



J. J. SEZNEC

JEAN JOSEPH SEZNEC

1905-1983

JEAN JOSEPH SEZNEC was proud of being a Breton. As he once said in a memorable series of lectures on Renan, 'Il n'était pas breton pour rien'. Neither was Seznec, but underneath the charm, the elegance, the worldly-wise attitudes, and the wit, one immediately felt the commitments, intellectual, artistic, sceptical, and religious. He was educated as, and died as, a practising Catholic. He came, two generations back, from a relatively humble family of peasant farmers, and his social origins combined with his Breton background, whether in spite of or because of his awareness of his own brilliance as a scholar, made of him a very private and very complex person behind the public *persona*.

This tribute to him, and to his work, is intended to be neither a biography nor a bibliography, not simply a eulogy, and certainly not just an extended review of his published works. It is intended as a tribute to an outstanding academic achievement and to an endearing and cultivated personality. As a memoir it draws on the recollections of Madame Seznec and of a number of other people who knew him well. It is intended to be for the public record some account of the academic achievement and of the particularly gracious personality. It must necessarily bring in the principal published works and career details, but no tribute to Jean Seznec can do him justice if it stops there. Something must be said of the kindness, the generosity, the subtlety, and the wit, as well as of the elegance of manner and the scholarship.

Jean Seznec was born at Morlaix on 18 March 1905, the eve of the feast of St Joseph which he always said he would have preferred to have been his birthday. His father was a schoolmaster noted for his elegance. He died at Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire on 21 November 1983. His family had farmed not far from Quimper and near the small hamlet of Seznec. His mother, Pauline Le Férec, like his father a primary school-teacher, and with whom Seznec had a very close relationship, came from Trégor where Renan, so much of interest to Seznec in

later life, had also been born. She died giving birth to a younger son and Seznec himself was later brought up by his grandmother.

After attending the Collège de Morlaix, Seznec was sent to the *lycée* at Rennes where Chateaubriand, on whom he also wrote in later life, had been a scholar. From there he went to Paris to the celebrated *Lycée Louis-le-Grand* where he was taught by Alain and André Bellesort, and was a contemporary of Jean-Paul Sartre. Robert Shackleton, from whose memorial address some of these details are taken and who, had he not himself been taken ill, would also have written this memoir, recalls how Seznec used to regard himself in those days as a provincial who had arrived in a great metropolis, comparing himself (wrongly) with Julien Sorel, the central figure of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Neither Seznec nor Julien Sorel were ever social climbers, but Seznec's mind was by far the more supple.

Seznec's later interest in the visual arts was perhaps triggered by his own skill at sketching portraits while still at *Louis-le-Grand*. He considered becoming a professional artist and would have liked to attend the *École des Beaux-Arts*, but adequate financial provision for so hazardous a career seems to have been lacking. Until his last illness his handwriting always remained wonderfully neat and precise. He regarded Emile Mâle (1862–1954), the great pioneer historian of French medieval and post-Reformation art who pointed out the Eastern origins of medieval iconography, as an inspiration and one of his principal masters.

An appreciation of Seznec's later contributions to the history of art has been written by Francis Haskell, Professor of the History of Art in the University of Oxford, and appears at the end of this memoir. Francis Haskell, Robert Shackleton, and I were in 1974 to edit one of the two sets of essays published in Jean's honour, *The Artist and the Writer in France* (Clarendon Press, Oxford).

In 1925 Seznec went on to the *École normale supérieure*, then directed by Lanson and where his contemporaries included Raymond Aron, Nizan, and again Sartre. In 1928 he took the *agrégation*. His youthful academic career had obviously been brilliant but, remembering him as he later became, reading his *curriculum vitae*, his list of publications and discussing with the librarian, Mr Giles Barber, the notes he left to the Taylor Institution at Oxford, I have the impression that Seznec's academic interests had not yet found their focus. They were not to do so for some years yet.

After the *agrégation* he went to Rome for two years (1929–31)

as a member of the French School there and published his first recorded article, *Érudits et graveurs au XVIIe siècle*, published significantly in the 1930 'Mélanges d'histoire et archéologie'. It was during this period that he formed his lifelong affection for Italy. He has subsequently been criticized for spending so much of his career outside France, but it can easily be argued that he did more as an ambassador for French culture by his largely expatriate career than he could ever have done by staying in France. He moved to Cambridge to lecture on French literature for two years (1931–3) before spending a year at the *Lycée Thiers* in Marseilles. This he adored, liking nothing more at this time than teaching the classics to thirteen and fourteen year olds.

In later life he was occasionally to be hurt by sparse attendance at his Oxford lectures. He almost always lectured in French, and may well have been too sophisticated for Oxford undergraduate teaching. His Chair was a research post and did not allow him to give tutorials to undergraduates. That he was content to leave to college tutors. I am told that he examined in the Schools only once and believe that his vast range of academic interests and competences must have made him less than the perfect supervisor for post-graduates whose interests lay in achieving higher degrees quickly. He would however always take on whatever lecturing, even to first-year undergraduates, which the sub-faculty requested of him, and was superbly helpful to a host of colleagues and juniors. Generosity with his time was one of his endearing characteristics. He could not do enough for anyone with a research problem, but he does appear to have been impatient of syllabus constraints. Among the things about him remembered most vividly are the All Souls seminars, the lectures at the Ashmolean, and the wit and elegance of the BBC talks, none of which had anything much to do with teaching the French sub-faculty's curriculum, which must have seemed to him as unimaginative as it actually was, and whose procedures as philistine as at that date they actually were, although he would never have said so. Sez nec's eye for the abilities of his colleagues was acutely perceptive, and was occasionally resented.

After Marseilles, Sez nec returned to Italy (1934–9) to lecture on French literature at the French Institute in Florence of which he became assistant director, and where he was also happy. He returned to France at the outbreak of war, was mobilized as a *lieutenant* in the Chasseurs Alpains, a strange fate for a Breton and one which he disliked but undertook honestly, being much liked by his detachment. He then demobilized at the armistice in 1940,

the year in which he also published the book which gained him his doctorate and which first demonstrated to the world his academic brilliance and to which he always attached more importance than to any other of his academic publications, *La Survivance des dieux antiques*, a breathtaking partly iconographical and partly literary study of the way in which the French plastic arts from the middle ages to the eighteenth century treated the gods of Greek and Roman mythology.

It was in 1941, while sailing via Martinique with his first wife and Alain, his only son, currently Cornell University's Librarian, that Seznec started his long association with Harvard, having had to cancel an appointment there when war broke out in 1939. He went on to hold a variety of increasingly important posts there until, as Chairman of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, but disliking almost intensely both administrative duties and committee chores, he accepted the Marshal Foch Chair of French Literature in the University of Oxford (1950–72). He did however keep up his association with US academic life, visiting Harvard, Cornell, and Pittsburgh (three times). Of the seventeen visiting professorships listed in his *curriculum vitae*, two were in Spain, two in the UK, and thirteen in the US. Not surprisingly, honours were heaped on him: Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Member of the Medieval Academy of America, Fellow of the British Academy (which gave him special pleasure), Member of the Victoria and Albert Museum's Advisory Council, Prix du Rayonnement français, Commandeur de l'Ordre National du mérite. He afforded very powerful assistance to the French embassy in London and to the Maison Française in Oxford and was awarded honorary doctorates by Harvard and St Andrews. He was pleased, too, by the two Festschriften in his honour, one of which originated in the US, as did another tribute which took the form of an edition of some of his more important essays.

It was in 1946 that Seznec first met Madame Seznec, then Simone Lee (née Simone Pailley), in New England. She was widowed, with two children, the daughter of a professor, and came from Bourgogne. They were married in 1954. Seznec never drove a car and she was for years also his willing chauffeur. They finally settled in a large, elegant and fastidiously kept cottage not too far from Oxford. Seznec was always grateful to his wife for her tolerance of his evenings at All Souls, to which college his Chair was attached and where he had a beautiful set of rooms in

one of the Hawksmoor towers. He became a close friend of the then warden, John Sparrow, who, with Maurice Bowra, had organized the 'poaching' of Jean from Harvard.

Because Sez nec's academic interests were chronologically so wide, although increasingly focused on the relationship between French literature and the visual arts, because it is important to see how slowly that focus was achieved, and because it seems important to round off the picture of the man as well as of the academic, the principal elements of the bibliography, completed by Madame Sez nec, are published at the end of this memoir. The most important works are clearly *La Survivance des dieux antiques* and the Diderot *Salons* (Oxford, 4 vols., 1957-67), but the spread of interest, the sheer academic competence, and the deeply penetrating scholarship, always presented as elegantly as the series of BBC concert interval talks, do demand a list. Nothing was ever superficial or lightweight, although a good deal was presented amusingly, even rather naughtily, as Sez nec very well knew. He was a very accomplished stylist, not given to undue solemnity, let alone pomposity, of presentation.

One of his friends, Mrs Herta Simon, remarks not only on his charm, which was intense and obvious, his subtlety, the complexity of his personality, his kindness, and his wit, but also on the modesty of the true artist and on the touch of melancholy, 'When things went wrong, he could be matchlessly melancholy: his face was capable of falling inches with his mood'. He was also deeply interested in music. He spoke perfectly at least four languages (French, English, Italian, and Spanish), was very widely read, learned but never pedantic, and always anxious to help. Academically his interests ranged widely enough to include medieval authors, German, Italian, and Spanish ones, as well as French authors from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, but came eventually to focus on the relationship between French literature and painting especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He was fascinated by Egypt, intended to write on its visual impact on nineteenth-century French literature, probably because of his interest in Flaubert, and enjoyed his mission to Japan to lecture on behalf of the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles (1973), as also his lecturing in Poland and Germany. He acknowledged in his Oxford inaugural lecture that the company of classical authors had brought him 'a rhythm and a style'. He was being modest. What about the charm, the elegance, the faint cynicism, the wit?

It has been put to me that Sez nec's attitude to the Oxford sub-

faculty was one of lack of interest, and that he was 'too good' for Oxford. This cannot really be true. Good as he was in college, at the All Souls seminars, at the Ashmolean, and on the BBC, and at being an ambassador for French culture in the US and in England, it is difficult to see how one can be 'too good' for what is essentially a research post. What Seznec understood, as too few of us do, is that elegance is an academic virtue because it implies a striving for clarity, wit, and an obvious considerateness for the audience. What counted for him was the importance, or amusing interest, of his subject matter. To that we have to add the sharpness of mind, the amazingly retentive memory, the perceptiveness, and the wearing of learning lightly 'pour ne pas écraser les autres'.

He was not uninterested in the machinations of the Oxford sub-faculty of French, although he had better things to do with his Wednesday afternoons than to take part in them. It was he who, whether aware of a general expectation that he should apply himself to the teaching needs of the faculty or out of a personal kindness to myself, whom he then knew almost not at all, suggested when I returned to Oxford to teach that the faculty had a glut of seventeenth-century teachers, and why did I not concentrate on the sixteenth century, in which he knew that I was anyway interested. When I accepted, he got me a fellowship to I Tatti where I twice worked in its glorious surroundings and was able to browse in Berenson's extraordinary library, as augmented by Harvard.

It is probably true to say that his view 'le travail avant tout', explains his distaste for the sub-faculty's often frivolous debates and his dislike of administrative chores. Perhaps his greatest asset, beyond pure intelligence, academically, was his visual and literary memory. Some of his work, treating of sources and influences, may now look dated, and he wrote everything before the *Annales* school had really established itself. Lucien Febvre much admired his work, but I do not myself find in Jean Seznec, even in the Diderot *Salons*, anything of the social historian, except when he was writing on eighteenth-century social problems unrelated to art or literature. Academically he was a brilliant analyst of an older school, linking together authors of different generations and cultures and taking special delight in noticing how established literary authors had drawn on stimuli derived from the visual arts and how much painters had drawn from what they had read. One of Seznec's early achievements was to show just how much Fragonard took from Ariosto.

Seznec had long cherished the idea of an edition of the Diderot *Salons* which would reproduce the paintings on which Diderot was commenting. The original set of four volumes was reprinted, although Seznec sadly never completed the planned second edition. He contributed much to the understanding of Michelet, Chateaubriand, Renan, and Flaubert, too. Indeed his work on Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* is quite remarkable, taking off from a 1940 study of the sources of the episode of the gods in the first (1849) version of the novel (Paris, 1940) and bearing fruition in the 1949 *Nouvelles études sur 'La Tentation de Saint-Antoine'*, extending the analysis with quite remarkably painstaking but never merely pedantic erudition to the main episodes of the final version (1874), tracing the influence on the novel of Flaubert's life and reading, and thereby throwing much light on its meaning.

But it is *La Survivance* by which he is most likely to be remembered. What gave him particular pleasure was its appearance as a French paperback in 1980. It was originally printed at Gap in 1939, but published only in London after the liberation, receiving the *Prix Fould* in 1948. Several UK and US editions followed. The book clearly owes something to what we may call the Warburg tradition, and is still of essential importance for the pre-history of the Renaissance both north and south of the Alps.

A. H. T. LEVI

J. J. Seznec as Historian of Art

Jean Seznec was not trained as a professional art historian, but he made contributions of great significance to an understanding of the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He was particularly concerned with that notable French tradition which has led both to so many historians, philosophers, novelists, and poets drawing on the visual arts as an aid to the creation of their own literary works and also (less frequently) to artists themselves taking part in intellectual debate. The bibliography that follows this memoir lists the large number of admirable articles which Seznec devoted to the exploration of this tradition; all of them are of interest and many are of real consequence—notably those in which he discusses the issues at stake in the lively disagreements between Diderot and the combative sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet. Falconet, who is today remembered chiefly for his equestrian statue of Peter the Great in Leningrad, both intrigued and

irritated Diderot who asked him to write the article on sculpture for the *Encyclopédie*, and the correspondence between them touches on many of the chief critical issues of the times which are clarified by Seznec with great subtlety.

Seznec's most remarkable book—*La Survivance des dieux antiques*—was probably the first extended work to bring to the attention of non-German readers some of the principal researches associated with the great cultural historian Aby Warburg and his followers; but to those researches (which Seznec generously acknowledged) he added his own lucidity, his gift for narrative, and his capacity to convey his feelings of fascinated astonishment at the story he had to tell. All these qualities, which have deservedly earned for the book the reputation of being a very readable classic, were certainly necessary, for much of the story was extremely complicated and potentially confusing. The problem was to account for the extraordinary resilience of the pagan gods (as demonstrated principally in the arts of the Renaissance) in the face of the scepticism of the ancients themselves, of the hostility of the early Christians, and of the distortions and misunderstandings of Arab transmitters of the Greek tradition. Warburg and Saxl had mapped out the astrological wanderings of the gods through much of Europe and part of Asia; and in an extremely influential article of 1932–3 (later to be elaborated in his *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*) Erwin Panofsky had proposed a 'principle of disjunction' to account for the fact that medieval artists had sometimes combined classical subject matter with unclassical form and had at other times made use of classical forms with which to represent non-classical themes, but had not succeeded in giving classical forms to classical subjects until the Renaissance itself.

Seznec drew on all this seminal work (and, of course, undertook much original research of his own in manuscript and obscure printed sources) while, at the same time, showing his allegiance to the great nineteenth-century French historians (especially Renan) of the beliefs of late antiquity in order to give shape to his exhilarating book. It throws brilliant light on many aspects of the intellectual and imaginative lives of thinkers and artists of all kinds in the ten centuries preceding the Renaissance, for of course it ranges far more widely than art history, as the term is usually understood. But Seznec also made it clear that he was interested in the later fate of the gods in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, after their survival had been assured, and here (in his investigations, for instance, of the work of Cartari,

Conti, and other mythographers) he had to venture on to territory that was still almost wholly unexplored.

La Survivance des dieux antiques remains irreplaceable, and it is astonishing that so learned, so compelling, and so readable a synthesis could have been produced by a scholar aged only 35. Seznec never again wrote anything on this scale or of this intellectual depth, but—as mentioned above—he continued to produce a stream of articles, and in 1957 he published another book, *Diderot et l'Antiquité* (based on a series of lectures). Although, as he pointed out, he did not aim to cover all the themes raised by his title, it is necessary to stress that the book also touches on more issues than that title may suggest. The most interesting of these is that of the mixture of hostility and incomprehension which characterized the intellectual relationship between the 'antiquarians' and the *philosophes*. The problem had been much discussed in the eighteenth century itself, and in a desultory way ever since, and in 1954 it was brilliantly illuminated in an essay by Arnaldo Momigliano, *Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method*. Once again Seznec drew on all his unrivalled literary gifts to bring to life what were sometimes very arid issues: he was helped by the fact that the two conflicting attitudes to antiquity were embodied in two prolific men of genius—Diderot and Caylus—who hated each other and who were well known to, and often described by, many of the most brilliant characters in eighteenth-century Paris. Seznec clarifies the differences between them with infectious verve—but his short book is of more significance than this allusion to it may suggest: Diderot's writings on art existed only in unreliable texts and were not easily accessible, while Caylus (the greatest antiquarian of the eighteenth century apart from Winckelmann) had been the subject of only one, quite inadequate, monograph dating from 1889. The first of these problems was to be largely remedied by Seznec himself: the second remains as intractable as ever.

It is no secret that most of the credit for the complete edition of Diderot's *Salons* published under the names of Seznec and Jean Adhémar (the most learned and delightful of men, but not the most scholarly) is due to Seznec; and it is not too much to claim that these four volumes have wholly transformed the study of French art of the eighteenth century. Indeed, it seems likely that the revival of serious interest in that art which, after many decades of neglect, has marked the last twenty years or so has been stimulated by this invaluable edition. Diderot was, of course, not only a critic of genius, but also the single most

important witness—sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile—of the lives of many of the artists whose works he described: his gossip about them often constitutes our main source as regards their characters and ambitions. But his criticism circulated only in manuscript to the limited number of subscribers to Grimm's *Correspondence littéraire* and was not printed until long after his death. None of Diderot's earlier editors had seriously collated the various available versions—Seznec was himself to have some difficulties at first over access to copies of the text in private libraries—and the great majority of the pictures discussed by him had never even been identified, let alone reproduced, thus making it impossible to understand the nature of his often surprising opinions. With the appearance of 'Seznec and Adhémar' the whole situation was radically transformed. It is not just that Diderot's texts were correctly transcribed for the first time and variants indicated, and that they were supplied with informative prefaces. Equally significant was the inclusion of complete catalogues of all the Salons (i.e. exhibitions) discussed by Diderot, accompanied by comments on most of the pictures shown in them which recorded the views of some of the other critics of the time and indicated their present whereabouts. In addition to all this, extensive photographic documentation provided what was, as yet, the most complete corpus of illustrations of French art between 1759 and 1781. Enough has been said to make clear the importance of this edition—and of the debt owed by art historians to the work of Jean Seznec.

FRANCIS HASKELL

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