

## THE NEW MORAL DRIFT IN FRENCH LITERATURE.

THE Editor of THE FORUM asks me to record for his readers my opinion of the moral evolution visible at this moment in the literature of my country—an evolution with which he is good enough to hint that I am intimately concerned. Perhaps such an intimacy is not the condition best fitting one to be a good judge. An artist has been often compared to a workman who weaves a tapestry from the back, without being able to appreciate its coloring and design. In the same way, I should feel myself wholly incapable of meeting such a request, if the response needed to be formulated in a very close and categorical manner. But with a problem so complex as that of the drift of a literary epoch, it is always admissible to offer, in default of a conclusion, a few notes susceptible, if not of solving the problem, at least of throwing light upon it. Notes of this character the reader will find here. If they inspire curiosity to know certain French authors better and to appreciate certain French works more equitably, I shall not feel that my pains are wasted.

First of all, does this moral evolution in our literature exist? And if it exists, what are its depth and scope? That it does exist, the facts prove. To cite definite examples, it is indisputable that between the novels published in France in about 1880 and the novels published in 1893, the difference is considerable. The first affected to neglect absolutely the aggregation of phenomena constituting spiritual life. They were concerned above all in displaying the necessities of man's organism and surroundings. They ruled out systematically all the problems of conscience, as they ruled out all exceptional character. They proposed to paint manners, and they succeeded marvellously; that is to say, to paint average life in its everyday manifestations. Their object, to use the formula which serves as the motto for a fine novel of M. Guy de Maupassant, was "the humble truth"; and this truth they incarnated in personages humble like itself, destitute generally of the power of resisting temptation, and incapable of effort. Effort! This exactly is the habitual theme of most of the novels of the new order, which apply themselves, in

diametrical opposition to their predecessors, to depicting cases of conscience—exceptional situations, traits rare and subtle, complex personalities; in a word, precisely that moral life which seemed forever exiled from romantic literature.

The same thing happens in poetry which, formerly realistic sometimes to the point of brutality, tends to-day to become idealistic, even to symbolism. Fifteen years ago, its ambition was, in picturesque and execution, to rival painting. To-day, it models itself on music. It is preoccupied with effects of mystery, of shadow, of the intangible. Criticism also, from being positivistic and wholly documentary, has become again philosophic and moral. It no longer contents itself with stating and explaining. It seeks to judge. And thus the theatre, which seemed for the moment to stand aloof from this common movement, now tends also to conform to it. Admiration of Ibsen and the Norwegian drama is the evident symptom.

These diverse literary manifestations, which I have not illustrated by any particular names—though the enlightened reader will at once supply them—might not have any significance for the future and might constitute only facts of rhetoric. It happens often that one generation having exhausted one form of art, the next generation espouses the contrary form, out of mere virtuosity. This was seen, for example, in France in about 1840, when, after the triumph of romanticism, the writers of the “good-sense school,” so-called, with M. Ponsard and M. Augier at the head, attempted to restore classic verse, formal tragedy, and middle-class comedy. All the effects of lyricism having been produced, they evidently desired, and they hoped, to produce other effects by adopting an æsthetic code absolutely opposed to that of their predecessors. For a moment, public opinion was as if unanimous in proclaiming the triumph of this attempt which, in spite of the success of “*Lucrèce*” and “*L’Aventurière*,” found that it had no real importance in the history of the century. It responded to no profound necessity.

It does not seem that the moral movement traceable in the French literature of to-day should be similarly considered, nor that it is exclusively professional. It is important to remember that it accompanies a great practical impulse, which, although restrained, is none the less significant. While romance, poetry, the theatre and criticism are engaged more and more with moral questions, the symptoms of a veritable religious renaissance are discernible among the young. True, the group of the so-called “Neo-Christians” is not very numer-

ous. Nevertheless, it exists. And to anybody who knew the youth of Paris of twenty years ago, the single fact of its existence, affirmed and proclaimed, reveals a process of transformation too striking not to be worth the trouble of seeking at least its genesis. Nature advances by leaps no more in the world of spirit than in the world of matter; and for my part, it seems to me that this moral crisis is the direct and inevitable upshot of a general spiritual advance in our country during the last fifty years—notwithstanding that it may appear, on the contrary, a reaction. But in literature, as in politics, do we not often achieve an end different from our original desire?

M. J.-J. Weiss, one of the most acute critics of the last generation, was the man who first celebrated the advent of the Second Empire as an important date in the history of French manners. In politics, first of all, that advent meant the triumph of democracy under one of the forms it has most often assumed among Latin races, and the one most conformable to the antique Roman tradition: Caesarism. Now, whether it be Caesarism or not, democracy rests always on the same principle—equality, which has for its own immediate consequence an aggravation of the struggle for life. To say that democracy triumphed in 1852 is to say also that the cult of material interest began to predominate from that epoch with singular intensity. This positivism of manners was also, through the whole *régime*, the habitual theme of the adversaries of power. That it did not vanish with that *régime* was because its roots had struck too deep; and indeed positivism of ideas had triumphed at the same time through science. At that date, 1850, the principal results of the experimental method were known. This transformation was almost overwhelming, by its rapidity in the world of metaphysics and in the industrial world, and it extended almost as quickly in the world of literature. The traits which mark the literature of that epoch are in direct correlation with this double metamorphosis. Democracy and science fraternized at every step. Manners became positivistic at the same time and for nearly the same reasons.

Now, what was the great impulse that the dramatic art of that epoch set in motion? It was no longer passion, as in 1830; it was no longer intellect, as in 1840; it was money. Money is the motive of Emile Augier's "Lionnes Pauvres," as of Barrière's "Faux Bons Hommes," as of Alexandre Dumas the younger's "Demi-monde" and "Question d'Argent." What energy of the wit predominates in the novels of that epoch? It is no longer the eloquence of passion,

as with George Sand, or high social and aristocratic philosophy, as with Balzac. It is the exact, searching and scientific analysis of sensation. The masterpiece of that epoch, Flaubert's "Madame Bovary," extorted from Sainte-Beuve the cry, "Anatomists and physiologists, I unearth you everywhere!" And it was really almost a veritable surgeon's dissecting-table that the great novelist thus drew, with a mastery which made his book a revelation. This same Sainte-Beuve, renouncing the mystic subtleties of his first manner, inaugurated in his "Lundis" a criticism void of doctrine, similarly anatomic, which he defined as "a natural history of the wits."

M. Ernest Renan attempted on his part a natural history of religions, while M. Leconte de Lisle and Charles Baudelaire created in poetry a new species—the first by renewing the vision of nature and of man through the medium of the latest zoölogy and philology; the second by applying surgical processes to the study of his intimate miseries in, as it were, an implacably minute and courageous vivisection. Finally, M. Taine, the most powerful mind of that epoch, the most capable of strong generalizations, defined literature as "a living psychology," and gave it science as its supreme end. "Science is approaching," he cried, prophetically, "and is approached by man." He might have said that she had taken entire possession of him.

With these ideas and with this method, the young people who began to write in France before 1870 took up their literary work. They inherited from those masters the religion of science and of scientific experiment, pushed even to idolatry. The most typical among them, whose work will live in years to come as the monument of an astonishing genius—M. Emile Zola—manifested more than anybody else this religion, as he has more than anybody else practised this method. This is the true significance of what has been called the "naturalistic movement," but which might more exactly have been called the "positivist movement." To reduce the literature of imagination to the rigor of an observation or even of a scientific contribution—such was the programme of this school. Its rigor explains why the artists of the group do not recoil before any audacities of the most flagrant realism. The world has been very unjust in not recognizing in the author of the "Rougon-Macquarts" the profound sincerity of a man of conviction, who may have been imperfectly understood by certain readers, but who has been guided always by his conscience. This programme explains also how this school was obliged, if one may so express it, to succumb by its own triumph,

or rather to become transmuted into its opposite. It had chosen observation as its unique end and as its method in the art of writing; but a moment was bound to arrive, and it did arrive, when it was seen that this word "observation" possessed a double sense, because observation itself may have a double object. Naturalistic literature limited its field of documentation to external man, his sensations, his social habitudes. It neglected the inner world of ideas and sentiments. Yet this world exists, as legitimately as the other. The complexities of a heart at war with itself, the distresses of a mind in search of truth, the joys and the remorse of a will which forces itself to its duty, or which rejects duty—are not these positive facts, and facts which, on this account, have the right to be registered? Is the observation which neglects them complete? It was thus that beside physiological realism, if one may so term it, another sort of realism manifested itself, which we may call psychological.

It became evident, moreover, by means of the novel of analysis; and in examining from this point of view the entire works of certain writers, one can trace easily the progress of the evolution. In no case has it been more marked than in that of the favorite pupil of Gustave Flaubert, the laborious and unhappy Guy de Maupassant. The reader who compares the first books of this author, "*Une Vie*," for example, and "*Bel Ami*," with the later ones, "*Pierre et Jean*," "*Fort Comme la Mort*," and "*Notre Cœur*," will place his finger on the transformation of which I speak. To the dissection of sensation succeeds, little by little, the dissection of sentiment. Instead of painting simply instincts, the artist seeks to define traits. In a word, he perceives dimly this domain of the life of the soul, of which he seemed ignorant, of which he was ignorant, at the period of his first attempts. He has not ceased to be a positivist, and his observation still limits itself to stating facts in the manner of a scientist who classifies phenomena without interpreting them. But it is already clear that he suffers from this attitude—and of this those who knew that great writer personally were well aware. During the year which preceded the last crisis of his malady, he was almost wholly absorbed with religious questions. No doubt whatever that if he had lived his fine talent would have been definitively modified in this sense, of spiritual and perhaps Christian life, a sense altogether unanticipated by the admirers of his first writings.

The truth is, there is a logic which overpowers all preconceptions in the relation of reality and human intelligence. The literature of

scientific observation was constrained to unfold into a psychological literature. It was impossible that this last should not encounter on its side the problems of moral life. In analyzing human sentiments from within instead of from without, we plunge by necessity into the mysteries of moral health and disease. We are forced to acknowledge that there are passions which destroy the soul, others that exalt it; that certain acts leave after them a trace of shadow, others a trace of light; that there are, in fine, laws of the inner life, as there are laws of physical life, and that these laws all presuppose in us the notion of liberty and responsibility. In other words, the problem of sin appears, and, once apparent, may be no longer neglected. Abandoned to itself and in the simple process of its normal development, contemporary French literature would inevitably have followed this route, and we should have witnessed, sooner or later, a renewal of moral preoccupations analogous to that visible to-day.

Two causes arose to precipitate it, which it is important clearly to determine in order to explain that which may have appeared a little artificial and which still deeply affects this movement. The first of these two causes was an influence derived from foreign literature. Frenchmen are often reproached with being ignorant of what goes on outside Paris; and this reproach, thus formulated, is very unjust. It would be more exact to say that they study the great books published outside of their own country, only at intervals. During one whole period, for example, they remained indifferent to the magnificent poetic movement in England which glittered with the names of Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne and Rossetti. Suddenly they discovered this universe of lyricism, and were intoxicated by it. M. Alphonse Daudet, in his "Immortel," finely satirized this sudden rapture when he said that to-day—he spoke of 1888—most young Parisian critics made their *début* with a study of Shelley! Similarly, despite the efforts of Mérimée, Russian literature remained almost unknown in France until the most brilliant of living essayists, M. E. Melchior de Vogüé, revealed to the readers of the "Revue des Deux Mondes" the genius of Count Tolstoi and of Dostoiévsky. Then arose a crisis of enthusiasm—abundantly justified—for "Anna Karenina," "War and Peace," "Crime and Punishment." It was suddenly discovered that the English poets and the Russian novelists were alike artists of a semi-mystical turn, preoccupied before all things with the inner life, and even, like Shelley and Tolstoi, moral reformers with the temperament of apostles. It is no



exaggeration to say that this experience was an illumination for many young writers who were seeking a direction. But every influence of this order has necessarily something factitious about it; and human as Shelley was, cosmopolitan as Tolstoi was, they remained none the less too essentially Anglo-Saxon and Slav to inspire a continuing imitation among the Latins of the end of the nineteenth century.

This is one of those elements of the contemporary French evolution that I have just called artificial. The other, which is more durable because more national, is the present state of the country. It is evident, to those who study impartially the France of to-day, that she is traversing a period of definitive metamorphosis. Political problems on the one hand and social problems on the other have reached a stage of acuteness difficult for those who know French life only on its Parisian and cosmopolitan sides to appreciate. At this moment, among the young people just on the threshold of manhood, there is a sentiment of national duty intense almost to the point of passion, a fervent desire to do strenuous work in the service of their country, a conviction that the agnosticism of science is not adequate to the creation of useful energies, an ardent and sorrowful anguish in religious problems. These are the young people whose intimate perplexities M. Paul Desjardins has explained in pamphlets which have made too much stir not to express a general mood.

It is also this mood which renders probable the duration of the literary evolution concerning which the Editor of *THE FORUM* has done me the honor to interrogate me. I should have been glad to reply with more precision and more authority. I should have been glad to cite more names and more books. But when a whole literature is under discussion, one fears to be not quite just by quoting one example rather than another. Besides, nothing can replace the actual reading of the books themselves. May these cursory notes at least persuade a few in America that we in France are working with true sincerity and true seriousness, that our efforts date not from yesterday but from a long time ago—and that in particular the novel of manners, like the novel of analysis, has been executed in France with a conscientiousness too frequently overlooked.

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## HAMILTON FISH: THE OLD SCHOOL AND THE NEW.

A VERY great change has come over American politics and American society, one may almost say over American institutions, since Hamilton Fish was born. The founders of the republic builded other than they knew; and Washington, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, would hardly recognize in the Congress of 1893 or in the millionaires of Chicago and New York the expected result of their labors. The founders were for the most part elaborate and dignified in manner, and careful, even conservative, in conduct; for although they inaugurated a revolution, they did their work in the spirit of the Girondins rather than of the Jacobins, of Fairfax rather than of Barebones. But revolutions never go backward, and their descendants live in an atmosphere and under a system very different from the atmosphere and the system of 1776. And yet these are the legitimate outcome of that era.

Fish came upon the stage when this transformation had hardly begun; his father was the friend of Washington and the executor of Hamilton, and the son witnessed during his eighty-five years a great succession of changes in national manner and feeling and character, which continued until there was left in all our high political life no other representative of the older style so conspicuous as he. The change is, however, a development as much as a revolution; and it is curious to contemplate in the career and character of a single man the process of this development. For Fish was the link between the race of politicians of colonial times, the manorial lords with powdered wigs and patrician bearing, and the modern type that has arisen since politics has come to be, for so many, simply a business.

Hamilton Fish was a survival. The possessor of large inherited estates and the representative of an almost historic family, he was in reality what so many are incorrectly called—an American aristocrat; not at all one of the money-kings of to-day, not in the least one of the statesmen who have raised themselves from the people by native genius. He was hardly the result of republican institutions, and yet he was American to the core. His father was an officer of the revo-