

C H A R L E S D U B O S .

CHARLES DU BOS has a particular interest for English-speaking readers from the fact that he, a great Frenchman, was not only partly English but that his sympathies were so largely Anglo-Saxon. Some of the last years of his life were spent in America, though he died near Paris in 1939. Had he lived through the occupation to the present delicate task of 'rehabilitating' France, who can say what bearing his unobtrusive influence might not have had on the evolution of French policy? Though ignored in his lifetime by the general public, as Martin-Chauffier says in his introduction to the Byron of Du Bos, "there is scarcely a first-class mind in Europe which does not know him and feel for him the surest and best-founded esteem; . . . It is not the least of undertakings to trace his influence on so many writers, so many works, so many matters which have stirred public opinion to passion."

That so potent a mind was unrecognised by the mass is due to the simple fact that Du Bos did not write what the mass cared to read; such writing, while it finally moulds thought and ideals, does so indirectly and slowly. It might also be thought that he wrote too little. For years Charles Du Bos suffered from a "paralysing" difficulty in writing at all; when he seemed to have overcome it, the first Great War supervened; at its close the same "total inhibition"—a doubt as to his own powers and a resulting scruple in writing—returned to him at intervals. His circle, the most exclusive of French cenacles, attributed his lack of production to a less fundamental cause: Du Bos, they believed, was too gifted in another way—he was a superb talker. For he could always discuss in flaming words the ideas which lit up for him the inner world which was almost all his world. His talk was, says Martin-Chauffier, a double-edged sword, but a dazzling one. That 'the sword' was never a mere monologue, and never boring, is proved by the quality and variety of the friends before whom it was unsheathed:—André Gide is not a man to suffer bores gladly, he was one of Du Bos's intimates. And he and Jacques Rivière, another intimate, were talkers of no mean calibre. Jacques Maritain was one more of the intellectuals to claim Du Bos as friend and to fill the latter's study for the sake of its owner's talk.

Charles Du Bos was born in 1882; his mother was of Anglo-American stock and he considered himself as equally at home in English as in French. He was at Oxford in 1900-1, though he did not follow any regular University course. In 1901 he went to the Berlin University, where he sat at the feet of the well-known Kantian, Professor Simmel, as well as of Walter Dilthey, the founder of 'Intuitive' philosophy, who more deeply than Simmel,

influence the spirit of German thinkers. Both of these two great minds, says Gabriel Marcel, in *Etudes* (September, 1939) considerably influenced Du Bos; indeed, until years later he came to recognise Maine du Biran and Bergson, he held what he himself calls the rather childish view that German thought alone lent itself to a true philosophy. At twenty-five he married Mademoiselle Sirey, the "Z" of his Journal.

Du Bos was constitutionally delicate, though as a young man he does not seem to have shown signs of ill-health; at Oxford he has been described as of a short, stocky build, very pleasant and cheerful. But it was not long before bad health troubled him, while his mode of life grew so "harassed and exhausting", that he wrote in 1928, "It is because for years my life has denied me rest that when rest offers itself to me I can no longer do anything with it." His income depended chiefly on his classes and lectures; he valued, above everything, home and study, but he had to spend half his time getting from place to place in metro and omnibus. This un-resting activity was the framework of his life, his happiness at home its back-ground, with, for years, a search for a lost Truth and a hankering, more or less subconscious, for the Faith he had, somehow, "mis-laid" but never denied or ceased to regret; he quoted, too, as applicable to himself, his beloved Pascal's phrase, "I have my fogs and fine weather inside myself."

The place of Charles Du Bos in literature is, at present, difficult to assess. His influence was partly personal, emanating as it did from talk. His *style* was so far from classical that he would never have been eligible for the French Academy. He almost always dictated, and the very ease with which the words poured out was a snare. He wrote as he spoke, and his phrases are too long, too involved, too full of clauses and sub-clauses. He himself believed he suffered from too many ideas. Everything was given to him, nothing acquired at the sweat of his brow, he said, his best thoughts arising 'fully armed' . . . Du Bos, whose Journal is considered a master-piece of self-analysis, was, no doubt, convinced that he knew himself well. But here he was wrong. His thought, maybe, came to him fully armed, its very vitality and richness may have harmed his style, though his style was his least preoccupation, but to say, or imply, that he simply sat back and let thought and ideas flow over him, that he was, in a word, superficial or even lazy, is simply a statement disproved by his very defects. He was, if anything, too laboured, he had to get to the very bed-rock of his thought, dissect and analyse it to infinity—like Péguy, he had to *force* his ideas into their proper prominence.

It is another anomaly of his case that he was in all this so quint-

essentially French, while his critics, even the most friendly, considered his mentality to be largely English. He himself writes (in English) of the "English recesses of my being, the existence of which I was somewhat prematurely beginning to doubt of"—a phrase that, however 'English' he might be, proved he was really French.

All this however was the external aspect of Du Bos. What he really was, at any rate as far as his work was concerned, was for years obscured and partly nullified by a concrete happening—the loss of his childhood's Faith. He was, no doubt, a brilliant and valued addition to literary circles, for he was born in due season. French literature and writers were no longer of the 'brutal' type, which would have rejected him with derision for one of his most outstanding qualities, his magnificent sympathy. Like Lamb, Du Bos could, indeed, have thanked God for a taste so catholic and unexacting; this analyst and critic was, in a sense, uncritical, not of literature, but of the point of view of others. He might differ but he always understood. Profoundly happy in the love of a human being, he could yet understand another author writing (in *Un Homme Heureux*) of "that involuntary hatred which some feel towards love, and still more towards happiness". But if, with his great qualities of mind, he wrote for years only articles forced from him by circumstances, the fact is not really accounted for by any theory of his circle. He had lost a faith he profoundly needed, though he was probably unaware that the scruples, the doubts of his own capacity, the dislike of writing and, too often, the inability to write, were due to that loss. Charles Du Bos was *essentially* spiritual, all who knew him well must have recognised the fact, as his friend Gide did. "I no longer know what I think of anything," Du Bos had said to Gide. Gabriel Marcel says that "he did not conceal that he judged himself detached from the Christian faith. Not without deep sorrow. He was not one of those who can be satisfied with an absence." It was this absence which, combined with the most serious sense of life and moral values, cut the ground from under him, a state he hit off, in the case of Ruskin, as "the weakness of the divided soul".

The two volumes of criticism Du Bos called *Approximations* sum up his work in the years before he refound the Faith; they are written from the secular standpoint of any writer of his circle at the time. He was honest to the point of scruple, incapable of half-stating or evading, any fact as he saw it. But even then his *tastes* were Catholic. The Gospels, St. Augustine, to whose "profound psychology" he often referred, Boussuet, Bourdaloue, were with Bergson, what one might call, his bed-side books; he admired

Chateaubriand himself with reserves, and "that strong intellectual armour of de Maistre" without reserve. Péguy he specially valued of his contemporaries, while the work of Claudel he described as a "block of granite—on which the tooth of envy cannot bite"; he seems, indeed, to have known Catholic authors at least as well as the countless others he read and re-read. He possessed the art, which he wrote of, as "being lost, I mean the art of reading, for it is an art and not, as commonly believed, a need"; slow, thoughtful reading in the "long, solitary evenings" he loved.

The *Extracts from a Journal*, published in 1928, was both the fruit and the flowering of his strange inhibitions. He himself felt it his "supreme resource from despair in the face of writing"; he has, at any rate, been ranked at least as high as the greatest diarists, "How sombre, limited, and as it were, constricted", says Martin Chauffier, "does Amiel seem in comparison". His friend, the Abbé Mugnier, in 1908, at the peak of Du Bos's inertia, had encouraged him to begin the *Journal*; it was a *Work*, Gide said, Du Bos's *Work*, and Gide never rested till some of it was put into book-form. The *Journal* scarcely registers external happenings, at most a concert, or gallery, the visits of friends, and the author's and their talk. But if Du Bos was then haunted by inner problems to the point of himself becoming "problematic", as he wrote in 1922, the fact, even in his 'forced' writing, does not detract from the firmness and authority of his tone. True the inner confusion is not infrequently evident, as when, in analysing Paul Valéry's *L'âme et la Danse*, Du Bos offers as a solution of life nothing better than "la danse qui semble tout résoudre dans l'entraînement de sa persuasive allègresse". To all the arts he turned, indeed, for further escape; the music which he passionately loved he had, like others of his complex mind, to dress up with a literary content; the painters of the pictures he most valued would have frowned, or smiled, at the esoteric meanings with which he endowed their beauty of line and colour—they too were drawn into the struggle of his soul with the devil. For such a struggle was precisely his life, for years. This fine spiritual genius was hampered, torn and confused by the inner conflict of his 'divided soul'. No story was ever written plainer, though the problem of his life was never, for him, a moral one, it was that of an 'absence'.

It seems to have been in the Spring of 1927 that Du Bos really turned his thoughts to a return to Catholicism. As long before as February, 1925, when assisting as a family friend at the second anniversary Mass for Jacques Rivière, he definitely faced the problem of some day having to know what he did believe. He faced, too, the problem which had for long affected Rivière in his return to the

Church: what part would be left to Thought when all Doubt was resolved? And he then resolved it: Sanctity, which to him seemed almost an interchangeable term with Belief, would be left, or rather, would be no bar to Thought, and in the work of "interior moulding" would be "a precious artisan". He appears to have left it at that till March, 1927, two years later, when in the Journal he quotes Seneca's aphorism, "Life passes in postponement", and proceeds to an exhaustive analysis of his state of mind. "All intermediary states are nothing to me . . . And this explains that prodigious indifference of mind to all that does not concern the truly vital plane. It is pretty terrible to have no means between a total defection on the one hand, and perfection on the other . . ." He was still at the point of having to own:—"Useless to object to me—and especially that I should object to myself, for *there* is the sophism—that I am not clear as to those realities themselves; for if I am incapable of . . . assembling them in a coherent body of doctrine, I know perfectly well when acts, words or thoughts contradict or deny them". He was still, in fact, in his old confusion of mind, a confusion partly due, no doubt, as he himself believed, to his ill-health; in support of this latter theory he quotes a letter of Rivière's asserting that he (Rivière) could only hold to belief (in the unity of human personality) "when he was well". But a month later: "It is as if the real content, the true one of my inner life, was at last clear to me, that content which, unknowingly—for, at bottom, I do not feel myself guilty of any premeditation in the matter—I had always, I do not say fled from, but gently put aside, or put off till the morrow. How can it be that from the Spring of 1918 till August 1926, I can have got from myself this succession of delays? Oh! I alone have the key to that: it comes from the almost monstrous and, so to say, continual abundance of religious emotion I poured out on profane objects—my nature is to such a point religious . . . this explains that at the age of 44 I am still only at the point of beginning to centre myself on the centre . . . And yet I have never quite lost the feeling that the high-altar of my spiritual life was empty . . ." Not too easily was the fact to be remedied. "It is not at all that I can see, that I can guess even, what someday may be enthroned there, it is not even that I am sure that anyone, or anything will be enthroned there, it is quite simply the imperative feeling, as it were, saturate with the irrevocable, that in the religious zone I have given all to the side-chapels and that, in future, only the high-altar matters". It would seem to have been the rather ordinary struggle of faith and un-faith, but in an exceptional nature. "Ah! no," he went on, after further searching analysis, "I do not lack faith, certainly—if I have not yet the Catholic faith". His

task was, he admitted, to re-read the Gospels, "to work on several planes, the Catholic, the Loisy planes . . . and especially the personal plane . . . , live in the practice, if not in the Faith, of Christianity, centring all my efforts on the solving of my personal problem". It was not till the June of the same year that he finally solved it.

The Journal is not a book of apologetics. The process of the author's conversion, with the exception of some passages such as those quoted above, has chiefly to be traced between the lines. On the 29th of July, at any rate, he was evidently brought up short by the impending departure from Paris of the Abbé Altermann, a friend to whom, by then, he evidently referred his spiritual problems. Before the Abbé left, an extraordinary grace was given Du Bos. Like St. Paul, like Claudel in our time, without warning, light flooded his mind, "luminous arrows of an almost unbearable splendour". But even then, and perhaps not surprisingly considering his excessive subtlety and his tendency to hair-splitting, he registered an "unceasing agitation"; he could wait for the Abbé's return in two months, he told the Abbé, but ought he to wait—*tout est là*. But, "perhaps," he at last perceived, "the final vice of our minds is not so much to lack coherence as to lack assurance that our mind itself is always capable of perceiving coherence on the plane which of all others transcends it . . . Let me take great care that at this hour . . . that light superabounding in me could be withdrawn, that I almost deserve that it should be."

Obviously, from the entries in the Journal, Du Bos then returned to Catholicism, for thenceforth he is writing like a Catholic, going to the Sacraments and so on. The Journal ends, for the public, in the following January. "After Mass, waiting for the Abbé in the courtyard of the Benedictine nuns, I was murmuring again the two texts which have been for the last weeks my companions and support beyond price . . . 'Not to us, Lord, but to Thy name be the glory', and Coventry Patmore's: 'To him that awaits all things reveal themselves *provided that he has the courage not to deny in the darkness what he has seen in the light*'."

After his return to the Faith, Gabriel Marcel tells us, Charles Du Bos lived the fullest Christian life, finding in daily Communion, the reading of the Breviary and meditation of the Gospels, the courage to bear increasing ill-health and pain. To what further heights he may have carried the aspiration that had always moulded his life we do not yet know. He died after untold suffering, borne heroically for many months.

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