MODERN TRENDS IN LITERARY STUDIES IN FRANCE

BEFORE I try to explain the character of and modern tendencies in literary studies in France, I should like to say a word or two about the reasons that have prompted me to choose this subject for discussion tonight.

This being essentially a group of professors of history in its various forms, of philosophy understood in the broad sense with which we are familiar in Europe, and of literature and the arts—a group that corresponds to our Facultés des Lettres in France, I first thought that a subject dealing with the very life of the Sorbonne or certain aspects of our Facultés des Lettres might be appropriate. But this would have led me to all sorts of administrative and personal matters that would have led you away from your normal scholarly pursuits.

On the other hand I have very frequently deplored in meetings of scholars that the subject under discussion should be so narrow, so minute, so remote from the audience that it would seem at times that the reader of the paper is the only one to be interested in it (if he is), especially when he is unable to come to any general or sufficiently far-reaching conclusions.

I am not trying to bring you anything very new tonight. My subject will be broad and somewhat abstract. I felt it might be of some interest to a fairly large number of you, since in our literary studies in France we never forget their historical aspects, nor the links that, especially in the field of literature, bind the world of art and the world of thought.

I have another reason for taking up this subject, and it is somehow related to my present status as a Visiting Professor. Supposedly, to paraphrase the pious words of certain international organizations, Fulbright Scholars and other categories of Visiting Professors are expected to contribute to better international understanding. But, without being cynical, I should be ready to endorse the statement once made before me by the American attaché in Paris that the result of such visits is often a little more international misunderstanding—a thing which is not particularly needed in this post-World War II era. A few years ago three articles in the Atlantic Monthly would seem to have been written just to corroborate this statement. In the issue for March, 1951, under the title “What Drove Me Crazy in Europe,” one of the most distinguished students of American literature, a Harvard professor with whom I had had the pleasure of having dinner, protested against a sort of academic standardization and narrow-mindedness in European universities. In the issue for August, 1954, under the title “Americans as Students,” a Frenchman who is not a university man but who had taught for several years at the Harvard Summer School listed with considerable zeal all the faults he had found with his students in this country. In the issue for October, 1954, under the title “The Gulfs of Academe,” the very Chairman of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard, a very subtle and keen mind whom we had been so glad to welcome among us a few months before, while full of praise for our secondary schools, had a number of scathing remarks on our methods—for instance this: “The method of instruction at the Sorbonne has not greatly changed since the Middle Ages when the professor dictated from and commented on a manuscript.”
I am ready to admit that we remain faithful to a number of medieval traditions, one being to scrutinize our texts very carefully and we hope intelligently, another being to conduct our thoughts, however subtle they may be—or appear to be to us—in a logical and clear way, still another being to present what we write in a methodical, sensible manner, leaving out the unimportant and irrelevant, stressing the essential points and leading to fairly definite conclusions. And indeed in our own teaching, in the discussion of our students’ papers, reports, and dissertations, we constantly insist on these factors of literary scholarship.

But our conceptions of literary studies have nothing to do with the Middle Ages. In spite of the wealth of rich general observations and shrewd, beautifully worded analyses of our sixteenth and seventeenth century grammarians and of the critics of the Ages of Louis XIV and the Philosophers, their rather dogmatic pronouncements and their ways of judging according to certain rules are for us a thing of the past, worthy of respect and eventually of study, but not necessarily of being followed by us today.

The critics who still have an influence on modern literary studies are much nearer to us. They are for the most part men who have been included by the late Professor Irving Babbitt in his important volume *The Masters of French Criticism*, and it was they who raised literary criticism in France to the rank of a literary genre.

Let me briefly mention a few of them.

Sainte-Beuve, the author of *Port-Royal* and the *Causeries du Lundi*, was an artist, gifted with a keen psychological acumen (a feature common to many French writers) and was able to give the subtlest portrait of the writers he was considering; not a scholar in the modern sense of the word, but
Literary Trends in France

essentially a man of letters, with immense reading, a subtle touch, a broad culture—in a word, a humanist. His manner (one can hardly speak of his method) will not be recaptured by anybody; but his insistence on the inner working of the author's mind and his careful, delicate handling of the work of art still have a bearing on our conception of literary analysis.

Taine, who came a little later, was also, like Sainte-Beuve; a writer, an artist, a psychologist and a moralist. But his mind, partly influenced by the English philosopher Stuart Mill, by the positivists, and later by the naturalistic movement, was of a more philosophical nature—and occasionally more dogmatic. It would be unfair to him to overemphasize his three main points—la race, le moment, le milieu—which would lead to a purely deterministic conception of literary and artistic creation. Taine never went to such an extreme as to deny the importance of the individual temperament of the writer and the amount of liberty he enjoyed in spite of the social influences he underwent. His merit was to stress the importance of the historical background and to make it impossible, as some of the older critics had done, to treat a book as if it had, in Flaubert's words, "fallen like a meteorite from the sky."

Brunetière, an extremely active critic and an admirable historian of ideas, dominated the critical scene in France at the end of the nineteenth century not only with his most interesting and suggestive theory on the evolution of the different genres, but with his constant insistence that scholarship should not be divorced from ideas and that these ideas should be subordinated to some higher end.

Faguet, his disciple, who was a professor at the Sorbonne and a member of the French Academy, was admirable both as a teacher and a commentator on the written text. An
enemy of any form of pedantry or pedantic erudition, he would read his authors with considerable care in order not only to understand them thoroughly but also to get at their very substance and draw for himself a picture of the author’s moral and intellectual personality. To him criticism was not only a science; it called for intuition and imagination: a point of view which is perhaps controversial, but which led him to studies of the great French writers who have been unsurpassed for their tact, depth, vigour and lucidity.

**Gustave Lanson**

The man who after those mentioned has exercised the most powerful influence on literary studies in France in the first half of the twentieth century was Gustave Lanson. He was, incidentally, a native of my home town, Orléans; I had the great privilege of knowing him personally when I was a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of which he was the Director.

Gustave Lanson had very clear ideas about literary history and criticism, which he has presented in various essays and prefaces. According to him, “literary history is a part of the history of civilization.” His method is therefore essentially the “historical method.” Or, as he writes elsewhere, “the study of literature today could not be conducted without erudition.” Hence the necessity of following very precise and careful methods: study of the manuscripts whenever available, careful establishment of critical editions, chronological research, study of sources and influences, biographies, bibliographies, etc. This method has been presented in detail by several of M. Lanson’s disciples, in particular Professor André Morize, of Harvard, in *Problems and Methods of Literary History, with special reference to Modern French Literature* and Professor Gustave Rudlec in *Les techniques de*
la critique et de l'histoire littéraire françaises modernes en littérature française. M. Lanson himself has produced a considerable number of critical editions, classic editions, monographs, notes, a bibliography of French literature, several very precise works on some of the most important French writers, and a Histoire de la Littérature Française. The last named work, very precise, subtle, compact and far-reaching in its views, has been used by generations of students in France and abroad. Disciples of M. Lanson have held numerous chairs of French literature in our universities between the two wars. Some have applied his methods to studies other than French literature, for instance M. Andler to the Germanic field, M. Cazamian to English letters, M. Hauvette to Italian literature.

The very rigor, the thorough scholarship of M. Lanson and his disciples does not mean that they lose sight of the particular quality of the literary work, and concentrate entirely on historical questions. Any literary text appeals, through its style, not only to our reason, but also to our sensibility and imagination; it contains a subjective, personal element which is essentially imponderable and cannot be measured by any truly mathematical device. Consequently, the study of literature is not only literary history, but also literary appreciation and criticism.

The French, I believe, have never lost sight of this dual aspect of scholarship. For more than half a century now, and greatly under the influence of M. Gustave Lanson himself, they have developed a technique for the close reading of texts, under the names of commentaire littéraire and explication de textes, which has been used extensively both in our secondary schools, where considerable importance is given to the study of our French classics, and in our Faculté des Lettres. It should be added that this method is applied
to the study of the Greek and Latin classics and foreign literatures as well. We feel that such close study of both matter and form throws considerable light on an author's temperament, style, and art. We even export our method: one of my students at Brown, now a professor at Harvard, was good enough a few years ago to dedicate one of his books to me for having taught him that serious criticism begins with the careful reading of a text. When at the exercises for the opening of the new Modern Language Hall at Brown University the late Professor Irving Babbitt delivered his address on "Scholarship and Humanism," he freely admitted to me that the French had sinned far less than others in divorcing culture from scholarship.

In the eyes of Professor Lanson—and this he always made very plain in his discussions with students—there was always a point in literary studies where a purely objective and scientific approach was no longer possible and where the scholar or critic had to rely on his own judgment, taste and sensibility. But he wanted the role of impressionism limited as far as possible.

**New Influences After 1920**

Gustave Lanson's views were the culminating point of the evolution of French criticism from Sainte-Beuve through Taine and Brunetièrè and they were in strict accordance with the general trend of French contemporary thought, the emphasis being laid on method and on the historical approach.

It may be that some of Gustave Lanson's disciples in France and abroad were a little prone to insist more on method than on judgment, on scholarship than on taste, on history than on criticism. I can remember how vigorously and lucidly one of Lanson's disciples, a man with great inde-
pendence of mind and the finest literary flair, Paul Hazard, who was good enough to honor me with his friendship, reacted against this tendency among some of his colleagues in a paper entitled “Méthode et Personnalité” which he gave around 1930. In this paper he insisted that method and erudition were indeed indispensable; otherwise there would be a return to an often lax and sometimes pretentious or presumptuous impressionistic criticism. But these were not enough. Literary studies (whether they were historical, psychological or critical) called for a broad, rich and solid culture in one who undertook them. They required a certain insight into human character that enabled one to penetrate the personality and the inner workings of the author’s mind and to discuss characters in a sympathetic and understanding way. Finally, they demanded enough taste to appreciate the beauty of the style, the colour and rhythm of either prose or verse.

It is somewhat along these lines that new tendencies have developed in the recent past, often in conjunction with developments in related fields.

**The Writer and His Work: The Problem of Literary Creation**

The study of the creative process presupposes psychological factors in the broadest sense of this term. Pathological psychology has induced a number of scholars to analyze, sometimes from a medical point of view, the “cases” of some writers (Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Gérard de Nerval) whose behavior was in certain ways rather strange. I need not emphasize the influence on literary criticism of Freud’s theory, particularly as it concerns the libido and the complexes. The works of my former and most respected colleague, M. Bachelard, a philosopher, in the field of literary
criticism are an admirable illustration and enrichment of Jung's theories, M. Bachelard insisting on the analysis of four elementary myths (fire, air, water, earth) in his studies of some of the French and English lyrical poets. A certain number of critics have been influenced by the "phenomenological" description of the working of the mind, as defined by modern "existentialism": imagination for them, according to Jean-Paul Sartre (who has developed his theories in L'Être et le Néant and applied them to Baudelaire and other French writers), has a quality of its own which may be linked to anguish and to our conception of our place in the world and of what is not ourselves in the world.

These, indeed, are among the newest departures in literary criticism and have not been widely followed. But there is little question that the taste for psychological analysis—a taste in which the French love to indulge—has grown considerably in the last two or three decades among critics and that it has often coloured their efforts. In many reviews in the various literary journals it has led to the frequent and not always appropriate use of such words as "complexes," "transference," "sublimation," "myths," etc.

One of the happiest consequences of this development has been the interest shown by many of our scholars in the subtle processes by which a work of art is produced. We have long felt that the study of influences and sources is of merely relative value so long as one does not explain how the influence is brought to bear on the writer and how a source is used. I can remember Professor Cazamian's commentary and criticism of the admirable study of Professor Livingston Lowes' The Road to Xanadu. He felt that it was all very well to dig out, as it were, the readings and sources of Samuel Taylor Coleridge; but how much more interesting it would be, he commented, to explain how the rough ma-
terial was transmuted into the pure gold of *Christabel*, *Kubla Kahn* and the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Many studies have been undertaken of late—for instance, by our far-reaching colleague of the Collège de France, Jean Pommier—on the processes of literary and poetic creation.

**Esthetics**

This brings me to the study of literary works from the purely esthetic point of view. Not indeed that esthetics had previously been forgotten or even neglected. But in the last twenty years or slightly more, they have been strongly emphasized. M. Pierre Audiat in *La Biographie de l'oeuvre littérale* had raised the point as early as 1924. M. Jean Hytier has stressed it more clearly still in *Les arts de littérature*, published in 1941. In reaction against the abuses of erudition, compilation, bibliography for the sake of bibliography, M. Hytier indicates that it would be appropriate, since pleasure is one of the elements of reading, to analyze the conditions that may cause this pleasure, in order to understand better the pleasure derived from a literary work of art in which the senses, knowledge, imagination and judgment have a part to play. One might recall in this connection the very suggestive observations made some thirty years ago about *la poésie pure*, that subtle and very elusive element that creates the poetic as opposed to mere words and their meanings. The considerable development given to esthetics in recent years, particularly by some of my colleagues at the Sorbonne—the esthetics of dancing, of drama, of painting, of the cinema (*filmologie*)—has naturally encouraged these efforts. Immediately after World War II, a brilliant lady, Madame Claude Edmonde Magny, who is an *Agrégée de Philosophie*, not a specialist in literature, wrote a very suggestive book, *Le Roman américain d'aujourd'hui* in which she points out
the relation between the technique of the cinema and that of the modern novel. The notion of pure poetic beauty as differentiated from content and meaning is one that is currently accepted today. We should look with little favor on any piece of work submitted to us that would not give proper attention to all the various problems raised by the esthetic quality (general structure, construction, style, imagery) of the literary work.

**PHILOSOPHY**

This does not mean that we lose sight of the moral, psychological, social, and occasionally religious or political meaning of the work under survey. It could not be otherwise in this period after the Second World War when our students, our *Facultés* in general and the public at large are so vitally interested in religion and in all the problems connected with religion. I should not go so far as to follow what my friends, Professor Geoffrey Bullough of King's College, University of London, and Lord David Cecil of Oxford University were telling me a few years ago: that their students were eager to find a link between the masterpieces they read and contemporary problems. But indeed our students and scholars pay considerable attention to the contents of books. Curiously enough in some quarters there has been a return to determinism in literary study, some authors suggesting a geographical classification of literary works, others (mainly of Marxist obedience) a social and political classification. But this is an extremist attitude which has found more favor in central Europe and Russia than in France. In a general way, the present efforts to put some order into literary classification would be conducted according to two main patterns: a chronological one in which "centuries" and
Literary Trends in France

“schools” have fallen into disuse, and are replaced by “generations,” the newest word, or “epochs”; and an ideological one in which literary currents linked with more general currents of ideas are studied in their growth, interaction, and eventual decay. It is noteworthy that this second approach, which is not new but which is being renewed, is closely linked with the modern conception of historical studies.

**Comparative Studies**

But, indeed, we feel that such a general comprehensive study of the evolution of literature should be undertaken only with considerable caution and by persons fully and indeed richly informed. Generally speaking, French scholars look with little favor at attempts at a study of World Literature: they would point out that such words as “Romanticism,” “Renaissance,” or “classical” have various meanings or connotations in the very countries in conjunction with which they are used. M. Paul Hazard, with his considerable knowledge and talents, has been able to give a most suggestive study of literary trends throughout Europe in the eighteenth century. But one of his successors in the field of comparative literature, my colleague, Jean-Marie Carré, has seen fit in the recent past to warn against comparing anything with anything; some influences, some interactions, the way in which one country is seen by another, the reputation, or as we say today the “fortune” of an author in a neighboring country or generally speaking abroad, are properly the subjects which lend themselves to further study and they should be investigated before we may embark upon more ambitious generalizations. A considerable effort along these lines is being made at present in France and calls for the happiest collaboration among various departments.
CONCLUSION

If one takes a broad view of these diverse approaches to literary studies in France, as they appear today, one is led to the conclusion that there is not one school of scholarly criticism as perhaps there was some thirty or forty years ago. New influences have been felt and have somehow broadened and diversified the interests of critics and scholars. But this is by no means an unhealthy sign; it may indeed be taken as a sign of vitality. Advanced work in literature at the Sorbonne and in provincial universities is still very active. It is not static. It has not fallen into a rut. In no way can it be said to be medieval in spirit or method. On the contrary, we are constantly trying to take advantage of what is being done in related fields. There is no rigidity in our methods, no complacency in our attitudes. There is an impressive amount of work being done in the literary field in France. We do hope that in spite of heavy handicaps, we succeed in maintaining high standards in teaching, in scholarship, and in criticism.

LOUIS LANDRÉ
M ANY of you, in connection with Montaigne, will recall the famous study by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his *Representative Men*, in which the French sixteenth-century writer, "the frankest and honestest of all writers" (to quote the New England critic) is shown as being essentially "the Skeptic," as opposed to Plato "the Philosopher," Swedenborg "the Mystic," Shakespeare "the Poet," Goethe "the Writer," and Napoleon "the Man of the World." And indeed Emerson's views in this study are suggestive and very often to the point, as are most of his ideas. It is nevertheless obvious in the light of modern criticism that Montaigne cannot merely be labeled a skeptic and that his scepticism requires considerable explanation, clarification and even qualification.

The student of English literature will remember that not only is Montaigne generally looked upon as the father of the essay, a genre which has developed with considerable success in Great Britain from Bacon to contemporary literature, but that he was translated into English very early in the seventeenth century by John Florio and later by Charles Cotton. Furthermore he was read by and had a real influence on many of the greatest English writers of the early and late seventeenth century, of the eighteenth century, of the Romantic and post-Romantic periods, as has been shown by many critics, in particular Pierre Villey and less than ten years ago by my own colleague, Charles Dédéyan.

The aim of this necessarily brief lecture will be first of all to place Montaigne in his time and show what sort of man he was and then to unfold the various and intricate aspects of his thought, as expressed in his famous *Essais*. And this, I hope, will serve to show first how and to what extent Mon-

* Lecture delivered at the Rice Institute, October 17, 1956.
Montaigne was a product and a symbol of his age; secondly, why he appears as a forerunner of our French Classicists of the following century and of our "philosophic writers" of the eighteenth century; and thirdly, if one takes a broader view of him, how his approach to the study of human knowledge, to the analysis of man and to human conduct, is not only far in advance of his time, but reflects some of the more permanent and characteristic "traits" (to use another of Emerson's words) of the French mind and character.

Montaigne's Era

Essentially Montaigne's era is marked on the one hand by the Renaissance in its many forms and on the other by the Reformation and its sad accompaniment in France in the second half of the sixteenth century and in many European countries then or at a later date: the Wars of Religion.

There are many currents and cross-currents in the sixteenth century Renaissance, even should we omit the extraordinarily important Italian Quattrocento: the renewal of mystical belief in Flanders and elsewhere; the return throughout Europe to the classical humanities, to the rich, rewarding texts of ancient Greece and Rome; a current of mystical platonism, best exemplified in Spenser's Four Hymns, but very strong in nearly all European countries; a dogmatic, intellectual, and in some ways rationalistic trend developing under the influence of the German Luther and the French Calvin; a curious blending of solid Christian faith and greco-latin humanism, of which Erasmus is the best representative; and finally, another form of humanism and rationalism closer to nature which is best exemplified by the vigorous common sense of François Rabelais—and, in his wake, epicureans and libertines of all sorts justifying their attitudes by the teachings of some of the old masters.
Montaigne

Against the strict teachings of medieval scholasticism, stimulated by the writings of ancient Greece and Rome, by the freer life and keener appreciation of the arts of modern Italy, a new conception of human thought, a new gusto for life develop on the continent and bloom in a magnificent way in the Elizabethan period.

In a curious and most characteristic manner, the French, at the same time as they absorb and are enriched by this new culture, will try to bring some sort of order to what comes to them in rich abundance: their Renaissance is more subdued than the Italian one, less exuberant than the English. They make a valiant and more systematic effort to organize their language and literature. They give more attention to the contradictions of the human soul and the problems of human conduct. They use common sense, intellectual acumen, logic and reason in an attempt to reconcile the old Christian beliefs with the new humanistic trends.

The country at the time, and in particular in the second half of the sixteenth century, is torn by struggles between strong religious factions. The Catholic hierarchy and France’s most important school of theology, the Sorbonne, fight hard against the rising tide of Protestantism stirred up by the teachings of Luther and particularly of Calvin. The kings as a rule take sides with the authorities. What has been at first a violent religious dispute soon turns into violent political revolt. A number of people, among whom is the Regent Queen, Catherine of Medici, try hard to bring peace, but with little success. The bitter civil war goes on, accompanied by assassinations and massacre. It will not cease until Henri de Navarre, himself originally a Protestant and the son of a fierce Protestant supporter, Jeanne d’Albret, becomes king, and after converting himself to Catholicism succeeds in bringing back first peace and later prosperity.
One might say that Montaigne was born into a world of conflicts—philosophical, religious, and political. This fact, indeed, together with the rediscovery of the ancient masterpieces, the invention and more extended use of printing which was to help the spreading of knowledge, and the discovery of new worlds, was to stir the minds of thinkers. New knowledge had brought to the world many new problems. What was the value of this knowledge? What do we actually know? How should we regulate our thoughts, form our beliefs? How, in turn, will these thoughts and beliefs inspire our actions, lead us to certain attitudes? These are the fundamental problems that Montaigne was to raise.

**THE MAN**

Who was he? We are not left in the dark about that question, because in order to understand other men, following the old Greek precept γνῶθι ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ, he had decided to know and understand himself.

This indeed is a hard process, as he says himself in Book II, Chapter 6: *De l'exercitation*: "It is a thorny and crabbed enterprise, and more than it makes show of, to follow so strange and vagabond a path as that of our spirit." But, he would conclude: "There is no description so hard, nor assuredly so profitable, as the description of man's own self." This, he felt, was the best way of getting acquainted with human nature and consequently of getting some insight into our fellow beings. Thus was he led to speak about himself abundantly. As he says in his famous "Advice to the Reader" dated March 1, 1580: "C'est moi que je peins"; and "Je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre."

A man of medium height, his face adorned with a long moustache and a pointed beard—dark when he was young, greyish as he grew older—with large, wide-awake and
thoughtful eyes, a forehead that extended more and more towards the top of his head, he claims to be an average man. Average he was in stature; below average, it would seem from what he writes, in the physical accomplishments which were still part of the equipment of a young gentleman.

His ancestors, the Eyquems, were important merchants in the prosperous and growing city of Bordeaux. In 1477 they had bought the small domain of Montaigne at some distance northeast of the town. His father fought in Italy, became mayor of Bordeaux and ultimately resided in his residence at Montaigne, which he enlarged, beautified, and fortified. He had married Antoinette de Louppes, who was probably of Jewish ancestry, but whose family had resided in Spain and perhaps had adopted the Protestant form of religion. Pierre de Montaigne wanted to appear as a country gentleman, interested in the new knowledge then in fashion, rather than as the descendant of wealthy tradesmen. He was to give his third son, Michel, who was to become the eldest after the death of two brothers, a liberal education in conformity with the spirit of the time.

Born on February 28, 1533, Michel was placed while still very young in the hands of a German tutor who spoke no French and could address him only in Latin, so that until the age of six he spoke nothing but that language. He was also taught Greek, but, to quote Montaigne, "par forme d'ébat et d'exercice," that is, by methods which would make the learning of it a game rather than a discipline. Then he was sent to the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, which was then, he tells us, the best and most flourishing school in France. He developed an extraordinary taste for reading which gave him a broad knowledge of Latin, French, and Italian literature. After further studies about which we know very little we find him a magistrate in Périgueux and then
in Bordeaux, but a magistrate rather apt to question the law he was expected to enforce, in particular its intricate and occasionally contradictory character, which made it "un vrai témoignage de l'humaine imbécillité." A man of the world, he mixed in the society of Bordeaux, not altogether averse to the pleasures that may be derived either from gambling or love-making. But the most considerable event was the meeting around 1548 of another young magistrate, Etienne de la Boétie, with whom he was to entertain a most famous friendship which he has celebrated in almost lyrical terms. But La Boétie was to leave this world in 1553, leaving behind him an example of labor, courage and virtue that Montaigne was never to forget.

In 1558, when he was 35, Montaigne's father died, leaving him with an important estate and a large fortune. Michel henceforth led the life of a country gentleman, little by little leaving to others the management of his affairs, detesting the religious war that was raging all around, and withdrawing more and more into the tower that was to contain his library. He was in touch mostly with scholars and humanists and with a number of leading political figures, in particular the king of Navarre, who visited him twice. He travelled as far as Italy by way of Germany and Switzerland, learned in 1580 that he had been elected Mayor of Bordeaux and accepted that position, but not without some reluctance. Above all he was anxious to read, to study and to reflect upon man: what he is, what he knows, what he does. Montaigne died before he was sixty—on September 13, 1592.

His experience in human affairs was broad and diversified. His reading—he read immensely—may be defined as "active," not "passive" reading. His was a mind constantly at work, alert and ever agile, constantly weighing the value of men, principles, and ideas. He would accept nothing which he
Montaigne

had not subjected to the sharp acumen of his intellect and to the clarity and poise of his judgment. His constant study was himself, not out of mere egotism, but because he felt that he could go much deeper into his own experience than anybody else's, and because he thought that from self-analysis he could draw a better knowledge of human nature and greater insight into the motives of human conduct.

Les Essais

Thus was he led to write his very famous Essais, into which he put the results of his keen self-analysis and carefully conducted thoughts, enriched by what he had seen of the world and by what he had thought fit to retain from a wide choice of poets, historians, thinkers and philosophers of ancient Rome and Greece, of Renaissance Italy and of modern France.

But he was not a man to express his thoughts in a systematic and methodical way. His Essais are, in some respects, a sort of intellectual confession in which his ever-changing moods and ideas are reflected as they occurred to him.

At first—that is, a little after 1570—he was, like many of his contemporaries throughout Europe, attracted mostly by Seneca and Plutarch. War was raging in France. The times were harsh. So his thoughts turned towards "le soulagement de notre misérable condition humaine" and to the fear of death and suffering. And he tried to fortify the courage of his readers by inviting them not to use their reason and imagination to make themselves miserable, but rather to call into action "la vertu, la vaillance, la force, la magnanimité et la résolution." In Chapter 39, "De la solitude," he praises the thoughtful retreat into which we should withdraw from time to time. These chapters illustrate what has been termed the Stoic period in Montaigne's thoughts. But the Stoic strain in
him should be qualified. By temperament he was not a man to forego the pleasures of life; his turn of mind would not allow him to be connected with any single school of philosophy. In fact, what we find in the first two or three years of his work on the *Essais* is a feeling that there are human problems which we should confront and be prepared to meet. But we should train our hearts, and minds and reason in such a way as not to live in a world of fear and stress but rather ultimately to reach a stage of quiet and smiling wisdom similar to the "contentement nouveau" and the "allégorie en jouée" that are apparent in Socrates’ last words before his death.

This attitude led him to a further and deeper questioning of human values which occupied him chiefly from 1575 to 1577 and which appears primarily in the twelfth chapter of his second book, his famous *Apologie de Raimond de Sebond*. In this essay Montaigne raises crucial questions that will be heard throughout the course of French literature, about man, "cette misérable et chétive créature"—unable to control himself, subjected to all sorts of dangers and fears, looking upon himself as the master of the universe about which he knows so little. He points to man’s lack of success in attaining truth through the various religions and philosophic systems that have had their day and died; to the uncertainty of all knowledge acquired through the fallible senses, which are too often under the influence of a distorting imagination. And he gives the curious example of how the wisest man placed in unexpected circumstances may entertain the wildest ideas. Faced by the rediscovery of old systems and the multitudinous new ideas that had been born during the Renaissance, Montaigne asks his famous "*Que sais-je?*" and is ready to laugh at the presumption of man,
Montaigne

whose knowledge is too often relative and subjective. Arguments drawn from the progress of the sciences, from the utility of such progress, may be brought against Montaigne. But indeed his attitude is never one of utter negation. He does not question the value of reason itself, or of judgment or the consciousness, but he shows how these can be affected and distorted by various factors. Rather than "sceptic," the words "subjectivist" or "relativist" should be applied to him. And in fact his sharp study of man's judgment and reason leads him to two conclusions: 1. Man should make a continuous study of himself in order to know his place and role in the universe. 2. Education should be conducted in such a way as to avoid mere pedantry or mere accumulation of knowledge, and should train young minds to remain intellectually alert and to exercise sound judgment. Learning should consist largely in listening to others, in traveling, reading, and thinking—and in training one's mind, if possible, in a joyful manner. In his chapters on *Le Pédantisme* and on *L'Institution des Enfants*, he is very far from pure scepticism, in fact from any scepticism at all.

Montaigne is not a philosopher, if by this term we mean a man with a complete, logically arranged philosophic system. But if we study his essays in their final form, as they appeared in the 1588 edition, we find at the conclusion of his long search for truth a very logical set of ideas.

1. Man should be the primary study of man; this study should be conducted in two ways that complement each other because man is "ondoyant et divers": by observing others, without forgetting how this observation may be coloured by our own idiosyncrasies; and by observing ourselves, as keenly, as lucidly as is possible, taking into account our own contradictions and the constant changes in our in-
ner thoughts and feelings. Here indeed he is very near the modern "stream of consciousness," miles away from the rigid medieval views.

2. We must organize our lives, not (as Montaigne was first tempted to do) by constantly thinking of death, but by constantly thinking of life, one might even say of simple everyday life. Our lives need not be heroic or self-denying. Pleasure is legitimate and should have a place in life. Man should therefore always obey the inner promptings of his conscience, being sure that his heart and his reason work in harmony, and furthermore he should retain enough volonté so that he is the master of his own destiny. Here indeed we find the central principles, the constant study of our French Classicists, of Corneille and Racine in particular.

3. We must see to it that political conditions allow our moral selves to develop harmoniously. This raises difficult questions concerning the relation between moral law and political law, the rights of the individual and those of the state or the ruler, questions which Montaigne broaches without offering any clear solution for them. Above all, Montaigne is decidedly against any form of fanaticism, intolerance, or unjust partiality not only towards his compatriots, whose views may very well differ from his own, but also towards foreign peoples, who are, he insists, men like himself.

4. The same wise, quiet, and tolerant position is to be found in his attitude toward religion, which was no small merit in his day. Montaigne died a Catholic, but had accepted an honorary position at the court of Henri de Navarre, the leader of the Huguenots. He opposed any form of violence in religion, even those exalted, zealous forms of religion common in his era. He was the reverse of a mystic, but there is no reason to feel that Montaigne, who knew the
Montaigne

weaknesses and infirmities of human nature, was not sincere in his quiet and tolerant faith.

5. Above all Montaigne was concerned with truth and the way to reach it. He was fully aware of all the difficulties man had to encounter in this vital search, whatever the means man chose to use: reason or experience. He brought no solution to this difficult problem, but only suggestions as to the value of human testimonies, thus opening the way for the historical approach, *l'art de conférer*, which he believed was the best way to examine contradictory opinions and ideas, and to avoid the dangerous conclusions of imagination. Bacon in England, Descartes in France, will go further in establishing rules to govern the use of experience and reason. But it is worthy of note that Montaigne in his careful and slow-moving way has prepared the way for them.

Montaigne, indeed, was far more than a mere sceptic or the creator of a literary genre. He was a most interesting and fascinating figure. A product of the Renaissance, he was a thinker with a far-reaching mind which enabled him both to sum up and to clarify many of the ideas that were in the air, bringing a rich personal contribution and opening the way for further development. The philosophy of the French seventeenth-century writers, the general attitude of many of their successors in the eighteenth century and even some developments that were to occur early or late in the nineteenth century, are in germ in the *Essais*. These *Essais*, indeed, are a rich contribution not only to French literature, but to the thought of the whole modern Western world.

*Louis Landré*