

Roger Martin du Gard, Albert Camus

Roger Martin du Gard¹

Read, in *Devenir!*, the portrait of old Mazarelles and his wife. From his very first book, Roger Martin du Gard achieves the portrait in depth, whose secret seems to be lost nowadays. This third dimension, which extends the range of his work, makes it almost unique in contemporary literature. Our present literary production could, in fact, when it is valid, claim descent from Dostoevski rather than from Tolstoi. Inspired or impassioned shadows outline the commentary in motion of a reflection on man's fate. Doubtless there is also depth and perspective in Dostoevski's characters; but, unlike Tolstoi, he does not make such qualities the rule for his creation. Dostoevski looks above all for movement, Tolstoi for form.

There is the same difference between the young women in *The Possessed* and Natasha Rostov as there is between a character in the movies and one on the stage: more animation and less flesh. In Dostoevski these weaknesses on the part of a genius are compensated for by the introduction of a further, spiritual dimension, rooted in sin or sanctity. But, with a few exceptions, such notions are considered old-fashioned by our contemporaries, who have as a result retained from Dostoevski only a legacy of shadows.

Combined with the influence of Kafka (in whom the visionary triumphs over the artist), or with the technique of the American behaviorist novel, assimilated by artists who have more and more difficulty, emotionally and intellectually, in keeping up with the acceleration of history and who, in order to deal with everything, go deeply into nothing, this imperious example has produced in France an exciting and disappointing literature, whose failures are on a par with its ambitions, and of which it is impossible to say whether it exhausts a fashion or foreshadows a new age.

Roger Martin du Gard, who began writing at the beginning of the century, is, on the other hand, the only literary artist of his time who can be counted among Tolstoi's descendants. But at the same time he is perhaps the only one (and, in a sense, more than Gide or Valéry) to anticipate the literature of today, by bequeathing problems that crush it and also by authorizing some of its hopes. Martin du Gard shares with Tolstoi a liking for human beings, the art of depicting them in the mystery of their flesh, and a knowledge of forgiveness—virtues outdated today. The world Tolstoi described nevertheless formed a whole, a single organism animated by the same faith; his characters meet in the supreme adventure of eternity.

One by one, visibly or not, they all, at some point in their stories, end up on their knees. And Tolstoi himself, in his winter flight from family and glory, wanted to recapture their unhappiness, universal wretchedness, and the innocence of which he could not despair. The same faith is lacking in the society Martin du Gard was to depict and also to a certain extent lacking in the author.

This is why his work is also one of doubt, of disappointed and persevering reason, of ignorance acknowledged, and of a wager on man with no future other than himself. It is in this, as in its invisible audacities or its contradictions accepted, that his work belongs to our time. Even today it can explain us to ourselves, and soon, perhaps, be useful to those who are to come.

There is a strong possibility, in fact, that the real ambition of our authors, after they have assimilated *The Possessed*, will be one day to write *War and Peace*. After tearing through wars and negotiations, they keep the hope, even if it's unadmitted, of rediscovering the secrets of a universal art that, through humility and mastery, will once again bring characters back to life in their flesh and their duration. It is doubtful whether such great creation is possible in the present state of society either in the East or in the West.

But there is nothing to prevent us from hoping that these two societies, if they do not destroy each other in a general suicide, will fertilize each other and make creation possible once again. Let us also bear in mind the possibility of genius, that a new artist will succeed, through superiority or freshness, in registering all the pressures he undergoes and digesting the essential features of the contemporary adventure.

His destiny then will be to fix in his work the prefiguration of what will be, and, quite exceptionally, to combine the gift of prophecy with the power of true creation. These unimaginable tasks cannot, in any case, do without the secrets contained in the art of the past. The work of Martin du Gard, in its solitude and its solidity, contains some of these secrets and offers them in a familiar form. In him, our master and our accomplice at the same time, we can both find what we do not possess and rediscover what we are.

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"Masterpieces," said Flaubert, "are like the larger mammals. They have a peaceful look." Yes, but their blood still runs with strange, young ardor. Such fire and such audacity already bring Martin du Gard's work closer to us. The more so, after all, if it does look peaceful. A kind of geniality masks its relentless lucidity, apparent only upon reflection, although then it takes on added dimension.

It is important to note, first of all, that Martin du Gard never thought provocation could be an artistic method. Both the man and his work were forged by the same patient effort, in withdrawal from the world. Martin du Gard is the example, a rare one indeed, of one of our great writers whose telephone number nobody knows. He exists, very strongly, in our literary society. But he has dissolved himself in it as sugar does in water.

Fame and the Nobel Prize have favored him, if I may so express it, with a kind of supplementary darkness. Simple and mysterious, he has something of the divine principle described by the Hindus: the more he is named, the more he disappears. Furthermore, there is no calculation in this quest for obscurity. Those who have the honor of knowing him as a man realize his modesty is real, so real that it appears abnormal.

I for one have always denied that there could be such a thing as a modest artist; since meeting Martin du Gard my certainty has begun to waver. But this monster of modesty also has other reasons, apart from the peculiarity of his character, for seeking to live in withdrawal from the world: the legitimate concern every artist worthy of the name has to protect the time needed for his work.

This reason becomes imperative the moment the author identifies his work with the construction of his own life. Time then ceases to be merely the place where the work is done, but becomes the work itself, immediately threatened by any diversion.

Such a vocation rejects provocation and its calculated stratagems, instead accepting in everything concerned with literary creation the law of true craftsmanship. When Martin du Gard began his career as a writer, men were entering literature (the history of the Nouvelle revue française group is clear proof of this) rather as one enters the religious life.

Today, people enter it or pretend to do so—as if in mockery; it is merely a pathetic derision which can, with a few writers, have its effectiveness. With Martin du Gard, however, there was never any doubt about the seriousness of literature.

The first of his published novels, *Devenir!*, is a clear indication of this, being the story of a literary vocation that fails through lack of character. He

makes the person in whom he depicts himself say: "Everyone has a little genius; what people don't have anymore these days, because it's something you have to acquire, is a conscience."

The same character likes neither too polished an art, which he describes as "castrated," nor "geniuses who are essentially adolescent." I hope readers will forgive the author for the truth and topicality of his second remark. But the "big guy," as Martin du Gard calls him in the novel, continues squarely in the same vein. "In Paris, all writers seem to have talent; actually, they have never had time to acquire any: all they have is a kind of cleverness which they borrow from one another, a communal treasure in which individual values are frittered away."

It is already obvious that if art is a religion, it will not be an attractive one. On this point Martin du Gard quickly cut himself off from the theoreticians of art for art's sake. Symbolism, which caused so much exquisite damage among the writers of his generation, never had any effect on him, except in certain stylistic indulgences² which he later outgrew, like adolescent acne. He was only twenty-seven when he wrote *Devenir!*, and the writer who is quoted with enthusiasm in this first work is already Tolstoi.

From here on, Martin du Gard was to remain faithful all his life to an ascetic vocation, an artistic Jansenism that would make him shun ostentation and effect, in order to sacrifice everything to uninterrupted labor on a work he wanted to make endure. "What is difficult," says this precocious and perspicacious thinker, "is not to have been someone but to stay that way." Genius runs the risk, in fact, of being no more than a fleeting accident. Only character and work can transform it into fame and a livelihood.

Hard work, and the organization and humility that go with it, are thus at the very core of free creation and consequently indispensable in a craft where work, but work humbly pursued, is also the rule of life. It is no exaggeration to say that Martin du Gard's very aesthetic principles made it inevitable that his work, in which individual problems have the starring roles, take on historical dimensions.

The man who finds his reasons for living and his delights in free work can, in the end, bear any humiliation except the humiliation justly inflicted on his work, just as he can accept every privilege except those that separate him from his liberty, the work to which he is chained. Works like Roger Martin du Gard's sometimes unknowingly restore artistic toil to its rightful place in the city, and can no longer be divorced then from its victories or defeats.

But even before any other discovery, the result is this work, solid as stone, whose main body is *Les Thibault* and whose buttresses are *Devenir!*, *Jean Barois*, *Vieille France*, *Confidence africaine*, and the plays.

We can discuss this work, we can try to see its limitations. But we cannot deny that it exists, and does so superbly, with an unbelievable honesty. Commentaries can add to it or detract from it, but the fact remains that we have here one of those works, exceptional in France, around which one can turn, as one walks around a building. The same generation that gave us so many aestheticians, so many subtle, delicate writers, also brought a work rich in people and in passions, constructed according to the plans of a well tried technique.

This nave of men, built solely with the rigor of an art practiced a whole lifetime, testifies that in a time of poets, essayists, and novelists concerned with the soul, a master craftsman, a Pierre de Craon without a religion but not without faith, was born in our land.

Nevertheless, a law exists in art which says that every creator should be buried beneath the weight of his most obvious virtues. The proverbial honesty of his art has sometimes hidden the true Martin du Gard in a time which, for various reasons, put genius and improvisation above everything else, as if genius could

do without a work schedule and improvisation without arduous leisure. The critics thought they had done enough by paying homage to virtue, forgetting that in art virtue is only a means placed at the service of risk.

There is certainly no lack of audacity in the work that concerns us. It stems nearly always from the obstinate pursuit of psychological truth. It thus serves to emphasize the ambiguity of human beings, without which this truth is meaningless. We are already surprised, reading *Devenir!*, by the cruel modernity of the ending; André, who has just buried his wife in great grief, notices the young servant girl standing at the window. We know that he has desired her, and realize that she will help him digest his sorrow.

Martin du Gard deals frankly with sexuality and with the shadowy zone of darkness it casts over every life. Frankly, but not crudely. He has never given way to the temptation of suggestive licentiousness that makes so many contemporary novels as boring as guides to social etiquette. He has not obligingly described monotonous excesses. He has chosen rather to show the importance of sexual life through its inopportunity.

Like a true artist, he has not painted directly what it consists of, but indirectly, what it forces people to become. It is sensuality, throughout her life, for example, that makes Mme de Fontanin vulnerable in the presence of her unfaithful husband. We know this, and yet it is never said, except as Mme de Fontanin watches over her husband on his deathbed.

What is also noticeable in *Les Thibault* is a curious intermingling of the themes of desire and death. (Once more, it is the night before the burial of Mother Frubling that Jacques is initiated by Lisbeth.) Certainly we must see this intermingling as one of the obsessions that are an artist's privilege and at the same time as a means of underlining the unusual nature of the sexual life.

But desire is not only mingled with the things of death, it also contaminates morality and makes it ambiguous. The righteous man, the man who observes the outward show of Christianity, the father in *Les Thibault*, writes in his diary: "Do not confuse with the love of our neighbor the emotion we feel at the approach, at the touch, of certain young people, even children." Then he crosses out only the final words, and this omission reconciles him with both modesty and sincerity.

Just as Jérôme de Fontanin savors the delight of the repentant libertine when he saves Rinette from the prostitution into which he had cast her. "I am good, I am better than they think," he repeats tenderly to himself.

But he cannot resist sleeping with her one last time, adding the pleasures of the flesh to those of virtue. One sentence is all Martin du Gard needs to summarize the mechanical inspiration of the pose: "His fingers were automatically unfastening her skirt, as his lips rested on her forehead in a paternal kiss."

The whole work has this flavor of truth. The admirable *Vieille France* not only offers us Martin du Gard's most sinister character, the postman Joigneau, a sort of Astaroth on bicycle, but it also abounds in pitiless revelations about the provincial heart, and the last page gives an astonishing conclusion. Similarly, in *African Secret*, the very simplicity of an incestuous brother's tone will make his unfortunate adventure seem natural. In 1931, with *Un taciturne*, Martin du Gard dared to put on the stage, without the slightest vulgarity of tone, the drama of a respectable industrialist who discovers he has homosexual leanings.

At last, in *Les Thibault*, the brilliant touches multiply. One could quote the scene in which Gise secretly allows the child that the man she loves has had with another woman to suck her virgin breast; or the meal Antoine and Jacques have, after the father's death, that almost in spite of themselves takes on a slight air of celebration. But there are two such touches I rank higher than the others, for they show the great novelist at work.

The first is Jacques' stubborn silence when, for the first time, Antoine comes to see him at the reform school in Crouy. How could there be a better way to convey humiliation than this silence. The rapidly muttered words, the onsets of reticence in which this silence is clothed, and which serve to underline it even further, are so accurately calculated and proportioned that mystery and pity suddenly erupt into what was until then a straightforward story, opening much wider vistas than those of the middle class Parisian milieu in which it had begun.

Humiliation has never been depicted more objectively or more successfully, except by Dostoevski, whose technique is either frenzied or grating (I am not counting Lawrence, who describes a personal humiliation) and by Malraux, in the epic mode (especially in *La Voie royale*, which I persist in liking whatever its author may say). No one, however, has ever tried to paint it in subdued and even colors, and Martin du Gard has perhaps achieved what is most difficult in art.

If there are artistic miracles, they must resemble those that come from grace. I have always thought it would be easier to redeem a man steeped in vice and crime than a greedy, narrow-minded, pitiless merchant. Thus, in art, the more prosaic the reality chosen as one's subject matter, the more difficult it is to transfigure. Even here, however, there is a point beyond which we cannot go, that makes any claim to absolute realism quite untenable.

But it is here nonetheless, half way between reality and its stylization, that art from time to time achieves the perfect triumph. The portrait of Jacques in his humiliation remains, in my view, one of these triumphs. To give one last example of Martin du Gard's technique, I shall quote the father's simulated death in *Les Thibault*. A brilliant idea, indeed, on the novelist's part, to make the playacting that had, in a sense, formed this character's whole life, extend even into death.

The man who could not prevent himself from constantly playing the part of a Christian is also incapable, in the idleness and depression of an illness that he does not know is fatal, of resisting the temptation to dramatize the last moments of his life. So he organizes, from his bed, a dress rehearsal, which is half sincere, involving assemblies of servants, exemplary acts of repentance, the praising of virtues, and flights of holiness. The father expects his reward in the form of protests that will dissipate the vague anxiety he sometimes harbors, as does every invalid.

But his family's genuine grief, their tacit acceptance of his speeches on his approaching end, suddenly bring him face to face with his true condition. His playacting, instead of producing the good results he had hoped for, brings the cruel reflection of a merciless reality. Having thought himself an actor, he finds himself a victim. From this moment, he begins to die, and fear sterilizes his faith. His great cry "Ah, how can God do this to me!" crowns this dramatic discovery with the emptiness and duplicity of his religious beliefs and also his need of them. He dies reconciled, nonetheless, but in gasps of pain and childish songs that reveal a man broken to the very core, stripped of his pretense and ostentation, delivered naked to death and simple faith.

Such a canvas bears the signature of a master. The novelist able to depict the successive impulses of a soul that transforms being itself into a device for pretense has nothing to learn from anyone. He has only lessons, and durable ones, to offer us.

But even more than his art it is Martin du Gard's themes that coincide with our own preoccupations. The path he has followed with so fortunate and deliberate a pace is one the rest of us have had to race along, with history at our heels. I mean, generally, the personal evolution that leads one to a recognition of the history of all men and to an acceptance of their struggles. Even in this, of course, Martin du Gard has his own particular stamp.

He stands midway between his predecessors and his peers (who talked of nothing but the individual and never let history play more than a circumstantial role) and his successors (who make only embarrassed allusions to the individual). In *Les Thibault*, and in Jean Barois, individuals are intact and the pain of history still quite fresh.

They have not yet worn each other out. Martin du Gard has not experienced our situation, in which we inherit at the same time shop-worn people and a history tensed and paralyzed by several wars and the fear of final destruction. We can say without paradox that what is alive in our present-day experience lies behind us, in a work like Roger Martin du Gard's.

As early as 1913, in any case, Jean Barois outlines the movement that concerns us. The subject of this curious novel is familiar, although its construction is quite unusual. Technically, in fact, there is nothing of the novel about it. It breaks with all the genre's traditions, and there is nothing comparable to it in literature since. Its author seems to have looked, systematically, for the least fictional of mediums. The book is made up of dialogues (accompanied by brief stage directions) and documents, some of them incorporated in their original form.

Consequently, the interest of the book never weakens, and it can be read in one sitting. This may be because the subject was perfectly suited to such a technique. Actually, Martin du Gard intended to adopt this form for all his future work. As it turned out, only Jean Barois was to profit from it. One might say that in a way this book (more than Zola's novels, which were intended as scientific although their author could not keep them from becoming epic) is the only great novel of the age of scientism, whose hopes and disappointments it expresses so well. This documentary novel is also a monograph, all the more surprising in that it concerns the case history of a religious crisis.

It happens that to make a card index of the aspirations and doubts of a soul was, in the long run, an enterprise particularly fitting in a period inspired, with a few exceptions, by the religion of science. In the course of the book, Barois abandons the old faith for the new. If, face to face with death, he betrays this new belief at the very last moment, he still remains the man of that brief new age which was to collapse in 1914.

His story is therefore all the more striking, related to us in the style of the new gospels. The case history reads like an adventure tale because its unusual form is deeply wedded to the story it unfolds. The evolution of a man who comes to doubt traditional faith, who thinks he finds a more certain faith in science,³ could not be reported better than by this technique of quasi-scientific description, which Martin du Gard intended to perfect.

In the end, science satisfied neither Barois nor his creator, but its method, or at least its ideal, was fleetingly raised, in this novel, to the dignity of perfectly effective art. The exploit has not been repeated in our literature or even in Martin du Gard's later work. But didn't the faith that inspired it, already threatened in the book itself, also die, prematurely, as a result of the excesses of mechanized savagery? Jean Barois remains at least a testamentary work in which we can find moving evidence of a vanished belief and prophecies that affected our lives.

The conflict between faith and science, which so excited the early years of this century, arouses less interest today. We are living out its consequences, nonetheless, which were foreshadowed in Jean Barois. To take only one example: irreligion is portrayed as closely linked to the rise of the socialist movement, and the book consequently lays bare one of the most powerful driving forces in our history. Fleeing from the encounter with God, Jean Barois discovers men. His liberation coincides with the great movement that grew up around Dreyfus.

The "Sower's" group links Barois to the rest of mankind; it is there that he reaches full maturity, and that what can be called the cycle of history

(struggle and victory) exhausts his manhood. Historical disappointments bring him gradually back to solitude, to anguish, and, faced with death, to the denial of his new faith. Can the community of men, which sometimes helps us to live, also help us die? This is the question underlying all Martin du Gard's work, which creates its tragic quality.

For if the reply is negative, the situation of the modern unbeliever is temporarily madness, even if a tranquil madness. This is doubtless why so many men today proclaim with a kind of fury that the human community keeps us from dying. Martin du Gard has never said this, because in truth he does not believe it. But he gives us in his novel, along with Barois, the portrait of a rationalist who does not deny his own beliefs, and who dies without abjuring reason. The Stoic Luce probably represents Martin du Gard's ideal in 1913. A particularly severe and sombre ideal, if Luce himself is to be believed. "I do not acknowledge two moral standards.

One must attain happiness, without being the dupe of any mirage, through truth and truth alone" One could hardly give a better definition of the enlightened renunciation of happiness. But let us simply remember that the first portrait of men who reject all forms of hope, determined to confront death in its entirety, who later swarm into our literature, was traced in 1913 by Roger Martin du Gard.

The great theme of the individual caught between history and God will be orchestrated symphonically in *Les Thibault*, where all the characters move toward the catastrophe of the summer of 1914. The religious problem, however, is upstaged. It runs through the first volumes, disappears as history gradually swamps individual destinies, reappearing in negative form in the final volume, with the description of Antoine Thibault's solitary death. The reappearance is nonetheless significant. Like any true artist, Martin du Gard cannot get rid of his obsessions.

It is significant, therefore, that his great work ends with the constant theme of all his books, the death agony, in which man is, if I may put it this way, finally faced with the ultimate question. But in the Epilogue that ends *Les Thibault*, Martin du Gard's two main characters—the priest and the doctor—have disappeared, or come very near to doing so. *Les Thibault* ends with the death of a doctor, alone among other doctors.

It seems that for Martin du Gard, as for Antoine, the problem has now ceased to present itself solely on the individual human level. And it is indeed the experience of history, and his enforced involvement in it, which explains this evolution on Antoine's part. Historical passion (in the two senses of the word) is atheistic today, or seems to be.

In simple terms, this means that the historical misfortunes of the twentieth century have marked the collapse of bourgeois Christianity. A symbolic illustration of this idea can be seen in the fact that the father, who represents religion to Antoine,⁴ dies just after Antoine has proclaimed his atheism. War breaks out at the same time, and a world that thought it could live by trade and still be religious collapses in bloodshed.

If it is legitimate to see *Les Thibault* as one of the first committed novels, the point should simply be made that it has better claims to this description than those published today. For Martin du Gard's characters, unlike ours, have something to commit and something to lose in historical conflicts. The pressure of immediate events struggles in their very being against traditional structures, whether religious or cultural. When these structures are destroyed, in a certain way man himself is destroyed.

He is simply ready to exist, some day. Thus Antoine Thibault first becomes aware that other people exist, but this first step leads him only to confront death in an attempt to discover, beyond any consolation or illusion, the final secret of his reasons for living. With *Les Thibault*, the man of our half-century is born,

the human being we are concerned with, and whom we can choose to commit or to liberate. He is ready for everything, so long as we have not decided what he is.

It is Antoine who most strikingly embodies the theme. Of the two brothers, Jacques is the one most often praised and admired. He has been seen as exemplary. I, on the other hand, see Antoine as the true hero of *Les Thibault*. And, since I cannot undertake to comment on the whole of so vast a work, I feel that its essential features can be underlined in a comparison between the two brothers.

Let me begin by giving my reasons for choosing Antoine as the central character. *Les Thibault* opens and closes with Antoine, who constantly grows in importance throughout the work. Besides, Antoine seems closer to his creator than Jacques. A novelist certainly expresses and betrays himself through all his characters at the same time: each of them represents one of his tendencies or his temptations. Martin du Gard is or has been Jacques, just as he is or has been Antoine; the words he gives them are sometimes his own, sometimes not. An author will, by the same token and for the same reasons, be nearest the character who combines the largest number of contradictions.

From this point of view, Antoine, because of his complexity, the different roles he plays in the novel, is a richer character than Jacques. Finally, and this is my principal reason, the basic theme of *Les Thibault* is more convincing in Antoine than in Jacques. Both of them, it is true, leave their private universe to rejoin the world of men. Jacques even does so before Antoine.

But his evolution is less significant since it is more logical and could have been foreseen. What is easier than to pass from individual revolt to the idea of revolution? But what is more profound, and more persuasive, on the other hand, than the inner metamorphosis of a happy, well-balanced man, full of strength and sincere self-esteem (a mark of nobility, according to Ortega y Gasset), that brings him to the recognition of a common misery in which he will find both his limits and his fulfillment?

The interest *Les Thibault's* first readers took in Jacques is understandable, of course. Adolescents were in fashion at the time. Martin du Gard's generation popularized the cult of youth in France, a cult at first merry and then fearful, which has contaminated our literature. (Nowadays, every writer seems riddled with anxiety to find out what young people think of him, when the only interesting thing would be to know what he really thinks about them.) However, I am not sure that the reader of 1955 will be tempted for very long to prefer Jacques to Antoine.

Let us admit at least that Martin du Gard succeeded, with Jacques, in giving us one of the finest portraits of adolescence our literature offers. Thin-skinned, courageous, self-willed, determined to say everything he thinks (as if everything one thinks were worth saying), passionate in friendship but clumsy in love, stiff and stilted like certain virginities, uncomfortable with himself and with other people, doomed by his purity and intransigence to lead a difficult life, he is superbly depicted by his creator.

But here again we have an exceptional destiny, a character who tears through life like a blind meteor. In a sense, Jacques is not made for life. His two great experiences, love and the revolution, are proof of this. It is worth noting, first of all, that Jacques experiences the revolution before he experiences love. When he sleeps with Jenny, he tries to live them both at the same time, a hopeless idea. When the revolution betrays both him and itself, he leaves Jenny suddenly and goes off to face a solitary death that he hopes will be exemplary.

His disappearance is the only guarantee that their love will endure. The wild, intractable Jenny, who begins by hating Jacques, without, moreover, being very fond of anyone, cannot bear to be touched, which has curious implications. Yet, separated from Jacques, she discovers she has a kind of hard passion for him, in

which there is little tenderness. She can find lasting fulfillment, if this word has any meaning for her, only as a widow. It would seem that Jenny is the stuff of which suffragettes are made; faithfulness to the ideas of her dead husband, and the care given to the child of this curious love will be enough to keep her going.

And in truth, what other ending is conceivable for the adventure of these two trapped souls? Their love— in the Paris of August 1914, with Jenny in mourning following Jacques into all the public places where the socialist betrayal, and the beginnings of disaster, will unfold, with both of them running through the scorching afternoon as bells boom out the order to mobilize—is filled more with pain than delight. It is not without surprise that we learn these two lovers have occupied one bed; we would prefer, in fact, not to think about this formality. Artistically, the two characters are more than convincing; they are true.

In a human way, Jacques alone touches our hearts, because he is a figure of torment and failure. Setting out from his solitary revolt, he discovers history and its struggles, joins the socialist movement on the eve of one of its greatest defeats, lives through this defeat in anguish, discovers Jenny for the briefest of moments, abandons her in the same dreamlike state in which he had made her his mistress, and, despairing of everything, retreats into solitude, but this time to the loneliness of sacrifice. "To give oneself, to achieve deliverance by giving one's all." One definitive act removes him from this life, which he has never really known, but which at least he thinks he is serving this way. "To be right against everyone else and escape into death!" The formula is significant.

In reality, Jacques does not participate, even after having discovered participation. A solitary figure, he can rejoin other people only through a solitary form of sacrifice. His deepest desire (ours, too, after all) is to be right, along with everybody else. But if this is only a dream, which it is, in order to be consistent he would prefer to be right against everybody else. In his case, dying, deliberately, is the only way of being right once and for all.

In reality, Jacques has not only never been able to feel at one with other people, except through a great idea; but he has always felt hemmed in by them. "I always think of myself as the prey of other people; that if I escaped them, if I managed somewhere else, far from them, to begin an entirely new life, I would finally achieve serenity." Here Jacques expresses something all of us think, at one time or another. But there is no "somewhere else," no new life either, or at least not one without other people.

Someone who insists on always being right will always feel alone against everyone else; it is impossible to live with others and be right at the same time. Jacques does not know that the only real progress lies in learning to be wrong all alone. But this presupposes a capacity for patience, the patience to make and to build, the only capacity that has ever produced great works, in history or in art.

Such patience is beyond the capacity of a certain type of man, however, who can be satisfied only by action alone. At the summit of this sort of men is the terrorist, of whom Jacques is one of the first representatives in our literature. He dies alone; even his example is useless, and the last man who sees him, a policeman, insults him as he finishes him off, because he hates having to kill him. Those like Jacques, who want to change life in order to change themselves, leave life untouched and, in the end, remain what they are: sterile and disturbing witnesses for everything in man that refuses and always will refuse to live.

The portrait of Antoine offers different problems and teaches different lessons. Unlike Jacques, Antoine loves life, carnally, with passion; he has a physical and wholly practical knowledge of it. As a doctor, he reigns in the kingdom of the body. But his nature explains his vocation. In him, knowledge always passes

through the medium of the senses. His friendships, his loves, are physical. The shoulder of his friend or brother, a woman's radiance, are the paths by which feelings set fire to his heart or kindle his intelligence.

Sometimes he even prefers what he feels to what he believes. He defends Protestantism, in front of Mme de Fontanin,⁵ solely out of physical attraction, for he never has any traffic with it otherwise. A liking for the physical sometimes leads to flabbiness or the cynicism of the sensualist. But it is balanced in Antoine by two complementary things, work and character. His life is ordered, occupied, and has, above all, a single purpose: his profession. Immediately, his sensuality is an advantage.

It helps him in his job and gives him a sense, an orientation no doctor can do without that guides his probings of the human body. It also softens his excessive determination. The result, his unshakable balance, his informed tolerance, and also his excessive self-assurance. For Antoine is far from perfect: he has the defects of his virtues. In the man who enjoys being what he is, a certain form of solitary happiness does not exist without selfishness and blindness.

Jacques and Antoine help us understand that there are two kinds of men; some will still be adolescents when they die, the others are born adult. But the adults run the risk of imagining that their balance is the general rule, and consequently that unhappiness is a sin. Antoine seems to believe that the world he lives in is the best possible and that anyone, indeed, can choose to live in a large town house on the rue de l'Université, to pursue the honorable calling of doctor of medicine, and welcome life in all its goodness.

This is his limitation, in the first volumes at least, and it leads him to adopt a number of unattractive attitudes. Born a bourgeois, he lives with the idea that everything around him is eternal, since everything surrounding him suits his convenience. This conviction even influences his true nature, which he drapes in the doublet of being a "Thibault son and heir." He behaves as a man of wealth, even in his sexual adventures: he pays cash for his pleasures, striking an air of importance and authority.

Antoine will therefore not have to accept life. He will merely have to discover that he is not the only person living. In keeping with his nature, he will simply follow an opposite path to his brother's. Here the profound truth of the novel is revealed. Martin du Gard knows that men learn not from circumstances themselves, but from the contact of their own natures with circumstances. They become what they are. And, quite naturally, it is a woman who breaks the shell with which Antoine protects himself. Truth can reach a carnal man only through the flesh. This is why its path cannot be foreseen.

Here the path is called Rachel, and the episode of her affair with Antoine remains one of the most beautiful in *Les Thibault*. The love affair between Rachel and Antoine, unlike so many affairs in literature, does not hover in the blissful heavens of verbal effusions. But it fills the reader with a secret joy, and gratitude for a world in which such truths are possible.

Rachel's physical beauty radiates the whole of *Les Thibault*, and until the very eve of his death Antoine continues to draw warmth from it. He finds in Rachel not the tired or humiliated prey to which he had been accustomed, but his generous equal. She admires Antoine, of course, but she is not his subordinate. She has lived, seen the world, she remains slightly mysterious for him, and cannot free herself from what she has been.

Without ceasing to love Antoine, she says, "I am like this," and he has to admit that people can exist independently of him, that this is nevertheless something good, which gives an added taste to life. From their first meeting, they are equals. On the stormy summer night when Antoine operates on a little girl with the emergency resources at his disposal, Rachel holds the lamp steadily and Antoine discovers that the doctor in him is helped simply by the fact that she

is there. Later on, exhausted, sitting side by side, they fall asleep.

Antoine wakes, feeling a gentle warmth along one side of his body: Rachel has dozed off against him. They will become lovers a little later on, but they are already intimate, linked to each other so that each pours into the other a richer life. From this moment on, Antoine abdicates, joyfully and gratefully. When Jacques meets his brother again in Lausanne, after long years of separation, he finds him "changed." What a hundred sermons could not have accomplished a woman has achieved. But this woman does not belong to the world Antoine had thought unique and unchangeable.

She is one of those who never stay, who are always nomads; what one inhales in her presence is liberty. A sensual freedom, of course, in which Antoine discovers for the first time that equality within difference which is the highest dream of minds and bodies. But this liberty is also a freedom from prejudices Rachel does not fight against; she does not even know that they are there, and her very existence quietly denies them.

This is why Antoine becomes less complicated with her and discovers the only valid aspects of his own nature: his personal generosity, his vitality, and his power to admire.⁶ He does not become better, but he fulfills himself a little more, outside himself and yet nearer to what he really is, in joyfully responding to a person who in turn acknowledges and welcomes him. Perhaps a certain royal truth is defined in this—a man who feels entitled to be just what he is, at the same time freeing another being by loving her very nature.

Long after their separation, this realization continues to inspire Antoine. "He was laughing the deep, youthful laugh he had so long repressed, that Rachel had permanently freed." They do in fact separate, without seeing each other, on a foggy, rainy night; their story is apparently a short one. Rachel follows the darker slope of her character, returning to Africa to rejoin the mysterious man who dominates her (here, the motivation seems a bit romantic). Actually, she is moving toward death, with which this living creature has a natural complicity.

But she has helped Antoine to grow up, and she will even have helped him to die better since it is toward her that he turns once more when he is close to death. "Do not despise your uncle Antoine," he writes in the notebook that he is keeping for Jacques' son ... "this poor adventure is, after all, the best thing that happened in my poor life." The word "poor" is excessive here, but it is written in self-pity by a dying man.

Antoine's love life has doubtless not been a very rich one, but, in this life, Rachel has been a royal gift that enriched him without obligation. When Jacques, to whom Antoine risks confiding something of this love, proclaims from the height of his ignorant purity: "Ah, no, Antoine, love is something different from that," he does not know what he is talking about. There is a lesson he has missed, a knowledge worth having, which would make him humbler about love according to the flesh and freer for the joyous gifts that life and people can bestow.

Liberty and humility, these are the virtues Rachel awakens in Antoine. Life is bad, Antoine sometimes tries to tell himself, "as if he were talking to some stubbornly optimistic interlocutor; and this stubborn, stupidly satisfied person was himself, the everyday Antoine." It is this Antoine, better informed, who survives the liaison with Rachel.

He knows that life is good, he moves easily through it, can he when he has to, and patiently waits for life to justify this confidence. Most of the time it does. But, somewhere within him, a concern awakened by Rachel has at the same time humanized his assurance. Antoine now knows that other people exist, and that, in love, for example, we do not take our pleasure alone. This is one way, but a sure and certain one, of learning that during the historical events to come he will not be the only one to suffer. France goes to war.

Jacques refuses the war and dies from this refusal. Antoine agrees to fight, with no love for war,⁷ and eventually dies from this acceptance. He leaves behind his life as a wealthy and famous doctor, the newly-decorated town house whose paint is chipped off by his army equipment. He knows that he will never return to the world he is leaving behind.

But he keeps the essential thing, his profession, which he can pursue even during the war and even, as he sincerely remarks, into the revolution. Carried along in the crazy course of history, Antoine is now free; he has given up what he owns, not what he is. He will know how to judge the war: a doctor reads communiqués as lists of wounds and death agonies.

Gassed, crippled, certain that he is going to die, he regrets nothing of the old world. In the Epilogue his only two concerns are the future of mankind (he hopes for a "peace with neither victory or humiliation," so that wars will not arise again) and Jean-Paul, Jacques' son. As for himself, he no longer has anything but memories, among them the memory of Rachel, which make up his knowledge of life and which help him to die.

Les Thibault ends with the diary of a sick doctor and the death of the hero. A world is dying along with him, but the problem is to discover what one generous individual can pass on from the old world to the new. History overflows and floods whole continents and peoples, then the waters recede and the survivors count up what is missing and what remains. Antoine, a survivor of the war of 1914, transmits what he has been able to save from the disaster to Jean Paul that is to say, to us.

And here is his greatness, which is to have come back, lucidly, to everyone's level. From the moment Antoine sees his death warrant in the eyes of his teacher, Philip, until his final solitude, he never ceases to grow in stature, but he does so precisely as he comes to recognize one by one his weaknesses and doubts. The petty, self-satisfied doctor now discovers his ignorance. "I am condemned to die without having understood very much about myself or about the world." He knows that pure individualism is not possible, that life does not consist solely of the selfish glow of youthful strength.

With three thousand new babies every hour, and as many deaths, an infinite force sweeps the individual along in the uninterrupted flow of generation, drowning him in the vast, unfillable ocean of collective death. What else can he do but accept himself with his limitations, and try to reconcile the duties he has toward himself with those he has toward others? As to the rest, he has to wager once again.

Gassed and fallen from his throne, Ulysses seeks a definition of his wisdom, and realizes it must have an element of folly and of risk. To avoid being a burden on anyone, first of all he will kill himself, all alone, in a way both so humble and deliberate that one hesitates to say whether he is like a successful Barois or a bourgeois Kirilov.

And in spite of this sensible suicide, or because it is so reasonable, his wager will be irrational and optimistic: he bets on the continuity of the human adventure, writing his last words for Jacques' son.

This double obliteration, by death and by fidelity to what will live on, makes Antoine vanish into the very stuff of history, of which men's hopes are made, and whose roots are human misfortune. In this respect, the remark of Antoine's that touches me most deeply is the one he jots down shortly before his death: "I've only been an average man." This is true, in a way, whereas Jacques, by the same standards, is someone exceptional.

But it is the average man who gives the whole work its strength, illuminates its underlying movement, and crowns it with this admirable Epilogue. After all, the truth Ulysses represents includes Antigone's as well, although it does not hold the other way round. What are we to think of the creator who can build, silently

and without commentaries, two characters who are so different and so commanding?

Since I have concentrated on the relevance of Martin du Gard's work to the present day, I still must show that his very doubts are our own. The birth of an awareness of history in the Thibault brothers is paired with the posing of a problem we can well understand. Summer 1914, which reveals along with the impending war the failure of socialism in circumstances decisive to the future of the world, offers a summary of all Martin du Gard's doubts. He was not lacking in lucidity.

We know that Summer 1914, appearing in 1936, was published long after *The Death of the Father* (1929). During this long interval, Martin du Gard carried out a veritable revolution in the structure of his work. He abandoned his original plan, and decided to give *Les Thibault* an ending different from the one he had originally intended. The first plan involved thirty or so volumes; the second reduces *Les Thibault* to eleven.

Martin du Gard had no hesitation next about destroying the manuscript of *L'Appareillage* (*Setting Sail*), a volume which was to follow *The Death of the Father* and which had cost him two years' work. Between 1931, the date of this sacrifice, and 1933, the year when armed with a new plan he began to write *Summer 1914*, there were two years of quite natural confusion. This is perceptible in the book's very structure. After a long pause the machine at first had some difficulty getting started again, and really gets going only in the second volume.

But it seems to me that we also feel this change in a number of new perspectives. Begun at the moment of Hitler's ascendance to power, when the Second World War could already be sensed on the horizon, this great historical fresco of a conflict men tried to hope would be the last is almost compelled to call itself into question. In *Vieille France*, written during the years when Martin du Gard had given up *Les Thibault*, the schoolmistress was already asking herself a formidable question: "Why is the world like this? Is it really society's fault?... Is it not rather man's own fault?"

The same question worries Jacques at the height of his revolutionary fervor, just as it explains most of Antoine's attitudes toward historical events. One can therefore suppose it must have haunted the novelist himself.

None of the contradictions of social action are, in any case, eluded in the long, perhaps overlong, ideological conversations that fill *Summer 1914*. The main problem, the use of violence in the cause of justice, is discussed at great length in the conversations between Jacques and Mithoerg. The famous distinction between the yogi and the commissar has already been made by Martin du Gard: within the revolution, in fact, it brings about the confrontation between the apostle and the technician. Better still, the nihilistic aspect of the revolution is isolated, in order to be treated in depth, in the character of Meynestrel.

The latter believes that after having put man in the place of God, atheism ought to go even further and abolish man himself. Meynestrel's reply, when asked what will replace man, is "Nothing." Elsewhere, the Englishman Patterson defines Meynestrel as "the despair of believing in nothing." Finally, like all those who join the revolution from nihilism, Meynestrel believes that the best results are achieved by the worst means.

He has no hesitation about burning the secret papers Jacques has brought back from Berlin, which prove the collusion between the Prussian and Austrian general staffs. The publication of these documents would risk altering the attitude of the German social democrats, thus making the war, which Meynestrel considers as the "trump card" for social upheaval, far less likely.

These examples are enough to show that there was nothing naïve in Martin du Gard's socialism. He cannot manage to believe that perfection will one day be

embodied in history. If he does not believe this, it is because his doubt is the same as the schoolteacher's in *Vieille France*.

This doubt concerns human nature. "His pity for men was infinite; he gave them all the love his heart contained; but whatever he did, however hard he tried, he remained skeptical about man's moral potentialities." To be certain only of men, and to know that men have little worth, is the cry of pain that runs through the whole of this work, for all its strength and richness, and that brings it so close to us. For, after all, this fundamental doubt is the same doubt that is hidden in every love and that gives it its tenderest vibration.

This ignorance, acknowledged in such simple terms, moves us because it is the other side of a certainty we also share. The service of man cannot be separated from an ambiguity that must be maintained in order to preserve the movement of history. From this come the two pieces of advice that Antoine bequeaths to Jean-Paul. The first is one of prudent liberty, assumed as a duty. "Don't let yourself be tied down to a party. Feeling your way in the dark is no joke. But it is a lesser evil" The other is to trust oneself in taking risks: to keep going forward, in the midst of others, along the same path that crowds of men have followed for centuries, in the nighttime of the species, marching and stumbling toward a future that they cannot conceive.

Clearly, there are no certainties offered here. And yet this work communicates courage and a strange faith. To wager, as Antoine does, over and above doubts and disasters, on the human adventure, amounts in the end to praising life, which is terrible and irreplaceable. The Thibault family's fierce attachment to life is the very force that inspires the whole work. Father Thibault dying takes on an exemplary quality; he refuses to disappear, comes unexpectedly to life again, lunges at the enemy, struggles physically against death, bringing nurses and relatives into the fray.

Inevitably, we are reminded of the Karamazovs' love of life and pleasure, of Dimitri's despairing remark, "I love life too much. It's even disgusting." But life is not polite, as Dimitri is well aware. In this great struggle to escape by any and every means from annihilation lies the truth of history and its progress, of the mind and all its works.

Here indeed is one of those works conceived in the refusal to despair. This refusal, this inconsolable attachment to men and the world, explains the roughness and the tenderness of Martin du Gard's books. Squat, heavy with the weight of flesh in ecstasy and humiliation, they are still sticky with the life that has given them birth. But, at the same time, a vast indulgence runs through all their cruelties, transfiguring and alleviating them.

"A human life," writes Antoine, "is always broader than we realize." However low and evil it may be, a life always holds in some hidden corner enough qualities for us to understand and forgive. There is not one of the characters in this great fresco, not even the hypocritical Christian bourgeois who is painted for us in the darkest colors, who goes without his moment of grace. Perhaps, in Martin du Gard's eyes, the only guilty person is the one who refuses life or condemns people.

The key words, the final secrets, are not in man's possession. But man nevertheless keeps the power to judge and to absolve. Here lies the profound secret of art, which always makes it useless as propaganda or hatred, and which, for example, prevents Martin du Gard from depicting a young follower of Maurras except with sympathy and generosity. Like any authentic creator, Martin du Gard forgives all his characters. The true artist, although his life may consist mostly of struggles, has no enemy.

The final word that can be said about this work thus remains the one that it has been difficult to use about a writer since the death of Tolstoi: goodness. Even then I must make it clear that I am not talking about the screen of goodness that hides false artists from the eyes of the world while at the same time

hiding the world from them.

Martin du Gard himself has defined a certain type of bourgeois virtue as the absence of the energy necessary to do evil. What we are concerned with here is a particularly lucid virtue, which absolves the good man because of his weaknesses, the evil man because of his generous impulses, and both of them together because of their passionate membership in a human race that hopes and suffers.

Thus Jacques, returning home after long years of absence, and having to help lift up his dying father, finds himself overwhelmed by the contact with this enormous body, which in his eyes had formerly symbolized oppression: "And suddenly the contact with this moistness so overwhelmed him that he felt something totally unexpected—a physical emotion, a raw sentiment which went far beyond pity or affection: the selfish tenderness of man for man." Such a passage marks the true measure of an art that seeks no separation from anything, that overcomes the contradictions of a man or a historical period through the obscure acceptance of anonymity. The community of suffering, struggle, and death exists; it alone lays the foundation of the hope for a community of joy and reconciliation.

He who accepts membership in the first community finds in it a nobility, a faithfulness, a reason for accepting his doubts; and if he is an artist he finds the deep wellsprings of his art. Here man learns, in one confused and unhappy moment, that it is not true he must die alone. All men die when he dies, and with the same violence. How, then, can he cut himself off from a single one of them, how can he ever refuse him that higher life, which the artist can restore through forgiveness and man can restore through justice. This is the secret of the relevance to our times I spoke of earlier.

It is the only worthwhile relevance, a timeless one, and it makes Martin du Gard, a just and forgiving man, our perpetual contemporary. Preface to the Pléiade edition of the complete works of Martin du Gard, published in 1955.

¹ Roger Martin du Gard was born in Paris in 1881 and died in 1958. He was trained as a historian and archivist, and his first really important novel, *Jean Barois*, uses some of the techniques of the professional historian for literary purposes. Published in 1913, it tells the story of a man who is led by the discoveries of nineteenth-century science to abandon the Catholic faith in which he has been educated. He founds a rationalist review called *Le Semeur*, which has similarities to Péguy's *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, and plays an active part in the campaign to establish the innocence of Captain Dreyfus. He is highly successful in his professional career, but nevertheless conscious of how easily he can relapse into the acceptance of Christian belief. One day, for example, when he has just delivered a lecture on *The Future of Disbelief*, his cab is almost involved in an accident, and he finds himself reciting the Hail Mary. This incident makes him realize the danger that he may, in old age, return to the religion of his childhood, and he therefore composes a "Last Will and Testament" in which he declares his complete lack of belief and states that any future relapse into religion is to be explained solely by old age and the fear of death. As he grows older, he does in fact accept Catholicism again, and dies a believer. On discovering his will, his pious wife, encouraged by a priest, burns this evidence of her husband's intended fidelity to free thought.

Martin du Gard's major work, however, and the one for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1937, is the long novel *Les Thibault*. This began appearing in 1922, and was completed by the publication of the *Epilogue* in 1940. It describes the life of two brothers, Jacques and Antoine Thibault, during the years immediately before the First World War. Jacques, the rebel, is some ten years younger than his more stable brother Antoine, and appears to be the more interesting character. In particular, his love affair with Jenny de Fontanin, sister of his close friend Daniel, occupies a good deal of the first two volumes. However, Antoine takes on more importance in the *La Belle Saison* and *La*

Mort du Père, and represents a theme to which Camus himself devotes much attention: the impossibility of explaining, within a religious context, the purely physical suffering that afflicts men, children, and animals alike. Like Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, Antoine is extremely conscious of the interminable defeat that death inflicts upon a doctor, and he administers to his father, who is dying in agony, the injection that he knows will kill him.

Originally Martin du Gard had intended to continue the adventures of Jacques and Antoine in a whole series of novels describing their life in the Paris of the 1920's. However, on January 1, 1931, he was involved in a serious car accident, and had to spend a long time in bed. There, meditating on his work, he came to realize that the 1914-18 war had so completely destroyed the world in which Jacques and Antoine had lived that he could not carry on with their story as if nothing had happened. He consequently destroyed the part of the novel that he had already written but not yet published, and composed *L'Été 1914*, a two-volume account of the outbreak of the First World War. Jacques, a socialist and fervent pacifist, is killed in an attempt to throw leaflets from an airplane onto the French and German armies as they advance to battle. Antoine is gassed, and eventually kills himself when he realizes that he will never recover.

The Epilogue is made up of his diary, and ends with two notations: "Easier than you think" and "Jean-Paul." Dying, he thinks of the son born to Jacques and Jenny, and of the physical survival of humanity and the family that this son represents. There are a number of analogies between Martin du Gard and Camus that help to explain the long preface Camus wrote to his collected works in 1954. Both were socialists, but were opposed to extremist forms of political thought. Both were agnostics, preoccupied with the problems of death and physical suffering. As artists, both strove to be impersonal, and to write books in which their own personality would not be immediately visible.

Yet while Martin du Gard succeeded, so much so that he is more completely identified with his work than any other French writer, Camus failed, and it is perhaps his awareness of this failure which gives such a note of regret. Similarly, Martin du Gard succeeded in organizing his life in such a way that he could devote his life to his work, whereas Camus, as can be seen from his letter to "P. B." (pages 343-4), was constantly distracted from writing by his other preoccupations and duties. -P.T.

2 "The milky river of the sky sweeps along its silver spangles" (from *Devenir!*).

3 "This innate need," says Barois, "to understand and explain, which today finds its wide and complete satisfaction in the scientific development of our age."

4 "I have never, alas, seen God except through my father."

5 One can almost speak of love between Mme de Fontanin and Antoine, although they never exchange a guilty word or gesture.

6 Admiration is also Martin du Gard's subject matter in the beautiful scenes between Antoine and his teacher, Philip. This is not surprising. Where admiration is lacking, both heart and work are weakened.

7 "It would really be too easy to be a citizen only until the outbreak of war and then no longer."

The end