

French Literature for the Club Program

LITERARY clubs in America show a growing interest in French literature, both classical and contemporary. This is a logical complement to the increase in French students which all universities have witnessed since the war. I hear of clubs where a whole season is to be devoted to French history and letters.

A club meeting is not a class, and is not bound to the same strictness of program. Members are supposed to have acquired, during their school years, a certain training in French and a knowledge of French classics. The scope of a club program seems to me to include such significant or entertaining works as were then left aside. A new perspective on French letters should thus be obtained, not duplicating but widening and enlivening the basic teaching of a few years ago. The French teacher used to explain "Les Précieuses Ridicules" and "L'Abbé Constantin". Now why not dig as far as "Don Juan", "Les Trois Contes", "Les Moralités Légendaires", "L'Annonce faite à Marie" and "L'Ecole des Indifférents"? For some reason or other, these and many more were never included in school programs.

Of course, the first question is, how seriously does your club intend to go about it? If you just plan to meet once in a while and exchange a few bits of information concerning the French best sellers, why not buy a fashionable magazine or two, consult the man behind the counter at your

bookseller's, purchase the recent works of Pierre Benoît, Paul Géraudy, and Marcel Prévost and let it go at that? But we shall assume that you are not so easily pleased, that you want a real foundation for your future literary investigations, and that you would like also to possess a few master keys to the treasures of modern French letters.

A first suggestion. If you have, say, a weekly meeting, why not pursue, one week out of two, the study of classical literature, and the other week the discovery of modern works? On the first and third week of each month, there could be a regular course on French history and literature from the origins to 1830 for instance, and on the second and fourth weeks, on France from King Louis-Philippe to President Millerand. If I choose 1830, it is because the "battle of 'Hernani'" marked a conscious and deliberate breaking away from the past such as French literature had never witnessed before. And politically, the break was even deeper.

With this plan club members who are especially interested in modern letters will not have to wait half the year. If the club subscribes to French current periodicals, such as those described here last month, they can be used with more profit from the start.

For the history of past literature, good handbooks are many. I suggest G. Lanson rather than Doumic, or else the elementary history by A. Fortier of Tulane University (Holt). These books are generally at their best in their commentaries on the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. After 1870, even Lanson ceases to be valuable. (On French history, the best résumés are probably given by V. Duruy.) For the literature of the nineteenth century, there is a good

anthology by Paul Sensitive (Payot) in two volumes — prose and poetry. Also in two volumes, at the *Mercure de France*, "Poètes d'aujourd'hui" by A. van Bever and P. Léautaud covers very completely the period extending from Verlaine to the first years of the twentieth century.

But anthologies and handbooks do not replace original works. In the case of old French, how will you escape the philological difficulty? By all means read, and read aloud, the "Roman de Tristan et Iseut" restored by Joseph Bédier, and, as soon as it is available, his restoration of the "Chanson de Roland". All the flavor and all the virtues of the old language have passed into these, and — you don't need a lexicon.

Also for reading aloud, some fragments of Rabelais: Frère Jean des Entommeures at the battle in the abbey garden — the address by Maître Janotus for the returning of the bells — these are in all expurgated editions. (Still I wouldn't have suggested this author, except for the fact that I shall be far away and safe when this paper appears.)

As "Horace", "Andromaque" and such classical classics, if I may call them so, are doubtless familiar to you, do enjoy a reading of "Les Plaideurs" (and why not a production, if you can muster a cast? I assure you that three or four new and successful "comedies" I saw last winter seem dull compared to that sparkling farce).

"Le Misanthrope", "L'Amour Médecin", are representative Molière plays. But "Don Juan", seldom played, strangely near to Shakespeare and the nineteenth century Romantics, deserves perhaps even more attention. As for the scenes of "Tartufe", they are so frequent around us that I wonder if an almost literal adaptation to

modern life could not be worked out with success. (That's another club suggestion.)

From La Bruyère to Montesquieu, from Bossuet to Voltaire, from Saint-Simon to Beaumarchais, there are enough to choose among for reading or commenting. Only try not to overlook such things as "Candide", "Les Lettres Persanes", and "Le Mariage de Figaro".

After Chénier (Laclos is for the grown up only) you will have nearly reached the end of the first program. Then, for vacation reading, "La Chartreuse de Parme" and "Adolphe" will blend harmoniously with the new books for which a parallel survey of modern literature has prepared you.

The period of 1830-1922, which Mr. Wells has found to be so short compared with the Paleolithic ages, is of much greater import from a literary standpoint. Victor Hugo is, of course, the personification of the French nineteenth century — in good and in bad. The famous preface to his "Cromwell" is a literary document not to be neglected today; and many a piece from "La Légende des Siècles" deserves the reading aloud which it calls for. There will not be time enough, I suppose, for reading more than short fragments of "Les Misérables", Gautier, Balzac, but try to read the whole of "Barberine" or another of Musset's plays. Then you will enter the world of contemporary literature, as Flaubert (read the excellent book by Albert Thibaudet which is about to appear) and Baudelaire hold the keys to almost all that follows.

Space is too short for even a good enumeration of names — for this end of a century was rich indeed. Renan, Maupassant, Daudet, Zola, Leconte de Lisle, Heredia, lead us to the five decisive poetical influences — Verlaine,

Laforgue, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Verhaeren — who shaped the literary doctrines on which most younger schools are living today.

Among the living, Anatole France, Maurice Barrès, Henri de Régnier, Francis Jammes, Paul Claudel, André Gide are probably the capital influences. To be at least acquainted with, are Comtesse de Noailles, Edmond Jaloux, Jules Romains, Giraudoux, Dorgelès — but the rest of this list is to be found in our regular monthly notes, or better, in the essays and current critical writings of Thibaudet, Rivière, Le Grix, Suarès, Crémieux, Braga. And there are also American guides, such as Ezra Pound, Ernest Boyd, William Bradley, Ludwig Lewisohn.

I have thrown names by the handful, as the sower does seeds on allegorical pictures. But I do realize that good sowers go more slowly and cautiously about it. . . . I am very optimistic as to the spreading of French current literature in this country. A discriminating taste is rapidly developing, although certain indispensable links in the chain are still missing — namely, a sufficient knowledge of the best prewar production. There is one danger to avoid: many foreigners, who know how to reject the trash, show a tendency to absorb the *second best*, while overlooking the best. People read Rostand but ignore Banville, they read Léon Daudet but ignore Charles Maurras, they read Rolland but ignore Péguy, they know Pierre Louys but not Marcel Schwob, etc.

If it were otherwise, though, foreigners would know better than most French people do themselves. And that would not be proper.

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