THE ART OF THE YOUNGER FRENCH WRITERS

BY A. G. H. SPIERS

THREE books of unusual interest have recently arrived from France. Although very different in form and inspiration, they all represent the art of the most recent generation of authors to receive general appreciation in France. The first, a quasi-novel, is noteworthy for its lyric treatment of historic setting; the second, a volume of essays, for its philosophy; and the third, a volume of descriptions, for the attitude of its authors toward pictorial and emotional material.

Rolland's "Colas Breugnon" is certainly one of the best novels to come out of France in the last twelvemonth. This is a good book, amusing, healthy and, in both form and spirit, decidedly original.

Rolland is getting older. "Colas Breugnon", though printed (but not issued) fully five years ago, shows traces of a change not uncommon in those persons who have passed the halfway mark of life. Forty is, as Péguy once remarked, an implacable age, an age after which "bluff" is impossible, when our blood reasserts its rights and our ancestors come into their own. Romain Rolland's experience testifies to the truth of this remark. He was planning, so he himself tells us, to continue writing in the vein of "Jean-Christophe"; but suddenly he felt it impossible to carry on the spirit of his younger days; and, a visit to his native country, *la Bourgogne nivernaise*, having awakened within him all the Colas Breugnons that "*je porte dans ma peau*", he composed instead the present "*oeuvre insouciante*".

As was to be expected, this new work is unlike any of Rolland's preceding writings. It is not an historic study, a critical appreciation, a philosophic essay, nor yet even, in the strictest sense of the word, a novel. It is rather a volume of reminiscences as told by a man of fifty; and the very aimlessness with which this man talks is in itself a pleasure; for Breugnon is himself the one subject of the book, holding our attention by the display of a wayward, sympathetic, and aggressive personality.

In a desultory fashion he tells us of many things—this virile and jovial fellow. A walk with his little granddaughter Godie gives him an opportunity to introduce the pretty story of the three birds—the wren, the robin, and the skylark—who each year bring down from heaven the warmth needed alike by man, beast, and plant; an exchange of banter with his married daughter Martine brings in the amusing conditions on which the *bon Dieu* agreed that children should be born able to walk; and an account of his love of roaming ends with a really beautiful description of the first visit paid by Breugnon to his onetime sweetheart, la Belette, thirty-five years after she had married another.

It is true that these events, like Breugnon himself, belong to a period none too close to our own—the first years of the seventeenth century. But we constantly forget the fact. The

old fellow is a man of such tact and of such infinite foresight! What he tells us is precisely the thing in which we of today are interested, and he leaves untold whatever might seem strictly local. Even those things which by their nature would seem exclusively connected with the epoch in which he lives, contain a peculiar charm for us; for, as he describes it, that epoch appears far more delightful than ours and its contemplation strangely apt to release our repressed desires.

In those days a man's contact with the world he lived in was saner, more direct, more satisfying than now. Physic had not yet taken the place of physique, a strong arm might still prod a tardy justice, and many a good thing fell to the lot of him whose heart was stout and whose imagination was fertile. Breugnon feasts for the sheer joy of eating and drinking; he fights lustily for the satisfaction of his instinctive desire to punish those who have injured him; he plies his chisel and his plane (he is a master wood-carver) not for the remote and characterless reward of money, but for the immediate delight of the hand that shapes and the fancy that plans, for the happiness of the artist who loves his productions *"de la bonne manière, voluptueusement, de l'esprit et des membres"*; and, for the satisfaction of an instinct scarcely less fundamental—the instinct of irreverence—he plays tricks on the nobles, is by no means enthusiastic in his allegiance to *"la grosse dondon de Florence"* (the queen regent!), and casts doubt—whether in earnest or in jest, neither he nor we can tell—upon the reality of the Deity.

Cruel indeed is the contrast for the unwary reader who, shaking off the spell of Breugnon's words, compares that life with our flesh-mortifying, spirit-deadening life of today. Yet the comparison is inevitable. In an essay on contemporary conditions published recently by Duhamel, we find: *"L'artisan, emprisonné dans une fonction presque mécanique, n'attend plus de sa besogne les satisfactions personnels qu'il obtenait jadis; comme l'a dit un poète: 'son travail vide est un destin qu'il combat'."* How can we forget this sad fact when hearing Breugnon exclaim enthusiastically: *"Qu'il est plaisant de se trouver, son outil dans les mains, devant son établi, sciant, coupant, rabotant, rognant, chantournant, chevillant, limant, tripotant, triturant la matière belle et ferme, le bois de noyer doux et gras, qui palpite sous la main comme un râble de fée!"*

That this contrast was intentional on Rolland's part, that it should be looked upon as the purpose that led him to write "Colas Breugnon", is improbable: this book is anything but a direct criticism or pointed satire upon our modern times. But that this contrast was present, if not in the mind, at least in the feelings of the author, there can be no doubt. Have we not Rolland's own statement that this book was written as *"une réaction contre la contrainte de dix ans"* spent in the *"atmosphère un peu tragique"* of our contemporary Jean-Christophe? To live in the company of Breugnon is a tonic: for all his faults, he appeals to us as a favored individual privileged to indulge, vigorously and in the harmlessness of health, those feelings and instincts which have been so cramped by our modern civilization as to die within us or to degenerate into unlovely and maleficent impulses. Rolland too, before ourselves, has felt the effect of this tonic—has loved it, reveled in it;

and this fact explains two things: it explains why Rolland has described the life of Breugnon in a peculiarly lyric style in which the sentences and paragraphs have a rhythmic swing of which the effect is heightened, now and again, by assonance and rhyme; and it explains also why we must consider these reminiscences of a hero living three hundred years ago, as an expression of the feelings of a man of our day.

"Colas Breugnon" is, therefore, a thoroughly up-to-date work, modern in inspiration and written in accordance with the ideas of the most recent type of novelist. Its author, ignoring the scruples of the slaves of environment, is primarily interested in reproducing, not the scientifically correct picture of a bygone age, but a mood which he himself is feeling. Finding certain elements of this mood in the life of a past century, he strips them of whatever would remind us too strongly of their date, fuses them with other elements belonging more particularly to his own times and, out of this diverse material, creates a work of art, vital and compelling, possessing an originality all its own.

Some time ago a friend accosted me with the remark: "I have just been reading 'Civilisation' by Georges Duhamel; that man has certainly something to him—but what is he driving at?"

It will be remembered that Duhamel, before writing "Civilisation" which won the Goncourt prize in 1918, had already written another volume of stories much appreciated in France, "La Vie des Martyrs". Both these works seem to have raised pretty generally in America the same query: what is Duhamel driving at? His new book, "La Possession du Monde", answers that question. It explains, with the greater clarity which the essay form affords, the attitude of mind underlying these two volumes; and it does something more: connecting this attitude with what was most characteristic in still earlier writings practically unknown on this side of the water, it reveals Duhamel as one of that younger generation of French authors of whom a critic once wrote, with some exaggeration: "On all important questions of life, they take a stand just contrary to that of their fathers".

Authors may write for years without formulating, even in their own minds, the nature of their inspirations; some do so never. In the lives of others, however, there occurs one day an event which prompts them to review their thought, to analyze their feelings; then, plotting, as it were, the resultant of the various forces that have guided their pens this way and that in the past, they become conscious for the first time of their own philosophies. This was true in the case of Rostand, for instance, when he was elected to the French Academy; it is true likewise for Duhamel, for whom the determining event was his experience of the World War.

For Duhamel, as for no less an observer of life than the great Pascal, the one need of man—the great impulse everywhere and always operative in life, and its legitimate goal as well —is happiness; and when the war broke out, he had a remarkable opportunity to note to what an extent our modern civilization was or was not suited to satisfy this need. A doctor by training, he was naturally attached to the hospital units of the French army. He was thus of the fighting, but not in it. He could observe the passions of men in moments when they were unusually free from the

veneer of everyday conventions; and, unlike the soldier whose whole attention was absorbed by the danger and excitement of his position, he enjoyed a comparative tranquillity that allowed him to reflect upon what he saw. The result of this reflection was the conviction that our modern civilization is vicious.

For the last half-century or more this civilization (so maintains Duhamel) has been materialistic; it has been exclusively preoccupied with *"la science des choses extérieures"*; and the Great War, with all the suffering that accompanied it, was the ghastly and supreme manifestation of the evils of this preoccupation. Two of his arguments might be quoted. In the first place, it should be noted that the war was precipitated by that nation that had given itself over most completely to this preoccupation; and in the second place, it should also be noted that the most inhuman suffering inflicted by the war was the result, not of anything inherent in war itself but of an attitude of mind prevalent in the years of peace before the war. Before 1914, we had come to treat ourselves and our fellow men as endowed only with the life of a chemical element or of a body subject to the laws of physics; consequently, those signal atrocities that filled the world with dismay, and that were characterized by a total disregard for the peculiar sanctity of human life and human emotion, should be attributed primarily to our mechanistic conception of life—a view further supported by the fact that it was precisely *"les peuples qui avaient consacré aux dieux de l'usine et du laboratoire le culte le plus fervent et le plus vaniteux"* who had, during the conflict, showed themselves by far *"les plus cruels et les plus fertiles en inventions inhumaines et déshonorantes"*.

Thus Duhamel is led to affirm that *"la civilisation scientifique et industrielle, basée sur l'intelligence, est condamnée"*; and it is condemned because it is contrary to man's fundamental need of happiness. But Duhamel's experience of the war was constructive as well as destructive: it did more than supply him with proofs that our present attitude toward life is bad; it furnished him also with indications of the way in which we may still recapture, if we will, that happiness which is slipping from us more and more every day. And the major part of "La Possession du Monde" is devoted to an elaboration of these indications.

It is just here that we recognize in this new book the inspiration which, in a less developed form, was characteristic of Duhamel's earlier writings. As early as 1912 we find suggested in an essay on poetry this idea: the most constant and vital interest for man is man and nature, or rather *"l'homme dans la nature"*. This idea, or, better, the feeling that prompted it, had already found expression in a somewhat disconcerting volume of verse entitled "Compagnons"; and it was later responsible for the peculiar human sympathy of "La Vie des Martyrs" and "Civilisation", a sympathy so simple, so unostentatious in its choice of subjects, so opposed to rhetorical development, that it passed unappreciated by those whose feelings were dulled by the more brilliant style of the older French story-tellers. And it is to this same idea that Duhamel now returns.

Two anecdotes given in "La Possession du Monde" are significant and typical. The first is the story of a young Englishman knowing no French, just as Duhamel knew no

English. He was terribly mutilated, resembling nothing so much as a poor animal, weeping and delirious and not always recognizing the hand that tended him. But one day, as Duhamel approached his bed, this Englishman smiled—smiled for the first time, with the smile of a man resuscitating. *"Et j'ai su tout de suite la cause de cette grande joie, car le moribond a tiré de son oreiller une cigarette qu'il avait cachée là, qu'il avait secrètement gardée pour moi et qu'il m'a donnée."* The second anecdote takes us into a crowded and stifling shack where Duhamel and a friend are doing what they can for a number of wounded soldiers. They are irritable and worn out with overwork and with the fearful realities before their eyes. As Duhamel is soaping his rubber gloves before attending to a new patient, he notices his friend looking off in the distance through a window. "What are you looking at?" he asks him. "Oh nothing," is the reply, *"mais je me repose avec cette petite touffe de verdure qu'il y a là-bas: elle me rafaîchit bien."*

These two anecdotes illustrate the idea of Duhamel's essay and they contain the germ from which he develops the remedy for our ills which is the real subject of "La Possession du Monde". This Englishman, finding joy in an expression of feeling for his fellow man, and this surgeon, refreshed by contemplating a bit of verdure—these men have drawn their comfort at the very source of human happiness. Such is Duhamel's belief. To be happy, we must live in immediate, direct contact with man, on the one hand, and with the world of nature on the other. Years of materialistic and deterministic obsession, of feeling only through the media of statistics and reports, of thinking exclusively along lines suggested by an implicit faith in the unfailing operation of scientific laws, have given us other habits; but our hearts still show occasional revivals of an aspiration toward man and nature; and it is in the careful encouragement of these revivals that lies the hope of the years to come.

Upon this belief, Duhamel has built up the most significant essays of his book, which aims at nothing less than a reeducation of the heart. Giving concrete examples as he proceeds, he would teach us how, by careful study, we may arrive at an ever broader appreciation of the world of nature, its flowers, its insects, its stones, everything in short which it contains from the docks of Liverpool to the most gorgeous scenery of the Riviera; and he would teach us also by what means we can extend our interest in, and understanding of, the men and women about us until we have become the "possessors", for their delight and ours, of those who seemed at first the least congenial to us.

Duhamel realizes the patience and perseverance required at certain moments of such a study: there are, for instance, people whom it is at first painful to try to know and understand. To help us over these difficult moments, he seeks to appeal to our instinct of pursuit and capture: and he insists at all times upon the value of personal effort, objecting strongly to the use of *clichés*, those labels made by others which discourage us from making our own observations. He further safeguards the freshness of our interest in man and nature by insisting on the variety they present: he would allow no appraisal of one thing in the terms of another; each must be appreciated in and for itself: *"Une touffe de violettes vaut*

beaucoup par le parfum et la beauté, elle peut réjouir ou soulager un grand nombre de coeurs. C'est pourtant une valeur commerciale misérable; évaluée en pierre de taille ou en bois de construction, elle ne signifie plus rien ou presque."

The "possession" of the world which Duhamel urges is, therefore, anything but a physical ownership, a cornering of the material riches of the earth; it is, as he himself has put it, *"la possession morale du monde"*, an acquisition stripped of all selfishness, *"car le monde est proposé à tous les hommes pour être possédé en totalité par chacun d'eux avec l'aide de tous"*. Thus his teaching is one of gentle, broad, and considerate humanity.

Although Duhamel has studiously avoided the mawkish and is possessed of a common sense that, in the discussion of the subtler relations between individuals, saves him from the quagmire of spiritualism, for instance, certain hard-headed readers will undoubtedly consider his book as a collection of sentimental futilities; others, however, having an eye to the general trend of modern thought, will not fail to see in it an interesting manifestation of a comparatively new spirit; and a few, at least, will put this book by their evening armchairs and turn to it, now and again, for pleasant relief from the severer realities of the day.

Like Musset's silver bay,—

Qui montre. . .
La blanche Oloosone à la blanche Camyre,—

the slow-flowing Bu-Regrag reflects the shimmering towers and walls of Salli to the equally white walls of Rabat el Fath. These towns and the Moroccan country about them are interesting alike for their past history and for their present state. Here in the past Phœnicians, Romans, Vandals, Goths, and Arabs have all sought in vain to establish an enduring empire; and here, at the present moment, the French have undertaken an enterprise of colonization and protection of which the effects are not limited to the arousing of German jealousy: its economic importance and its influence upon the national temper of the French both at home and abroad are as unmistakable as they are difficult to estimate. It is this land that Jérôme and Jean Tharaud describe in "Rabat ou les Heures marocaines". They have visited it and their book is based directly, or so it seems, upon the impressions of their visit.

Unlike the far-ranging but inarticulate camels to which they themselves have compared the majority of travelers, the Tharauds have the power of expression and tell with much charm the many things which they have seen and felt. Thus those readers who have themselves visited these Moroccan lands (be it only the outlying town of Tangiers) will find in "Rabat" a delightful stimulant for their flagging memories. They will be reminded, for instance, of the almost uncanny power of the word *balek*, so indispensable to him who would make his way through a crowded street; and, to quote an example of a different type, they will feel once more that mixture of fatigue and excitement produced by an effort to penetrate the secret of oriental towns. *"Ce qu'elles offrent d'elles"*, write our authors, *"enchante mais rassasie assez vite par son pittoresque même; et ce qu'on ne voit pas, après avoir vainement irrité la rêverie, finit par l'épuiser, car ce qui se dérobe à un premier regard, on ne le saisira jamais."*

But such observations are merely

incidental; the real substance of the book consists in carefully planned pictorial and emotional descriptions. And here we should note a characteristic that distinguishes the art of the Tharauds from that of other writers on like subjects. On the one hand, they make no attempt to describe coldly, impersonally, from the exterior, like the great descriptive writers of some forty or more years ago; and on the other hand, unlike the elegiac and valetudinarian Loti, for instance, they do not overlay all their scenes with one and the same emotional color. Each description in "Rabat" is, to be sure, harmonious, being the working out of a tonal suggestion developed with much skill; but these suggestions are not obviously interrelated from one description to another. There is little connection, for example, between the flight of the cranes which sets the mood for the opening pages of the book (those devoted to a general description of the locality in which Rabat and Salli are situated) and the suggestion of protecting armies which lends impressiveness to the picture, given later in the book, of the cemeteries as they extend down the slopes to the water's edge.

As a consequence, the descriptions of the Tharauds seem somewhat isolated, independent of one another and —in the sense that each appears to be dictated by the particular aspect of the object under consideration, in and for itself—realistic. In this respect, one of these descriptions especially calls for comment; for the authors have reproduced to a remarkable degree the experience of real life. They have taken us upon the housetops to view the town at night. There, as in real life, all that we notice at first is a general, comprehensive atmosphere of broad color and indistinct outline in which stand out *"d'énormes cubes blancs posés sur ces blancheurs comme de nouvelles maisons entassées sur les autres"*. But as our eyes become accustomed to this atmosphere and begin to seek some particular object for their attention, they are caught by two quickly moving figures scampering over the terraces, one slightly rose-colored, the other green—two young Moorish girls, chasing one another from roof to roof, *"deux couleurs qui tournoient, s'emmêlent, paraissent et disparaissent derrière les petits murs"*. Other authors have attempted such descriptions; few, I believe, have been more successful.

"Rabat" is, however, not an incoherent work. These descriptions and the numerous observations, scattered through the book, upon the legends and customs of the Moors produce a cumulative effect growing out of this disparity itself. They excite an intentional perplexity as to the value of this Moroccan civilization. How can we understand, and especially, how can we be presumptuous enough to judge, a people so different from ourselves?—a people whose houses are as introspective, as jealous of the secrets of a calm, inner life as ours are expansive and turned toward the outer world; whose amusements consist of repetition and excess, while our own are made up of variety and moderation; whose prophet has proclaimed his love of three things, women, perfume and prayer; a people, finally, who, while we are coming more and more to consider material things as an integral part of our existence, ignores these things, seeking only *"la liberté de vivre sans besoins et de prier à sa guise"*?

Some fifteen years ago, the Tharauds published, it will be remembered, "Dingley, l'illustre Ecrivain",

an attack upon the alleged brutal egoism of the British colonial policy. It is probable that they now regret the prejudice that inspired this attack. But, however that may be, they cannot, be it said in justice to them, be accused of encouraging in their own nation that which they condemned in another. On the contrary, in the intentional perplexity already referred to, in frequent direct exhortations, as in certain details of international life introduced for the purpose (notably the pages praising the easy relations between General Lyautey and the Sultan), they plead for tolerance and sympathy in the French treatment of *"le vieux Moghreb, ses traditions, ses moeurs, son gouvernement séculaire"*; and they do so with such insistence that this plea becomes one of the two unifying themes of their book.

The other great theme is not a plea and can hardly be called even an idea. It is rather the emotional appreciation of a great historical situation. The imaginations and feelings of the Tharauds have been stirred by the association of Morocco's two claims to our interest, already mentioned: her past history and her present state. They feel the responsibility of France and the greatness of her opportunities. With keen solicitude, they realize that this land which has but recently come under the protection of their nation, has known already the domination of half a dozen different peoples. No one of these has succeeded in captivating the heart and mind of Morocco: the spring of Shella is still the same as before the coming of the Phœnicians. What will be the effect upon it of French control? How deep, how enduring will French civilization prove to have been a few centuries hence? And this theme finds nowhere perhaps better expression than in the following lines referring to the new French town building on the outskirts of the old ruined city: *"Ses maisons, ses rues, ses moeurs viendront battre les murailles de la silencieuse Chella. Pour des années ou pour des siècles? semblent se demander avec un air de sphinx les grands murs flamboyants de la cité disparue, qui de tout ce qui vécut, aima et combattit dans leur tragique enceinte, ne gardent plus de vivant qu'une source d'eau fraîche et quelques pierres de tombes disloquées par les figuiers."*

Colas Breugnon. By Romain Rolland. Paris: Paul Ollendorff.

La Possesion du Monde. By Georges Duhamel. Paris: Mercure de France.

Rabat ou les Heures marocaines. By J. and J. Tharaud. Paris: Emile-Paul Frères.