



Twentieth Century French Writers: (Reviews and Reminiscences)

Mary Duclaux

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From the PRE-WAR PREFACE.

I meant this book to be an image, a reflection, of the Twentieth Century in France, so far as it is shown in literature during the first fourteen years of its course. But my book is small, the subject is vast: an actual, living movement, a growing generation, is a difficult thing to copy—it will not keep still! And it branches out so wide: there are so many French writers of the younger sort! I am overcome with remorse when I think of the gifted beings whom I have left out!

I remember that child whom Saint Augustine saw, trying to gather the sea into his little shell; like him, I see the waters stretching inimitably: I have only brought away a sample. Yet those who taste it may have some faint idea, if not of the breadth and the numerousness of the literary movement in France, at least of its savour and its quality.

Given the limits of my little volume, I was compelled to make a choice; and there is always some injustice in a selection. Why should some be taken and others left? Why accept Rostand and reject Bataille? Why give Madame de Noailles and say nothing of Fernand Gregh? Why gather up Boylesve and André Gide, neglecting Estaunie, and Sageret, and Paul Adam? If I have Marie Lenéru, why not Sacha Guitry? Choosing Madame Colette, what reason have I for eliminating Madame de Régnier or Madame Delarue-Mardrus? I especially mourn the absence of the Brothers Tharaud, those perfect artists, who preserve the tradition of Flaubert. And there is a great gap in my fabric where I should have put the colonial novel (that flourishing Euphorion, born of the union of Loti and Kipling). Why have I not a line for Henry Daguerches, for Claude Farrère? All these are names to remember.

At least I lay this unction to my soul: if I have not always chosen the most perfect, I have faithfully gone in for the most characteristic.

Having to choose a remnant, I have taken those who, instead of continuing the traditions of the Nineteenth Century, have said a new thing, boldly differing, starting forth on a fresh career of their own. I have 'plumped' for the daring apostles of Life, those who cultivate movement and liberty rather than Art; freedom of rhythm rather than classic determinism and classic constraint; all those whose method tends to the condition of music, who say with the Abbess Hildegard (and with Bergson), 'Symphonialis est anima.' Such authors as these are emphatically of the youth of the world, and the most difficult for a foreign public to distinguish.

My readers will probably find most of these names new; they may even be disappointed at not meeting with those more illustrious spirits with whom for five-and-twenty years they have been familiar: Pierre Loti, Paul Bourget, Anatole France. These great writers still shed on the Twentieth Century the lustre its predecessor brought them; but they are the glorious past, and our concern is with the future.

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