BAZALGETTE AND THOREAU

HENRY THOREAU, Bachelor of Nature. *By Léon Bazalgette. Translated by Van Wyck Brooks. 8vo. 357 pages. Harcourt, Brace and Company. $3.*

SINCE Bernardin de Saint-Pierre French literature has come variously to America for materials and forms wherewith to recreate itself. The greatest instance is still perhaps that of Chateaubriand whose impossible Indians may outlast the too possible Frenchmen of Flaubert. The sustenance which Stendhal won from contemplation of our scene for the aesthetic of his novel of the modern will is less widely recognized. We are aware however of how the symbolists transfigured Poe; and more recently of the enthusiastic creation by the Dadaists of a romantic America of cowboys, skyscrapers, and jazz. Romantic movements in classicist France are ever forages for nurture rather than voyages of discovery. Like Greece, France is omnivorous and egocentric. In every period of influences her writers are like a family consuming beefsteak. That beefsteak will become, let us say, part of a lanky father, a fat mother, a bad pagan boy, and a noble Christian sister. At this moment, we may behold America turn into Louis Aragon, Valéry Larbaud, and Bazalgette. . . .

Bazalgette's translation and biography of Whitman had a dynamic share in the slow stirring of French letters, away from the Narcissus mood which led to the masterworks of Claudel, Valéry, Proust, and Gide, toward a new gesture of spiritual excursion whence a good range of fresh romantic stuffs will accrue for the young classicists to work on. His Whitman was a biography that held fairly close to the narrative form, save that a lyrism illumined it and made it speak with emphasis and fervour to the imagination of the French. In Henry Thoreau, however, Bazalgette stands revealed more clearly: a poet himself, and a prophet, he employs a certain spiritual experience made manifest in America because less assimilated here than the experience of Rousseau and of Tolstoy in their lands; and he makes of it his own spiritual Word for France. This technical analogy between Bazalgette

in sophisticated Paris writing of Thoreau, and Chateaubriand in rationalist Paris dreaming of our virgin forests must not be strained too far. Bazalgette is less a poet than Napoleon's noble hater, but he is more historian and critic. His book has the lilt and passage and effect of a packed personal paean; and yet it is perhaps the best of all pictures of our great New England. There is no phenomenal relation between Chateaubriand's America—or that of the Dadaists—and ourselves. Their work is therefore not negotiable beyond their immediate needs. But clad in the fine English of Mr Brooks, Bazalgette's Thoreau responds to our experience. It becomes an American classic as surely as it is a French one.

The method is not narrative: it is a composite of allusiveness, colloquy, lyrical projection, and dramatic scening. A hard method to follow unflagging through three hundred pages; and at first the frail figure of Thoreau seems insufficient for it. The author has sustained his tone with ruthless logic that at times may pall. One would occasionally welcome passages in a more direct, conventional prose. But the consequence of the author's lack of mercy is an aesthetic form the more remarkable when one considers the after all comparative slightness of Thoreau's stuff and the frustrate colours of his *milieu*. At the end, one realizes that this unsparing method was the inevitable right one for the subject. Thoreau's greatness did not loom like Whitman's. It was the consequence of impacts on a small living nucleus, of the organic yet reactive growth of that nucleus within an inchoate social envelope. When he created his Whitman, Bazalgette had but to follow Whitman. Hence his use of narrative was correct. Even the Civil War fell into place as a sort of objective scene for the hero's progress. Creating Thoreau, Bazalgette creates primarily the New England town, and the woods and the rivers and the birds, creates the astringent air of Emerson and Alcott, creates Mr Greeley and his Tribune, John Brown and his raiders, Lyceum audiences and village ne'er-do-wells. A superb massivity of America bounding Thoreau gives him his dimensions by indirection and by the dynamism of the man's responses. It was a subtle task, and Bazalgette has done it. It required a complete mastery of the American scene; and the extent to which this Frenchman who has never visited our land knows it—its past, its present, *and* its future—is

uncanny. Where did he learn what a New England village feels like, what winter is, in a Canadian wood? How did he catch this scent of the Emersonian family, this shuttling rhythm of Broadway, this dark deluvial stain in the Judge's house in Staten Island? No mere thorough scholarship can explain it. Chateaubriand's Indians, Baudelaire's Poe are alien and exotic. Bazalgette possesses a true intuition of America. Strange as it may seem, he loves us—loves our promise, our struggle to evolve it. But his love is clairvoyant: his mind has stratified his vision of us with analytic understanding. He knows the heartbreaking husk of social and psychic life in which our promise stifles. Bazalgette is a Roussinean romanticist in that he chooses to bring to Paris our Thoreau as a reality *for it*, from the New England town. But he is no romanticiser of the town. Nor of Thoreau who emerges from the book as a true hero almost by a process of survival. Thoreau is a hero of his age, we gather, because his age was otherwise unheroic.

The book is a new type of novel, if you please, rather than biography in the strict French sense. There is a new novel form—the Proustian—in which the hero is literally "I". An example of it in our language is Mr Anderson's Story Teller's Story. Here is another kind of novel—a sort of Crocean history—in which a real personage is drawn ruthlessly as regards the facts and yet with dionysian freedom in spiritual emphasis and in aesthetic.

A work like this dares to contain anything: and there is to be found here a bit of literary criticism so original in form that it must be mentioned. Thoreau and Whitman meet. Their talk is a failure. Walt is distrustful of this highbrow Yankee who has so consciously turned away from Harvard. Bazalgette records the futile dialogue and adds to it, by way of antistrophe, an imagined dialogue consisting of responses gleaned from the two men's work. The effect is powerful and convincing: a contrapuntal fugue that does more to prove the nuclear energy of the American mind and its unity, in variety, of direction, than a score of essays.

Mr Brooks's translation has a tendency toward "toning down." The original title, as an instance, reads "Henry Thoreau, Sauvage." This might be faithfully englished as Henry Thoreau, the Untamed. Mr Brooks has preferred to substitute Emerson's "bachelor

of Nature." Perhaps he shares somewhat Emerson's Apollonian attitude toward this nature-drunk, nature-sweet, neo-primitive neighbour. But the translation is very far indeed from a betrayal. It is the process whereby Bazalgette's book becomes indigenous and takes its place in our American literature between the old and the new. Thoreau stands with Whitman and with Melville for the creative transitional gesture between that new America, inheritor of Old World forms, and our old America, creator of a new world. Of this hazardous long birth-hour in whose travail we persist, there is no lovelier expression than the prose of Van Wyck Brooks.

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