PRELIMINARY NOTICE

In writing this "Manual of the History of French Literature," which is at the same time, I do not venture to say the promise, but at least the "programme" of a more exhaustive and detailed "History," I have given attention in particular to certain points, which will be noted I hope; but as there is a chance of their being overlooked—if I have been unsuccessful in making them clear—the reader will excuse my insisting upon them in this short preliminary notice.

In the first place, to the customary division into Centuries, and in each century into Branches —poetry set apart from prose; comedy in one section, the novel in a second, "eloquence" in a third—I have substituted the division into Literary Periods. For since the periods of physics or those of chemistry are not dated from the transition from one century to another, nor even from the beginning of the reign of a sovereign, what grounds are there to date in this way those
of the history of a literature? Did writers reflect in the course of the year 1800 that they were about to belong to the nineteenth century; and are we to believe that they were at pains to differ from themselves in view of the advent of January 1, 1801? At the same time, the division into branches is in nowise less artificial or less arbitrary, supposing these branches to become differentiated, after the manner of species in the natural world, solely by the struggle, against one another, to which they are perpetually exposed. What, for instance, is tragi-comedy, if not the hesitation of the drama between the novel and the tragedy? And how shall we perceive this, if we separate the study of the novel from that of tragedy? The truth is, Literary Periods ought to be dated only from what are called literary events—the appearance of the *Lettres provinciales*, or the publication of the *Génie du Christianisme*;—and this is not only in accordance with reality, but is also the only mode there is of giving the history of a literature that continuity of movement and life without which, in my opinion, there is no such thing as history.

In the second place—and with a view to making this continuity still clearer—I have not omitted

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1 I would remark, however, that of the other divisions in use the most natural would yet be the division into reigns or political periods; and in this very book, for example, I have sketched some of the literary characteristics common to all the regencies in French history.
to note those other influences on which it is the habit to lay weight, the influence of race or the influence of environment; however, as I hold that of all the influences which make themselves felt in the history of a literature, the principal is that of works on works, I have made it my special concern to trace this influence and to follow its continuous action. We wish to be different from those who have preceded us in history: this design is the origin and determining cause of changes in taste as of literary revolutions; there is nothing metaphysical about it. The Pleiad of the sixteenth century wished to do “something different” from the school of Clément Marot. Racine in his Andromaque wished to do “something different” from Corneille in his Perharite; and Diderot in his Père de Famille wished to do “something different” from Molière in his Tartuffe. The romanticists of our own time wished to do “something different” from the classicists.\footnote{There have also been writers who have wished to do “the same thing” as their predecessors. I am well aware of the fact! But in the history of literature and of art, they are precisely the writers who do not count.} It is for this reason that I have not concerned myself with the other influences, except in so far as the succession of periods is not sufficiently explained by the influence of works on works. The useless multiplication of causes is to be avoided, and under the pretext that literature is the expression of
society, the history of literature must not be confounded with that of manners. They are quite distinct.

Finally—and for the reason that neither originality nor even genius consists in being without ancestors or forerunners, but most often in being successful where many others have failed—I have given more attention to the Periods of Transition than is usually accorded them. Is it necessary to point out in this connection, that in spite of all that can be urged, "periods of transition" exist? And since it is usual to describe them in natural history or physiology, why should they not be described in the history of literature? Not only do not all periods offer the same characteristics, but there are periods whose peculiar feature is to be lacking in characteristics. Able to show few lasting works, they are often prolific in writers of every class and particularly in ideas. Is it a law of the human mind that it often does not perceive at the outset the whole import of its discoveries or of its inventions? In any case, scarcely anything is seen to give definite results in literature or art that has not been frequently attempted, and in vain. Herein, precisely, lies the interest of the periods of transition. They explain the other periods because they pave the way for them, and they are quite unexplained by the other periods; and in this way they transform
into a genealogical link the connecting link of history, which would otherwise be chronological or solely logical.

Such are the two or three points I have endeavoured to keep in view in the kind of Discourse, which forms something like a half of this Manual. I now come to the points to which I devote attention in the continuous Notes which constitute its other half; they should serve the former half as illustrations or proofs.

I have made a selection among the writers, and have only retained for notice those of whom it seemed to me it could truly be said that something would be wanting in the "sequence" of French literature, were they not to be mentioned. There are very great writers—not many, but there are two: Saint-Simon and Mme de Sévigné—of whom I have not spoken, because the first Lettres de Mme de Sévigné having only seen the light in 1725 or perhaps in 1734,¹ and the Mémoires de Saint-Simon in 1824, their influence is not sensible in history. A method is a discipline which must be rigorously observed if it is to render all the services of which it is capable. On the other hand, to other writers, to Honoré

¹ I note here, as an indication of my method, that in a more exhaustive history, I should place towards 1734 what I should have to say of the Lettres de Mme de Sévigné; and I should connect with them that ambition to figure as letter writers, which a great number of clever women are seen to display about the date in question.
d'Urfé for example, I have given more space than is usually accorded them. Finally, there are writers of the stamp of Rollin or d'Aguesseau of whom I have thought it right to "disencumber" history. It is necessary to adopt this course when we begin to fear that the attention may be growing wearied, and especially that in consequence of this passing under review in triumphal succession of so many authors, the notion of the distinctions and distances that separate them may end by being abolished.

Again, this book being a Manual—I would almost say an Aid to the Memory—I have so contrived these Notes, that each of them in its kind, and in its rather narrow but also most clearly defined scope, should be the outline or "summary" of a complete study, and naturally I have proportioned the dimensions of this study, as mathematically as I have been able, to the true importance of the writer who is its subject. I say "mathematically," because in such a matter there should be no intrusion of one's personal tastes; one does not write a History of French Literature for the purpose of giving expression in it to his own opinions, but, very much as he draws up the map of a large country, with a view to giving in it a correct idea of the relief, relations and proportions of the constituent parts.

Further—always in order that the book might be more useful and a more efficacious and constant
aid—I have given very special attention to the Bibliography of the subject. *Qui scit ubi scientia sit, ille est proximus habenti:* this old proverb is never more apposite than in connection with literary history. In consequence, at the end of each of these notices will be found an almost complete enumeration of the *works*, and of the best editions, with their dates, of the *works* of each writer; while the notices begin with an enumeration of the principal *sources* of information to which reference can be made if it be desired. It is even incumbent on the student to refer to these sources: first, because he cannot neglect them without exposing himself to making discoveries that are not discoveries at all; and in the next place, because the very judgments formed upon the works of our writers by their contemporaries and by those who have come after them have become, as it were, incorporated with the idea we form of them ourselves. The criticism of Boileau, for instance, and that of Voltaire are inseparable from the notion of the tragedy of Racine. I have also endeavoured to classify these sources, and to arrange them in a manner that in itself constitutes their criticism; but this classification is still all too imperfect—and for this reason I do not insist upon it.

It only remains for me to apologise for the errors that it will be only too easy to point out
in this book. I have spared no pains to prevent there being too many of them of a serious or of a too serious nature, for in a certain sense every error of fact or in a date is serious in a Manual, based, one flattered oneself, upon an exact chronology as its firm foundation. But how is it possible to verify thousands of dates and to assure oneself of the exactitude of hundreds of facts without the memory wearying and even the eyesight being at a loss? I shall therefore thankfully accept all rectifications or corrections that may kindly be brought to my notice. A book of this nature only becomes what it is susceptible of becoming by the lapse of time—and owing mainly to the indulgence and collaboration of the public.

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