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Céline Mansanti

- 1 *The French They are a Funny Race*, written by Lyon Mearson and published in New York in 1931, is an unusual novel for at least two reasons I'd like to explore in this paper. First, *The French* mixes two different discourses seldom brought together. It is both a novel describing the adventures of a young expatriate American man looking for cultural "background" in Paris, and a critical discussion of modernism. Finding such an explicit discussion of modernism in the pages of a novel is rather unusual: when modernism is discussed, in the early 1930s, it is oftentimes within the pages of newspapers or magazines. Is it because *The French* combines two quite different discourses that *The New York Times* deems its "satire on modern art" "irrelevant"? In any case, I'd like to show that there is a logical continuity between the two discourses, especially in the context of the time, in which the ongoing debates on expatriation and on modernism are both marked by a criticism of "distinction." "Distinction" is the goal of the "uncommunicative [modernist] poet" according to Max Eastman in "The Cult of Unintelligibility" (Eastman, 1929: 636); it is also a notion used by Eugene Bagger in

“Expatriates in Time,” an essay published in the same magazine (Bagger, 1933). To Bagger, “distinction” characterizes the expatriate highbrow who “derives spiritual satisfaction from refusing to conform to the common standard” (Bagger, 1933: 369). As many other critics of the time, Bagger goes on to denounce the expatriates’ “illusion of superiority” and “retreat from the competitive order of democratic existence” (Bagger, 1933: 365). As we will see, *The French* ridicules such “distinctions,” through the perceptive observations of its middle-class hero, keeping, however, a certain form of lightness and humor, away from Bagger’s more critical approach.

- 2 Second, *The French* offers a discussion of modernism which is not just a “satire on modern art” – unlike what *The New York Times* writes. In fact, this discussion is not even primarily a way of transmitting modernism to a middlebrow audience eager to “read up,” to use a phrase by critic Amy L. Blair, who defines “reading up” as reading “for self-improvement rather than aesthetic pleasure” (Blair, 2011: fourth cover page) (an incitement we repeatedly find in middlebrow magazines such as the first *Life*). More than that, the novel organizes quite an open debate on modernism, allowing for the expression of its difficult language. A few words on Lyon Mearson might help to better understand his capacity to openly discuss modernism. From the little information available on this Canadian-born American author, playwright, and magazine editor, born in 1888, and who died in 1966, we gather that Mearson was interested in modernist writings as well as in the burgeoning popular genres that developed at the time. When Theodore Roosevelt left the editorship of *Metropolitan*, Mearson replaced him, and, with the help of his publisher, the eccentric Bernarr Macfadden, he brought F. Scott Fitzgerald (as well as Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and Upton Sinclair) to the magazine. Like Macfadden, Mearson was also interested in developing new popular genres, such as crime and science fiction – he published a science-fiction novel, *Phantom Fingers*, and a mystery novel, *Footsteps in the Dark*, both in 1927 –, as well as confession and crime magazines – he edited *True Experiences* and *True Story* magazines, both published by Macfadden, who was famous for introducing the extremely popular genre of the confession magazine. Mearson also wrote two Broadway plays and hundreds of short stories.

***The French* and the Tradition of the Expatriate Novel**

- 3 Before looking at *The French* as a discussion on modernism, I would like to show how it inscribes itself within the tradition of the expatriate novel. Even though it would be hard to call Mearson an expatriate writer (he probably traveled to Paris but did not stay long), he did stage expatriate characters and tackled the subject of “cultural” expatriation in his novel. And like most expatriate novels and short stories, *The French* satirizes both the Europeans at home (as the title clearly indicates) and the Americans traveling to Europe. The relationship of the French that Edgar meets to the war debt is probably the most salient feature of their collective personality, as most of them (porter, taxi driver and “ouvreuse” alike) repeatedly try to extort a few francs from him by protesting against the unfair war debt that plagues France (page 48 for example). Another recurring issue Edgar has with taxi drivers is their recklessness and stubbornness; but when confronted to a driver who won’t take him to his destination in good time, Edgar displays to the reader the “lesson in strategy among the French which [he] never forgot”: “There are several things the French hold sacred beside the franc.

One of them is eating, and another is an engagement with a woman. I used the knowledge to good purpose in my later stay in Paris” (Mearson, 1931: 52). Indeed, pretending one has a “rendezvous” with a woman is, according to Edgar, the quickest way to arrive wherever you wish to go. Throughout the first half of the novel, many French specificities and oddities are pinpointed: the French don’t usually have iceboxes and that is why they buy only for the next meal (Mearson, 1931: 28); concierges are all-powerful, “owing to the fact that the latchkey is practically unknown in France” (Mearson, 1931: 196), and therefore extremely mean unless lavishly tipped; French cigarettes and French coffee are so disgusting that “They must have, by some accident, brewed the coffee out of tobacco, and made the cigarettes out of ground coffee beans (Mearson, 1931: 102)!”; and a room with a bath in a hotel means that in order to take a bath “You have but to descend one flight of stairs and turn to the left. Then you mount the small flight of stairs leading into the court and the second door at your right is the room of the bath” (Mearson, 1931: 61). In this respect, *The French*, like other expatriate writings, turns into a practical guidebook providing its readers with information about the cultural habits of the French, as well as a list of the sights to see (from the Champs-Élysées to the Café de la Paix, the Louvre and the Tour d’Argent).

- 4 However, the novel’s title is deceptive inasmuch as the American tourists are satirized as well. Edgar wants to see “the real Paris” (Mearson, 1931: 29) and soon realizes that everyone else on the boat to Europe does:

There were a great many other interesting people on the boat, mostly American tourists who had never been to France before, and by some peculiar coincidence every one of them was going to see the real Paris and not go where all the tourists go. You never saw such purposeful single-mindedness in any group before. Each one of them was going to discover how the French really lived (Mearson, 1931: 42-43).

- 5 If, among the American tourists Edgar meets, Marcella is an easy prey as she’s described as an idiot – which is confirmed by the fact that “she had heard that the Louvre was a better store than the Galeries Lafayette” (Mearson, 1931: 45) –, Edgar is also able to put into question “the Americans in Paris” (Mearson, 1931: 106) at large, for example in a lengthy section in which he describes the very light contents of the Paris edition of the *New York Herald* – where “a heated controversy was going on as to whether women really like men with or without beards” (Mearson, 1931: 105). A comparison with a French paper he manages to translate works against the Americans (at least the Americans in Paris):

We – the Americans in Paris – were all one little family together, and everything was just grand. Later in the day I got a French paper and managed, with the aid of a dictionary, to discover there was grave possibility of a war between China and Russia, and that the Arabs, having decided that there were really too many Jews hanging around in Jerusalem, and not being able to control the birth rate, had decided to attend to the death rate (Mearson, 1931: 106).

- 6 Discovering the novel in the summer of 1931, when it was published, it would have been hard for the contemporary reader of *The French* not to make a parallel between the novel under their eyes and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the best-seller Anita Loos had published six years earlier. In both cases, the hero/ine is sent to Europe by their fiancé(e) in order to get “education,” as Loos and Mearson suggest with a touch of irony: whereas Lorelei writes in the first pages of her diary that her protector Mr Eisman “intends to present me with a trip to Paris as he says there is nothing so educational as traveling” (Loos, 1998: 11), Edgar is told by Lucille that “a girl likes to

look up to a man,” and adds: “if you could learn how to make a good impression when you get among cultured people” (Mearson, 1931: 15). Although *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* relies more heavily on satire, as Lorelei’s models of fine taste, but also Lorelei herself, are strongly ridiculed, the two novels start off with a denunciation of cultural refinement – “that sophistication,” to quote the title of a short story by Sherwood Anderson, first published in *Vanity Fair* in December 1928. “That Sophistication” follows the adventures of Mabel, a young and rich American woman, from Chicago to Paris, in her quest for “culture, sophistication” (Anderson, 2012: 667). Some details further suggest that Mearson could have been inspired by Loos’s novel, such as her reference to the bad temper – and financial greed – of the French at the beginning of the Paris chapter: “But the good thing about French gentlemen is that every time a French gentleman starts in to squeal, you can always stop him with five francs, no matter who he is” (Loos, 1998: 51). Lorelei’s comic belief that francs are not proper money – “[...] the price marks all had francs on them and Dorothy and I do not seem to be mathematical enough to tell how much francs is in money” (Loos, 1998: 53) – also seems to find an echo in the opening of *The French*, as the bank clerk asks Edgar whether he will cash his check “in francs” or in “money” (Mearson, 1931: 11).

- 7 Another recurring feature of the expatriate writings of the time is their insistence on French technological backwardness, especially in terms of plumbing. Bathrooms in Paris tend not to be attached to hotel rooms, making hotel stays little practical, as mentioned earlier. The complicated itinerary to the bathroom described by Edgar in *The French* finds echoes in other texts, such as *The Left Bank*, a 1931 play by Elmer Rice. Claire, an American woman staying in an uncomfortable Parisian hotel with her husband John, explains to her American visitors, Susie and Waldo, that “The bath is on the next floor above. And the W. C. is on the landing, half-way up” (Rice, 1931: 54). The backwardness of French plumbing was turned into a major issue for Americans, as revealed by an advert for a gas water heater published in *Life* magazine in 1919. The ad is based on a comparison between the little comfort of the Latin Quarter and the convenience of American modernity. Under two drawings showing the narrow “rue Brise Miche” in the Latin Quarter, and a man carrying a bathtub on his back, a caption reads “Hot Water in the Latin Quarter,” and is followed by this short text:

Compare this quaint Parisian method of having a bath brought upstairs to you on a man’s back with the hot-water service enjoyed in 150,000 modern homes having Ruud Hot-Water Service. Ruud owners simply turn any faucet in the house – any time – and get unlimited hot water (*Life* 74, 1919: 72).

- 8 Two illustrations complete the ad: one showing water running from a “hot” faucet; and another one depicting the gas water heater. The commercial world of the advertising business thus manages to reverse a cultural comparison that usually works against the United States into a way of celebrating the modernity of the country.
- 9 However, more often than not, expatriate novels, short stories and plays insist less on cultural differences and technological gaps between the U.S. and France than on the snobbism of the French “Art Boys”: in *Paris Bound*, a 1927 play by Philip Barry, Jim, a character traveling to Paris asks his friend Richard if he can do anything for him in Paris. Richard’s answer has the dryness of a stock phrase: “You might tell the Art Boys on the Left Bank not to talk quite so much” (Barry, 1929: 85). The snobbism of the rich American expatriates visiting Paris is another common target. “That Sophistication” by Sherwood Anderson is one example, so is “The Cradle of Civilization,” a short story by Dorothy Parker published in *The New Yorker* on September 21, 1929. Two rich, young

New Yorkers, drinking gin fizz at the terrace of a café on the Mediterranean and wearing “bérêts, striped fishing-shirts, wide-legged cotton trousers, and rope-soled espadrilles” – which Parker describes as the equivalent of Frenchmen wearing “a felt sombrero, planter’s overalls, and rubber hip-boots” in an “American resort” – carelessly talk about the ridiculous sums of money their crowd lost at the casino the previous night, complain about the French who “don’t even speak English in the post-office,” marvel at their own education (the young man is very proud of knowing that the Mediterranean is called “the cradle of civilization”), and express their dissatisfaction and boredom with life (Parker, 2009: 23-24). In some – unusual – cases the American expatriates are described as living a life of poverty. This is the case of the American couple in the short story “Soap,” written in 1932 by James T. Farrell: they need to decide whether they will buy soap or bread. Farrell was not the typical expatriate writer though; although he did spend some time in Paris in the early 30s, he came from a working-class background and was close to Marxism. “Mendel and His Wife,” written between 1931 and 1936, also features a couple of poor expatriates; but instead of describing utter misery, as he did in “Soap,” Farrell shows the contradictions of a couple who sees themselves as politically committed on the left, but who in fact lives off their friends and relatives back in the States and does not mind leading a bourgeois life when the situation permits.

- 10 The snobbism of the expatriates often goes together with a pretension to climb the cultural ladder. Sherwood Anderson writes about a couple in “That Sophistication”: “Then their son and daughter had got the culture hunger. Their fathers might have been half proud of them, half ashamed. The woman, when she was in college, won a poetry prize. An American magazine, of the better class, published the poem. Then she married the young man, the son of her father’s friend. They went to live in Paris. They were conducting a salon” (Anderson, 1992: 670)². In “Go East, Young Man,” a short story by Sinclair Lewis published in 1930, Whitney Dibble (from *Zenith*, like George Babbitt) is encouraged by his father, a rich business man who would have liked to be an artist himself, to go to Paris and study art. At the beginning of the short story, we see him snubbing his Yale friends who are discussing their career plans: “I am not [...] at all interested in your low-brow plans. I am going to Paris to study art” (Lewis, 2005: 153). Quite logically, he rents an apartment on the Left Bank and “That evening he went to the famous Café Fanfaron, on the Boulevard Raspail, of which he had heard as the international (i.e., American) headquarters for everything that was newest and most shocking in painting, poetry, and devastating criticism in little magazines” (Lewis, 2005: 154). Interestingly, Whit’s father, T. Jefferson, sees the cultural ladder as a continuity of the financial ladder he has already climbed, while most stories tend to distinguish both sets of values. In *The Left Bank*, Claire and John end up disagreeing on their status as expatriates. While Claire feels they’re “aliens” (Rice, 1931: 217) and is “tired of being an exile; tired of drifting – of this aimless, wandering existence that we live here” (Rice, 1931: 217), John believes that “We are living in the most civilized country that there is in the world today” (Rice, 1931: 217); “France is [his] spiritual home” (Rice, 1931: 217). He goes on to add: “I happen to be a sensitive individual, who prefers civilization to barbarism; cultivated speech and manners to the buffooneries of a plutocracy; intellectual and spiritual freedom to slavery – and the wines of Burgundy to even the most delectable Kansas turnips” (Rice, 1931: 218). “Culture” is ironically presented as the new credo in “Go East, Young Man,” as the “Babbitts” back in *Zenith* have an idealized vision of Paris and beg Whit – just like his snobbish friends at the Café

Fanfaron – not to stay in Zenith: “And don’t stay here! Don’t let the dollars get you! Don’t let all these babies with their promises of millions catch you! Beat it back to Paris. Culture, that’s the new note!” (Lewis, 2005: 165).

- 11 Some expatriate writings clearly develop a comic vein: it is obviously the case of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; but it is also the case of a lesser-known short story by Nathanael West, “The Impostor,” first published decades after his death, in 1997, in *The New Yorker*. “The Impostor” is the narrator of the short story, a would-be writer who knows that in order to be accepted by the Montparnasse crowd, he has to be seen as an original character. But, “By the time I got to Montparnasse, [...]. All the more obvious roles had been dropped and the less obvious were being played by experts.” “The impostor” eventually finds a solution to his problem by behaving as conventionally as he can: his strategy proves efficient as he is “asked to all the parties” (West, 1997: 411-412). But most satires are less characterized by their humor than they are by a conservative moral judgement on the expatriates. In his 1926 novel *They Had to See Paris* – a title which speaks for itself –, Harold Croy has his heroes come back to Clearwater, Oklahoma. A relieved Mrs Pike exclaims that “there’s no place like home” (Croy, 1926: 250). *They Had to See Paris* was clearly targeting a popular audience: the novel was published in the London-based Readers Library Film Edition, “illustrated with scenes from the all-talking William Fox photo-play Starring Will Rogers,” and preceded by an editorial note promising “A genuinely human story, brimful of fun. The surprising situations into which Pike Peters’s family plunges itself keep the reader entertained from first to last” (Croy, 1926: 9).
- 12 But other writings visibly targeting less popular audiences can prove just as conservative in their conclusions. The author of *The Left Bank* clearly sides with Claire and Waldo, the two characters who decide to go back to the U.S. and “face the realities of [their] li[ves]” (Rice, 1931: 219). Whit Dibble, in “Go East, Young Man,” comes back to Zenith and starts a career as real estate salesman. Conservative cultural clichés are not uncommon. Psychoanalysis, and Freudian theories in particular, are the butt of many attacks, for example in *The Left Bank* where John’s assertions that his son Teddy has a neurosis and that “Nearly all neuroses begin in childhood” (Rice, 1931: 18) are ridiculed by his friend Alan – a spokesman for the author – who replies that [he] think[s] [he]’ll have [his] dog psychoanalyzed” (Rice, 1931: 18). In “Expatriates in Time,” his 1933 essay for *Harper’s Monthly*, Eugene Bagger stigmatizes the expatriates who “have come all the way from Wisconsin to the hinterland of Toulon to write super-Freudian best-sellers by the light of wax-tapers in a crusader’s castle” (Bagger, 1933: 364). Non-dominant sexual and gender identities also constitute a recurring threat. In “That Sophistication,” the expatriates are, “for the most part, mannish women and womanly men” (Anderson, 2012: 667), an expression of homophobia that was very much developed at the time, France being often associated with effeminate behaviors considered as threatening for the virility of the American man³ – female homosexuality or gender-fluidity, being, as often was/is the case, less of an issue in the public debate. Those judgements seem to reveal a form of social anxiety which sometimes expresses itself as a threat weighing on what would be an American cultural identity. “Go East, Young Man” is a case in point. Going back to Zenith, Whit is in a lyrical mood: “Here, Whit felt, was a place in which an American might find again, even in these days of eighty-story buildings and one-story manners, the courage of his forefathers” (Lewis, 2005: 168). The “courage” Whit alludes to is first and foremost the “courage to tell his father of his treachery in becoming American again [...]” (Lewis, 2005: 170), that is to say taking a job as a real estate

salesman, and more broadly speaking, “mak[ing] your own living” (Lewis, 2005: 168). Such a reconsideration of middle-class traditional values might seem to contradict Lewis’s better-known writings, in particular *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. However, as Sally E. Parry remarks in her introduction to *Go East, Young Man, Sinclair Lewis on Class in America*:

In many of his short stories Lewis toned down the social criticism that was prominent in his novels. Most of these stories were published in popular magazines, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Redbook*, and *Cosmopolitan*, and you were expected to adhere to primarily positive presentations of American culture (Lewis, 2005: xii).

- 13 Compared to other expatriate writings, *The French* intends to present the reader with a comic vision of expatriation rather than a moral lesson on the relationships of Americans to Europe and their own country. The conclusion of the novel is not conservative. Edgar ends up deciding not to marry his fiancée Lucille. Lucille – the conservative character of the lot, who, at the beginning of the novel, threatened Edgar with not marrying him if he didn’t go to Europe to improve his education – is castigated by being sent to the Vosges by Aunt Minnie. As to Aunt Minnie, her aunt and chaperon, she proves to adapt very well to the Left Bank, becomes a modernist painter, adopts Kiki de Montparnasse and eventually concludes the novel by sending “the folks in Chicago” “to Hell” (Mearson, 1931: 298). It is true that the novel does not avoid some conservative pitfalls, such as associating France to a series of representations, not to say clichés – such as “There are several things the French hold sacred beside the franc.” (Mearson, 1931: 52). But on the whole, the comic prevails over the complaint, and the novel is less conservative than most. Its conclusion sets it apart from writings such as “Go East, Young Man” or *They Had to See Paris*. *The French* also differs from a novel like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as a bestseller, was also read by a middle-class audience. It was originally inspired by a romance Loos’s friend Mencken had with “a stupid little blond” (Loos, 1998: xi), as Regina Barreca states in her introduction to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and read by “highbrow” readers such as Faulkner, Joyce and Wharton (Loos, 1998: xi), who were undoubtedly attracted by its fierce humor and intricate layers of satire.
- 14 Mearson’s literary project is less ambitious than Loos’s, and the readership of *The French* was probably less diversified in this respect. Mearson seems eager to address a specifically middle-class audience, and provide them with helpful information on Paris while avoiding the most obvious conservative discourses on expatriation. The hero himself is middle-class: Edgar’s “middle-class moorings” (Mearson, 1931: 264) are clearly stated, and his profession – “the automobile accessory business” (Mearson, 1931: 194) – is even used as a positive counterpoint in a comparison with art criticism: “The automobile accessory business is much more subject to a close analysis. A description will last as long as the article described. It won’t be swept into the dust-heap the moment you turn from one article to another” (Mearson, 1931: 194). The reader is made even more comfortable since Edgar is presented as someone who does not know anything about modernism. The questions “Who’s Joyce?,” and “Who is Gertrude Stein?,” asked to “the man next to me” (Mearson, 1931: 203) in an artists’ party are supposed to be the ultimate proof of his ignorance – Joyce and Stein, as Leick showed, were the two best-known modernist celebrities in the 1930s. If Edgar doesn’t know much about modernism, he is presented as a curious person, one eager to “get background” – to quote the title of the chapter, “I Begin to Get Background”. In that chapter, Edgar reads “a description of the *Mona Lisa* by an English writer named Walter

Pater” and is “irresistibly driven to the Louvre the next morning” (Mearson, 1931: 191) to compare the description with the original. Likewise, on Stanton’s advice, he reads *transition* magazine (Mearson, 1931: 221) and *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of ‘Work in Progress’* (Mearson, 1931: 224) in order to try to understand modernism.

- 15 In this respect, Edgar is very much a reflection of the middlebrow reader depicted by critics interested in middlebrow publications, such as Joan Shelley Rubin, Sharon Hamilton, Faye Hammill, Karen Leick, and Daniel Tracy, among others. Middlebrow publications, to those critics, “bring forms of high culture to a large, broad readership,” thanks to their pedagogical function (Kane, 2005: 25). Edgar, a middle-class character, who doesn’t know about modernism or art criticism at large, but is eager to learn, fits this description, and can be seen, as such, as a model for the implied reader. However, comparisons between different middlebrow publications suggest that they are not all similar, but on the contrary spread over a wide spectrum. *The French*, for example, when compared to *Life* magazine (New York, 1883-1936), which can also be defined as a middlebrow publication, tends to be more critical of certain aspects of middlebrow culture. “Reading up” is not presented as an objective in *The French* – whereas it is much more of an objective in *Life*, for example, where culture quizzes and adverts for companies offering “25 books” to be “absorbed and digested” in order for their readers to be “well on the road to culture” abound⁴. Conversely, in *The French*, Mearson is eager to make fun of the Book of the Month Club (Mearson, 1931: 19) – just as he is eager to criticize all sorts of social conventions such as “seeing the typical Paris where tourists don’t go.” (Mearson, 1931: 185). In this respect – but only in this respect –, *The French* is closer to a little magazine like *transition* – which also makes fun of the Book of the Month Club in “Outline of American Literary Calendar 1927-1928”⁵ – than it is to *Life*.

The Debate on Modernism in *The French*

- 16 As we saw in the introduction, *The French* is as much a discussion on expatriation as it is a reflection on modernism; and the relationship of *The French* to modernism is just as nuanced. The question of modernism is introduced quite early in the novel, in chapter III (“Mr. Stanton Regards His Wife”), but is mostly treated towards the end of the novel, once the more obvious expatriation theme has been exhausted. The first presentation of modernism in *The French* is quite sarcastic, and corresponds to many other satires of modernism in middlebrow productions of the time. Stanton, who is introduced as “a young American painter [...] who lived in France” (Mearson, 1931: 37), agrees to show Edgar a portrait of his wife. Edgar’s description is quite “remarkable,” as he observes:

It appeared to be a woman; or rather, it appeared more like a woman than anything else. The nose, however, was at least a foot long, and was painted the most beautiful green you ever saw. There were no eyes at all, but there were long, luxuriant, purple eyebrows, and the hair was a scarlet smudge that stretched off into infinity. If she wore any clothes it would have taken a better man than I am to discover it, but her body was also green, with a touch of purple here and there, ‘To bring it together,’ Stanton explained to me. She had angular hips and no shoulders, and only one foot, or rather, hoof (Mearson, 1931: 38)

- 17 Such a satire of modernism, based on the notion that art should be mimetic, is common at the time, and was repeatedly used in the pages of newspapers and magazines like *Life*, from the 1910s to the 1930s. In 1913, “A Cubist Romance,” a poem by John Kendrick

Bangs, a well-known satirist in the magazine world, stages “a Post-Futurist marriage” between a Cubist and a “Matisse Maid” whose “neck was in a bow-knot tied,/ And brilliant were her blue lips” (Bangs, 1913: 740). Likewise, in the 23 May 1930 issue, cartoonist Gardner Rea shows a “successful modernist” who introduces his model to a crowd gathered in an art gallery where his paintings hang. The caption reads: “I owe it all, gentlemen, to the little woman!” (Rea, 1930: 13). Much to the crowd’s surprise, the “little woman” herself is twisted, has a crazy look, and no feet.

- 18 However, if Edgar and Stanton’s conversation reenacts a common form of satire against modernism, the reader soon discovers that Stanton’s position cannot be simply dismissed; half-way through the conversation, Mearson starts to rebalance Edgar’s and Stanton’s relationship by having Stanton abruptly cut Edgar in the midst of a bout of easy mockery: “Well, it’s easy to be funny about this sort of thing” (Mearson, 1931: 40). Once warned, the reader is ready to listen sympathetically to Stanton’s explanation: “We’ve come to the conclusion that resemblance doesn’t matter any more, in portraits. Many an artist can paint accurately, but the thing that makes him great is not his ability to copy nature – at least, not that alone – but his viewpoint.” Stanton’s explanation goes on, leaving Edgar speechless for a while, as he tries “to take this in” (Mearson, 1931: 40). This rebalancing does not mean that Stanton is meant to represent Mearson’s ideas; the conversation goes on, and Stanton is made “uncomfortable” and “hesitant” as Edgar is not easily convinced by his arguments. But a debate is launched, and Edgar is ready to try to understand Stanton’s point of view earnestly.
- 19 As Stanton and Edgar meet again later on in the novel, their conversation on modernism becomes more specific. After attending a party at Stanton’s studio in chapter 22 – an opportunity for Edgar to mock “the orgasmic pleasure” the young, snobbish would-be artists “got out of their conversational exhibitionism” (Mearson, 1931: 207) –, Edgar meets Stanton again at the Dome, where they discuss Joyce and Stein (chapter 24). The emphasis on Joyce and Stein in *The French*, in chapters 22, 24, and 28, confirms Leick’s analysis of the celebrity of these two modernist writers, and the numerous references to *transition* – a “joke book” according to Edgar (Mearson, 1931: 221) – equally suggest the centrality of the magazine in discussions on modernism. Joyce and Stein – as well as *transition* – are presented as the epitome of unintelligibility – especially in chapter 24, which involves a discussion of *Our Exagmination* and *Four Saints in Three Acts* – and snobbism – especially in chapter 26, where a “dialogue between James Joyce and Gertrude Stein” “with chorus of Left Bank editors” is punctuated by the statement: “We don’ think wid de crowd!” (Mearson, 1931: 279). However, here again, even if *transition*, Joyce and Stein lead to much mockery, as is the case in many other publications of the time, Edgar’s central concern is to dissipate the “smoke screen” (Mearson, 1931: 226) surrounding them, which reflects Mearson’s quite nuanced approach of the debate. Although the young modernist snobs are severely satirized, middle-class conformism is also mocked, for example at the beginning of the novel when Edgar is on the boat to France: “I had been enjoying them [the seagulls], up to that time, but when I discovered that they weren’t the better kind of gull at all, I began to feel there was something wrong with my artistic taste” (Mearson, 1931: 28). And although most of chapter 24 can be read as a harsh indictment of Joyce, Stein, and modernism at large, Stanton eventually takes the lead in the debate that opposes him to Edgar, when he surprises the hero by rejecting the cliché according to which the United States represents “the ugly skyscraper

civilization.” (Mearson, 1931: 233). Stanton’s perspective on American art is quite balanced, especially for someone who defends expatriate modernism and is a *Dome habitué*:

America hasn’t been able to make a real contribution to any of the other arts yet, probably because she’s too young, but she has made the first advance in architecture in centuries, and it’s been done in the last five or six years. [...] Don’t let anyone tell you there’s no beauty in America – they’ll be modelling their new cathedrals in Europe after the inspiration of some architect on Forty-Third Street. You’ll see (Mearson, 1931: 233-4).

- 20 Stanton’s inspired tirade then shifts to a convincing defense of Joyce which resonates as a warning, not only for Edgar, but also for the reader and for all the satirists of modernism:

And while I think of it, there’s something else about Joyce you people who come without preparation to his newest work ought to know. Joyce has passed through three distinct periods – he is now in his fourth – at least. With each publication, in each separate period, he proved that he was a serious and substantial artist; he did this with *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and with *Dubliners*, and to match his *Ulysses* you’ll have to go back at the very least to Goethe. That’s the reason we take Joyce so seriously; the man has been a giant in the past and we are well aware of it. Such a man must be taken seriously and sympathetically in his experiments, and it is altogether possible that one of the reasons we do not quite understand his present work is because we are not a hundred years older. It is possible that the man is too big to vibrate intellectually on the same plane with us. Before you laugh at a work of art because you think it’s funny you ought to stop to consider whether one day you yourself won’t be much funnier [...] (Mearson, 1931: 234).

- 21 This final tirade, which concludes chapter 24 on a note of “victory” for Stanton over Edgar, turns the modernist painter into Mearson’s spokesman, and counterbalances the title of the chapter, “I Can’t Understand it but I Get a Feeling,” a summary of Edgar’s – and most probably Mearson’s – criticism towards Stanton’s reading of modernist texts. This complexity encapsulates Mearson’s capacity to consider various aspects of the debate on modernism, and expose them quite minutely, far from the classic exaggerations satirists relied on in order to amuse and reassure their middlebrow audience. Edgar, the middle-class hero, tries to understand modernism (and gets frustrated when Joyce and Stein make no sense to him), just as he is ready to listen to Stanton’s arguments: “Yes, I understand that,” I said. “I believe you, too” (Mearson, 1931: 232). Interestingly, instead of just mocking modernism, or even defending it one-sidedly, Mearson organizes a debate which is likely to make sense to a wide audience. The difficulties of modernism are earnestly and explicitly taken into account, without leading to a radical condemnation of the movement (a subtle attitude which was not that common at the time). *The French* also contributes to a collective reflection on the geopolitics of modernism, for example by integrating a specifically American form of art (architecture) into global modernism. As such, a middlebrow novel such as *The French* actively conducts a true debate on the status and future of modernism – a debate which has mostly been studied as taking place within the modernist field⁶ –, and, in its capacity to open that debate to a broader audience, displays all its richness.

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NOTES

1. As underlined by Leick (Leick, 2009: 132), *The New York Times Book Review* sees in *The French* a "very good, though slightly irrelevant, satire on modern art and the school of James Joyce." ("Comic Paris," *New York Times*, Book Review, 26 July 1931, p. 6-7).
2. "A 'salon,'" as Lorelei says, "means that people all get together in the evening and improve their minds." (Loos, 1998 [1925]: 7).
3. See for example the poem in the "New York: 1928" manifesto in *transition* that reads: "Young Mr. Androgyne the talented poet/ writes verse on the beauty of his soul/ ☞ my body is as lovely as my verse/ big truckdriver if you like this verse of mine/ take me, big truckdriver". ("New York: 1928," *transition* 13, June 1928, p. 96).
4. "Are We a Nation of Low-Brows?," *Life* 80:2075, 10 August 1922, p. 1.
5. "Outline of American Literary Calendar 1927-1928," *transition* 14, Fall 1928, p. 120.
6. And rightly so. In 1931, the date when *The French* was published, West and Williams, with the second series of *Contact* magazine, or some of the contributors to *New Masses* were developing forms of modernism in an American grain as part of a political reflection on the evolution of modernist art in a world in which expatriation to Europe was not considered as a solution anymore.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article s'intéresse au débat sur l'expatriation et aux représentations du modernisme dans un roman "mainstream", *The French They are a Funny Race*, de Lyon Mearson (1931), en montrant que ces deux aspects sont liés par une perspective critique commune sur la distinction, comprise comme le sentiment de supériorité que les expatriés et les modernistes développent envers les gens ordinaires. En utilisant des sources primaires de la même période, il inscrit d'abord *The French* dans deux traditions littéraires et critiques, le roman d'expatriation d'une part, et la discussion du modernisme dans des productions mainstream d'autre part. Dans une deuxième partie, il montre que le point de vue du roman sur l'expatriation et le modernisme est assez fin,

bien moins conservateur, et plus ouvert d'esprit que d'autres romans d'expatriation et revues mainstream.

This article focuses on the discussion of expatriation and on the representations of modernism in a middlebrow novel, *The French They are a Funny Race*, by Lyon Mearson (1931), arguing that those two aspects are linked by a common critical perspective on distinction, understood as the feeling of superiority the expatriates and the modernists develop towards ordinary people. Using primary sources from the same time period, it first inscribes *The French* within those two literary and critical traditions, the expatriation novel on the one hand, and the discussion of modernism in middlebrow productions on the other hand. It then proceeds to show that the novel's standpoint on expatriation and modernism is quite subtle, and noticeably less conservative and more open-minded than other expatriation novels and middlebrow magazines.

Este artículo trata del debate sobre la expatriación y de las representaciones del modernismo en una novela media, *The French They are a Funny Race*, de Lyon Mearson (1931), mostrando que estos dos aspectos están vinculados por una misma crítica de la distinción, entendida como el sentimiento de superioridad que los expatriados y los modernistas desarrollan hacia la gente común. Comparando *The French* con otras obras de la misma época, este artículo primero inscribe la novela de Mearson dentro de estas dos tradiciones literarias y críticas, la novela de expatriación por una parte y la discusión del modernismo en producciones medias por otra. En una segunda parte, el artículo muestra que el punto de vista de la novela sobre la expatriación y el modernismo es bastante fino, menos conservador y más abierto que lo que encontramos en otras novelas de expatriación y en la mayoría de las revistas medias.

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Palabras claves : Expatriación, modernismo, Mearson, literatura media, *The French They are a Funny Race*

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