

The Present Social Situation of the French Writer

When war broke out in 1914, a book by Guillaume Apollinaire—*Le poète assassiné* [The Poet Assassinated]—was in press.¹ Apollinaire has been called the Bellachini of literature.² Both his way of life and his style of writing contain all the theories and slogans whose time was ripe. He drew them out of his own nature just as a magician pulls objects out of a hat: pancakes, goldfish, ball gowns, pocket watches. As long as this man lived—he died on Armistice Day—no radical or eccentric fashion appeared, whether in painting or literature, that he had not created or at least launched. Together with Marinetti, he was the first to proclaim the main keywords of Futurism; he followed this up by making propaganda for Dada; then came the latest wave of painting, from Picasso to Max Ernst; and last, there was Surrealism, which he gave its name.³ In the title story of the volume *Le poète assassiné*, Apollinaire prints an apocryphal article that allegedly appeared “on January 26 of this year” in *The Voice*, a paper published in Adelaide, Australia. The article, supposedly written by a German chemist, includes these words:

True glory has abandoned literature in favor of science, philosophy, acrobatics, philanthropy, sociology, and so on. Nowadays, the only task of poets is to draw on money that they no longer earn, because they scarcely do any work; and the vast majority of them (with a few exceptions, such as cabaret artists) have not the slightest talent and hence not the slightest excuse. As for those who are not wholly without ability, they are even more pernicious, because they neither receive anything nor turn their hand to anything, yet they make more noise than an entire regiment . . . All these people have forfeited their right to exist. The prizes that are conferred on them have been purloined from workers, inventors, scholars, philosophers, acrobats, philanthropists, sociologists, and

so on. Poets have to go. Lycurgus drove them out of the republic; they should be driven from the face of the earth.

In the evening edition, the author is said to have published a postscript in which he argued: "You have to choose, O world, between literature and your own life; unless serious steps are taken to deal with literature, it will mean the end of civilization. This is no time for procrastination. The new age begins tomorrow. There will no longer be any poetry . . . Writers will be exterminated."⁴

These words do not look as if they had been written twenty years ago. Not that they are unmarked by the passing of twenty years. But their effect has been to transform a whim, an exuberant improvisation, and to lay bare the truth it contained. The landscape that is illuminated by these words as if by a lightning flash, and that at the time could barely be discerned in the distance, is one we have since become familiar with. It is the social climate of imperialism, in which the position of intellectuals has become increasingly intractable. The process of selection that has since taken place at the hands of the ruling classes has assumed forms that are scarcely less inexorable than the process Apollinaire described. Subsequent attempts to define the function of the intellectual in society are vivid testimony to the crisis in which he lives. Few people have had the wit or the resoluteness to perceive that this process of attrition, which has so undermined the intellectual's moral basis in society, if not his economic one, is predicated on the most radical changes in society itself. If this insight is unambiguously expressed by André Gide⁵ and a number of other, younger writers, its value can be enhanced only by a scrutiny of the difficult conditions under which it was acquired.

The lightning shafts of Apollinaire's prophecies serve to discharge a stifling atmosphere. It is the atmosphere which gave birth to the work of Maurice Barrès, who had a decisive influence on the intelligentsia of the prewar years.⁶ Barrès was a romantic nihilist. The disorientation of the intellectuals who succeeded him must have been great indeed if they could approve the utterances of a man who had said, "What do I care about the truth of ideas—it is the enthusiasm with which they are advanced that I respect." Barrès profoundly believed, and made a point of declaring, that "everything amounts to the same thing, with the exception of the excitement which we and people like us derive from certain ideas; for those who have managed to adopt the right point of view, there are no great events but only magnificent spectacles." The more thoroughly we become acquainted with his ideas, the more closely they seem to be related to the doctrines which the present age has everywhere brought forth. They consist of the same basic nihilistic outlook, the same set of idealistic gestures, and the same conformism that result from the synthesis of nihilism and idealism. La Rochefoucauld said that education can do nothing more than teach a man to peel a peach with decorum. In the same spirit, the entire romantic and ultimately

political apparatus that Barrès sets in motion to propagate “the cult of the earth and the dead” ends up by subserving no higher purpose than “to transform chaotic feelings into more cultivated ones.” These cultivated feelings never deny that they originate in an aestheticism which is merely the obverse side of nihilism. And just as modern Italian nationalism harks back to Imperial Rome and the Germans hark back to Teutonic paganism, Barrès believes that the time is ripe “for a reconciliation of the saints and the defeated gods.” He wishes to salvage the pure springs and dense forests of France, as well as its cathedrals, on whose behalf he wrote a celebrated pamphlet in 1914. “And in order to preserve the spiritual vitality of the race, I call for an alliance between Catholic feeling and the spirit of the soil.”

Barrès made his greatest impact with his novel *Les Déracinés* [Men without Roots], which follows the fortunes of seven Lorrainers who pursue their studies in Paris. The critic Thibaudet has made an illuminating comment on this novel: “As if by chance, four members of the group make something of their lives and become respectable people. They are the ones who have money. Of the two that receive scholarships, however, one becomes a blackmailer and the other a murderer. This is no accident. Barrès tells us that the great precondition of respectability is independence—in other words, wealth.”⁷

Barrès’ philosophy is the philosophy of inheritance. Significantly, one of the main figures in this weighty novel, in which he works out this philosophy, is a character study of one of his teachers, Jules *Lagneau*.⁸ In real life, the two men failed to understand each other, and came from radically different parts of the social spectrum. Lagneau was genuinely without roots. He hailed from Metz; his family was ruined after they sided with France in 1871.⁹ For the young Lagneau, France was the very opposite of a legacy. At the age of twenty, the philosopher had to assume the burden of supporting his family. At the same age, Barrès came into an inheritance that gave him the leisure to write *Le culte du moi*.¹⁰

Lagneau left few writings. But in the intellectual history of the last few decades, he is an important signpost. He produced two important students—two intellectuals whose work gives a more or less complete picture of the bourgeois ideology of France. What Barrès’ work did for the ideologies of the Right, his other pupil, Emile Chartier,¹¹ did for the Left. Alain’s political statement of faith, *Eléments d’une doctrine radicale* (the title refers to the doctrines of the Radical party),¹² are a kind of intellectual legacy of Jules Lagneau. The Radicals are, at least as far as their leaders are concerned, a party of professors and teachers. Lagneau was a very typical representative of this stratum. “We renounce,” he writes, “every bid for popularity, every ambition to represent anything; we also deny ourselves the right to entertain

or create any untruth, however slight, or any misguided opinions about what might be possible, whether in speech or in writing.” He adds, “We will not store up any wealth: we renounce all claim to savings, to provision for ourselves and our families. This virtue, which shall be the death of us, needs no recommendation.” The features of this intellectual—however real their basis in life—represent such a definite and deeply ingrained ideal of the bourgeois elites in the “republic of professors” that we would do well to shed as much light on them as possible. This can perhaps be achieved with the aid of a paragraph by Jacques *Chardonne*, in which this type of bourgeois intellectual is seen as the epitome of the petty bourgeois himself.¹³ The fact that this depiction is stereotyped and exaggerated makes it all the more useful for our purposes:

The bourgeois—and it is the petty bourgeois we have specifically in mind—is an artist. He is an educated character, but sufficiently independent of books to have his own ideas. Whether from experience or from close proximity, he has known enough wealth to enable him not to have to think about it constantly; he is fundamentally indifferent to indifferent matters, and was made for poverty like no one else. He is without prejudices, even exalted ones; without illusions and without hope. He is the first person to demand justice for others, and the first to suffer it, if need be. On earth, where he has received everything but his just deserts, he expects nothing more, nor does he expect to fare better in the world to come. Yet he takes pleasure in his unpretentious life, and is able to enjoy what it offers without maligning it. The world that has brought forth such people has not failed in its task. The path that leads to such wisdom is not an evil one. This is why there is still hope for the disinherited. This is why we must not dispute in advance a person’s right to whatever society can offer.

As a political party, the Radicals have taken Barrès literally. He and they pose the problems in the same way, only his answers are diametrically opposed to theirs. To the inherited rights of the traditionalists he opposes the rights of the child; to the privileges of birth and wealth, the personal merits of the individual and success in state examinations. “And why not?” concludes Thibaudet. “Chinese civilization maintained itself for thousands of years as an examinocracy.” Strange though the comparison with China may seem, it provides some insight. It has long since formed part of essayists’ stock in trade. Paul *Morand* has used it to point out the striking similarities between the Chinese and the French petty bourgeois.¹⁴ Both display the same “fanatical thrift, the art of constantly repairing things to prolong their usefulness . . . , distrust, a centuries-old politeness, a deep-rooted but passive hatred of foreigners, a conservatism punctuated by social squalls, an absence of public spirit, and the toughness of old people who have outlived their illnesses. One is tempted to think that all old civilizations resemble one another.” The social subsoil on which the largest party in France has

grown—for this is what the Radical party is—is far from being identical with the structure of the country as a whole. But the clubs and organizations (the so-called cadres) that this party possesses throughout the land undoubtedly constitute the climate in which the most important ideologies of the intelligentsia have been shaped, and from which only the most progressive have fully developed. The book that André Siegfried wrote three years ago under the title *Tableau des partis en France* [Portrait of the Parties in France] is a valuable tool for the study of these cadres.¹⁵ Alain is by no means their leader, but he is the shrewdest interpreter of these groups. He defines their activities as “a constant battle of the small against the great.” And in fact it has been asserted that the entire economic program of Radicalism consists in creating an aureole around the little word “small” and in defending the interests of the small farmer, the small businessman, the small property owner, the small depositor. So much for Alain. He is an interpreter more than a fighter. It is in the nature of the social substructure on which the activities of bourgeois intellectuals take place that any more determined course of action at once threatens to slip into Romantic sectarianism. The ideologies of Benda and Péguy are proof of this.¹⁶

In the intellectual situation fostered by Barrès and Maurras¹⁷ and sanctioned by postwar developments, the appearance of Julien Benda's book *La trahison des clercs* [The Treason of the Intellectuals] five years ago was like a bombshell. Here, Benda is concerned with the way in which intellectuals have begun to respond to politics over the past few decades. According to him, ever since intellectuals came into being, their world-historical task has been to teach the universal, abstract values of mankind: freedom, justice, and humanity. But now, with Maurras and Barrès, d'Annunzio and Marinetti, Kipling and Conan Doyle, Rudolf Borchardt and Spengler, they have begun to betray these values, whose guardians they have been for centuries. This new turn of events is marked by two signs. First, the unprecedented immediate relevance that politics has acquired for the writer. Wherever you look, you see political novelists, political poets, political historians, political reviewers.—But it is not just political passions that he finds incredible and unprecedented. Even more disconcerting and damaging is the direction this political activity is taking: he is shocked by the slogans of an intelligentsia that defends the cause of nations against that of mankind, of parties against justice, and of power against the mind. The bitter necessities of reality, the maxims of *Realpolitik*, were defended by the *clercs* in earlier times, but not even Machiavelli tried to embellish them with the pathos of ethical precepts.

Benda's general stance is prescribed by Catholicism. The thesis which underlies his book formally asserts a dual morality: that of force for states and peoples, and that of Christian humanism for intellectuals. His complaint is less that the norms of Christian humanism have no decisive effect on the world events than that they must forgo their claims to do so, because the

intellectuals who defended them in the past have now gone over to the party of power. We cannot but admire the virtuosity Benda displays in confining his attention to the foreground of the problem. The decline of the independent intelligentsia is determined crucially, if not exclusively, by economic factors. The author understands as little of the economic basis of their crisis as he does of the crisis in the sciences—the undermining of the dogma of an objective research free from preconceptions. And he seems not to understand that the attachment of intellectuals to the political prejudices of classes and nations is for the most part no more than a disastrous, short-sighted attempt to break free of idealistic abstractions and come closer, closer than ever before, to reality. Admittedly, this entire movement was, in the end, violent and desperate. But instead of seeking an appropriate form for it, reversing it, and attempting to return intellectuals to the seclusion of their utopian idealism, he reveals—and no appeal to the ideals of democracy can disguise the fact—a thoroughly Romantic outlook. Benda recently proclaimed this openly in his *Discours à la nation européenne*, in which he gives an enticing description of a unified world whose economic forms have survived unaltered:

This Europe will be scientific rather than literary, intellectual rather than artistic, philosophical rather than picturesque. And to more than a few of us it will come as a bitter lesson. For aren't poets more attractive than scholars? Aren't artists more captivating than thinkers? Here, however, we have to be more modest: either Europe will be serious, or it will not come into being. It will be far less entertaining than the various nations, which had been far less entertaining in their turn than the provinces. So we must choose: either we shall create Europe, or we shall remain eternal children. The nations have been lovable Clorindas; they will rejoice in the knowledge that they have been sensuous, passionately adored creatures. But Europe will come to resemble those youthful scholars of the thirteenth century who taught mathematics at the University of Bologna and who appeared before their audience veiled, so as not to confuse them with their beauty.¹⁸

It is not hard to discern in this very utopian Europe a disguised and, as it were, oversize monk's cell, to which intellectuals—"the spiritual"—retreat in order to weave the text of a sermon, undaunted by the thought that it will be delivered to rows of empty seats, if indeed it is delivered at all. This is why Berl is unanswerable when he says, "Revolt of the spirit? When Benda uses the word 'spirit,' isn't he thinking really of priests who minister to souls and see to earthly goods? . . . Doesn't his voice echo with nostalgia for the monastery, the Benedictines . . . a nostalgia that has become so powerful in the modern world? Must we continue to lament their loss?"¹⁹

The "spirit" to which Benda appeals so beseechingly, in an effort to counter the crisis, shows itself quickly enough in its true colors. It is nothing more than the manifestation of a figure from the past: the medieval cleric

in his cell. But there has been no lack of attempts to breathe life into this notion of the “spirit,” and no one has striven more fervently to give it flesh and bones than Charles *Péguy*, who appealed to the forces of the soil and of faith to assign intellectuals a place in the life of the nation and of history, although—unlike Barrès—he does not renounce the libertarian and anarchic elements they drew from the traditions of the French Revolution. Péguy fell early in the war. His life’s work is still important today, thanks to the lucidity and energy with which he sought to define the role of the intellectual. Péguy might well be thought to fit the picture that Benda sketched of the *clerc trahissant*, the intellectual as traitor. But a closer inspection reveals that this is not the case. “You can say of Péguy what you will, but not that he is a traitor. And why? Because a particular attitude becomes treachery only when it is dictated by fear or indolence. The treason of intellectuals lies in their willingness to submit to prevailing moods and prejudices. Péguy does nothing of the sort. He was a nationalist, yet a supporter of Dreyfus. He was a Catholic, but was banned from taking Communion.”²⁰ And when Berl, alluding to the title of a book by Barrès, sums up a certain type of writer with the words, “Enemy of the laws, indeed, but friend of the powers that be,” this applies least of all to Péguy. He came from Orléans. There, according to the Tharauds, who describe their friend’s origins, “he grew up surrounded by an ancient civilization, whose original complexion was determined by local traditions and a centuries-old history with no (or barely any) foreign element, in the womb of a population that was close to the earth and belonged to a peasant type . . . In short, he was surrounded by an ancient world that was closer to the France of the ancien régime than to the present.”²¹

Péguy’s great reform efforts bore in all respects the stamp of his origins. Even before he had established the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* (acting as his own publisher and his own printer so as to create a vehicle for his own ideas), he had already consciously tried to maintain the traditions of his home, while he was still at the Ecole Normale. For the first time since the Renaissance, the generation he belonged to gave France great writers of peasant stock, with accompanying rustic language and way of thinking: Claudel, Jammes, Ramuz.²² “Péguy was the first to provide the repellent spectacle of a student who had attended the Ecole Normale but who failed to exhibit the slightest evidence of a cultivated, classical, traditional style.” On the contrary, Péguy’s style comes from the soil; the long, coarse sentences that characterize it have been compared with long, coarse furrows intended for seed.

Thus, the forces to which Péguy appeals in order to form the type of the revolutionary intellectual are of prerevolutionary origin. According to André Siegfried, “the peasant and the French craftsman have come down to us from the Middle Ages; and if we gaze deeply into ourselves, we will have

to confess that for good or ill, everything important in us was shaped before the Revolution. We are not a youthful nation.”²³ This must be borne in mind if we are to understand that Péguy directed his appeal not to the young (as would be customary nowadays) but to those in their forties. The revolutionary task he set them was not of the defensive sort whose spirit was succinctly formulated by Alain when he said, “The attitude of the Left is that of a controlling authority.” On the contrary, he urged his supporters to go on the attack, and his onslaught was directed not just at the rulers, but also at the cohorts of academics and intellectuals who had betrayed the people from whom they sprang. “I shall found the great party of forty-year-olds. Someone recently included me in that category, impulsively putting me in the class of forty-year-olds. I shall make use of this for my own purposes. An old politician makes use of everything. I will found the party of forty-year-olds.”²⁴ That was in 1914. But those to whom Péguy was making his appeal were twenty in 1894; and that was the year in which Dreyfus was court-martialed and demoted. So the controversy about Dreyfus had the same importance for Péguy’s contemporaries as the Great War had for the generation that followed. With regard to the Dreyfus Affair, however, Péguy sought to distinguish between two aspects that point to the way in which he and his friends were to be cheated of the fruits of their victory. He speaks of “two Dreyfus Affairs, one good and one bad. The first is pure; the second, reprehensible. The first is religious; the second, political.” And Péguy decisively repudiated the political struggle over Dreyfus. He opposed his allies on the left, accusing them of “Combes-like demagoguery,” and changed camps the moment the victors turned against the religious orders.²⁵ So before the bar of history it is Zola, not Péguy, who delivered the judgment of the intellectuals on the Dreyfus case.

And in this and other respects, it is *Zola* who provides the standard by which we must judge the historical outcome. The same may be said of great tracts of his fiction. It is well known that Zola’s work is not based on a directly political theory. But it is a theory in the full sense of the word to the extent that Naturalism not only determined the subject of Zola’s novels, and their form, but also supplied some of the basic ideas—such as the project of representing the heredity and social development of a single family. In contrast to this, what characterizes the social novel to which more than a few left-wing writers today have been devoting their energies is the absence of a theoretical foundation of any kind. As has been remarked by a sympathetic critic, the sheer impersonality and simplistic nature of the characters of the so-called *roman populiste* make them resemble characters in the popular fairy plays of times past, and their expressive power is so limited that it recalls the childish babble of those forgotten puppet-like figures.²⁶ It is the fatal, old confusion—we find it first, perhaps, in Rousseau—according to which the interior life of the disinherited and the oppressed is distin-

guished by a simplicity all its own, one to which authors often like to add an element of moral edification. It is obvious that such books have a very meagre yield. In fact, the *roman populiste* represents not so much an advance for the proletarian novel as a retreat on the part of bourgeois aesthetics. What is more, this corresponds to its origins. The fashion—if not the term—goes back to Thérive, the current critic for *Le Temps*.²⁷ But despite the enthusiasm with which he has sought to promote the new trend, its products—not least his own—show that what we are dealing with is just the old philanthropic impulses in a new form. The genre's only chance lies in choosing subjects that halfway conceal the author's lack of insight and education. It is no accident that the genre's first great success—*Voyage au bout de la nuit* [Journey to the End of Night], by Céline—is concerned with the *Lumpenproletariat*.²⁸ Like the *Lumpenproletariat*, which has no class consciousness that might enable it to fight for a life worthy of human beings, Céline, in his description of it, is quite unable to make visible this defect in his subject. Hence, the monotony in which the plot is veiled is fundamentally ambiguous. He succeeds in vividly portraying the sadness and sterility of a life in which the distinctions between workday and holiday, sex and love, war and peace, town and country have been obliterated. But he is quite incapable of showing us the forces that have shaped the lives of these outcasts. Even less is he able to convey how these people might begin to react against such forces. This is why nothing can be more treacherous than the judgment on Céline's book delivered by Dabit, who is himself a respected representative of the genre:²⁹ “We are confronted here with a work in which revolt does not proceed from aesthetic or symbolic discussions, and in which what is at issue is not art, culture, or God, but a cry of rage against the conditions of life that human beings can impose on a majority of other human beings.” Bardamu—this is the name of the hero of the novel—“is made of the same stuff as the masses. He is made from their cowardice, their panic-stricken horror, their desires, and their outbursts of violence.” So far so good. Were it not for the fact that the essence of revolutionary training and experience is to recognize the class structure of the masses and to exploit it.

If Zola was able to portray the France of the 1860s, this was because he rejected it. He rejected Haussmann's urban planning, La Païva's palace,³⁰ and Rouher's eloquence.³¹ And if modern French novelists are unable to portray the France of our own day, this is because they are inclined to accept it at its face value. “Imagine,” says Berl, “a reader in the year 2200 who tries to picture to himself the France of our day on the basis of our best novels. He would not even learn about the housing shortage. The financial crises of these years would be barely discernible. And there is no immediate prospect that our writers will begin to concern themselves with money matters.”³² This conformism turns a blind eye to the world in which it lives.

And it is the product of fear. Writers know that for the bourgeoisie the function of the intelligentsia is no longer that of defending its most human interests over the long term. For the second time in the bourgeois age, its intellectuals have entered a militant phase. But whereas between 1789 and 1848 they occupied a leading position as part of the bourgeois offensive, now their role is defensive. The less rewarding such a stance frequently is, the more urgent is the demand that intellectuals demonstrate their class reliability.

The novel is such an outstanding test of this reliability that the different attitudes displayed by authors in the process of adapting to society bring something resembling an ordered point of view into the chaos of producing literature. This does not mean, of course, that such literary production will automatically lend ideological support to the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, a large number of writers are much more likely to stand aloof from the middle class, at least in appearance. The position of a humanistic anarchism that seemed to hold sway for half a century or so—and in a real sense actually did so—has been irrevocably lost. Hence, the *fata morgana* of a new emancipation beckons, of a freedom between the classes—that is to say, the freedom of the *Lumpenproletariat*. The intellectual mimics the external appearance of proletarian existence without being even remotely connected to the working class. He thereby seeks the illusory state of standing outside the class system. While a Francis Carco could become the sensitive portrayer, the Richardson, of this new independence, a MacOrlan could become its ironic moralist, its Sterne.³³

But conformism has even more elusive hiding places. And since even the greatest writer cannot be truly understood without defining the role of his works in society, and since, on the other hand, it is often those with the greatest talent who display a tendency to escape the consciousness of this role, even if they have to retreat to Hell to do so, this is the proper place to speak of Julien Green.³⁴ Green is undoubtedly one of the most important of the younger generation of writers, and he really has made the descent into Hell. His works are night-paintings of the passions. They burst the confines of the psychological novel in every respect. The antecedents of this writer take us back to the great Catholic and ultimately even the heathen depictees and interpreters of *passio*—to Calderón and even Seneca. But however deeply Green buries his characters in the provinces, and however subterranean the forces that move them, he does not always succeed in insulating them so completely from our own world that we should not expect them to make some sort of statement about it. Yet it is precisely at this point that we encounter the silence which is the expression of his conformism. I may perhaps be permitted to explore the traces of this attitude in his latest work, *Epaves* [Flotsam], if only because its conception makes it one of his greatest achievements.³⁵

At the opening of the story, we encounter the hero taking a solitary evening walk along the banks of the Seine in the capital. In a remote corner of Passy, down by the waterside, he becomes the involuntary witness of a street fight between an old woman and a drunkard. It is a quite ordinary family scene, "but the man had been drinking and the woman was obviously afraid that he would throw her into the Seine." And further, "The man held her by the arm and shook her, loudly abusing her all the while. But she didn't take her eyes off Philippe"—this is the hero's name—"and shouted to him, 'Mister!' Her voice was coarse, but at the same time so subdued that he was transfixed with terror. He remained motionless." After this, he steps back. Then he goes home. "He arrived back home almost at the same time as usual."—That is all. Green's book now shows how this encounter begins to ferment inside his hero. It leads him, in the author's eyes, to a process of self-knowledge; it compels him to confront his cowardice, and it eventually undermines his entire life, over which the Seine increasingly gains a mysterious power. But he does not take his own life in the river.—Because this novel was written by a man of Green's qualities, it offers a pitiless example of the destruction of a great idea by conformism. No one will deny that the incident Green describes at the opening of his book is typical of life in our big cities. For this very reason, it clearly tells us nothing about the psychology of the man who refused to heed the cry for help. But it helps us understand his social character. For the involuntary witness who turns a blind eye is a bourgeois. An open quarrel between two bourgeois would scarcely take such a form in the street, in full view of the public. So what paralyzes Green's hero is the abyss that opens up in front of the bourgeois, while beyond it two members of the class of outcasts conduct their quarrel. It is not really the critic's task to make suggestions about how the author might have depicted this hidden meaning of the scene—the meaning that is actually its authentic one. The crass circumstance that unceremoniously opens the eyes of the bourgeois to the abyss that surrounds his class existence—the same crass circumstance might equally cause him to slip over the edge into madness, which could turn the abandonment and loneliness of his class into the abandonment and loneliness of his individual existence. The uncertainty about the fate of the woman who had appealed to him for help and of whom he hears nothing further seems to contain the seeds of such a development in Green.

Green's problem is old-fashioned, and no less old-fashioned is the standpoint of most of these novelists on questions of technique: "Most of these writers have an unshakable faith in their characters' statements, or pretend they do—even though, since Freud, this faith must be seen as misplaced. They refuse to see that a report which someone gives about his own past reveals more about his present state than about the past that is the report's

ostensible subject. They insist on seeing the life of a character in a novel as an isolated process that has been fixed in advance within the framework of an empty time. They refuse to take cognizance of behaviorism, or even of psychoanalysis."³⁶ Thus writes Berl. In a word, it is characteristic of the present state of French literature that we are beginning to see a separation between leading intellectuals and novelists. The exceptions—Proust and Gide above all—confirm the rule. For both have made more or less crucial modifications to the technique of the novel. But neither Alain nor Péguy, neither Valéry nor Aragon, have published novels;³⁷ and those that we have from Barrès and Benda are really illustrations of theses. For the mass of writers today, however, we may venture this generalization: the more mediocre an author is, the greater his desire to use his activity as a novelist as an excuse to evade his responsibilities as a writer.

For this reason, it makes sense to inquire what the novel of the last decade has achieved for freedom. It is difficult to conceive of any answer, other than to note the defense of homosexuality that *Proust* has been the first to undertake. However, even though such a comment does justice to the meager revolutionary fruits of literature, it by no means exhausts the meaning of homosexuality in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. On the contrary, homosexuality appears in his work because both the most remote and the most primitive memories of the productive forces of nature are banished from the world he is concerned with. The world Proust depicts excludes everything that is involved in production. The attitude of the snob that predominates throughout is nothing other than the consistent, organized, and hardened observation of existence from the standpoint of the pure consumer. His work conceals a merciless and penetrating critique of contemporary society, and up to now criticism has scarcely done more than scratch the surface of his analysis. Still, this much is clear. Starting with the work's structure, which combines poetry, memoir, and commentary, down to the syntax of the overflowing sentences (the Nile of language pouring out over the plains of truth, fertilizing them in the process), the writer is everywhere present, adopting a point of view, giving an account of himself, and constantly placing himself at the disposition of the reader. In no instance can an author have any claim to making an impact on the public, unless he begins by asserting his claim to be regarded as a writer. France is fortunate that the highly suspect confrontation between "poetry" and writing has never really gained much currency there. Today, more than ever, what is decisive is the idea a writer forms of his work. And it is even more decisive if it is a true poet who attempts to make this concept a reality.

These remarks pertain to Paul Valéry. He has a symptomatic importance for the function of the writer in society. And this symptomatic importance is intimately connected with the unquestionable high quality of his work.

Among contemporary French writers, Valéry possesses the greatest technical expertise. He has reflected on the nature of technique in writing like no one else. And the unique position he occupies can perhaps best be summed up in the statement that, in his eyes, writing is primarily a matter of technique.

But it is equally important to note that writing, in his sense, includes poetry. He has appeared before the public, in a decisive capacity, both as essayist and lyric poet, and in neither case has he failed to provide repeated explanations of his technique. Valéry sets out to explore the writer's and especially the poet's intelligence like an inquisitor; he calls for a break with the widely held view that it is self-evident that writers are intelligent, as well as with the even more widely held idea that intellect is irrelevant to the poet. He himself possesses great intelligence, of a kind that is anything but self-evident. Nothing can be more disconcerting than its embodiment, Monsieur Teste. In his appearance, Monsieur Teste is a philistine; in his way of life, he is a man with a private income. He sits at home; he does not really mix with people; he is looked after by his wife. Monsieur Teste—in English, “Mr. Head”—is a personification of the intellect that reminds us very strongly of God as conceived by the negative theology of Nicholas of Cusa.³⁸ Everything we learn about Teste ends up in negation. “Every sense of excitement, every feeling is the sign of a failure of construction and adaptation.” However human Monsieur Teste feels himself to be, he has taken to heart Valéry's aperçu that the most important ideas are those that contradict our feelings. He represents therefore the negation of the “human.” “Behold, the twilight of the approximate is setting in; and before the door stands the reign of the dehumanized, which will emerge from the precision, rigor, and purity in human affairs.”³⁹ No expansive, pathos-filled gestures, nothing “human,” comes into the ambit of this Valéryesque eccentric, in whose image the pure writer is to be formed. Thought is the only substance from which the perfect can be created. “A classical writer,” Valéry says, “is a writer who conceals or absorbs his associations of ideas.”

But within the framework of the French bourgeoisie, Monsieur Teste represents nothing but the experience that Valéry attempted to trace on a human scale in a number of great artists. It was with this aim that he wrote one of his earliest works, *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*. Leonardo appears there as the artist who never in his work renounces his claim to give the most precise account possible of his activity and his methods. Valéry has said that he would prefer a mediocre page in which he was able to give an exact account of every word that flowed from his pen to a perfect work for which he was indebted to the power of chance and inspiration. Similarly, at another point, he writes: “The realms of chance, the powers of the gods, and Fate are nothing but the symptoms of our own mental deficiency. If we had an answer to everything—a precise answer, that is—these powers would not exist . . . We feel this ourselves, and this is why

we end up turning against our own questions. But that should be just the beginning. We ought to be able to formulate a question within ourselves that precedes all others and tests them in turn to see what they are worth.”⁴⁰

The strict return of such ideas to their context in the heroic period of the European bourgeoisie allows us to master our surprise at encountering once more the idea of progress at such an advanced stage of the old European humanism. It is, furthermore, the valid and genuine idea of a progress transferable at the level of methodology, a term that corresponds to Valéry’s concept of “construction” as neatly as it conflicts with the *idée fixe* of inspiration. As one of his interpreters has claimed, “The work of art is not a creation, but a construction in which analysis, calculation, and planning play the principal roles.” The ultimate merit of the systematic process of leading the investigator to go beyond himself has proved its worth in Valéry. For who is Monsieur Teste if not the human subject who is ready to cross the historical threshold marking the dividing line between the harmoniously educated, self-sufficient individual and the technician and specialist who is ready to assume a place within a much larger plan? Valéry failed to extend the idea of planning from the realm of art to the sphere of the human community. That threshold he did not cross. The intellectual remains a private person, and this is the melancholy secret of Monsieur Teste. Two or three decades earlier, Lautréamont had said: “Poetry must be made by all. Not by a single person.”⁴¹ These words have not reached Monsieur Teste.

The threshold that constituted such a barrier for Valéry has recently been crossed by *Gide*. He has joined the Communists. This is a matter of significance for the development of the problems in the advanced intelligentsia in France that we are attempting to portray. It may be said that Gide has not missed any of its vital phases of the past forty years. The first stage could be seen in his critique of Barrès’ *Déracinés*. It contained more than a sharp repudiation of his hymn to roots. It contained a reinterpretation. Of the four main characters in the novel who are made to exemplify Barrès’ thesis about the nation, Gide can interest himself only in the one who has sunk furthest in the social scale and has become a murderer. “If Racadot had never left Lorraine, he would never have become a murderer. In that case, he would have been of absolutely no interest to me.”⁴² Being “deprived of his roots” forces Racadot into originality. In Gide’s view, this is the true subject of the book. It was in the name of originality that Gide undertook to explore the entire range of possibilities that disposition and development had opened up for him. And the more astonishing these possibilities were, the more ruthlessly he fought to make room for them in his life—in the full glare of the public gaze, moreover. Self-contradictions were the last consideration that might have deterred him. “In every direction I started out in, I went right to the very end, so that I might turn round and pursue the opposite course with just as much determination.” This fundamental rejec-

tion of the golden mean, this commitment to extremes, is dialectics—not as an intellectual method, but as life’s blood and passion. Even at its extremes, the world is still whole, still healthy, still nature. And what drives him toward these extremes is not curiosity or apologetic zeal, but dialectical passion.

It has been said that Gide’s nature is not rich. This is a judgment that is not just valid but decisive. And Gide’s own attitude suggests he is not unaware of this himself. In his book on Dostoevsky, he writes: “At the origins of every great ethical reform we always encounter a small, physiological secret, a failing of the flesh, a restlessness, an anomaly . . . The discomfort from which the reformer suffers stems from the absence of inner equilibrium. The moral givens, positions, and values are in contradiction with one another, and he is laboring to bring them all under one roof; what he wants is a new equilibrium. His work is nothing but an attempt, with the aid of logic and reason, to sort out the confusion he feels within himself and to replace it with a new order . . . An action in which I do not recognize all the contradictions inside me betrays me.”⁴³ The attitude that is expressed in these and similar statements has been questioned countless times. The critic Massis calls Gide “demonic.”⁴⁴ But rather more illuminating is the fact that Gide has never claimed for himself that other kind of demonism which the bourgeoisie is always happy to concede to the artist—namely, the freedom of the genius. Just as Valéry succeeded in integrating his entire production into his intellectual life, Gide integrated his into his moral life. It is to this that he owes his pedagogical influence. After Barrès, he is the greatest leader the French intelligentsia has found. As Malraux writes: “It is perhaps incorrect to regard André Gide as a philosopher. I think he is something quite different: an advisor on matters of conscience. That is a highly important and unusual profession . . . For a long time, Maurice Barrès dedicated himself to the same cause. Gide likewise. It is certainly no small matter to influence the mindset of an entire epoch. But while Barrès could only give advice, Gide has drawn attention to the gulf between our desires and our dignity, between our aspirations and our wish to master or exploit them . . . He has awakened the intellectual conscience of half the people we call ‘the young generation.’”

The effect described here can be closely linked to a particular character in *Les caves du Vatican* [The Vatican Cellars]. The novel appeared just before the outbreak of the Great War, when, for the first time in the younger generation, intellectual currents began to appear that would later flow, via Expressionism and Dadaism, into Surrealism. Gide had every reason to reprint in his selected writings, *Pages choisies*, which he has dedicated to the youth of France, the page from *Les caves du Vatican* in which Lafcadio’s decision to commit murder is described. Traveling in a train, Gide’s young hero is irritated by the ugliness of an old man who is sharing a compartment

alone with him. It occurs to Lafcadio to do away with him. "Who would see?" he muses. "There within reach of my hand is this double lock that I can easily undo. The door would suddenly give way and he would topple over; the least push would do it; he would fall out like a stone; you wouldn't even hear a scream . . . It is not so much the events I am curious about, as about myself. Some people imagine themselves capable of anything, but when it comes to acting, they hold back . . . What a gulf between intention and deed. And you have no more right to take it all back than in chess. No matter; if you knew all the risks in advance, the game would lose all its interest."⁴⁵ And slowly, cold-bloodedly, Lafcadio counts to ten and then pushes his traveling companion out, for no reason—purely from curiosity about himself. In the Surrealists Lafcadio has found his most eager pupils. Like him they began with a series of *actes gratuits*—groundless or almost idle scandals. But the path taken by subsequent developments is well designed to shed a retrospective light on Lafcadio. For the Surrealists showed themselves increasingly intent on bringing scenes that had originally been initiated in a playful spirit or out of curiosity into harmony with the slogans of the Communist International. And if there could still be any doubt about the meaning of that extreme individualism under whose banner Gide's work was launched, it has lost all validity in the face of his recent statements. For these make clear how, once this extreme individualism had tested itself on the world around it, it inevitably became transformed into Communism.

"All things considered, what strikes one most immediately about the spirit of democracy is that it is asocial." This was written not by Gide, but by Alain.⁴⁶ Gide came late to this insight into the spirit of democracy. It was only at a late date that he prepared himself intellectually to recognize it. After his various travels into the interior of Africa, his descriptions of the living conditions of the indigenous populations under colonial rule created some unease among the political public. A few years earlier, when he had put himself forward as the advocate of homosexuals, he had caused offense, but now, as the champion of black people, he threatened to create an uproar.⁴⁷ For him, as for those who followed him, the factors that provided the occasion for his intervention were exclusively political. The war in Morocco has a special importance in this context, particularly for the younger generation.

Surrealism would have been spared many enemies (from which, incidentally, it derived enormous benefit) had it originated unambiguously in politics. But this was far from the case. Surrealism came to maturity in the confined space of the literary circle around Apollinaire. Aragon showed, in his *Vague de rêves* [Wave of Dreams] of 1924, in what an unprepossessing, homegrown substance the dialectical nucleus of Surrealism was originally found. At that time, the movement broke over its founders in an inspirational dream wave. Life appeared worth living only where the threshold

between sleeping and waking had been eroded, as if by the footsteps of images ebbing and flowing by the thousand. Language was itself only where, with automatic exactitude, sound and image, image and sound, had merged with each other so utterly that there was no space left for “meaning,” not even the smallest fissure. To enlist “the forces of intoxication for the revolution”—that was the real program. The dialectical development of the movement, however, was such that the image space which it had so boldly opened up for itself proved more and more to be identical with the image space of political praxis. It was within this space, at any rate, that the members of the group located the home of a classless society. It may well be that the promise of such a society owed less to the dialectical materialism of a Plekhanov or a Bukharin⁴⁸ than to an anthropological materialism derived from their own experiences, and from the earlier experiences of Lautréamont and Rimbaud.⁴⁹ However that may be, under the leadership of Breton and Aragon, this world of ideas established the rules that governed the actions and literary production of the group, until political developments permitted them to formulate their ideas in a simpler, more concrete way.

Since the end of the war the left-wing intellectuals, the revolutionary artists, have set the tone for a major segment of the public. It has now turned out, all too clearly, that this public esteem was not matched by any profounder impact on society. From this we may conclude, in Berl’s words, that “an artist, however much he may have revolutionized the arts, is no more revolutionary than Poiret, who in his day revolutionized the world of fashion.”⁵⁰ The most advanced and daring products of the avant-garde in all the arts have had only the haute bourgeoisie as their public—in France and Germany alike. This fact does not necessarily imply a judgment on their work, but it does point to the political uncertainty of the groups that stood behind these manifestations. Again and again we see the decisive influence of anarchism on the literary movements of the 1930s: the gradual displacement of anarchism characterizes the trajectory of Surrealism from its beginnings to the present. The crucial turning point came in the mid-1920s. In 1926 Blaise Cendrars’ book *Moravagine* appeared.⁵¹ In the type of revolutionary terrorist depicted in those pages, left-wing intellectuals could see the reflection of their former ideal, one they were in the process of discarding:

What impulse did we obey when we undertook the assassination of the czar, and what was our frame of mind? I often asked myself this question when observing my comrades . . . Everything in them had withered and died. Feelings fell away from them like scales and became waste products. Their brittle senses had become fragile and were no longer capable of enjoyment; they disintegrated into dust at the merest attempt to enjoy anything. Inwardly we were all singed as if by a blazing fire, and our hearts were no more than a heap of ashes. Our souls had been laid waste. We had long since ceased to believe in anything, or

even in nothing. The nihilists of 1880 were a sect of mystics, dreamers, agents of a universal happiness. But we were the antithesis of these merry fellows and their opaque theories. We were men of action, technicians, specialists, the pioneers of a new generation who had dedicated our souls even unto death, the harbingers of world revolution . . . Angels or demons? No; in a word, we were automata . . . We dwelled not in the shadow of a guardian angel or in the folds of his robe, but rather at the feet of our own *Doppelgänger*, who gradually detached themselves from us to find a new shape of their own and to take on bodily form. As the alien projections of ourselves, these new beings absorbed us into them so that we imperceptibly slipped into their skin and became identical with them. And our final preparations were very similar to the final stages of production of those terrible, arrogant automata that are known to magic as Teraphim. Like them, we set about destroying a city, laying waste a whole country and crushing the imperial family between our fearsome jaws.⁵²

The civil war in Russia is now part of history. In the meantime, civil wars have broken out elsewhere. And the fact that the climate and problems of Russia's civil war are of greater concern to the literary intelligentsia of the West than the evidence about the construction of society in Soviet Russia reflects not just the primitive nature of the political education in Western Europe, but also the situation there. *Malraux's* work is symptomatic here.⁵³ The setting of his latest book—like that of his earlier novel *Les Conquérants* [The Conquerors]—is China during its civil war period. In *La condition humaine* [The Human Condition] Malraux forestalls neither the historian nor even the chronicler.⁵⁴ The episode of the revolutionary uprising in Shanghai that was successfully put down by Chiang Kai Shek is neither politically nor economically transparent. It serves as a backdrop for the depiction of a group of people who play an active role in these events. Different though their roles are, and different though these people are in character and background, and hostile to the ruling class as they may be, they have one thing in common: they all spring from it. They work either for that class or against it; they may have left it behind them or been expelled from it; they represent it or see through it. But whatever their situation, that ruling class is in their bones. This is equally true of the professional revolutionaries who are in the foreground in the book.

Malraux does not say this in so many words. Does he know it? He proves it, at any rate. For the work, which is laden with the dialectical tension from which the revolutionary activity of the intelligentsia is born, feeds on this secret homogeneity of his characters. The fact that these intellectuals have abandoned their own class in order to make common cause with the proletariat does not mean that the latter have accepted them into their ranks. Nor have they. Hence the dialectic in which Malraux's heroes move. They live for the proletariat; but they do not act as proletarians. At the very least,

they act far less from their consciousness of class than from their consciousness of their own isolation. That is the torment that none of these people escapes. It is also the source of their dignity. "There is no dignity not based on suffering."⁵⁵ Suffering makes people lonely, and it feeds on the loneliness that it creates. To escape it is the fanatical desire of those who have the decisive say in this book. The pathos of the book owes much more to its nihilism than might be thought.

What human need is satisfied by revolutionary action? This question arises simply and solely from the special situation of the intellectual. His solitude is a major factor here. But when the intellectual elevates this to the essence of *la condition humaine*, the human condition, as Malraux does here, it prevents him from seeing quite different preconditions of revolutionary mass action—preconditions eminently worthy of study. The masses have quite different needs, and elicit quite different reactions—reactions that seem primitive only to primitive psychologists. Malraux's analysis is limited by its inability to explain the actions of the proletarian masses for whom revolutions are part of their experimental historical agenda. But (it will be objected) if his analysis is limited, his story is likewise. Without doubt. But we may legitimately ask how much freedom an author has when constructing a plot on this subject. Can he really afford not to anticipate the historian? Is there a genuine revolutionary literature without didacticism?

These questions highlight the crisis that besets literature, and their clarification remains the preserve of the Surrealists. The preconditions for a solution have been fulfilled, even if there is little to show for it at present. They lay in the emergence of the new nationalism that made manifest the true features of the "spiritual" which had been delineated by Barrès. They lay in the crisis of parliamentarianism that made the entry of young intellectuals into the ranks of those who adopted Alain's ideas increasingly precarious. They lay, furthermore, in the fact that internationalism, as a cultural concern, as Benda understands it, was about to undergo a series of very demanding trials. They lay in the speed with which the image of Péguy became the stuff of legend; in the impossibility of discovering in his writings any practical lessons for the situation in which intellectuals find themselves today. They lay in the insight that gradually imposed itself on the conscientious—namely, that they would have to learn to renounce a public which could not reconcile the satisfaction of its needs with its own better judgment. An indirect indication of these preconditions, however, can be found in an important writer like Valéry, who is a problematic figure only insofar as he lacked the strength to make clear to himself the contradiction between his technique and the society to which he was making it available. Last, these preconditions could be found in the example provided by André Gide.

What is crucial about all this is that the Surrealists approached the problem in a way that enabled them to exploit these preconditions to the

full. Thus, they variously imitated Lafcadio's playful action before they tackled more serious ones. They lent a more pointed meaning to what appears as "pure poetry" in Valéry when they started to view literature as a key to the psychoses. In the same vein, they found a place for the intellectual as technologist by acknowledging the proletariat's right to make use of his technology, because only the proletariat depends on technology at its most advanced. In a word—and this is the decisive factor—they attained their achievements without compromise and as a result of constantly reexamining their own position. They reached their goal as intellectuals—that is to say, via the longest route possible. For the intellectual's path to the radical critique of the social order is the longest, just as that of the proletariat is the shortest. Hence their attack on Barbusse⁵⁶ and others who were concerned to shorten it by appealing to conviction. And this, too, is why they have no room for depictions of poverty and deprivation.

The petty bourgeois who means business with his libertarian and erotic aspirations ceases to provide the idyllic picture that Chardonne welcomes in him. The more uninhibitedly and resolutely he asserts his claims, the greater the certainty that he will find himself on the road to politics—albeit via the most circuitous route, the only one viable for him. At the same moment, he will cease to be the petty bourgeois he once was. "Revolutionary writers," Aragon maintains, "if they are of bourgeois stock, are essentially and crucially traitors to the class of their origins." They become militant politicians. As such, they are the only ones able to interpret that dark prophecy of Apollinaire's with which we began. They know from experience why literature—the only literature they still think worthy of the name—is dangerous.

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Notes

1. This collection of stories by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) was in fact first published in Paris in 1916, following his recovery from head wounds incurred in World War I.
2. Bellachini (1828–1885) was a well-known conjuror.
3. The first Futurist Manifesto, of which Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) was the principal author, was published in *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909. The first use of the term "surrealist" occurred in the subtitle of Apollinaire's play *Les mamelles de Tirésias: Drame surréaliste*.
4. These citations are from Barrès' *La grande pitié des églises de France* (Paris: Emile Paul Frères, 1914).

5. André Gide (1869–1951), French writer, humanist, and moralist, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947. See “André Gide and Germany” and “Conversation with André Gide,” in this volume.
6. Maurice Barrès (1862–1923) was a French writer and politician whose fervent individualism and nationalism made his ideas a rallying point for the Right.
7. Albert Thibaudet (1874–1936) was an eminent French literary historian. Benjamin here cites *La république des professeurs* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1927).
8. Jules Lagneau (1851–1894), French philosopher, is known for the idealist-spiritualist influence he exerted on a number of his students who later achieved prominence.
9. Metz, in the Lorraine, was lost to the Germans in October 1870. The defeat marked a turning point in the Franco-Prussian War.
10. While studying literature in Paris, Barrès embarked on a solitary project of self-analysis, through a rigorous method described in the trilogy of novels entitled *Le culte du moi* (The Cult of the Self). This work comprises *Sous l’oeil des barbares* (Under the Eye of the Barbarians; 1888), *Un homme libre* (A Free Man; 1889), and *Le jardin de Bérénice* (The Garden of Bérénice; 1891).
11. Emile Chartier (1868–1951), French essayist, took his pseudonym, Alain, from a fifteenth-century poet. His collected essays, *Propos*, found a primarily youthful audience.
12. The Parti Radical (the name is an abbreviation of Parti Républicain Radical et Radical-Socialiste) was founded in 1901 as a coalition of various socialist and republican forces that had been brought together by their support for Dreyfus. Alain was a leading spokesman for the party. His *Eléments d’une doctrine radicale* appeared in Paris in 1925.
13. Jacques Chardonne (pseudonym of Jacques Boutelleau; 1884–1968), French novelist, detailed the tribulations of (mostly hopeless) marriages.
14. Paul Morand (1883–1976), French diplomat, novelist, and biographer, served as the Vichy government’s ambassador to Romania and Switzerland.
15. André Siegfried (1875–1976) was a distinguished French sociologist and historian.
16. Julien Benda (1867–1956) and Charles Péguy (1873–1914) collaborated on the journal of politics and letters *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine* (1900–1914). Both writers came to intellectual maturity during the Dreyfus Affair as champions of Dreyfus’ innocence. After 1910, Benda emerged as an outspoken opponent of Henri Bergson and of what he saw as philosophical and political irrationalism in general; his most famous and influential work, *La trahison des clercs* (1927), condemns the European intelligentsia for their submission to the irrationalist temptation. Péguy, in contrast, favored Bergson and campaigned against “scientific” socialism and positivism.
17. Charles Maurras (1868–1952) was a French writer and political theorist whose “integral nationalism” anticipated some of the ideas of fascism.
18. Julien Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933), pp. 70–71. Clorinda is a virgin warrior-maiden in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*.
19. Emmanuel Berl, *Mort de la pensée bourgeoise* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1929), p. 32.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 49–50.
21. Jérôme Tharaud and Jean Tharaud, *Notre cher Péguy*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1926), pp. 19–20.

22. Paul Claudel (1868–1955), poet and dramatist, spent his childhood in the village of Villeneuve-sur-Fère, in northeastern France. Francis Jammes (1868–1938), poet, spent much of his life in villages in the French Pyrenees. Charles Ferdinand Ramuz (1878–1947), poet, came from a village in Switzerland’s Vaud canton.
23. André Siegfried, *Tableau des partis en France* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1930), p. 10.
24. Charles Péguy, “Victor-Marie, Comte Hugo,” *Oeuvres en prose, 1910–1914* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 838.
25. A reference to Emile Combes (1835–1921), a radical politician and minister. His anticlerical views helped enact the law separating Church and State.
26. Fairy plays, a genre established in the eighteenth century by the Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806), were dramatizations of fairy tales, fables, puppet plays, and oriental stories. They were deliberately naive in characterization and expression. Gozzi, a defender of traditional dramatic forms such as the *commedia dell’arte*, was opposed to the innovations of such realist playwrights as Carlo Goldoni. His dramas were quite successful for a time, and formed the basis of many subsequent theatrical and musical works—especially in Germany, where he was admired by Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and the Schlegels.
27. André Thérive (pseudonym of Roger Puthoste; 1891–1967) was a novelist whose work exemplifies the populist genre under discussion here. *Le Temps* (founded 1861) was one of France’s most distinguished newspapers until its demise in 1942, on the day of the occupation of Lyon.
28. A German translation has just been published by Julius Kittl in Mährisch-Ostrau. [Benjamin’s note. Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s famous first novel, whose bleak vision and linguistic brilliance powerfully affected a generation of writers, was published in Paris in 1922.—*Trans.*]
29. Eugène Dabit (1898–1936), novelist, was the author of the popular novel *Hôtel du Nord*, which depicts life in a proletarian hotel. It was made into a film by Marcel Carné in 1938.
30. Thérèse Lachmann, known as La Païva, was a celebrated courtesan married to the Marquis de Païva, the Portuguese ambassador in Paris. The palace in question—which was built with money provided by her later husband, Count Henckel de Donnersmarck, and which still stands on the Champs-Élysées—is famous for such features as its monumental entrance and an onyx staircase.
31. Eugène Rouher (1814–1884), conservative politician, was one of the leading figures in the Bonapartist party during the Third Republic.
32. Berl, *Mort de la pensée bourgeoise*, p. 107.
33. Francis Carco (1886–1953) was a writer of memoirs and novels known for their realistic descriptions of low-life milieux. Pierre MacOrlan was the nom de plume of Pierre Dumarchey (1882–1970), a novelist who worked in the group around Apollinaire and Max Jacob. His novels are notable for their mixture of fantasy and reality, and for their sensitive portrayals of the marginalized and vagabond.
34. Julien Hartridge Green (1900–1998), French-American novelist, wrote bleak stories that were influenced by the gothic novel of the southern United States. His characters are typically neurotic and compulsive small-town figures. Green was elected to the Académie Française in 1971.
35. Green’s novel *Epaves* appeared in Paris in 1932. An English translation, under the title *The Strange River*, appeared the same year.

36. Berl, *Mort de la pensée bourgeoise*, pp. 89–90.
37. Paul Valéry (1871–1945) was a French poet, essayist, and theorist. Louis Aragon (1897–1982) was a French poet, novelist, and essayist associated with the circle of Surrealists around André Breton. Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and *Vague des rêves* were important stimuli in Benjamin's initial work on *Das Passagen-Werk* (The Arcades Project).
38. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) propounded the idea that God is the "coincidence of opposites." Because God is infinite, He embraces all things in perfect unity; He is at once the maximum and the minimum. As for man's knowledge of the infinite God, he must be content with conjecture or approximation to the truth. Absolute truth escapes man; his proper attitude is "learned ignorance."
39. Paul Valéry, *Rhumbs*, in Valéry, *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Pléiade, 1971), vol. 2, p. 621.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 647.
41. Comte de Lautréamont, "Poésies II," in Lautréamont, "*Maldoror*" and the *Complete Works* (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1994), p. 244. "Lautréamont" was the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse (1846–1870), whose work is notable for the violence, and the violent juxtaposition, of its images. He was a major influence on the Surrealists.
42. André Gide, *Prétextes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1903), p. 56.
43. André Gide, *Dostoïevsky: Articles et causeries* (Paris: Plon, 1930), pp. 265–266.
44. Henri Massis (1886–1970), author and critic, was aligned with Péguy's Catholic nationalism. He attacked Gide for representing an anarchy supposedly originating in the East (and thought to comprise communism).
45. André Gide, *The Vatican Cellars* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 139.
46. Alain, *Éléments d'une doctrine radicale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1925), p. 139.
47. See André Gide, *Corydon* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924); and *idem*, *Le retour du Tchad* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928).
48. Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856–1918), Marxist theorist, was the founder and for many years the leading exponent of the Marxist movement in Russia. A Menshevik, he opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917 and died in exile. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin (1888–1938), Bolshevik and Marxist theoretician and economist, was a prominent leader of the Communist International (Comintern).
49. Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) was a French poet and adventurer whose Symbolist poetry had a profound influence on modern literature.
50. Paul Poiret (1879–1944), couturier and decorator, is best-known for helping to eliminate the corset from feminine fashion.
51. This novel by Blaise Cendrars (pseudonym of Frédéric Sauser; 1887–1961) is, like much of his work, marked by striking images and an intense focus on rendering immediate experience.
52. Blaise Cendrars, *Moravagine* (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre, 1926), pp. 122–124, 134.
53. André Malraux (1901–1976) was a novelist, art historian, and statesman. His major works include the novel *La condition humaine* (The Human Condition, translated as *Man's Fate*; 1933); *Les voix du silence* (The Voices of Silence; 1951), a history and philosophy of world art; and *Le musée imaginaire* (The Imaginary Museum, translated as *Museum without Walls*; 1952–1954). Mal-

raux became an active supporter of General Charles de Gaulle and, after de Gaulle was elected president in 1958, served for ten years as France's minister of cultural affairs.

54. André Malraux, *Les Conquérants* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1928); *La condition humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933).
55. Malraux, *La condition humaine*, p. 399.
56. Henri Barbusse (1874–1935), French writer and journalist, published novels, poems, and essays infused with pacifist and socialist views. His novels include *L'Enfer* (1908), *Le Feu* (1916), and *Clarté* (1919).