

NON EXPEDIT

CLERAMBAULT. *By Romain Rolland. Translated by Katherine Miller. 12mo. 286 pages. Henry Holt and Company. \$2.*

A SAD, chaotic, heart-breaking book. Romain Rolland was during the war one of the few great pacifists, the greatest of those whom pity rather than scorn led to the heights above the battle. The least intelligent member of the least effective secret service can testify to the stupidities and intrigues of pacifist circles, to a fanaticism almost as shocking as patriotic devotions, to muddle and mischief. Very little of this is told in Clerambault, a book which the author declares is neither a novel nor an autobiography; but what is told is enough. Nietzsche once declared that if he could forget everything else he would never forgive Christianity for corrupting the mind of Pascal; and those who care for the one against the multitude may say that if they can forget the whole disaster of the war and the peace they cannot forgive what was done to Romain Rolland.

Clerambault is not in the line of Jean-Christophe; it is another in M Rolland's series of the *Lives of Illustrious Men*. Beethoven, Michael Angelo, and Tolstoy are its predecessors, and in the first of these I find the purpose of the last:

"Life is hard. It is a daily struggle for those who do not resign themselves to mediocrity of spirit, a bitter struggle most often, without grandeur, without happiness, and fought out in solitude and silence. . . . They can count only on themselves; and there are moments when the strongest of them winces with pain. They call for help, for a friend. . . . It is to help them that I have undertaken to surround them with heroic Friends, with the great souls who have suffered for the good. These *Lives of Illustrious Men* are not addressed to the ambitious; they are dedicated to the unhappy."

Clerambault is dedicated to the unhappiest, to those who cannot

associate themselves with the passions of their fellows, to the one against all. The single step taken by M Rolland is in his departure from the war itself to the theme: "that the individual soul has been swallowed up and submerged in the soul of the multitude." That is in the preface. It is not in the book.

It is not superfluous to indicate that towards the end of Clerambault we are confronted with a long and confused apostrophe to Liberty which begins to be clear with the final prophecy: "*The One against All* is the *One for All*, and soon will be *The One With All*." Clerambault's opposition to his world interests M Rolland because Clerambault opposes only to cure and save; Clerambault, in effect, is miserable because he cannot identify himself with the momentary passions of his time; but he is supported by his faith, he is associated with the deep desires of humanity; soon, all too soon, the craving to merge with the multitude will be satisfied. This is not independence, but prophecy. The predicament of the one who finds himself at odds with the ultimate concerns of humanity M Rolland has not even approached.

I consider this an evasion because that is the theme which the book implies and because nihilism is the immediate portion of free spirits unless they escape from the present dilemma of being for or against the multitude. Accidents will happen and the world will become a better place for everybody; but the most which we can do at present is to make it possible for independent minds to survive; ten million slaves are shoring up the monuments of the past and a thousand are hewing stone for the monuments of the future; the proportion is normal and the slavery is equal. And those who stand between the grossness of to-day and the grossness of to-morrow crying out "A plague on both your houses" are accused of frivolity! Nothing is more frivolous than the refusal to think.

M Rolland has always been willing to sacrifice lucidity to strength; Jean-Christophe is a masterpiece out of chaos; "*informe, ingens . . .*" He is the single exception among the great to the rule that you cannot write French without being clear. In Clerambault everything is sacrificed to an altar without a God, just as the hero is assassinated to no purpose. "Hatred makes no mistakes," says a friend after the assassination and as one thinks back to the tumultuous pages of *The Market Place* one wonders whether M Rolland hasn't failed in this book because he has forgotten how

to hate. The failure of the book is terrible; it turns the heart to stone; it defeats its own cause. Its passions and outcries and rhetoric create nothing; there is no magnificence in its tragedy and the tragedy of ten million wasted lives should have its magnificence. We have been told at times that a great secret organization is plotting the downfall of nationalism and is using pacifist propaganda as an insidious weapon; we rather doubt it; the heads of such societies are no fools and they would have suppressed this book. Because it is not expedient to tell things in this way. It is often better not to confess, and this book is a confession.

In the preface to his Beethoven, M Rolland wrote:

"L'air est lourd autour de nous. La vieille Europe s'engourdit dans une atmosphère pesante et viciée. Un matérialisme sans grandeur pèse sur la pensée, et entrave l'action des gouvernements et des individus. Le monde meurt d'asphyxie dans son égoïsme prudent et vil. Le monde étouffe.—Rouvrons les fenêtres. Faisons rentrer l'air libre. Respirons le souffle des héros."

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