why? That he may live, not 'unto God', but simply unto himself as virtuous in another way. The hero is called to martyrdom for the sake of *one* of his virtues. He is sacrificed, after all, to a *part* of himself, to something less than himself.

But such a hero is only half a martyr; for he is neither whole-hearted nor wholly sacrificed. And a half-martyr is only half a hero. Hence Corneille is led by the logic of the pure heroism he is trying to express to conceive the figures of Polyeucte and Auguste:

the Christian martyr and the pagan Emperor. Polyeucte embodies a Christian convention or commonplace; but Auguste takes us right to the heart of Corneille's originality. With his enemy in his power, with a flawless moral right to crush him forever, Auguste not only spares his enemy, not only invites him to co-operate with himself in the government, but offers him, man to man, the equality of friendship: "Soyons amis, Cinna . . ." Passion and virtue, anger and justice are both forgone in favour of mercy, and mercy reaches beyond itself to love and the offer of friendship. The imperial virtue (justice) and sovereignty seem to bow before something else. The heroism reaches a sort of completion in self-loss, in generosity. Even the conflict of virtues, justice versus mercy, Auguste transcends; he does not prefer mercy to justice, but love to both. Indeed he stands by no one of the imperial virtues or functions; he stands simply on his imperial being. To this being, to this absolute generosity, as it were, he surrenders all particular satisfactions of honour or passion; and it and himself he affirms together, by an act of the will:—

"Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers;
Je le suis, je veux l'être. O Siècles! O mémoire,
Conservez à jamais ma dernière victoire!"

That is the Cornelian climax. Notice that it is an unthinkable climax, a sheer mockery, unless Auguste has, or is represented as having, the power effectively to be so generous. At the end of the play he has, and must have, an air of absolute power,⁽⁶⁾—"maître de moi comme de l'univers". He has become, indeed, a god. A god on earth, imperial, is the consummation of Corneille's cult of the heroic, in so far as this involves a positive conquest and achievement, through an act of the will and reached on this side of the grave. Not the hero's surrender only, but his glory. Polyeucte dies, but Auguste is infinitely more alive at the end of the play than at its beginning; and the glory that surrounds him is divine power and goodness. The antinomies native to heroism are transcended in a showing of divine being; and the ground of the hero's will is seen, in a glimpse, to be the power of God. One might say that the last effort of Corneille, when he is not content to show the triumph of the Cross, in the Christian martyr, is the creation of a *myth*: analogous, I think, to Dante's Beatrice. Auguste and Beatrice are both, in different ways, symbols for divinised humanity; both have a splendour beyond our actual condition; and in this sense we are closer to Polyeucte, who stands for the necessity of death.

"Généreux" is one of the great words in Corneille. In Descartes

(6) As Napoleon well understood. "Quel chef-d'oeuvre que ce Cinna!" he said; and of the poet himself: "S'il avait vécu sous mon regne, je l'aurais fait prince"; and again "Comme il m'eut compris!"

too, his contemporary, the word rings out with emphasis; "générosité" is the quality "qui fait qu'un homme s'estime au plus haut point qu'il se peut légitimement estimer"⁽⁷⁾; more precisely, it is the sheer consciousness of free-will: . . . "en ce qu'il connaît qu'il n'y a rien qui véritablement lui appartienne que cette libre disposition de ses volontés".⁽⁸⁾ The phrase is an incitement to heroism. Both men had been to school with the Jesuits, and this, no doubt, helped to predispose them to exalt free-will. But "généreux" was a word with a wide and strong appeal at that time. We find it, very relevantly, on the lips of St. Francis of Sales: "il faut avoir des esprits généreux qui ne s'attachent qu'à Dieu seul . . . faisant regner la partie supérieure de nostre âme, puisqu'il est entièrement en nostre pouvoir, avec le grâce de Dieu, de ne jamais consentir à l'inférieure".⁽⁹⁾ The reference to Grace brings in the Christian note explicitly, with all its consequences; but it was good for a generation which passionately admired human greatness, and saw itself reflected in the great figures of Corneille, to have a spiritual leader like St. Francis of Sales, one who fully shared that admiration without being in the least blinded by it.

And then, after the mid-century, something new came in: a change that was subtle and pervasive and profound; a spiritual change to which modern historians of culture seem to be particularly attentive, but of which I would isolate only one aspect here: the new note that sounds in the tragedy of Racine. There is no point in labouring the conventional contrast of Racine and Corneille; de Reynold deals with it in three translucent pages, in the general contrast of the younger poet's generation (the "school of 1660") with that which it challenged and superseded; and he summarises: "Comparez à Pascal, les jansenistes semblent d'un autre âge; Corneille, compare à Racine, a l'air gothique". The new generation, with its complex sensitivity and its scruples, is in full reaction, even in revolt, against the old. How would the heroic ideal fare, now that it had become a convention? The new men, Boileau and Molière to the fore, seem to deride the heroic. They are out for the real, the concrete, the natural, the everyday; for exact observation and common-sense. With this they combine a renewed verbal refinement and a fierce regard for simplicity in composition. And these two elements, exact truthfulness and the utmost purity of line, freedom from verbiage, go to make up Racine; and charged with his extreme sensitivity they issue in that brief and terrible series, from *Andromaque* to *Phèdre*.

For Racine is terrible. If the work of Corneille might be com-

(7) Cf. G. Gadoffre: *Corneille—Descartes*, in *Rencontres* No. 2. p.83-4.

(8) *ibid.*

(9) *Oeuvres* (ed. Mackey; Annecy) vol. VI, 334.

pared to a mounting arch that reaches its highest point in the figure of Auguste (who unites and holds together the whole work, as a key-stone holds an arch), the drama of Racine is a whirlpool. Whatever the predominant cause of this may have been—his "Jansenism" or his devotion to Greek tragedy or simply his own feelings—the fact is certain that for him, precisely as a poet, Fate is supreme. Man is controlled by his passion, and the issue is fatal. The movement to this issue whirls in narrowing circles towards death. It is characteristic of Racine to set his characters moving in a sort of procession towards disaster, one behind the other; and each character is placed in the series by his or her passion, a passion of love to start with, for the *one in front*; so that the love-passion of each is drawing him or her precisely *away* from his or her own lover. Love drives the series by a movement *away* in a single direction, so that of necessity it is circular, a vicious, hopeless circle. And of necessity too a second movement, an urge to hatred begins; and eddies back and forwards, exasperating, defiling, destroying. Hermione, desiring Pyrrhus (who desires Andromaque) hates Oreste, who desires her; and then hates Pyrrhus; and then uses Oreste, the slave of her whim, to kill Pyrrhus, only to find her hatred of Oreste redoubled, her love of Pyrrhus unquenched and forever unquenchable. Love at this point becomes sheer agony, and there is only one way out. Love and hatred meet perfectly at last in her, and she kills herself. You cannot say, at the end, whether she dies of hating love or loving hatred; the passions have simply cancelled out; they have a common issue, and, in this sense, are identical.

Where is the heroism? In Corneille it is in the hero, on the stage. In Racine it is in the poet, rather, or in the words he puts on the lips of his creatures. They say precisely what they are. They thoroughly know their disintegration, their *odi et amo*; and with that blend of exquisite verbal delicacy and utter directness which is the style of Racine, they thoroughly acknowledge disintegration. They would rather kill than cease to hate; and, killing, they still know they love; and say so. Their integrity consists in confessing disintegration.

It is noticeable too, and part of Racine's honesty, that although, in a sense, the suicide-dénouement is heroic—in the sense that it is the consistent conclusion *ad ultimum* of the action—yet in these plays it never appears as heroic. The Romano-Stoic Corneille was far more inclined to that particular bravado. But in Racine suicide is simply the moral and physical term of a process of destruction by passion; and the heroic is kept purely on the side of the intellect and its verbal expression; that is why I said that it is chiefly in the poet himself. After Racine, and increasingly in the next century,

with Diderot and the sentimentalists, this clean distinction got blurred, and men strove to wrest the material itself, passion and, later on, even despair, into heroic shapes. Racine kept the poet's privilege of standing apart from his work; but lesser poets, and less Christian men, found that poise too much of a strain.

A word may be added about the "honnête homme". This, roughly the seventeenth-century French conception of the 'gentleman', denotes the human background of this great literature; it is the common ideal of the class for which these poets wrote. It combines cornelian and racinian elements: the *élan* and chivalrous pride of the one, the poise, candour and unpretentiousness of the other. (I mean, of course, the *idea* of the 'honnête homme'). Basic to it was the notion of "honneur"; that was the heroic starting point, as in Corneille. But this notion must be completed by the epigram; "l'honnête homme est celui qui ne se pique de rien"; which de Reynold explains in three words: "l'horreur de paraître". Whatever your talents, do not boast of them nor identify yourself with them. You are a man first of all, and everything else is less than that. But if neither talents nor outward glory is the man, what, in his heart and soul, is man? One answer came stark and sudden when that candour and unpretentiousness was turned, by Racine, into an instrument of analytic art, displaying the horrors of the inner world of *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, and revealing a profound inward, and especially sexual, disturbance; which revelation itself must have profoundly affected his contemporaries. The "honnête homme" was put on his mettle; alas, he tended, in the next generation to justify himself, *de se piquer de quelque chose* and especially of being a "philosopher". A literary racinian, Voltaire turned away from Racine's inner world. But already, a century earlier, St. Francis of Sales, who was great enough to include, in a way, the whole 17th century, had expressed his solution of the problem set towards the close of it by Racine: "J'ay accoustumé de dire que le throsne de la miséricorde de Dieu c'est nostre misère: il faut donc, d'autant que nostre misère sera plus grande, avoir aussi une plus grande confiance".⁽¹⁰⁾

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(10) *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, p.22.