FOREIGN NOTES AND COMMENT

The Importation Movement

OF the various literatures which, in default of a better term, we now call modern, American literature is the only one which began in an unreservedly inauspicious way. Where Italian made its debut with the writings of Dante, and French with the immortal Troubadours and Trouvères, American letters entered the field with the publication of the "Bay Psalm Book" (1640) and followed it up, thirty-two years later, with a volume of verse by Mrs. Anne Bradstreet. Where the early Scandinavians had their sagas, the Americans had John Eliot's adaptation of the Bible. Where the Dutch of the fourteenth century read De Weert's writings, which did much to bring on the Reformation, we had Cotton Mather's ecclesiastical history of New England. That reasons can be given for America's poor showing at the beginning does not alter the case: it is always quite beyond the power of an explanation to remove a fact. Why America is at present on the point of taking her place among the world powers in letters is also a fact which — my Chief consenting — I hope to explain, in part, in this and succeeding articles.

In reply to the question, "What is the outstanding advance this country has made in *belles-lettres* since 1900?", various answers might be given: the establishing of new publishing houses, the founding of new magazines, the greater number of books and journals brought out, the suggestions received from visitors, increased interest in criticism, a more liberal spirit in fiction, and probably the one essential of all — better writing. I am personally convinced, however, though my conviction may rest to a degree on my vocation, that one of the greatest and most advantageous changes that has come over American letters since 1900 is the willingness, if not actual eagerness, on our part to import, to publish translations, to be able to read in English every conceivable type of foreign book.

I hope in time to make the list of important translations for any one month complete. This month I must confine myself to just three books, all from the same publisher, a publisher who could not have been persuaded to bring out the Argentinian novel at all twenty-three years ago, who would have thought twice before acting once on the Saint-Saëns, and who would have thought three times before acting on the Vildrac. How much "thinking" he did in 1923 before acting in this cosmopolitan and commendable way is for those behind the scenes at 681 Fifth Avenue to know. It is sufficient for the public to know that he has acted, and that, if it will take advantage of his action, it will know a vast deal more about life and letters than can be got by the exclusive study of the native product.

The publication in this country at this time of Manuel Galvez's "Nacha Regules," in the excellent translation of Leo Ongley, is altogether typical

and symbolic of what might be called the importation movement in American literature. The novel is a story of immense interest to anyone whose interests have advanced beyond the Bradstreet-Mather stage; but the theme is sociological. It is a story of Buenos Aires, which is regarded by those who know it as a city of infinite charm; but cities of this description nourish an underworld activity that some refuse to believe exists while others ascribe it to the existence of a few bad men and bad women, and affect to the know that it will disappear of its own volition as the streets become better lighted, and the police more diligent.

Manuel Galvez is of a different opinion. Endowed with an imaginative insight that goes deeper than the sociologists' investigation, and filled with a spirit of sympathy that frequently finds at most only a disguised expression in the pulpit that Luther made a possibility, he has told the story of a man who spends ten years of his life in order to marry a prostitute. Then it was not worth the telling. It would not be if a primrose by a river's brim were only a primrose, and a yellow one at that; or if the suffering that is in this world were merely the result of people who ought to know better and, not knowing, might just as well be shoved into jail or ambulanced off to institutions where real and potential derelicts are cared for. Or it would not be worth telling if Manuel Galvez were merely another heavy thinker with a grudge against the established order of things.

None of these alternatives applies here. The contour facts are simple: Dr. Fernando Monsalvat, distinguished lawyer, illegitimate son of a distinguished family, returns to Argentina after seven years' residence in Europe. He is about forty years old; it is about 1912. Sitting alone in a cabaret one evening, he sees a ruffian, Dalmacio Arnedo, abusing a beautiful young woman. He intervenes on behalf of her (Ignacia Regules, the "Nacha" of the novel) only to see his efforts scorned by the very girl whom he would save. For years he tries to salvage the good that is in her. Every time success seems near, failure leaps out from behind some intriguing device of civilization until, blind himself and quite without the usual means of making a living — he has inherited some property—Nacha comes to him, and they marry.

It sounds as banal as a servant girl novel in Germany of the early nineteenth century. It is in truth as noble and captivating a visualization of the love that spells supreme sacrifice as current letters in any country have to record. Moreover, it is intelligent fiction. You really know something about Argentina when you are through with it. Oh, for novels that leave their readers with extended minds!

That is precisely what these "Outspoken Essays on Music" do: they extend the mind. The title is a bit over reaching; for they show Camille Saint-Saëns studying spiders in Cochin China, admiring "the beauty of the Hudson, that great river ploughed on every side by enormous multi-decked steamers and spanned by gigantic bridges", watching in protest the caged animals in the zoölogical section of Central Park, and engaging in still other diversions which, it would seem, have nothing to do with the Saint-Saëns type of music. Let us be assured, however, that to the Saint-Saëns type of mind nothing is extraneous.

I am not a musician in any sense of the word; but I greatly enjoyed this

book. For it refreshened memories of former days, days in which, like those of so many Americans, I frequented opera, concerts and recitals until I could say that I had seen and heard the best. Saint-Saëns has written his essays for my kind; for the individual who knows but little if anything about music, but who may be enabled to listen to music with the heightened appreciation that comes from knowing where the music itself came from, what idea the composer had in mind when he wrote it, and how little the musicians themselves agree as to how it should be played.

It is interesting to see him shower affection on d'Indy in one paragraph and assault his theories in another; to hear him laud the Metropolitan in New York for giving "Romeo" in French, "Aïda" in Italian and "Lohengrin" in German, "thus avoiding the treacherous translation"; to see him prove that Mozart was a Tirolese Austrian and therefore more than half Italian, Gluck entirely Italian in his mature days, Beethoven Austrian, Haendel English, Meyerbeer Judiac-French, and so on until there is not much left but Wagner who is referred to as "Richard"; to read his derision of those "who cross the Rhine in search of truth", as Victor Hugo did; and to hear him contend that the one perfect musical instrument is the human voice — a proposition which Goethe stoutly defended over a century ago. If this book does not increase one's intelligence, then intelligence is a fraud.

I have emphasized these phases of these two books because of the support that is given them in Witter Bynner's perfect rendering of Vildrac's perfect lines. In his introduction, Emile Verhaeren says that M. Vildrac's chief message is "to love beings and things". It is also Galvez's. Verhaeren urges us to cultivate Vildrac's "gift of sympathy". We cannot help but be improved in our souls by the sympathy Galvez shows. Verhaeren writes: "In Vildrac's eyes the most banal action acquires a sudden importance. . . . Let two companions lean face to face across a table at the back of a wineshop, and the brief comment of the poet releases from this chance encounter a brusque and profound emotion." So does Galvez. And in his own note of introduction, Mr. Bynner feels that by reading M. Vildrac, on whom he has worked for five years, we may learn something about Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and free verse at the same time that our emotions are being stirred within us and our souls educated into more enduring joy.

I am as old as Goethe was when he went to Italy, and I have never written but three poems, though I have had sense enough not to publish them. There is one trait I have however — it is a blessed gift. I know a good poem when I see one. A good poem, a real poem, expresses a thought which can be grasped at a single reading, or it paints a picture which can be enjoyed with the same exertion. And in either case the thought or the picture remains pleasing regardless as to the number of times one may revert to it. Anything short of this is either trash or pretense. M. Vildrac, in Mr. Bynner's translation, measures up to my standard, unfailingly. The twenty-eight poems that make up this slender volume indeed go slightly beyond it to the extent that in his pictures there are also thoughts, or the other way about. It is a doubling up of forces to which it would be doltlike to object.

This being my view, I have always

held superlatives out of place in speaking of poems; for how could there be degrees of thought or beauty, However, M. Vildrac's most democratic poem, the one that savors most strongly of Walt Whitman, is probably the one entitled "To Be a Man". It reminds one, too, of the late Theodore Roosevelt. Had he read it he would have exclaimed, "By George, that's bully!" and the comment would have been adequate. In "Dejection" we have the best instance of a picture and a thought in one. In "Invective", he shows most clearly the source of the trouble between labor and capital; the employer does nothing to make his employee love him; he does not even love the employee's work;

But no, your doings have had to prove to me
That my toil and your care and your computing
Were for no other end than your stupid fortune;
With my hands for accomplices!
And my eyes for witnesses!

The novel by Manuel Galvez makes for intelligence; so does the collection of essays by Saint-Saëns. But how can *"Un Livre d'Amour"* by a Frenchman be informative? Love, *l'amour*—why of course, that is what a Frenchman always talks about. Here is the informative feature of this "Book of Love" by a Frenchman: there is not a line of allusion in it to love in the sense of inter-sex passion. It is the love that Verhaeren refers to in his appreciation of M. Vildrac: the love of the rich for the poor; of the strong for the weak; of the mother for her son; of the father for his child; of the fortunate for the unfortunate. There are precious few people in the United States who realize that a Frenchman can strike a note of this kind and sustain it throughout an entire volume. There are virtually none who would imagine it could be done in a "book of love." That it has been done is informative. That it has been so admirably translated is an auspicious sign.

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Nacha Regules. By Manuel Galvez. Translated by Leo Ongley. E. P. Dutton and Co.
Outspoken Essays on Music. By Camille Saint-Saëns. Translated by Fred Rothwell. E. P. Dutton and Co.
A Book of Love. By Charles Vildrac. Translated by Witter Bynner. With an Introductory Note by Emile Verhaeren. E. P. Dutton and Co.