

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELEK

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MAURICE MAETERLINCK  
(Famous Belgian Poet)

*Frontispiece to The Open Court*

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## MAETERLINCK AND THE SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM<sup>1</sup>

BY GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER

THE life of Nature seems to be rhythmic and periodic: spring, summer, autumn, winter — childhood, youth, manhood, age — seed, bud, blossom, fruit — fallowness, production — rest, motion.

Thus the pendulum of culture and civilization swings back and forth between the rational and the emotional comprehension of the world; between the philosophic and the artistic, i. e., between rationalism and mysticism, classicism and romanticism. Such movements ebb and flow in the history of the spirit as well as on the strand of the sea. A mighty wave of intellect flows over a whole generation, reaches high tide, then gives way to a wave of feeling which has the same career and the same fate. Some men are logical and feel themselves at home only in a world of proof. Others are mystical; they are not convinced but persuaded, not instructed but edified; in a word, they do not know, but believe.

Thus it is with whole generations. Classicism, as science, has to do with the universal, the abiding, the constant, the necessary,— in short, with genus. Romanticism, as art, has to do with the individual. This world-historical conflict is the Cross of all philosophy,— the problem of the universal, the tragic relation between unity and multiplicity, the individual and society, anarchy and absolutism, the exemplar and the genus.

Mysticism and logic, these are the two poles of the spirit: *feeling*, with its organ, religion—*reason*, with its organ, philosophy; *fantasy*, with art as its organ—*science*, with the understanding as its organ. The rational spirit seeks as its portion the typical, the repeatable, the interchangeable, the universal. The romantic spirit seeks as its portion the individual, the unrepeatable, the unchangeably personal.

<sup>1</sup> This manuscript was edited by J. V. Nash from unpublished manuscript notes left by Dr. Foster at his death.

Reason and understanding, with philosophy and science as organs, originate order. Feeling and fantasy, with religion and art as organs, have as their content the unclassifiable, the irreplaceable, the intimately personal.

If there are to be science and philosophy, there must be investigators and thinkers with trained intellects. If there are to be religion and art, there must be prophets, redeemers, saints, heroes, geniuses, in whom feeling, will, fantasy predominate: Euclid and Isaiah—Euclid, naturally cool, objective, practical, passionless,—in a word, the classicist; Isaiah, temperamental, impressionistic, enthusiastic, eminently personal. Classicism wants eternal truth; Romanticism, intimations, interpretations of what is coming, unraveling the fate of peoples, admonition and edification.

Classicism expresses itself in the Church as orthodoxy, in politics as conservatism; romanticism, as radicalism in both. The caricature of classicism is Nirvana; the caricature of romanticism is Utopia. Classicism ossifies; romanticism volatilizes. In extreme classicism the waters are dammed back to an unruffled pool in which the miasma of rottenness and decay are at home. In extreme romanticism, the waters swell to a wild torrent which tears down all the dams of historical tradition, and overflows all the walls of convention and legality, rule and law, right and custom, religion and morality, asset and institution, in order to bury everything historical underneath the debris.

This is the eternal theme of the history of the world,—this never-ending conflict between personality, for which romanticism stands, and race, for which classicism stands; between self-preservation and race-preservation; between human precept and natural order of the world; between instinct and ideal; between anarchism and socialism; in a word, between motion, for which romanticism stands, and rest, for which classicism stands; between Messiah and Nirvana; between the wintry peace of the old church-yard, and the awakening life of springtime. Classicism—like geometry, which has to do with fixed figures in space, according to unchangeable laws; Romanticism—like biology, which has to do with the cell that lives and grows; co-existence and succession, order and progress; stationariness on the one hand, rhythm and periodicity on the other. Thus the everlasting tick-tock of the clock of history and of personal life goes on.

After a century, romanticism is triumphant again. Who are exponents of romanticism and mysticism, rather than of classicism

and rationalism? Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin, Morris, Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Huysmans and Maurice Maeterlinck. The latter is the present philosopher of romantic mysticism.

The old romanticism, certainly on its religious side, was best represented by Novalis, the poet of the fanatic love for Christ. The hymn, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want," is characteristic of him. But he composed hymns to Mary, intimate and tender as a Catholic could wish, though himself not a Catholic. He knew well the weak points in Luther's position, he said that Luther's Bible-religion was poor, pedantic, empty, scanty, and he paved the way for freer and fairer appreciation of the wealth and worth of Catholicism.

Novalis was neither a Bible-believing Protestant, nor a Church-believing Catholic. He was the poet of the devout human heart, of an immediate religious experience of one's very own. But he was abnormal—pathological in mind and body—as is seen in his hymn to Night after tragic love affairs of his youth. He turned from light to darkness. Daylight was glaring and cruel, hiding his beloved from him. Therefore he fled into the arms of Night, to be embraced with their inexpressible, mysterious darkness. In that darkness the sun of his love shone. He could raptuously embrace and marry the form that the day snatched from him. Night was life to him: day was death.

Fantasy against the understanding, you see. Dream against reality awake. Fantasy creates a life which the understanding denies,—forms, dream images which dwell in the wishland of the soul. But the understanding destroys these images and this land as illusion and unreality. "How beautiful and lovely and dear!" cries the man of fantasy. "Yes, but it is not true, not real!" sneers the man of intellect.

And yet, does not the romanticist help one side of life into its rights—a side that would wither and decay under the sole supremacy of pure reason? Still fantasy, divorced from intellect, becomes lawless, unbridled. It puts forward its dream constructions as realities and would obligate us to the unreal. In order to be able to live in the kingdom of dreams, it bids farewell to the penetrating, critical understanding.

To be sure, ecclesiastical piety has not done this entirely. Indeed, calumniating reason, it uses reason though limiting it. Even when the Church says, "believe because it is absurd," reason is active, because it is reason that is expected to determine what it is that is

absurd. The Catholic mystic also remains rational in his mysticism. What he wants is a higher reason, a purer light.

The Protestant romanticist, however, would like to put out every light, that nothing might disturb fantasy as it lingers in the world of dreams. This is pathological; it manifests itself in clairvoyance, spiritualism, and the like. This folly produces an over-heating and over-stimulating of fantasy. Sunlight and tasks of daytime become pain and burden. In the name of Faith, spook forms are sought after, which are the creations of one's own diseases. These are sense images which fantasy produces, but sense only in color and form, without flesh and blood, without genuine, living sensuousness.

Therefore, the soul of the romanticist is consumed in this torturing contradiction of a sensibly felt love, which yet lacks an object tangible to the senses. Perhaps the Christ whom the soul loves cannot be apprehended and sung more sensibly than was the case with Novalis. The poet sees his Christ corporeally by his side, or walking before him. The contact of the sacramental bread with his lips is a kiss of Christ, the beloved.

Thus Novalis writes: "The Christian religion is the religion of bliss, of voluptuousness even; sin is the greatest stimulus to love the Deity. The more sinful a man feels, the more Christian he is." The poet thinks that everything that is best begins with disease. Half disease is an evil; whole disease is blissful and higher pleasure. He says again: "The value of perfect health is merely scientifically interesting. Disease individualizes us. Disease distinguishes man from animals. Suffering belongs to man. The more helpless a man is, the more receptive he is for morality and religion." And thus a conception of life began here which did not fight disease as exceptional. Pathological natures were supposed to be of a higher and finer organization, more spiritual than were the robust and healthy. Thus the decadent, the neurotic, the erotic, was the higher type of man.

Feeling—feeling: that is everything. No clear thought, no strong, firm will; only feeling—feeling that revels in itself; no worth but feeling—feeling that incites to erotic love, to the stormy desire of an unsatisfied, insatiable sensuality.

This Novalis called *die blaue Blume*, the blue flower, which he and his hero went out to seek—the *wunder Blume* which satisfied his insatiable longing; not the strong yearning of the will which longed for deeds, but the impotent yearning of the feeling; after every new feeling a yearning which artificially stings itself, in order



to be intoxicated with the fragrance of the blue flower—with its own self; and, drunk in such yearning, flees the world of reality.

It is easy to see that there is something wrong with this old romanticism,—a heavy, close atmosphere in which we cannot breathe freely. But what is it that is wrong? There is immediacy and inwardness, fineness and depth, attractive as against our hard and external practicality. That is in its favor. Our theologians have excogitated a faith in which there is no mystery, no unfathomable deep,—a faith in which everything is proved, made clear by sacred letter and formula.

In romanticism faith turns back into the world of the heart. In romanticism faith seeks union again with original life, with the soul's capacity for intuition and intimation. Faith needs picture and parable, the language of poesy, and would make peace with the senses. Therefore Novalis said: "The history of Christ is as much poesy as history, and only that history can be history at all which can also be fable."

Yet romanticism is, at best, a half truth. Feeling sunders the union with the understanding and the will, whereas it is only all together that make the human spirit. Romanticism is like an organism that would nourish only one organ—the heart—at the expense of all the other organs, and on that very account even the heart itself would deteriorate.

The new romanticism, of which Maeterlinck is the great exponent, is separated, however, from the old by more than two generations, a period of deep significance for all civilization. The French Revolution and our American War of Independence, two catastrophes from which the new world was born, assigned new tasks and set new goals to national life everywhere. Political society henceforth has to safeguard and nourish freedom; has to be germinative and formative of freedom.

Still, ideas clashed: the Bastille was stormed for the sake of freedom; yet freedom, at the same time, created the foundation on which the imperial throne of the Corsican was erected. Then freedom fled from the political world, in which it was outlawed, into that other world of poesy; it remembered the kingdom of dreams over which no Corsican or Czar ruled, where fantasy swayed the sceptre.

In this world, man still felt that he was a glorious being on his own account. As poet, he felt that he had the capacity to escape all limits of earthly requirements, and to mock all the forces that would coerce him. But this fantasy still came from a world of unfreedom

and still lived on the memory of its origin. Therefore, its poetic forms wore the garb of slavery, from which men still sought release,—the garb of the mediaeval past, the garb of the romanticism in whose golden light all sacred and secular citadels were asylums of light and freedom.

And when now the growing reactionary spirit, the spirit of darkness, desired a garment of light in which it could be clothed, romanticism offered it what it needed,—the shimmering splendor and irishued veil, under which the true nature of a rule by might, throttling freedom, might be concealed.

The spirit of freedom, however, created new forms, walked new paths which ran counter to all romanticism, apparently to all life of freedom as well. This was no romanticism,—to fight on barricades, and hunger and perish in dungeons. And what remained of this freedom, even of the romantic spirit itself, was entirely lost to men, children and grand-children. They saw that there were powers by which every stress and impulse of the soul to freedom was destroyed. And the man who still sang his song of freedom so proudly, preached to the world the new gospel that there was no freedom at all, that the individual, down to the most hidden stirrings of his soul, was bound under law, the laws of nature and society; that even his thought and his will were totally dependent, an effect of causes, from whose inviolable order there was no escape for man.

Even art made peace with this gospel of dependence and restriction. It was articulated in the bony structure of nature and society and upborne by their forces. Art became materialistic, realistic, and thereby stripped of the last shimmer of the old romanticism. **Art** did not seem art any longer to all those who did not know art without romanticism. Instead of the world of fairy tales, raw reality!—the world where the clatter and hammer of machines, the smoke of chimney stacks, banished all romantic ideas, where hard class-war, struggle for existence, awoke man from all his romantic dreaming.

Now, however, freedom begins to stir in man again. He seeks the freedom in the inner life which is denied him in the outer. A new romanticism begins. It opposes another world, the world of the heart, over against the world given in nature and naturalistically apprehended. This new romanticism is convinced that the world of the feelings is truer and more real than the outer alien world, that in the inevitable conflict of the two worlds one's own inner world must win the victory over the outer and alien world.

In this new romanticism religion wears a different countenance.

Religion turns back into the inner world of man again, speaks once more the language of fantasy and feeling. Yet naturalism has not lived and worked in vain for it. At the present time romantic religion can no longer escape the weight of naturalistic religion. The two begin to seek each other, reciprocally to deepen and fertilize each other.

Maurice Maeterlinck, the Flemish poet, is the most conspicuous representative of this religion of the new romanticism. Like the old romanticists, Maeterlinck at first lived entirely in his own soul. The people that appear in his plays are people of the inner mystic life. Their corporeality is mere seeming, a mere veil of the soul. That is the old romantic way. Fantasy lends personal form to the feelings of the soul, and straightway forgets what reality belongs to these forms on account of their origin.

Maeterlinck seeks to describe the drama of the soul, the drama of the innermost man, to whom all outer acts are incidental, because not the act, but the feeling, the inner experience, ought to be the main thing for man. Hence the figures of Maeterlinck's earlier dramas have only pseudo-bodies; they are not flesh and blood, but only shadowy beings.—souls encased in bodies.

Yet these souls are not bound to corporeity, to the limits of time and space. They have presentiments of what goes on behind closed doors. They have powers of telepathy; they see the future as already present. It is not the senses that mediate truth, but the immediate connection of soul with soul, where soul works upon soul. Truth is not in speech, but in silence. Men who are silent in each other's presence understand each other better, more correctly, than those who are constantly expressing their thoughts in words. There is always an error cleaving to the language which conscious life creates,—an estrangement of souls, because consciousness itself separates men from each other, and man from his own self. Man is only himself wholly in silence, where the unconscious is living in him and works its mysterious works.

In this unconscious background, or underground, of the soul, are all the elementary forces which shape human beings, including great hate and great love; and what afterward breaks forth in man as word and deed has previously taken shape in the hidden deep of the soul. Therefore, the more important events in human life are not those which are sensibly perceived, but the still, silent experiences which no one can see nor hear. And the true wealth of man is that he has his treasures within himself,—the treasures of the poor by

which they are richer than the rich. It is the sight of the blind, which thereby becomes sharper than their brothers' with sound eyes; the knowledge of those who do not know, to whom more is thereby given than all the scholarship of the world.

It is the *world of instinct* which is the only true world to the poet, and these instincts, these emotional and impulsive forces of the soul, present themselves to the poet as personal shapes. The mysterious twilight stress in man becomes man himself: everything else in man is nothing but accessories. All this is poetically thought and felt; it is the dream-life of fantasy, which makes itself master here of the inner world of man and shapes that world after its own image. But our poet believes in his dream-forms and in the wish-land of his soul. He does not believe in it with the tacit reservation that he is himself the one who creates and animates these soul-pictures, but with the vacillating feeling that his world of the heart is also the world of Nature, that the poetic interpretation which he gives his psychic experiences must satisfy the demands of a consideration of reality also.

Such is Maeterlinck. It is with the new romanticism as it is with the old, as it is with everybody who lives only in himself, lives with everything only in himself, seeks to interpret his own self only in the world of his own heart. He subtly introspects himself, until he only knows the riddle of life which is ever before him as eternal death; he feels in his own heart-world the iron limits which are imposed upon him, death which penetrates to him from all sides, and puts its mark on him, the living.

Therefore, at bottom, it is ever only a feeling which pulses in all the figures of the poet, a feeling by which all his forms are animated—the horror of death, this uncanny guest ever slipping upon him, ever announcing itself, unbidden, making its arrival so plain to the presentiments of the soul. It is the incarnate presentiment of death which Maeterlinck puts upon the stage in most manifold forms. It is the death that the blind see, that those who do not know, know; that slumbers in every love, and oppresses every silent soul. Death is the truest reality; its mystery is the most transparent meaning of life, which lurks behind every experience of life.

This is the same disease of which the old romanticist was a victim. It is the mediaeval spirit which celebrates its orgy. A feeling of death animates the play of fantasy; the breath of death fans all the flames of life and fills the whole being and life of the soul with its magic power. Therefore, it is night air which we breathe

in the first series of Maeterlinck's works ; it is a world of spooks in which we live.

A mighty time of development, however, lies between the new and the old romanticist. The man of the nineteenth century has learned to see Nature with sharp eyes. His attention has been diverted from the tumultuous, unclear impressions of his own soul to what is going on in the outside world. And this outside world becomes a new revelation to him, not of death, but of life.

Maeterlinck also has been affected by the forces of his age, called from introspection to research. As poet, he now lovingly broods over the world of Nature. Of course, what he sees and what he hears from now on, is apprehended by his poet-soul, whether he tells of a dog, the faithful companion of man, or of the life of bees, which live under a constitutional government of their own. All these are humanized mirrors in which the poet-soul rediscovers its own self.

Yet perhaps only he who truly loves Nature knows Nature, as perhaps we do not know anybody if we do not love him. Everything which we call Nature, illumined by colors which our eyes give to it, everything is but the child born in the wedlock of that which we are with that which we are not.

Therefore, we cannot dispense with a genuine and true understanding of the nature of the poet's spirit, which binds together all the fragments of our observation and scientific enquiry into a living whole and breathes into that whole the breath of the life of his own spirit. Therefore, what we call natural science, exact inquiry, is the only path to a higher goal, to the vivification and animation of Nature, to the profoundest feeling of Nature. Thus we rediscover Maeterlinck, the poet of the soul, once again, as the poet of Nature. And we see how he began to walk this new path of the life of his spirit.

It was precisely the horror of the death which he found in himself, so long as he lingered over himself alone, that impelled him beyond himself. He sought redemption from the ghosts of night that held him imprisoned. He fled to daytime, to the sunlight of reality, to life. He sought to lay hold of the world there where it promised him redemption and convalescence from his horror, there where death spoke to him of a higher order of life, even in the civil state of the bees, in this wonderful articulation of the individual in the whole, in this necessity of a great massive dying that the whole may live and be rejuvenated. Here, now, is Maeterlinck's crisis ; yet not his alone,—the crisis of all romantic brooders, the crisis

which promises healing and help to all souls tortured by the horror of death—to breathe the fresh air of the world, which streams into the home of the heart's instincts, to take a broad, free look at life, to join on to the whole which also conducts man out of his limitations and teaches him to be a ministrant member of the whole.

The poet experiences not conversion, but development. His faith in the living union of the soul with God, the original ground of all life, his faith in a world of the unconscious, of eternal mystery, from which we emerge with all our knowledge and deeds—this faith abides with him. And, into the dark abyss of the eternal mystery by which he sees himself surrounded, a ray of light falls; viz., the certainty of a purpose in personal life, a purpose which man has brought with him out of the most hidden world-ground into the light of day.

The might of destiny has remained, iron and inescapable, and it mocks all efforts of the human spirit to get behind its mystery, to resolve it into its formula and to comprehend it by means of thought. It is madness and folly to ascribe human ends to this might of destiny which masters everything,—to search for the plan of an eternal order, of an eternal righteousness in it. All philosophy and all theology fail here. And the expedient of faith to transfer the equalizing of the illimitable unrighteousness of life into a second world beyond this world, is nothing but a confession that there is no righteousness in this world, the only world we know. Nothing remains but to bury the ancient temple in which the world-ground itself is celebrated and sung.

Yet, out of these hidden powers of destiny from which man derives his existence, man brings with him a wisdom of his own which teaches him, at least, righteousness. This is something positive, something sure. Righteousness signifies for us the air and joy of life. Every wrong separates us from our own true selves. All righteousness at which we have worked elevates and ennobles our life, increases our joy in living; not the questionable thing which men call happiness or fortune and on account of which they hunger for an eternal righteousness, not the fulfilling of all vain wishes which the soul voluntarily makes, but strong, inner, permanent joy, which quietly beholds the shattering of all the wishes of life,—joy to have, in one's own soul, an inner world which no destructive power can reach.

This is the righteousness, which, as the world-ground, seemed buried under the debris of the old temple, risen to new life in men. It is the goal of human life, the task of human life. It asserts itself

in us as the power for which we are responsible, as the life which we ought to create. And because we ought to create it, it may not be already in the world. If righteousness were in the world, men need not create it still. We can work toward righteousness, but we cannot escape righteousness. For it holds us back ever again to itself, holds us firmly to itself by the unbreakable threads with which man is bound to his happiness. To seek his happiness is to seek righteousness, and in unhappiness righteousness warns the soul that it is on the wrong track in seeking happiness. It does not leave off warning until we leave the road of error and have discovered the right path. The path of righteousness is the articulation of the individual in the world, obedience to the law of the life of the whole.

This is what the poet learned from the bees. He learned from the bees that there is no higher life than living or dying, contributing to the preservation of the whole, serving the whole in the place where one stands, with the gifts and powers one has received. If our human state, our human society, does this, giving everyone his own, giving everyone the possibility to make out of himself what one as an individual owes to the whole, then are we in the path of righteousness. Thither does the hunger and thirst of our soul after happiness summon us.

Such is Maeterlinck. A crisis the poet experienced, but not an entirely healthy one. Occasionally the old ghostly forms of his fantasy hovered over him still; still they spoke their old ghostly language to him, whether the impossible were, after all, not possible. Yet these ghosts no longer burdened him, created no horror any longer. Out of the shadows of death a light came. Death transformed itself into light, into a service rendered to life, that life might be created.

Thus the poet placed the new romanticism in the service of life's tasks; he called all enthusiastic brooding spirits out of the religion of the self-consuming heart into the religion of deed, the religion of creative life, the religion of social righteousness. Groping, it all is with Maeterlinck; but even so, he shows us the struggling of the modern spirit,—the modern spirit which would rescue its faith from the ruins of that temple in which death is worshipped, into the great, wide world which requires the service of life. He shows the way in which, finally, all imprisoned in the horror of death can go—must go—if they would rescue their souls and be free from that horror. "I am come," said Jesus, "that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly."