

Nobel Prize in Literature 1937



Roger Martin du Gard

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1937 was awarded to Roger Martin du Gard "for the artistic power and truth with which he has depicted human conflict as well as some fundamental aspects of contemporary life in his novel-cycle *Les Thibault*".

The recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1937, Roger Martin du Gard, has dedicated most of his activity to a single work, a long series of novels with the collective title, *Les Thibault* (1922-40). It is a vast work both in the number of its volumes and in its scope. It represents modern French life by means of a whole gallery of characters and an analysis of the intellectual currents and the problems that occupied France during the ten years preceding the First World War, a gallery as full and an analysis as complete as the subject of the novel permitted. The work has therefore taken a form especially characteristic of our era, called the «roman fleuve» in the country of its origin.

The term designates a narrative method that is relatively little concerned with composition and advances like a river across vast countries, reflecting everything that is found on its way. The essence of such a novel, in large as well as small matters, consists in the exactitude of this reflection rather than in the harmonious balance of its parts; it has no

shape. The river lingers at will and only rarely does the undercurrent disturb the smooth flow of its surface.

Our age can hardly be called calm; on the contrary, the speed of the machines accelerates the rhythm of life to the point of agitation. It is strange, therefore, that in such an age the most popular literary form, the novel, should have developed in a totally opposite direction, and by so doing have become only the more popular. Still, if the novel offered us the satisfying world of fantasy, one could explain this phenomenon in psychological terms as a sort of poetic compensation for the frustrations of daily life. But it is precisely the heart-rending anguish of reality that the novel takes such time to sound and to emphasize.

Nevertheless, the novel is there, with its boundless substance, and the reader finds a certain solace in the heightened awareness which he acquires from the inevitable element of tragedy inherent in all life. With a kind of heroism, it swallows reality in large draughts and encourages us to bear even great sufferings with joy. The reader's aesthetic demands will be satisfied in isolated sections of the work which are more condensed and therefore better suited to call forth his feelings. *Les Thibault* does not lack such sections.

The essential characters of the novel are three members of the same family: the father and two sons. The father remains in the background; his passive role, one of weight and massiveness, is presented by a special technique. The two sons and the countless secondary characters of the work are presented in a dramatic manner. Unprepared by anything in the story, we see them before us, acting and speaking in the present; and we are given a detailed and complete description of the setting. The reader must be quick to grasp what he sees and hears, for the capricious and irregular rhythm of life beats everywhere. He is helped in his task by the writer's most perfected tool: the analysis of his heroes' thoughts, expressed beyond words, an insight into the darkness which engenders conscious actions. Martin du Gard goes even further; he shows how thoughts, feelings, and the will can be transformed before becoming words and acts. Sometimes exterior considerations - habit, vanity, or even a simple gaucherie - alter expressions and

personality. This examination, at once subtle and bold, of the dynamic processes of the soul obviously constitutes Martin du Gard's most original and most remarkable contribution to the art of characterizing human beings. From the aesthetic point of view, this is not always an advantage, for the analysis may appear cumbersome when its results do not seem necessary to the story.

This introspective method is used even for the father's character, but it is less complicated in his case. His personality is already clear-cut and complete at the beginning of the novel, for he belongs to the past. Events of the present no longer affect him.

He is a member of the upper middle class, conscious of his status and his duties, a faithful servant of the Church and a generous benefactor of society, full of prudent advice. He really belongs to a generation before his own, to the France of the July Monarchy; that is why he is to come into more than one conflict with the next generation, in particular with his sons. But this conflict rarely reaches the verbal level, for the old man is too convinced of his proper worth to engage in discussions. Hence the perennial theme of the opposition of youth to age is not specially treated here.

The representative of age appears above all in an attitude of introspection and immutability; he relies heavily and complacently on all that he thinks wise and just. No word can influence him. In the isolation of his life, one might see the whole tragedy of age if he were not himself so completely unaware of the possibility of such a tragedy.

He is characterized rather by comic traits; profounder sentiments are expressed only at the time of his death, in the face of his human destiny. This expression is not direct but results from a strictly objective, concrete description of the long martyrdom of his agony. It is a moving description despite its minute detail. Up to now he had been considered only from without, with the exception of some rare instances when he had revealed what, even in him, was hidden behind the façade he presented to the world.

The difference between him and his oldest son receives little emphasis. Antoine Thibault is a doctor. Entirely absorbed by his profession, his father's moral and ethical points of view are entirely alien to him. Morality is replaced in him by an intense and

conscientious devotion to research and to the exercise of his profession. Master of himself, prudent, tactful, he has not the least desire for opposition; he has not even time to think of it. In the novel one witnesses his rapid evolution within prescribed limits. He is a man ambitious for the future. At first he is occasionally a little fatuous, but he soon commands respect by his work.

Antoine becomes a sympathetic representative of the intellectuals of his day, full of ideas, without prejudices in his conceptions, but as a determinist convinced of the inability of the individual to change whatever the general course of events may be. He is not a revolutionary.

Quite different is his brother Jacques, who is several years younger. The latter is too close to the writer's heart to suffer any criticism. He is the hero of the work, and the exterior world is examined and judged according to his ideals. His father's responsibility for his evolution is considerable, but actually Jacques, by his whole nature, is destined to be a revolutionary. When the story begins, he is a schoolboy of fourteen in a college run by priests. Although he dislikes and neglects his studies, he commands respect by his intelligence. The catastrophe occurs when he discovers a friend among his schoolmates, and their affection, at this dangerous period of adolescence, takes an exalted and seemingly erotic form. Their feelings are betrayed by their letters, misinterpreted (as, indeed, they are bound to be) by the priests who intervene with disciplinary measures. The strict surveillance and the very intrusion into his emotional private life are an unbearable offense to Jacques. Furthermore, he has to await his father's rage, stirred up by this scandal. His revolt is expressed in action. He carries along his friend in his escape far from all yokes, those he endured and those he feared in a hostile and harsh world. He feels that his whole being, in the grip of romantic poetry and of more dangerous tendencies, is irreconcilable with the real world. Seeking happiness and freedom, the two boys leave for Africa, but their visionary project is destroyed in Marseilles by the efforts of the police who had been alerted.

On his return, his father, in an excess of pedagogic zeal, makes a psychological mistake; he condemns his son to solitary confinement in a reformatory founded by himself. The oppression of this confinement causes Jacques' indomitable personality to emerge even stronger and fiercer. The account of this development is the most moving episode in the work.

After he has been released owing to his brother's influence, Jacques is permitted to pursue his studies, his only consolation. He does brilliantly and is easily accepted by the École Normale, the supreme goal of all ambitious and talented students and the open door to all top literary or scientific careers. But Jacques cannot be attracted by an official career that for him is only a void and an illusion; he soon sets out for adventure and reality. Once more the boy escapes to Africa, but this time he succeeds and he remains absent from the narrative for a long time.

He is seen again when Antoine discovers his residence - in Switzerland among the revolutionaries - and brings him back to their father's deathbed. He arrives too late for a reconciliation, even if one considered a reconciliation between these two diametrically opposed concepts of life possible. The old man does not recognize him, but Jacques feels a deep sorrow, for he is not one of those people who, obsessed with mankind's future happiness, begin by stifling every trace of humanity in themselves.

Such is the outline of Jacques' inner life as far as it is known. For the rest he remains rather elusive, as before, but we notice the author's great appreciation of his faculties and of his character.

We get to know him fully when the novel approaches its conclusion and at the same time its height of epic grandeur - in the summer of 1914 just before the world catastrophe. Jacques is in Geneva, having left Paris soon after his father's death in order to escape the necessity of inheriting a fortune in a society which he scorns. He belongs to a group of socialist and communist reformers whose immediate mission is to halt the threat of war by the revolt of the masses. The description of these agitators is one of the least successful

passages in the book; the overall impression, whether intended or not, is that these men are not worthy of their mission.

But Jacques' stature increases in everyone's eyes when he leaves Geneva and returns to Paris to accomplish his mission. His development is moral rather than intellectual; his actions have no great results, but he saves his soul. The description of the last days of July in Paris, with Jacques wavering between hope and despair in this surcharged atmosphere, is a veritable *tour de force* in Martin du Gard's novelistic achievement. The history of this period revives, reawakens, as far as the masses' role is concerned. But, as almost always, the role is not decisive. The masses are impotent, blind, and in this case even less familiar than usual with the game of politics that causes such tragedies. The author himself seems not to be particularly initiated, but he is tolerant and human, and his description, as far as it goes, is truthful.

Against the background of this bewildering anxiety there occurs a brief but highly illuminating episode of a completely different character. Jacques meets again a young girl with whom he had almost fallen in love several years before, but from whom he had run away as he had run away from everything else. This time the true spark is kindled between them. This fatal love story is one of the most significant episodes in the novel; it is profoundly felt and rendered in all its pure beauty precisely because it is restricted to the dimensions that the breathless flight of days imposes on the story. It lasts only a short time, but that is enough to give it a tragic and simple beauty.

When all the political illusions vanish for Jacques at the declaration of war, he recreates for himself a new illusion, born of his despair and of his will to sacrifice. Right at the front lines he tries to ward off the catastrophe by appealing from an airplane to the two opposing armies, seeking to inspire in them a common revolt and a desire to overthrow the powers which hold them captive. Without hesitating he leaves Paris and the woman he loves.

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