

VANITY FAIR

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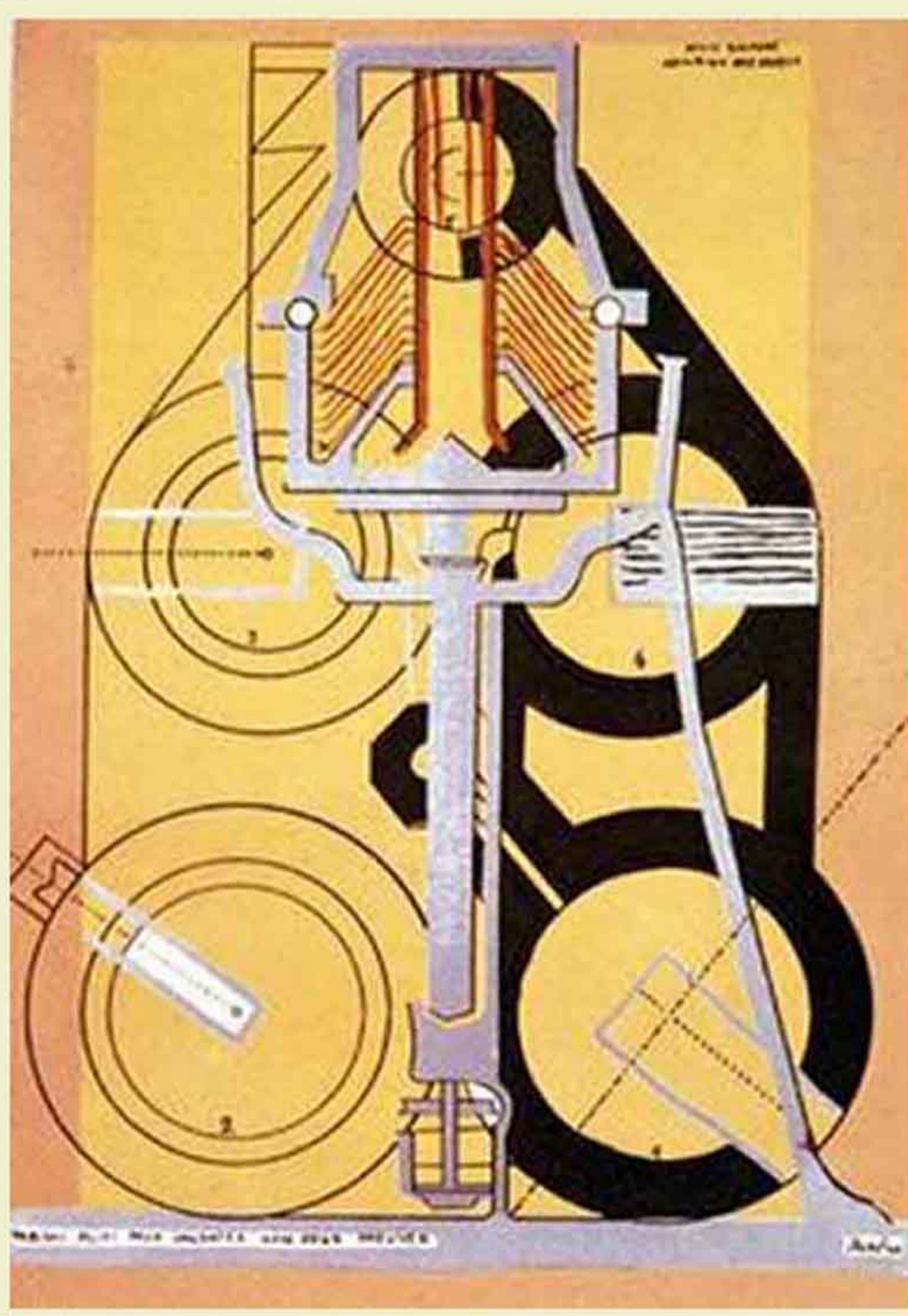
The Aesthetic Upheaval in France

The Influence of Jazz in Paris and Americanization of French Literature and Art

By EDMUND WILSON, JR.

YOUNG Americans going lately to Paris in the hope of drinking culture at its source have been startled to find young Frenchmen looking longingly toward America.

In France they discover that the very things they have come abroad to get away from—the machines, the advertisements, the elevators and the jazz—have begun to fascinate the French at the expense of their own amenities. From the other side of the ocean the skyscrapers seem exotic, and the movies look like the record of a rich and heroic world full of new kinds of laughter and excitement.



'Tableau peint pour raconter et non pour prouver' by Francis Picabia, the modernist French painter, who has given up painting conventional portraits for the purpose of painting decorative machines

Victorianism in France

ONE must understand that in France, too, they are having their reaction against Victorianism; but in this case the reaction is against something which we are not in the habit of considering Victorian—that is, against the French nineteenth century. We Americans, when we react against our own nineteenth century are accustomed to turn, in literature, for example, to Flaubert and Huysmans, to Baudelaire and Anatole France as the most perfect artists and sophisticated minds which the modern world has produced. We feel that we have been fed on water and that those are the headiest of wines, unaware that at the hands of their posterity they are suffering the fate of Tennyson. When Huneker discovered Europe and brought us the glad news that such things as *A Rebours* and *Les Fleurs du Mal* existed, he performed for America a service for which we never can be sufficiently grateful; but it is rather a pity that the matter should have been allowed to rest there. The people whom Huneker championed were, for the most part, exceedingly worth while, but he was frequently less a critic than a typical enthusiast of the nineties. Huysmans and Baudelaire, whose merits we may now question, were both obsessions with him and, in consequence, many Americans still imagine, that *A Rebours* is an extraordinarily beautiful book. Mr. Burton Rascoe, for example, is still shouting about Huysmans.

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I do not mean to align myself, however, with the younger French generation by whom Flaubert is lightly dismissed and Anatole France *conspué*—among whom the name of De Maupassant is like that of Longfellow to us. I simply want to point out that, in our anti-nineteenth century reaction, we flee for liberty to an asylum which has long since been abandoned as a jail, and even as a home for imbeciles. For the younger artists in France have completely thrown overboard the ideals of perfection and form, of grace and measure and tranquillity, which we Americans are accustomed to think of as their most valuable possession. Beside their devastating strictures, even the contempt of the *fin de siècle* seems orthodox and mild: Baudelaire, when he made fun of Renan and Molière, was quarrelling, after all, merely with the light in which they presented their subjects; in the production of his own work he was following ideals of perfection essentially the same as theirs: he was trying to write "well"—that is, well in the French tradition.

But the present generation does not want to write well: they are afraid of "good" writing. They believe that limpidity and smoothness are inevitably meretricious; they have become so much the habit of the race that masterpieces almost write themselves. The feeling seems to be in France that there are so many second-rate men who can achieve perfection in their sleep that, if a young man would save his soul, he must flee to the jagged and confused. There is even a curious reaction toward such people as Stendhal and Balzac, because they wrote badly. One of the ablest of the younger Frenchmen explained it to me as follows: "Ce ne sont pas toujours les gens avec les plus belles épaules qui tirent le plus souvent des mouches. Flaubert et Anatole France ont de très belles épaules, mais ils ne tirent jamais des mouches. Stendhal et Balzac n'ont pas du tout les épaules bien faites, mais ils tirent beaucoup de mouches." He himself, he told me, had been nourished in the old tradition and wrote naturally in the old way. "I have difficulty now", he assured me, "in writing badly!" But to write badly was his aim.—"A bas le clair génie français!" is the title of a spirited article in a Dadaist review.



An illustration to 'La Fin du Monde', a novel 'filmé par Blaise Cendrars'. It introduces two elements of American life made much of by the French modernists; the negro, and the poster

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The French Discovery of America

IT will readily be seen that, once arrived at the point of abandoning moderation, the French would find in the extravagances of America something very much to their taste. And it was not only the inordinate that attracted them in America: they had also reacted violently against the *raffiné* toward the popular, and the movies and dances and music of a country where everything was popular could hardly fail to fascinate them. Besides, America since the war has almost a monopoly of life; now that the life of Europe is exhausted we are bound to command their attention if only by virtue of the energy and the money of which we dispose. Here at least, they feel, life is going on unencumbered by its burden of conventions. Our skyscrapers may be monstrous but they are at least manifestations of force; our entertainments may be vulgar but they are

That is why we find French Dadaism—a violent, rather sophomoric movement—laying hold on our advertisements, with their wild and aggressive make-up, as models for the pictures and text of their manifestos and tracts—(with which it is proposed to “purge” French art of its slavish subservience to rules). That is why a painter like Picabia has given up painting portraits and taken to painting machines, why an author like Cendrars writes a novel in the form of a movie film and why a composer like Georges Auric devotes himself to fox trots and jazz. Even Jean Cocteau, who claims that in France he passes now “for the only modern detractor of the skyscraper and the affiche”, writes of a film called *Carmen of the Klondike* that “un pareil spectacle égale dans le souvenir les plus beaux livres du monde”, and longs wistfully for New York, which he never has seen:

“J’aimais jadis les gratte-ciel et les machines

*De New-York cité faite en affiches dessus
Et dessous en égouts peuplés par la Chine
(Après un incendie on s’en aperçut).”*

“Machines, gratte-ciel, paquebots, nègres,” he writes in *Carte Blanche*, *“furent certainement l’origine d’une direction neuve, excellente. Ils marchèrent sur Capoue comme une armée d’éléphants.”*

But the American who sees all this is tempted to cry out a warning: “Be careful that the elephants do not crush you! Do not try to make pets of the machines! In the country where you live, a dynamo is still a novelty; in your eyes, accustomed to low-built cities—“made to the measure of man”, to outlines, precise and gentle, that never obtrude themselves, to colors as soft and fine as if the whole world were water-colored, and to the music and the pictures and the poems which have taken their shape from these things, the harsh and bulky forms of New York, with their giant angles and edges, seen to satisfy your senses with a violence which your own country cannot supply. All about you can see nothing but the monuments of the dead; our films and factories and marimbas are at least of the living world. Your spokesman and critic has said that he prefers an American skyscraper, not to the fine buildings of the past, but to the bogus buildings of the present—to the modern French building designed in imitation of the eighteenth century. A skyscraper at least makes no pretensions: it is simple and suited to its purpose. But a piece of paste eighteenth century is an offense against both beauty and taste.—Well, I am not quite sure that

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(Les Signataires de ce manifeste habitent la France, l'Amérique, l'Espagne, l'Allemagne, l'Italie, la Suisse, la Belgique, etc., mais n'ont aucune nationalité.)

DADA SOULÈVE TOUT

DADA connaît tout. DADA crache tout.

MAIS.....

DADA VOUS A-T-IL JAMAIS PARLÉ :

OUI = NON

OUI = NON

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de l'Italie
des accordéons
des pantalons de femmes
de la patrie
des sardines
de Fiume
de l'Art (vous exagérez cher ami)
de la douceur
de d'Annunzio
quelle horreur
de l'héroïsme
des moustaches
de la luxure
de coucher avec Verlaine
de l'idéal (il est gentil)
du Massachussetts
du passé
des odeurs
des salades
du génie . du génie . du génie
de la journée de 8 heures
et des violettes de Parme

JAMAIS JAMAIS JAMAIS

DADA ne parle pas. DADA n'a pas d'idée fixe. DADA n'attrape pas les mouches

LE MINISTÈRE EST RENVERSÉ. PAR QUI? **PAR DADA**

Le futuriste est mort. De quoi? De DADA

Une jeune fille se suicide. A cause de quoi? De DADA

On téléphone aux esprits. Qui est-ce l'inventeur? DADA

On vous marche sur les pieds. C'est DADA

Si vous avez des idées sérieuses sur la vie,

Si vous faites des découvertes artistiques

et si tout d'un coup votre tête se met à crépiter de rire,

si vous trouvez toutes vos idées inutiles et ridicules, sachez que

C'EST DADA QUI COMMENCE A VOUS PARLER

OUI = NON

**A manifesto by the
Dadaists, whose aim
is to 'purge' the con-
temporary mind. This
leaflet states their
program: one of row-
diness, revolt and
disgust**

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"And do not try to be too barbarous it is impossible for you to succeed. The very essay in which you damn "*le clair génie français*" is very evidently written in a style which no other genius could produce. It sounds clear in spite of everything—even when the thought is obscured. Your attempts at the barbarous and the harsh are the most horrible things imaginable. Leave that sort of thing to us: our genius is adapted to it. We surpass you alike in the triumphs and the atrocities of the barbarous. Our greatest master, Shakespeare did supremely well with our language what Jean Cocteau sits up nights to do indifferently with his. The electric signs in Times Square make the Dadaists look timid; it is the masterpiece of Dadaism produced naturally by our race and without the premeditation which make your own horrors self-conscious and which makes them offend our taste doubly because we know that they first offended yours. Our monstrosities are at least created by people who know no better. But yours are like risqué stories told by well-bred young girls to show off their sophistication; they sadden even the ribald; they make even the barbarian wince!"