

dren and to the masses of the people. Without the *ipse dixit* of a supernatural authority, the people are not to be trusted and are liable to go off into all sorts of vagaries of belief and of conduct. This is, perhaps, the last and most insidious refuge of a dying autocracy. It is worth while here to recall one of Lincoln's remarks, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." We cannot, if we would, conceal the truth which is growing in the world and we may take as our motto the words of our greatest Leader, "The truth shall make you free."

ANATOLE FRANCE—A POSTSCRIPT.¹

BY LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS.

"WE do not remain one moment the same, and yet we never become different from what we are,"² said Anatole France at thirty. But what is the stable element in this restless soul? Is it the poet or the naturalistic novelist, the dilettante or the patient historian, the mystic or the rabid anticlerical, the amiable skeptic or the bitter polemic, the cynical satirist or the reformer, the scoffer at men or the humanitarian and builder of a new Utopia? What is constant in this kaleidoscope of phases or moods?

Halt your kaleidoscope at any figure, and take it apart. Some of the colors are covered up by others, but underneath lie all the elements of every pattern. Take Anatole France in any of his phases, and one finds, balanced or conflicting or dominated one by the other, his two basic elements: an imagination essentially romantic and a Voltairian keenness of analysis. And under all their changes of pattern plays the same motive force, the same instrument, the *sensibilité nerveuse* which he early noted in Racine: in other words the artist's temperament, vibrant and sensuous, richly responsive but a shade too delicately poised—a nature which after its first contact with life, is bound to turn away from its ugliness to that softer reflection of reality given by literature and art.

"There are times when everything surprises me, times when the simplest things give me the thrill of a mystery,"³ he writes at

¹ In the following we give the last chapter of the book on Anatole France which we announced in our September number, and which will soon be ready for publication. The author, Professor Shanks, is now teaching in the University of Wisconsin.

² *Génie latin*, p. 309.

³ *Livre de mon ami*, p. 4.

forty. This is the faculty which makes the poet, the mystic, the curious and eager dilettante. "Imagination turns into an artist a man whose feeling is stirred, and a brave man into a hero."⁴ This is the faculty which makes the idealist and the dreamer of reform.

Fond of the marvelous and the exotic, enamored of the past, subjective and sentimental beneath all his irony, finding in memory "une Muse divine,"⁵ this imagination is undeniably romantic. But against that influence works the acid of an intellect analytic as Voltaire's, solving or dissolving all; and if its rational activity, which gives us the scholar, the philosopher, and the satirist, does not invariably end in cynicism, one may be reasonably sure of that result in a temperament self-betrayed by its visions and wounded through its abnormal sensitiveness. Before that final term, his intellect finds pause on Montaigne's pillow of doubt, and happily mingled with imagination, finds flower for over a decade in its finest pages.

Who, could we choose, would not live the golden forties with Anatole France? In those cloister days, protected like his long adolescence, even the "nervous sensibility" of the artist combines happily with his mental faculties, urging fancy and intellect alike to explore. Rooted in an ardently sensitive nature, "that high curiosity, which,"—as he tells us,—“was to cause the confusion and the joy of his life, devoting him to the quest of that which one never finds,”⁶ now leads the poet and the scholar to a past infinitely more attractive than the present. An egotist, an intellectual romanticist, loving the past less for truth's sake than for the escape it offers to his imagination, where it reflects itself as richly as a woman's beauty in a Renaissance mirror, so too he loves the ideas of the past, the ideas of the present, the marvels of science, the Utopias of the reformers, the poetry in all of man's pageant of philosophy, whereof he believes not a single word. We may rightly blame the selfishness of this attitude, but even an idle curiosity may produce for us the gift of beauty. So with this intellectual hedonist: in his richly furnished mind each new impression echoes and reechoes, until somewhere down the galleries of memory it strikes to music a forgotten harp or violin. For Anatole France lives in his memory as he lives in art and reality.

Yes, reality. Even this skeptical monk of letters cannot completely shut out the real world, the world of feeling and experience. "Like others, skeptics too are subjected to all the illusions of the universal mirage: they too are the playthings of appearances; some-

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁵ *L'anneau d'améthyste*, p. 190.

⁶ *Pierre Nozière*, p. 17.

times vain forms cause them to suffer cruelly. Useless for us to see the nothingness of life; a flower will sometimes suffice to fill it to overflowing."⁷

There, surely, the conflict of his temperament stands revealed. Impossible for him to reconcile his intellect, his pessimism, with the sensuously imaginative love of beauty which draws him—with that passion which fires his artist's blood before life's tragic moments of beauty—brief foam-flowers lapsing into waves of ugliness or a flood-tide of indifference or despair. Impossible to reconcile this conflict, which makes Bergeret, beset by provincial vulgarity, "dream of a villa with a white loggia set above a lake of blue, where, with his friends, he might converse in the perfume of the myrtles, at the hour when the moon comes forth to bathe in a sky pure as the gaze of the good gods and soft as the breath of the goddesses."⁸ Awakened like Bergeret by stones crashing through his library window, an oversensitive type will turn back to his books, longing, at least momentarily, for the hermit's life which will remove him definitely from the incongruities of a world not made for romanticists.⁹

So Bonnard is transformed into Bergeret, who, despite his cult of ataraxy, reveals a latent capacity for emotion—the romantic sensitivity—in his praise of Irony and Pity. But in the course of life one gets used to living, learns to love life, to love it even in its ugliness, like the atheist in *La chemise*. "Moi, j'aime la vie, la vie de cette terre, la vie telle qu'elle est, la chienne de vie."¹⁰ So the mature Anatole France attains the pessimistic tranquillity of Doctor Trublet and Brotteaux des Ilettes, in whom imagination has at last yielded to intellect, philosophers grown serene with age, no longer lamenting Bergeret's dream-villa, but content to gather uncomplaining the crumbs of beauty life offers by the way.

In fine, one cannot help thinking that Anatole France looked into the mirror when he drew Dechartre in *Le Lys rouge*. Like the artist, he too is "a restless mobile spirit, egotistic and passionate, eager to give himself, prompt to withdraw, loving himself generously in all the beauty which he finds in the world."¹¹ He too is one who lives for self, for the pleasures his fancy and his intellect and his temperament can give. This makes him an artist, and this gives him the defects of the artist. "There are people who are masters of their impressions, but I cannot imitate them."¹² So he

⁷ *Vie littéraire*, II, p. 174.

⁸ *Mannequin d'osier*, p. 33.

⁹ *Livre de mon ami*, p. 70.

¹⁰ *Barbe-bleue*, p. 258.

¹¹ Page 99.

¹² *Pierre Nozière*, p. 275.

is the victim of his qualities, unable to coordinate or discipline either intellect or imagination. "I have never been a real observer, for the observer must have a system to guide him, and I have no system at all. The observer directs his vision; the spectator lets himself be led by his eyes."¹³

The results of this yielding to self are shown in his art. All his longer stories are formless: lack of true constructive ability is the real basis of his preference for the tale. Unable to force his talents or coordinate them, he requires twenty years to finish his one piece of serious scholarship. But discipline would have curbed that universal curiosity which is his life's chief interest; the dilettante cannot subordinate his talents, the skeptic can build no system save the skepticism which indulgently tolerates them all.

A man of moods, living after his moods, his subjectivity will always limit his creative imagination. His best characters—the only truly living characters of his novels—are invariably "portraits of the artist." Aside from that, he can only draw directly from life—as he did with Choulette—or sketch a figure cleverly characterized by the externals which impress his sympathy or his impassive hate. Rather significant, in this connection, is his denial of the creative imagination: "All our ideas come to us from the senses, and imagination consists, not in creating, but in assembling ideas."¹⁴ So, too, he defends plagiarism and makes creation a matter of style: "Ideas belong to everybody, but as a thought has no value save through its form, to give a new form to an old thought is art in its entirety and the only creation possible to humanity."

Yet it would be easy to push this criticism too far. The originality of Anatole France is to depict his multiple self, to mould figures into which he can breathe his own ideas, and to make them of enduring metal rather than the usual sawdust or straw. Subjective portraits as they are, Sylvestre Bonnard and the genial Abbé, Professor Bergeret and Trublet and Brotteaux are enough to compensate for this creative deficiency, which is supplemented by a memory which makes his brain the sum of all he has ever been. For Anatole France lives in his own past as he lives in the past of humanity.

To impose no rein upon imagination or intellect, to avoid discipline and coordination of one's talents to a single end, to follow the self where it listeth, is the mark of the intellectual Epicurean. And perhaps we may even drop the adjective! "Let us not listen to the priests who teach the excellence of suffering," he tells an

¹³ *Livre de mon ami*, p. 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

audience *in propria persona*,¹⁵ "for it is joy which is good. . . . Let us not fear joy, and when a beautiful thing or a smiling thought offers us pleasure, let us not refuse it." Needless to cite proof: indications of his pagan sensuousness are frequent enough throughout his work, particularly in the growing license of the later books. That fact alone shows the breakdown of pure hedonism as an intellectual ideal. But, on the other hand, here we find the very quality which, at its best and under control, creates his finest prose: it is this sensuous vibrancy that gives such an atmospheric afterglow to his pages which stir the senses and trouble the soul like the poignantly fleeting beauty of a sunset sky. It is a glamor we can only feel, created by one who "would rather feel than understand."¹⁶

An Epicurean gifted with an active mind, a restless soul ever seeking the unknown, will of course enjoy a longer cycle of pleasures than a mere sensual hedonist. "One wearies of everything except the joys of comprehending." But "books trouble restless souls,"¹⁷ and though comprehension remains a pleasure in the long ranges of the mind, when it comes home again to self its joys are turned to torment. "Our ignorance of our own *raison d'être* must always be a source of melancholy and disgust."¹⁸ When youth is gone and self-centered intellect alone remains, dissolving that hope and illusion which is the spiritual basis of life, when the bitter skeptic has definitely put down the poet and the idealist, he must reaffirm himself by action, and the cloistered Epicurean knows no form of action but writing. Even the skeptic must write—write to regain an illusion for living. He may not know whether the world exists, but as an artist he does know that his art exists absolutely. We must all believe: the very gymnosophist, sitting in mud on the Ganges banks, hugs a negative belief beneath his squalid immobility. We must believe and *act*, or die: "Whatever be our philosophic doubts, we are forced to act in life as if we had no doubts at all."

So like the homunculus of Faust, the romantic Pyrrhonist yields to life's imperative call. He turns to his desk, and there makes a stand against the flux of appearances which Heraclitus first taught by the Ionian sea. He expresses himself, like all of us; and it is well perhaps that this impulse to self-expression should be instinctive and blind. He may excuse his inconsistency by saying, like Anatole France, that "it is better to speak of beautiful things than not to speak at all," but at heart he knows that he is only the blind

¹⁵ *Opinions sociales*, p. 70.

¹⁶ *Vie littéraire*, II, p. 191.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. iv.

¹⁸ *Jardin d'Epicure*, p. 67.

instrument of the Light that is in him, the slave of a Word that must be made flesh for the salvation of his soul.

And thus, even in his cloister, the artist like the philosopher justifies his existence to the world. He is judged by his results. If the man of stronger passion and simpler mind,—the man of action,—finds his self-expression in fighting the universe without, his broader vision and more timorous judgment will turn him from that unequal struggle with an age of low ideals, to find a field of action in the universe within. He will live, not in life but in books, that agreeable dilution of life, which even a world of "service" may well allow to those who distil honey for its delight. And if, as with Anatole France, his is too vital a temperament to stay there forever, if finally the same nervous sensitiveness which had led him to art brings him out of his study in generous pity for the oppressed, we must sympathize with him returning in disillusion. Not that such a one needs it: he still has, to console him behind his study doors, the intellectual life, the much-needed critical spirit which alone will make the liberty of our children's world. And some day, reviewing his work and noting in his later loss of poise the brand of the conflict, posterity will regret that Anatole France did not stay in his library, content to remain one of those "for whom the universe is only ink and paper," comforted by the fact that ink and paper and broken marble is all that is left of those who laid the foundations of modern Europe in the little Attic town. To keep to his books, to shut the door upon the petty struggle, to hold his universal curiosity and his universal sympathy down to the definite task of criticism—there lay the way out for Anatole France. That was Sainte-Beuve's solution of his own similar problem: "*J'éventre les morts pour chasser mon spleen.*"

Of course, such a philosophy has its limitations. After all, the beauty of art is a symbolic beauty. Its larger interest lies in its significance: the masterpiece crystallizes a type of the human spirit arrested at a vital stage. In the calm of the Greek marbles, in the smile of Mona Lisa, in the patient niggling realism of the Dutch school, a whole age is revealed, a phase of humanity caught and fixed for all generations to come. What is real in the contrast between Watteau's suavity and Millet's rude force is the more definite contrast sensed in the age and the people, in the silent multitudes behind the artists. This matrix, this mass of human flesh, voiceless and inert, forgotten unless it find immortality in such a masterpiece, must always be the critic's background: he paints a

portrait, but if chosen rightly, the face sums up the spirit of the age.

Are we justified in finding such a type in Anatole France? Certainly not, if in his work he sought a literal reflection of his larger background, a panorama of life such as is revealed in the monumental creation of a Balzac. To be sure, something of this kind of realism may be found in *Histoire contemporaine* and others of his modern novels. But from a philosophic standpoint, these are far less significant than *Thaïs* or the tales, which, under the mask of history, present symbolically a spiritual and intellectual portrait of the later nineteenth century in France.

Anatole France typifies his age in its dominant interest, the historical spirit. Discovered by Walter Scott, developed by Romanticists eager to follow imagination in a flight from reality—fortified, in Flaubert and his school, by archeology and psychology, the great modern study finds in this writer a characteristic devotee. His keen perception of human identity beneath all the manifold differences of time and place teaches him that man's duty is to rewrite history: yet, despite an increasing realism, he is no dupe of the pseudo-scientific school of historians. To the end he remains a critic and an artist, recreating the past through insight and imagination.

He typifies the excessive individualism of this age of democracy. Even in his conservative days he is ardently personal: he cannot keep self out of his creation. Not merely subjective, like the Romanticists, from whom he differs by a greater intellectual reserve, he carries subjectivity into the things of the intellect, and to justify the dilettantism of his attitude, exalts it finally into a philosophy. Hence his skepticism, eager to show the relativity of other men's realities, rising under attack to a devotion toward philosophic nihilism which is a devotion to his own form of dialectic. Barring a few years of pragmatism, this is his dominant attitude: from first to last he is an intellectual anarchist, reducing all things to his measure; and in his reaction against all absolutist formulas he has become a large figure in the new philosophy of Humanism.

His pragmatic period, and indeed his whole later evolution, reflects our modern humanitarian and socialistic interests. A corollary of his subjectivity, confessedly grounded upon an Epicurean sensitiveness to pain,¹⁹ this social pity is still real enough to lead him into thorny paths for the sake of justice. Here at least his idealism overrides the skeptic. For as he says, "if the object for which one sacrifices oneself is an illusion, self-sacrifice is none the

¹⁹ *Lièvre de mon ami*, p. 124.

less a reality, and that reality is the most splendid adornment that man can put upon his moral nakedness."²⁰ And though, to him, "earth is only a grain of sand in an infinite desert of celestial worlds," none the less he adds: "But if men suffer only upon earth, it is greater than all the rest of the universe. . . . It is everything and the rest is nothing at all."²¹

How different this attitude from the Romantic contempt of ordinary humanity, from that hatred of the bourgeois which all his life held Flaubert aloof in the artist's aristocratic pride. Yet Anatole France is one with Flaubert in his cult of art. He too has that devotion to style, born of Romantic example and grown into a religion with the Parnassian poets and the author of *Salammbô*. Primarily a stylist, even his reaction against *Le Parnasse*, his rejection of their "splendid" diction for a classical simplicity, is still a devotion to form, a devotion whose labors only a stylist can fully understand. To the end he remains in spirit a Parnassian, polishing his seemingly artless phrases until all trace of effort or workmanship is filed away. So for him there is no unconscious simplicity. "A good style is like yonder beam of light, which owes its pure brilliance to the intimate combination of the seven colors which compose it. A simple style is like white light: it is complex, but it does not seem so. In language true simplicity is only apparent, and springs merely from the fine coordination and sovereign blending of its several parts."²²

A conscious artist, he is ever seeking a greater perfection. Remodeling *Sylvestre Bonnard* in 1900, he ponders every phrase and particle in his effort to improve its delicate rhythm. His work has ripened from the beginning, until in *Histoire contemporaine* its finish and contexture are rich enough to dispense with constructive unity. But even *Le mannequin d'osier* is not so fine as the art of *Les dieux ont soif*, so carefully polished, so delicately evasive of all that is tedious or obvious, so full of pages which haunt the memory like the cadences of Walter Pater or the songs of Paul Verlaine. Some of its episodes may be open to criticism, but the style is perfection itself.

The charm of these pages is indeed hard to analyze. Always one feels the intellectual qualities underneath, the philosophy, the humor. It is the charm of ironical detachment, the mask so often adopted by the disillusioned idealist. It is a universal irony—seen not merely in the art of inverted statement which Coignard and Bergeret take from Voltaire; it is also the impassive irony of Flau-

²⁰ *Jardin*, p. 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

bert, recounting in cold moderation abuses which clamor for emotional treatment, for the lash of sarcasm or indignation. And with all this it is the irony of Renan, those indefinable overtones of an ironic temperament, divided between imagination and intellect. Poised condor-like over a serio-comic universe, this fantastic humor seizes contrasts which startle or appal.

If primarily intellectual, his charm is also due to qualities which belong to the poet as well as the philosopher. The art of Anatole France is a product of his imagination, his taste, and his musical sense. Symbolic of his whole creation is his statement concerning the ballad which first revealed to him the virtue of poetry: "In my prose will be found the *dissecta membra* of the poet." This is plain enough when his work is read aloud. Only thus can one realize the flexibility of his diction, which runs the whole gamut of melodic quality without ever losing its purity or its power to express his changing moods: a flexibility which gives the reader all the delicacy of the impression, in a music which seems stolen from the very flute of Pan.

Yet with all his sensuousness he rarely falls into stylistic exaggeration. His taste may break down as regards matter, but never in his manner or form. It is this which keeps him from the bathos so common in esthetic or rhythmic prose—taste and an intellectuality which the sensation never quite obscures. They save him from that pitfall of French writers, rhetorical emphasis—from that love of sonorous or dramatic effect which makes the theater the dream of every literary Gaul. "*En tous les genres, il nous faut des Marseillaises.*" Taste turns him from this to the poetry which life itself distills, perceptible only to those whose ears are not filled by noise alone. An instinctive tact seems to have led him naturally to the Greeks, rather than to the oratorical Romans so dear to French classicism, and when his old Ciceronian professor of rhetoric criticized him on this point, suggesting that he read "the complete works of Casimir Delavigne," he felt already that he had found something better. "Sophocles had given me a certain bent which I could not undo."²³ And all through his life that same taste has kept his genius from the contamination of northern literatures, making him the most truly classical of all the moderns. Alone among contemporaries, Anatole France has grafted the living flower of Hellas upon the Gallo-Latin logic of form.

"You are the genius of Greece made French," said Alfred Croiset in his memorial tribute to Anatole France. "You have taken

²³ *Livre de mon ami*, p. 166.

from Greece her gift of subtle dialectic, of smiling irony, of words which seem endowed with wings, of poetry delicate yet definite and full of luminous reason; and you have shed upon that Greek beauty the grace of the Ile-de-France, the grace which invests her familiar landscapes, and which also lends its beauty to the style of our dearest writers, those who are most delightfully French."

Greek, yet subtly national, this is why Anatole France has taken his place among the great French classics. This is why he must remain a classic. For if literature is the least durable of all the arts, dependent as it is upon words and metaphors which never cease to change, he alone in his generation has chosen the simplicity which suffers least from time. In the last fifteen years, a new literature and a new hope have succeeded the pessimism consequent upon 1870, and when the tinkling poets and morbid self-dissecting novelists are forgotten, when the sickly symbolism or the cruder sensuality of the end of the century has passed like a cloud in the cold, bright, windswept dawn of to-morrow, we shall still remember Anatole France. A monument of that discouraged era, when life itself forced the artist into the esoteric, his books will best recall the delicate age which found its object in an Epicurean cult of art and self. For he alone has avoided the formal dangers of its romantic subjectivity, building not in agate nor in porphyry, but in the cool yet glowing marbles of the Greeks.

A new age is upon us, an age whose first reaction will be toward *life*. The cult of the self—"that pearl of degeneration" as a Socialist poet calls it—will probably perish. But art will not perish; and in art, we know, works without grace are of no avail. We shall return to Anatole France some day, come back to his work as the traveler returns to Athens, for the beauty that is hers. As on the Acropolis, we shall think of the labors which built the temple, reared and polished with infinite pains, and wonder why such a devoted artisan should have suffered the reproach of hedonism. We shall marvel at a lost ideal, at a perfection impossible to a time which will have so much to do. And we shall return to our workaday world tempered and exalted by a devotion to art which is also a devotion to truth.