Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 41

ISSN 0276-8178

Volume 41

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1900 and 1960, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Gale Research Inc.
835 Penobscot Building
Detroit, MI 48226-4094

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-8103-2423-7
ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom
by Gale Research International Limited
(An affiliated company of Gale Research Inc.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Preface

Since its inception more than ten years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC.* In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these authors' works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and excerpting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC.* For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 12-16 authors or 4-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, excerpts of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and followed by a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **author heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **biographical and critical introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References are provided to past volumes of *TCLC* and to other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism, Children's Literature Review, Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography,* and *Something about the Author.*

- Most *TCLC* entries include **portraits** of the author. Many entries also contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.

- The **list of principal works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the excerpts in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editors' discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- Critical excerpts are prefaced by **annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the excerpt, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference excerpts by critics who discuss each other's commentary.

- A complete **bibliographic citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book follows each piece of criticism.

- An annotated list of **further reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **author index** listing all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross-references to such biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* For readers' convenience, a complete list of Gale titles included appears on the first page of the author index. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC,* yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC.*

- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **nationality index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.

- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **topic index,** which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC, TCLC, LC 1400-1800,* and the *CLC* Yearbook.

- Each new volume of *TCLC,* with the exception of the Topics volumes, contains a **title index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. The first volume of *TCLC* published each year contains an index listing all titles discussed in the series since its inception. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included in the *TCLC* cumulative index.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

[1] T. S. Eliot, "John Donne," *The Nation and the Athenaeum,* 33 (9 June 1923), 321-32; excerpted and reprinted in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800,* Vol. 10, ed. James E. Person, Jr. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), pp. 28-9.

[2] Clara G. Stillman, *Samuel Butler: A Mid-Victorian Modern* (Viking Press, 1932); excerpted and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* Vol. 33, ed. Paula Kepos (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), pp. 43-5.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including annotations to excerpted criticism, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume, the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reprint rights, and Anthony Bogucki for assistance with copyright research. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, Wayne State University Purdy/Kresge Library Complex, and the University of Michigan Libraries for making their resources available to us. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reprint material in this volume of *TCLC.* Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

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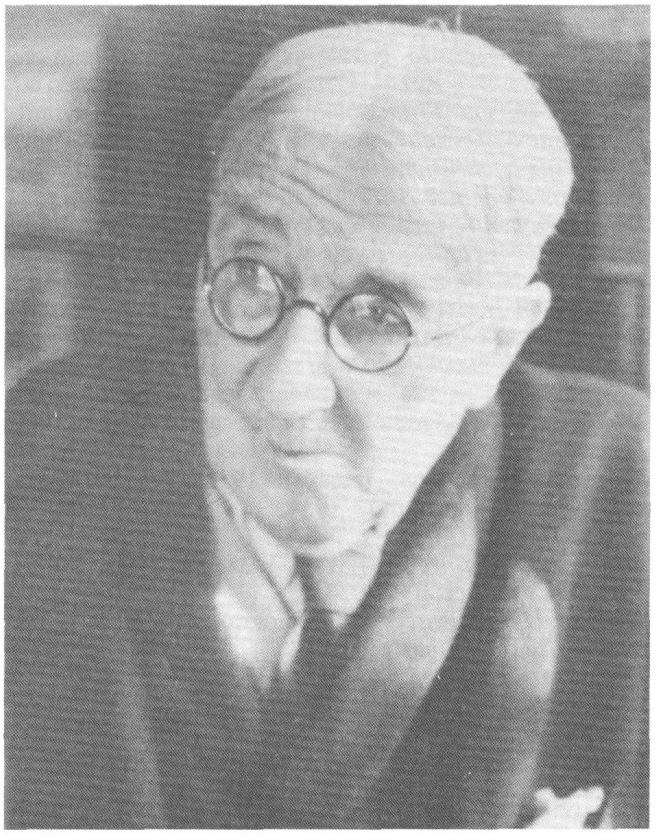
Contents

Alain

1868-1951

(Pseudonym of Emile-Auguste Chartier; also wrote under the pseudonym Criton) French philosopher, essayist, critic, and educator.



An influential philosopher and educator in France during the first half of the twentieth century, Alain is best known for his writings in a literary form that he termed the *propos,* a brief, informal essay commenting on a philosophical, cultural, or political subject. His major works, including *Mars ou la guerre jugée (Mars; or, The Truth about War*), a collection of *propos* condemning war, and *Les dieux (The Gods*), a book-length study of metaphysics, have been lauded for their witty and insightful observations on modern society, religion, and literature. Widely read during his lifetime, Alain's *propos* have earned him recognition as a notable figure in French philosophy.

Born in Mortagne in the Normandy region of France, Alain was the son of a veterinarian. He attended a Catholic elementary school in Mortagne and from 1886 to 1889 he studied at the Lycée Michelet in Vanves, where he developed a strong interest in philosophy. Alain spent the next three years studying philosophy and literature at the Ecole normale supérieure in Paris. After graduating in 1892 he taught philosophy at various lycées during the next four decades. In addition to teaching Alain wrote a weekly column for the newspaper, the *Dépêche de Rouen,* between 1903 and 1906. He subsequently conceived of the *propos* as a form requiring less effort to produce than a full-length column. Under the pseudonym Alain he published daily *propos* during the next eight years to much popular acclaim. At the beginning of World War I Alain volunteered to serve in a French artillery unit; although he was an ardent pacifist, he believed that one must experience war to pass judgment on it. Wounded in action, he returned in 1917 to teach philosophy at the Lycée Henri-Quatre in Paris, while writing numerous *propos* for national periodicals, and four years later *Mars; or, The Truth about War* was published. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Alain produced several book-length works primarily on philosophical and literary subjects. He retired from teaching in 1933 and his autobiography, *Histoire de mes pensées,* appeared three years later. Alain was awarded the first Grand Prix national de littérature shortly before his death in 1951.

During his lifetime Alain wrote more than five thousand *propos,* many of which have been gathered in collections that focus on such recurring topics in his writing as war, religion, political authority, and literature. Working under the pressure of daily deadlines, Alain limited each *propos* to two handwritten pages, often containing fewer than a thousand words, and rarely revised his ideas after they had been initially transcribed. Alain's *propos* characteristically begin with a specific reference to a common experience or a well-known incident, such as the sinking of the *Titanic,* and then develop a general observation or assertion. In discussions of his numerous volumes of *propos* Alain has been especially praised for his balanced commentary on the relationship between individual responsibility and governmental authority. Critics observe that *The Gods* and many of his book-length studies are arranged in short sections similar in scope to *propos,* and these works are commended for their philosophical insight and poetic prose style. While a few commentators criticize Alain for failing to offer a formally elaborated system of thought and find his writing style obscure, many note that Alain never claimed to offer a systematic philosophy and respond favorably to the intuitive quality of his writings. Both supporters and detractors of Alain attribute part of his critical reputation to the continuing adoration of his former students. While Alain's works have gained international recognition, critical discussion and translations of his writings have been relatively limited in English-speaking countries. In France, however, Alain is acknowledged as a significant teacher and writer of modern French philosophy, and his works are considered representative of French political thought during the interwar era.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Les cent un propos d'Alain. 5 vols. (essays) 1908-28
Quatre-vingt-un chapîtres sur l'esprit et les passions (essays) 1917
Les propos d'Alain. 2 vols. (essays) 1920
Système des beaux-arts (philosophy) 1920
Mars ou la guerre jugée (essays) 1921; also published as *Mars ou la guerre jugée* [enlarged edition], 1936
[*Mars; or, The Truth about War,* 1930]
Propos sur l'esthétique (essays) 1923
Propos sur le christianisme (essays) 1924
Eléments d'une doctrine radicale (essays) 1925
Le citoyen contre les pouvoirs (essays) 1926
Les idées et les âges. 2 vols. (philosophy) 1927
Propos sur le bonheur (essays) 1928
[*Alain on Happiness,* 1973]
Entretiens au bord de la mer (philosophy) 1931
Idées: Platon, Descartes, Hegel (philosophy) 1932; also published as *Idées: Introduction à la philosophie—Platon, Descartes, Hegel, Comte* [enlarged edition], 1939
Propos sur l'éducation (essays) 1932
Les dieux (philosophy) 1934
[*The Gods,* 1974]
Propos de littérature (essays) 1934
Stendhal (criticism) 1935
Histoire de mes pensées (autobiography) 1936
Avec Balzac (criticism) 1937
Propos sur la religion (essays) 1938
Lettres à Sergio Solmi sur la philosophie de Kant (letters) 1946
Cahiers de Lorient. 2 vols. (notebooks) 1963-64

André Maurois (essay date 1930)

[*A former student of Alain, Maurois was a French literary figure whose versatility is reflected in the broad scope of his work. However, it was as a biographer that he made his most significant contribution to literature. Following the tradition of Lytton Strachey's "New Biography," Maurois believed that a biography should delve into the psychological aspects of personality to reveal its subject's multiplicity, contradictions, and inner struggles, as well as serve as a personal expression of the biographer. In the following excerpt from his introduction to* Mars; or, The Truth about War, *Maurois surveys Alain's early career and describes his worldview.*]

I write to introduce to English readers a contemporary French thinker, who is not yet translated and not yet known outside his own country; a writer whose fame is likely to grow with time, and in whom I believe.

The contemporary influence of an author depends nearly as much upon his character as his work. Art is a means of escape from the slavery of actuality, and men are disappointed if a writer's life proves that he also was only a bondman, and if his recorded actions destroy the illusion which his writings have created. Tolstoy was Tolstoy because he had written *War and Peace, Anna Karenina,* and *Ivan Ilyitch,* but he was also 'Tolstoy,' thanks to the legend of Yasnaya Polyana; Byron would never have fired the imagination of Europe if his readers had not divined him in *The Corsair, Childe Harold,* and *Lara;* and Proust, if he is the greatest French novelist of his time, is also the sick man in a cork-lined room, feverishly set upon the 'recapture of the past' before he dies.

In the case of philosophers and moralists, we expect the link between a man's life and his work to be even closer. It is hard to feel respect for one who, while writing a treatise on morality, is canvassing his election to an academy, and while he is scheming for his own ends, expounds those ends of which the whole Universe is in travail. 'The genuine Socrates is fearless and satisfied; one, who without wealth, influence, or worldly adroitness, lives contented. Doubt in itself is the sign of a strong soul, and indifference to possessions and opinions are proofs of a noble doctrine, independent of others.'

The growing prestige of the philosopher, who signs himself Alain, and whose real name is Chartier, is due, in part, to such ancillary causes. He is a professor in the Lycée Henri IV, and the feelings he inspires in his pupils are not unlike those which Socrates inspired in his followers. So many want to attend his lectures that no hall on the premises can hold them. Men who have long finished their academic careers seek in vain the privilege of becoming again his pupils, and many of these are writers. They look up to him as to a master, who not only once influenced them profoundly, but one whose praise and blame still far outweigh the blame and praise the world can give. Jean Prévost, who is such a writer, published in *La nouvelle revue française* the story of his eighteenth year. He describes Alain thus:

> We waited for him on the morning of his first lecture in a room which looks out on the Panthéon: we heard the sound of his footsteps and were silent; he entered limping a little from his wound. At first I only noticed his shoulders and his enormous hands. Then he took off a soft hat, the brim of which had seemed to reach down to a great fat nose, peering over a ragged moustache. Had he kept it on and his forehead hidden, I should have taken him for a heavy dragoon. I awaited his famous exposition, fortifying my heart like a Christian about to hear profane doctrines: I was astounded. What he was reading and translating and commenting upon was that Ode in Horace in which Teucer addresses his comrades, and I remember well his joyous gesture, expressive of the assent of the whole of his robust body, to the final verse: *Cras ingens iterabimus æquor.*

Let me mention a few actions characteristic of him: Alain, though a passionate pacifist, volunteered as a private soldier and served four years in the artillery. As soon as he was free he wrote a terrible book against soldiers, ***Mars ou la guerre jugée*** (in my opinion too severe, but salutary as a counterblast). Again, this professor, the most brilliant of his generation, could, by conciliating the authorities in some small degree, have secured any sort of promotion;

the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, the Institut were all within his reach. But he has deliberately turned aside from such prizes. He has kept his Lycée post to preserve his independence. (pp. 9-12)

[Alain also wrote many thousands of propos (some of which have been collected under such titles as ***Propos d'Alain, Propos sur le bonheur, Propos sur le christianisme***) that were first published in a small provincial newspaper, the *Dépêche de Rouen.*]

Alain, who at that time was a master at the Lycée in Rouen, supplied this paper daily with such comments, fifty to sixty lines in length. They were upon anything and everything: poets, God, the seasons, Catholicism, myths, prostitutes, Stendhal, Beethoven, Goethe. They were certainly the most curious and remarkable kind of journalism written under the Third Republic. Providing these paragraphs has had a great influence on Alain himself, inculcating in him a habit of thinking in short chapters.

The first important work in which his doctrine found expression was called ***Quatre-vingt-un chapitres sur l'esprit et les passions,*** and many of the ideas contained in it have been developed since . . . ***Les idées et les âges.***

During the war, in his artillery dug-out, he pondered the problems of æsthetics, and conceived there what is perhaps the best of all his books, his ***Système des beaux-arts.*** In that book he examines the principles underlying the different arts, and the proper part of each in the life of man. According to Alain the function of Art is to discipline the imagination and to rescue imagination from the disastrous madness of mere dreaming, by linking it on to realities—real forms, whether sculptured or created in literature. A list of the titles of the different parts into which [***Mars; or, The Truth about War***] is divided will give some notion of its contents: 'De l'imagination créatrice,' 'De la danse et de la parure,' 'De la poésie et de l'eloquence,' 'Du théâtre et de l'architecture,' 'De la peinture,' 'Du dessin,' 'De la prose.'

It will be seen that the book moves from the concrete artforms to those which are most abstract. To Alain, the art of prose is at once the most difficult and the most beautiful of all; but he only rates thus highly prose which is simple and severe; for brilliant and many-faceted prose he shows much contempt. (pp. 14-16)

Alain himself is far from being a facile writer. He sacrifices nothing to appearances; he exacts much from his readers. You must, before you take him up, resolve to respect him, and continue to read him in spite of all forbidding initial difficulties. He presses so hard on his pen that it goes, so to speak, through the paper till it reaches thought itself; and such readers as persevere can make that thought their very own. The region of his mind is enclosed by a few large simple boundary lines. No writer cares less about being up to date, or in touch with new ideas or authors. He is a man of few books: Plato, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Auguste Comte, are the springs which feed the river of his thought; there is also no doubt that he is the best reader that Stendhal and Balzac have ever found in France. With some hesitation he has recently adopted Proust, and more recently Paul Valéry. He is an admirer of Retz and Saint-Simon. Add to these Goethe, occasionally Shakespeare, a few of George Sand's novels—and he has all the reading he wants; for he knows how both to ignore and to select; precious gifts in this age, when intellects are a prey to miscellaneous curiosity.

It is, of course, impossible in an article to give an accurate account of Alain's extremely personal philosophy. Moreover, he has himself a horror of analysis, and he would think poorly of me if I attempted it. Interpreters are apt to be obscurer than their masters. If you wish to see how he himself re-creates the system of another thinker, read his little book on ***Spinoza,*** or his ***Onze chapitres sur Platon.*** He thinks *with* Plato, *with* Spinoza; stationing himself first at that point from which they saw the world, and then re-thinks as it were their thoughts as though they were his own. His own view is that this is the only reliable critical method. He has a deep disdain for dialectical discussion—even for 'proofs.' He holds that the methods of mathematics, so trustworthy in sciences dealing with definable elements, become absurd in the case of such complex entities as the soul, as feelings, as thoughts: 'Every proof is, as far as I am concerned, invalid.' For Alain, philosophy is more akin to Poetry than to Science.

Some time ago there was, at the Ecole normale, a professor, M. de la Coulonche, famous for reducing writers to descriptive formulas. He would say, for instance: 'Lucretius! He is the St. Paul of Epicureanism; a Schopenhauer in metre mitigated by Victor Hugo.' I fancy that if M. de la Coulonche were still alive he would be tempted to define Alain as 'a graver Chesterton, with an admixture of Ruskin; a Santayana of greater vitality, on whose countenance one occasionally catches the expression of Carlyle.' (pp. 16-18)

André Maurois, in an introduction to Mars; or, the Truth about War, *by Alain, translated by Doris Mudie and Elizabeth Hill, Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1930, pp. 9-18.*

Felix Morrow (essay date 1930)

[*An American publisher and writer, Morrow is the author of several books on the civil war in Spain. In the following review of* Mars; or, The Truth about War, *Morrow criticizes Alain for neglecting a substantial body of scholarly works on the economic and social causes of war, as well as disparaging what he views as the obscure form and weakly interrelated content of Alain's* propos.]

There is a reading public, composed of literati, which knows almost nothing about philosophy and the social sciences, but which nevertheless feels an interest in philosophical and social ideas—an interest not entirely satisfied by reading the current reviews of important works. It is this public that has given importance to a kind of writing that is neither belles-lettres nor yet sustained thought: short, undocumented, "suggestive," unsystematic, and very literary books, usually collections of essays. Their typical writers are Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, and A. R. Orage. Alain, who has an enormous reputation in France and who is now for the first time translated into English [in ***Mars; or, The Truth about War***], belongs to this class.

It is significant that all the writers mentioned have been interested first in aesthetic problems, for it is their writing in this field that has given them their model. Their overconcise, elliptical style, with its false air of precision (created by a parade of qualifying phrases) cloaking the essential absence of definition, their obscure and allusive manner are especially suitable to the field of aesthetics and literature, subjects whose principles remain vague, whose boundaries are unmapped, with which documentation can do little to induce intuitive agreement, and to which dialectic proof is inapplicable. Yet even in this field such an endeavor as I. A. Richards's (in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*) to write with some science and system makes the work of these others appear that of amateurs and dilettantes.

Certainly the attempts of these writers to deal with philosophical and social ideas, fields intensively, fruitfully, and systematically cultivated in well-established traditions, in the same fragmentary way that they deal with literature are not to be taken very seriously. One's judgment on this aspect of their work is made more harsh than necessary by the serious attention one sees lavished on it by men who should know better. It is not so much this kind of writing as the uninformed praise of it that should be condemned. There is a certain, though very subordinate, value in Valéry's ideas about the nature of thought, Eliot's ideas about politics, or Orage's psychological exercises. Such work is at least a kind of journalism of thought. But it is never more. And for this reason it is unfortunate that Alain should be introduced to the English public by these little essays on a subject which—unlike aesthetics and religion, on which he has written a number of books usually referred to by thinkers who praise him—is comparatively amenable to analysis. War is a phenomenon with economic and social causes, and there is already a considerable literature upon it in economics and social psychology; anyone who writes about war with any hope of saying something important must take this literature into consideration, and must certainly be prepared to elaborate fully his ideas. Besides Trotter's *Instinct of the Herd in War and Peace*—I compare it to a book which is also a psychological study, tentative and speculative—Alain's essays appear thin, pontifical in their brevity, and literary in the worst sense of that word.

Alain hates war, thinks it not inevitable, and considers its cure to be the reduction of the power of the state, which he considers at best a necessary evil. He considers the conflict of interests to be "only the occasion" for war, its cause is "the passions." The conflict of interests and the passions are talked of as if they were individual as well as social phenomena; which they are at any point is not quite clear; and their relation to the war-waging state is not developed. An individualistic psychology—Alain tells us that Descartes has said the last word on the passions—is scarcely the instrument with which to analyze a group phenomenon like war. Though the essays were written to stand together, there is no attempt to relate the various ideas to each other. The best bits in the book are discussions of the minutiae of war: the psychology of commanding officers, of civilians, of army doctors. This gives us a hint as to what is wrong with the book. Alain is, perhaps, attempting nothing more than to tell us how he *feels* about war, but he has selected the form most unadapted to this. A narrative, interspersed with reflections, should have been its style, not this highly abstract and obscure prose. The result of this war between a narrational motive and an ideational form has been that neither emotion nor idea has come through. We shall have to read something of his much more successful in form and impressive in content before we can understand the awe and admiration with which André Maurois [see excerpt above] and Denis Saurat write the foreword and introduction.

Felix Morrow, "Alain," in The Nation, *New York, Vol. CXXXI, No. 3409, November 5, 1930, p. 500.*

Albert Guérard (essay date 1957)

[A French-born American critic, historian, philologist, and educator, Guérard has written several studies of French history and of French and comparative literature. In the following excerpt, he praises Alain's literary artistry and the iconoclasm of his philosophical thought.]

A book by Maurice Barrés has this appealing title: *Le mystère en pleine lumière,* "Mystery in Broad Daylight." It might well be applied to the enigma of Alain's widespread, prolonged, and yet esoteric fame. Everything is obvious about him, and everything is strange. A philosopher writing daily "columns" in a provincial newspaper, and by imperceptible steps establishing himself as a power in French thought and literature; a political theorist wearing without shame the outmoded and almost seamy garb of the small-town radical, and maintaining stubbornly his position against the mighty hosts of Maurrasian reaction on the right and Marxism on the left; a profoundly religious man, a catholic in the fullest sense, who also professed to be a free-thinker and a determined anticlerical—Alain is the most improbable of chimeras. Yet he did exist in the flesh, and labored in the spirit, for our education and our delight.

First of all, why *Alain?* The name, with a medieval flavor, and familiar in Brittany, is not frequent in modern France. Fifty years ago, Alain Fournier and Alain Gerbault were unknown. Seeking a clue in the past, the inquirers first came across the great and elusive Alanus de Insulis, or Alain of Lille, the *Doctor Universalis,* author of *De Planctu Naturae;* but it proved a false scent. The one obvious Alain in French annals was Alain Chartier, in the darkest days of the Hundred Years' War. Every schoolboy knows, as Macaulay loved to say, that he wrote the *Quadrilogue invectif*—a title so fascinating that I never went beyond it—and, four centuries before Keats, "La Belle Dame sans Merci." While he was asleep, a Princess bent over him and kissed his honeyed lips. This time, the guess was correct: the man who signed "Alain" was called Chartier (a name famous at the time for a chain of popular restaurants), and he was a teacher of philosophy. (pp. 171-72)

Alain was an unconventional, and withal an admirable, teacher. His courses, and even his individual lectures, never were formally organized. He read and commented

on some great text—Plato and Spinoza were his favorites—and thought aloud. This great free-thinker did not encourage free discussion in the classroom. Not that he was a dogmatist: his teaching was truly Socratic, a liberation and a stimulant. But he was conscious that the Socratic game often is a waste of time; that, in serious thought, improvisation is mostly futile; that the objections raised by the best students were probably what the teacher was planning to say next; and above all, that the young men who had least to say were those most anxious to say it at great length. At any rate, the testimony of his former pupils, in the *Hommage à Alain* published by the *Nouvelle revue française,* is unanimous. Alain taught no system, encouraged no chatter; but he made young men think for themselves. So great was his influence in the classroom that it gave deeper significance to his writings: when the last of his actual disciples has died, it is possible that much of the halo will fade. I, who never met Alain, approve of his work, and relish it; but my appreciation is tepid, compared with the fervor of the initiates. There was, and there still is, a chapel with an altar to Saint Alanus, miracle worker. But the congregation is shrinking, and it may be doomed to disappear.

In this uneventful academic life, there were only two dramatic episodes, created by outward events: the Dreyfus Case and the First World War. Alain, a young teacher, threw himself ardently into the Dreyfus crisis. The famous "Affair" was not a mere technical miscarriage of justice: it involved a conflict of ideals. Alain served his cause by teaching at a "Popular University," a sort of voluntary adult education center, intended to initiate workingmen into careful methods of thought, and above all to foster the critical spirit. It was this agitation also that induced him to become a local journalist. All this, of course, without thought of self or fame.

The other episode was the Great War of 1914. When it broke out, Alain was beyond military age. He had never been a militarist, and his Dreyfusism had strengthened his bias. Yet he volunteered—out of pride, no doubt, but also out of conviction. France, in his eyes, was fighting not for life or happiness but for liberty. He enlisted as a private. Many safe and comfortable staff jobs were open to him: an office, not the trenches, was the normal place for a middle-aged professor. He insisted on going to the front. He got on very well with his comrades in the ranks; at times, an officer was found to recognize his moral greatness and address him as "Sir." An artillery observer on the front line, he rose to the high rank of technical sergeant. He was not embittered by the hard experience—at least not against men, not even against the enemy. But he brought back from the trenches a book, ***Mars ou la guerre jugée,*** which is a formidable indictment. There still are men who believe like Napoleon that "there is no substitute for victory," and that truth, justice, peace, and brotherhood can be attained if only you massacre a sufficient number of men. Against that poison, Alain provides a powerful antidote.

Beyond the classroom, Alain's activity was manifested chiefly through the daily press. He wrote several thousand miniature essays, each under a thousand words, which he called *propos.* The literal meaning is "chats," but with a particular shade. There is no chitchat, no smalltalk in Alain. Each of his brief articles has a definite *purpose* and offers us a *proposition.* The brevity, the daily publication, the variety of subjects, the freedom from pedantry would make the *propos* similar to some of our columns; and I have read remarks by Will Rogers and Heywood Broun akin, in spirit and form, to Alain's *propos.* Oddly, a mightier name suggests itself to us—Emerson. Both Alain and Emerson were professional philosophers; but both wrote without pedantry, in an alert, lucid style, homely, somewhat jerky, full of unexpected sallies and paradoxes, all the shrewder, all the wiser, for a constant background of humor. No wisecracking: their chief purpose is not to make us laugh, or even smile, as did Mark Twain, Mr. Dooley, and Will Rogers. Irony is present but not obtrusive; and even more subdued is Irony's melancholy twin, Pity. There is a constant check on pretense and pretension. Both Emerson and Alain, with the limpidity of a mountain spring, are difficult to follow at times, because their thought refuses to be systematic, and because their expression is willfully elliptical. Emerson is the worse offender: it is easier to get lost and weary in a twenty-page Essay than in a two-page *propos.* Emerson, I firmly believe, deliberately indulged in lofty nonsense: his Yankee shrewdness could not quite shake off German transcendentalism. Alain managed to keep his paradoxes within reason.

In a collection, *Thinkers and Philosophers,* a volume, by Paul Foulquié, is devoted to Alain. Philosopher he certainly was, by training and calling; but he never wrote a treatise or elaborated a system. The word philosopher, however, has many meanings. To be a philosopher, first of all, is to adopt an attitude of haughty fortitude in the trials of life; to view contingencies—including death—from the heights of thought and character: this elevation, this stoicism, were present in Alain. But a philosopher need not be harsh in his personal pride, stiff in his moral certitude: he must know how to take our tribulations *philosophically,* i.e., with a smile and a shrug, and Maurois was not wrong in calling Alain our Montaigne. Finally a philosopher, or more precisely a *philosophe,* is one who reflects, but in the hope of guiding human progress: on the intellectual front, a servant of civilization. In this capacity, Alain was not untrue to the spirit of Voltaire, and some of his *propos* could take their place in the *Dictionnaire philosophique.*

But, philosopher or not, Alain undoubtedly qualifies as a thinker. First of all, he believes in the primacy of thought. Descartes was his guide, and for Alain also thought was the sole evidence of our existence. It is essential that we learn how to conduct our thought, yet the goal of thinking is not the elaboration of an infallible system: systems soon harden, and become impediments to free—i.e., fluid—thought. Our thought, while remaining free, must not be loose. It should be able to discern trends in the apparent chaos and to accept the discipline of laws, even if only as working hypotheses. A mind soberly reflecting on realities, in the hope of guiding action, is a *moralist* in the best sense of the term; and a long line of such moralists is a tradition of which France may well be proud. A moralist is not a mere satirist; not a rigid agent of the law, ever-anxious to reprove and rebuke; not a disenchanted old

bachelor like Koheleth; but a shrewd and realistic adviser, in whom occasional gruffness is tempered by kindly humor.

If he had no system, Alain had ideas and opinions. Increasingly at the end of his career, he was interested in the fine arts, which include the finest of all, literature. (The title, ***Système des beaux-arts*** is a misnomer; but the book is a pregnant one.) In this domain, he was in close agreement with Paul Valéry, whom he had distrusted at first; and in our age of confusion, there was something reassuring, even ennobling, in the active sympathy between those two great minds. Alain professed to be an anticlerical, but only in the sense in which the very best Catholics would be anticlericals. The community should not be dictated to by any single group—business, labor, the military, the clergy. Religion is the center of Alain's philosophy; with Hegel, he holds that "to philosophize is to reflect upon religion." For the myths of the past, he has nothing but respect. He only complains that living myths, instinct with spiritual power, have been fossilized into dogmas, turned into pseudo-science, and thus bereft of their true significance and of their potency. Man must constantly create new myths to guide his constant quest.

In politics, he called himself a Radical of the Emile Combes persuasion. The basis of this "radicalism" is equality: never give official recognition to superiorities which cannot be tested at all times, and without fear. Accept no permanent master: every master is an enemy, as La Fontaine had said long before Blanqui. Alain's attitude is a curious compound of reluctant conformity—it is prudent and wise to obey—and indomitable inner resistance. Had he lived in this country, he would have rebelled against "hundred-per-centism, or else . . . "—the enforced "American way of life," because he would have considered it destructive of our fundamental Americanism, which is liberty. He is a law-abiding citizen, the reverse of a subversive, but with the soul of an anarchist: very much after the heart of Herbert Spencer and Herbert Hoover.

The average Frenchman (a myth, no doubt, but myths may throw a searching light upon reality) is an Alain. He obeys, but saves his self-respect by grumbling. He believes in checks and balances, which protect the individual, rather than in the sensational achievements of dictators, giant concerns, elaborate organizations—all *démesurés,* beyond the common measure. He shudders at the ruthless—and barely conscious—collectivism of American life: nationwide standardization, a day formally appointed to love and honor your mother. If one fourth of the French electorate vote the Communist ticket, it is because most of them are Alains who refuse to be coerced even into the right path, and who believe that it is healthy for a government to be faced with a genuine opposition. A country in which "the other side" has not a single representative in Congress seems to the French Alains to be in grave spiritual jeopardy.

I have read many of Alain's innumerable works over the last thirty years; I was glad to renew, extend, and organize my acquaintance by perusing his best books again, and the tributes of his friends. After this scrupulous inquiry, I find it hard to pass a general judgment upon him. I owe nothing to him: the first *book* of his I read, ***Mars,*** appeared in 1931, when my own thought was well formed. On most points I agree with him: both of us men of the people, both teachers by profession, both rebels against the same imperious masters, both deeply stirred by the Dreyfus Case, both religious free-thinkers. My verdict ought to be: "Marvelous! Just what I have said myself!" On the contrary, Alain's message is so familiar to me that it appears a trifle trite.

It is as a literary artist that Alain is to be judged. "Only well-written works will pass to posterity," said Buffon, who could redeem natural history from the blight of naturalness. There is no more "thought" of a startling nature in Montaigne and in Voltaire than in Alain. The problem is one of style, and style is personality. Alain's teaching manifestly had a style of its own: I am not so sure about the esthetic quality of his *propos.* He wrote too many; he wrote them too fast; he made it a principle never to correct himself. Compared with Montaigne, his picturesqueness is not sufficiently vivid, and his humor is tame. The chief difference is that Montaigne offers us "a man, not a book": Alain refuses to take us into his familiar confidence. A man of the people, and garrulous, he is actually more distant than Count Alfred de Vigny, the apostle of stoic silence. For those who have not known him in the flesh, Alain does not become a permanent friend, as Montaigne does.

André Maurois, who knew him well, and who distilled an admirable summary of his teaching, brings him the most glowing tribute of all.

> I prophesy that his work, within a hundred years, will be in the literary history of our days what Montaigne's was in his time. Among the writers of this century, which are destined to survive? In the case of most, I should not like to commit myself. But about this one, I have no hesitation; and the only glory I crave with our descendants is to have been the herald of his glory.

This was written in 1950, when Alain was still alive: I am glad that Maurois's wreath was not laid down on a tomb. Funeral orations should be antehumous. Now Alain is dead, and it is not inconceivable that he will stay dead. Time will tell? Time *may* tell: but will it tell the truth? Time has preserved mummies, and destroyed beauties which should have been imperishable. But to crave for the interminable afterglow of a text and of a name is vanity—a vanity that Alain himself would have scorned. He did good, and he had his fun doing it: what other reward is needed? (pp. 174-80)

Albert Guérard, "The Enigma of Alain," in his Fossils and Presences, *Stanford University Press, 1957, pp. 171-80.*

John Hampton (essay date 1961)

[*In the following essay, Hampton examines Alain's views on individualism, civilization, and religion.*]

It is strange that the voluminous writings of Alain—the pseudonym of Emile-Auguste Chartier, 1868-1951—should be so little known in this country, whereas in France his prestige was great enough, at his death, to warrant a special number of the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* and the *Nouvelle revue française,* two national journals of very high standing. M. André Maurois has prophesied that Alain's name will rank alongside that of Montaigne when the final assessment has been made.

This comparison is indeed significant, for just as one naturally thinks of Alain as the philosophical counterpart of the *poet* Valéry, so one has no difficulty in placing him in the great French tradition of philosopher-*moralists* who have, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel today, always had one foot in philosophy and the other in literature. Such a marriage not only helps the writer to maintain contact with the "laity", but is also the best guarantee that he will not leave the sure path of experience. We assume too readily that experience is something given. This is true only in the grossest sense. Experience is rather a function of consciousness which develops with the cultivation of attention. And philosophy itself demands not only rigour, but also the *finesse* of perception which results from such pursuits as the practice of literature.

Alain's approach to his subject is interesting in itself. Nearly everything he wrote, including those books in which he treats a single overall theme, like religion or art, was presented in the form of short articles or *propos* of two, three or four pages. The habit of writing in this way was acquired at an early stage in his career, probably when he was a contributor to the *Dépêche de Rouen,* but it was not the product of chance. Alain's whole aim was to produce *ideas* which would help his readers to see reality more clearly. These ideas he compares to spectacles, and leaves it to the reader to judge for himself whether they give him clearer vision or not. But, he points out, if an idea does not give us a better grasp of things, no amount of argument will make us accept it as true.

On the other hand, ideas which illuminate the world for us can do without proof. "La preuve est la compagne de l'ignorance," he says in ***Vigiles de l'esprit.*** That is to say that one tries to prove only what cannot be immediately seen, or in other words, what one does not and cannot *know* in the most concrete sense of the word. The task of the philosophers, in the words of Alain, is to "reveal the world as it is and man as he is". If their teachings are rarely understood, that is because, in most men, vision is obscured by passion. Prior to all valid thought, therefore, there must be a moral preparation, a real purification, without which it is useless to go further. Argument, however clever, will merely be the slave of passion.

Each *propos* of Alain aims at pointing to one particular "view" of a given theme. This was usually expressed by Alain on the four sides of a sheet of folded writing-paper. If it could not be done in this way, it had better not be done at all. Indeed the author tells us that very often, especially in the early days before the First World War, it just didn't "come off". Nevertheless, whenever he wrote, Alain insisted on putting down on paper the genuine and authentic expression of his mind as it was at the moment of writing, as it freely *perceived* and *judged* in face of the problem it had set itself. The mind must be faithful only to itself.

Alain hardly ever corrected what he had written, confident as he was that the naked expression of his living judgment was more likely to awaken the mind of his reader than a whole shopful of logical devices. Such an attitude affects his style considerably: it is, as it were, an anti-style, devoid of transitions, of rhythm, of any striving after effect, and the shock of such candour has a greater effect than anything the author could have invented. The result of this was to make Alain the centre of an enthusiastic band of disciples, but his success never led him to seek high office. He remained a schoolteacher all his life, refusing a post at the Sorbonne as he had, during the war, refused a commission, in order that he should not debase himself by rising. To his motto *rester peuple* he remained faithful to the end of his life.

One might well be tempted to see egoism in such a cross-grained individualist as Alain seems to be. But I am sure one would be quite wrong. To convince ourselves of this, we need only consider Alain's attitude towards his own life. He was quite unable to take any serious interest in himself, to such a degree that when pressed to write his autobiography, he confined his study entirely to the development of his impersonal ideas, refusing to relate these to external events or to those influences so beloved of the psycho-analysts.

> "I do not like confessions," he wrote in his ***Histoire de mes pensées,*** so much so that I have been unable even in the form of a novel, to write anything about my private life; it is perhaps because I do not like to think about it too much, or because I have found other consolations. *I have learnt how to forget and begin again;* and this practical method cannot be put into maxims, *since it breaks the sequence of the story.* Not to talk about oneself thus becomes a kind of rule, an almost merciless one, designed to lead to forgetting.

Of his childhood he tells us little, and what he does say is merely meant to stress the childishness of his childhood. "I wish to speak here," he continues, "of hours of complete sobriety, that is to say of that part of my existence for which I am joyfully responsible."

I mention this attitude of the author, first because it helps us to distinguish, using this example, between a legitimate individualism and an immature egoism, and secondly because it gives us already a glimpse of Alain's philosophy. For where there is a complete biographical explanation of a man's philosophy, to that extent it comes under suspicion as being *inauthentic,* that is, of having been inculcated by circumstances and institutions. And inauthentic it remains until such time as it is—if ever it is—confirmed in a moment of freedom and lucidity by the person involved, acting as a centre of responsibility. Alain would insist that such an act transcends the possibilities of the body, confined as it is to the causal flux of sensation and emotion. *L'esprit,* the mind or the spirit, is the only aspect of human nature characterized by *autonomy.* It is the only