

IMPRESSIONS AND OPINIONS

By George Moore

Edited by Robert Becker

George Moore (1852-1933) was a creative Irish writer of modernist fiction, memoir, essay, drama and poetry. He was a contributor to several “movements” and is fondly remembered as a purist who made art for art’s sake.

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Preface to the First Edition (1891)

Since their first appearance in the Reviews these papers have all been revised, and in some cases entirely rewritten. The article on Balzac, first printed in the *Fortnightly*, has been increased to nearly three times its original length. 'Mummer-Worship' has been redeemed from certain emendations introduced into it by Mr. Quilter. For these discarded trifles the curious are referred to the pages of the *Universal Review*. Other articles have been printed from the *Magazine of Art* and the *St. James's Gazette*.

Chapter 1. Balzac

As a traveller in the unknown East, standing on the last ridge of the last hill, sees a city, and in awe contemplates the walls fabulous with terraces and gates, the domes and the towers clothed in all the light of the heavens, so does the imaginative reader view the vast sections into which the Human Comedy is so eloquently divided – scenes from private life, scenes from provincial life, scenes from Parisian life, scenes from political life, scenes from military life, scenes from country life, philosophical studies, analytical studies. These are the streets and thoroughfares which intersect and divide this great city of thought; below each division the titles of the volumes rise like spires and pinnacles, and unconsciously the reader passes from story to story like a sightseer through palaces and gardens inexhaustible.

Jonah marched three days into Nineveh before he began to preach: Nineveh was little compared with the Human Comedy. I have walked many years in its streets and mused many years on its terraces, but so abundant is that city of thought with all beauty of imaginative design, so resplendent with all jewels of wit, so full of the many enchantments of various love, so terrible with all accents of pain, grief, sorrow, and pathetic melancholy, that the mind may retain only a portion of the wonders there displayed. With Balzac it is as with a great city, neither can be learnt completely; at each fresh acquirement the mind loses something hitherto its own. And, when we close the fiftieth volume and take up the first, which we read ten, maybe twenty, years before, what we have not forgotten we read with new lights, for the light of middle-age is different from that of youth.

Impossible it is then to write an article on Balzac as it is to write one on life itself, and the guide that comes forth from the city to meet the stranger will do well to limit the range of the first excursion. If he is a wise guide he will say, 'Let us not attempt too much this first day, let us pass it in some quiet suburb rather than in the torrid magnificences of the town; come with me and we will at leisure examine some quaint interesting places where may be studied the characteristics and the genius of the city.' And even so would I address the reader wholly unacquainted with the Human Comedy.

Just as a guide meeting a traveller climbing the last ridge of the last hill would I address the reader: 'Come with me,' I say, 'we will spend the day in a suburb where you will learn much, but the city you must explore yourself, for they who have attempted to explain its beauties have failed. There was Sainte-Beuve, there was Janin; both fell into memorable disaster; and the first discredited the critical labour of his life by failing to understand the great genius of his age,'

The lot of critics is to be remembered by what they failed to understand. That Sainte-Beuve understood Hugo, who cares? but his failure to understand Balzac will assure him of the sneers

of many a generation. The same with Ruskin; who cares that he understood Turner? We know that he did not understand Whistler, and the 'pot of paint flung in the face of the public' will survive his finest prose passage. And the unfortunate Janin, writing of *Les Illusions Perdues*, one of Balzac's very greatest works, depreciates, indeed he even tries to turn into ridicule, Balzac's constant reference to the exact sums of money that Lucien spent daily in the restaurant. These pecuniary details appeared to Janin to indicate a low and sordid mind. Janin failed to understand how by thus apportioning out the daily expenditure of Lucien, showing how the young poet might live on his little fortune while educating himself, Balzac was introducing a new element into fiction – the value of money. Balzac was the first to perceive 'that money was as necessary to a young man in the nineteenth century as a coat of mail was in the fifteenth.'

Zola himself was not successful in his study of Balzac. He told me that of all his critical studies his Essay on Balzac was the one he was least satisfied with. And he is right; his Essay on Balzac does not compare, for instance, with his Essay on Flaubert. So, having regard for the celebrated failures that have preceded this attempt, it occurred to me that possibly the only way to a suggestion of the vastness of Balzac lay through the minor pieces. However this may be, and before we start on our adventure, let us for a moment view the city from this last ridge, whence we can see it spreading over the plain, beautiful in its magnitude – famous public ways and squares clearly defined; and far away, under the horizon, vapoury indications of rampart and outlying fort.

The works of no other writer offer so complete a representation of the spectacle of civilised life as the Human Comedy. That sensation of endless extent and ceaseless agitation, which is life, the Human Comedy produces exactly. If we think of its fifty volumes, we are impressed with the same perplexed sense of turmoil and variety as when we climb out of the slum of personal interests and desires, and from a height of the imagination look down upon life, seeing image succeeding image and yet things remaining the same, seeing things tumbling forward, hastening always, passing away, and leaving no trace. The Human Comedy justifies its name; it is the only literature that produces the endless agitation and panoramic movement of civilised life. To do this may not be the final achievement, the highest artistic aim: I contest not the point, I state a fact that alone among writers Balzac has succeeded in doing this.

For in the fifty volumes you find all that represents civilisation. Civilisation in the nineteenth century is money, and Balzac, with his unerring wisdom which saw into the heart of things, knew, or rather felt, that money would be the stake for which Christianity would fight its last great battle. Therefore the grim faces of misers meet you at every turning. All varieties of misers are to be found in the Human Comedy: the sordid wine-making peasant counting the sugar in the bowl, starving his wife; the hideous country miser and usurer, holding the entire village in his grip, receiving the first-fruits of farm-yard and garden; the terrible and cynical miser, conscious that he is the type and epitome of the evil of the city – terrible indeed is the Père

Gobsek, and terrible is the signature which precedes and announces him. There are others, and around misers and usurers and money-makers hundreds of human souls float round and round as in a vortex; the usurer everywhere, each governing his own section as he governs it in life. We find too the drama of love depicted in all its infinite phases. Love with flowers of Resignation in his hands, and the light of Resignation on his face, and between the sublime figures of Séraphita and the Duchesse de Langeais, we have the awful story of the man that lust pursues even past white hair into final decrepitude. Then turning from the mad sublimity of Lady Dudley in *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or*, we meet with the beautiful human nature of Eugénie Grandet; from Eugénie Grandet to the Comtesse in *Le Lys de la Vallée* there is but a step. There human nature ascends to pause only on the threshold of divine nature. So pure is the Comtesse, that were it not for that short moment when in the midst of death she declares that she will live, desiring, in one absorbing moment of passion, life for love's sake, she would never have been quite human; but soon spirit regains dominion over flesh, and she passes from the human into angelic estate. Never shall I forget the emotions, strangling in their intensity, with which I read those last pages – those pages in which the calm frenzy of renunciation is expressed, – that scene when the priest enters and exhorts, and when we see falling from her passion and desire until nothing is left but the pure will-less soul of the saint. This death is but the representation of the philosophy of abnegation of self, which Schopenhauer taught as being the only gate through which lasting happiness may be found.

All classes of society are represented in the Human Comedy, and all types of men. There are peasants working in fields and drinking in cabarets, there are courtesans in the streets and in palaces, there are old men being preyed upon by unscrupulous women, who in turn are the victims of unscrupulous young men. There are men who sacrifice their lives to art, and others who sacrifice their life to pleasure, there are poets who waste their talents in love-dreams, there are poets who waste their talents in bon-mots. There are full-length portraits, half-length, heads and silhouettes. The characters pass and repass, and as in life you stumble unexpectedly upon acquaintances.

This innumerable and unceasing eruption of souls is accompanied with a poignant and searching criticism of life, sometimes the criticism is direct and personal, more often it proceeds experimentally by comparison with the immediate past; we find allusions full of anticipatory insight into those problems of clairvoyance and hypnotism and auto-suggestion, which modern science is rescuing from the pollution of supernatural belief, and classifying within the natural.

Balzac's intuitive knowledge of the latent forces in things which circumstances might at any moment develop into active forces led him to see that if peasants combined the laws would prove powerless to tear from them either the rent or the land, and that by passive resistance and secret murder the landlords could be forced to sell their properties to the peasants at nominal prices. No Irish agitator could draw up a plan of campaign more effectually than Balzac did in

this book written fifty years ago. In this book will be found every incident of the land war in Ireland; indeed, the murder of the bailiff differs not at all from the many such murders we have read of in Ireland in these last ten years, and the boycotting of the general might be included with very little alteration in Captain Boycott's memoirs; and the schemes for land reform propounded in that wonderful chapter, 'En quoi le cabaret est le parlement du peuple,' wonderful from the title to the closing word, might pass without exciting suspicion for extracts from one of Michael Davitt's speeches. To have looked so far into the future, and with such precision and graphic detail, constructing a world to come from a single fact, as Cuvier constructed a past animal from a single bone, must strike even the casual reader as a most extraordinary intellectual feat, and quite beyond the reach of any other novelist.

It will be asked how Balzac could have written so much and yet found time to experience the life he was describing.

The vulgar do not know that the artist makes but little use of his empirical knowledge of life, and that he relies almost entirely upon his inner consciousness of the truth. In Balzac perception of the truth extended over an inconceivably wide area; the perception was not so pure as in Shakespeare, but it was wider. Living as Balzac did in the giddiness and exaltation of an unceasing creation, I can imagine him lifting his face from the paper like one still under the influence of the dream, unable for a moment to bear with the intensity of the enchantment. In the somnambulism of his genius he lived peopling a perfectly imagined world with souls as troubled with passions and all the racking inquietude of existence as those that wander in that moment which we are pleased to call real life. Of his own soul and his own troubles he must have lived nearly unconscious, hardly aware of their existence. He often mentions in his letters that he has been working eighteen hours, and it is not infrequent to find him saying that he rose at two in the morning; he would then continue his cerebral debauch till noon. And the story of the improvisation of the *Cousine Bette* in six weeks is one of the wonders of literary history. Think of the book! To have woven such a fabric, to have created so many souls, and to have lived through it all in six weeks! ... Surely no one who reads these lines need wonder why my illustrious predecessors failed to write any adequate essay on Balzac; and surely all, even should they find no further wisdom in this essay, will admit that it was fortunate in conception, and that probably the only way to convey a suggestion of the genius of the great novelist lies through the minor pieces.

I will begin with *Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan*.

'The revolution of July destroyed many aristocratic fortunes upheld by the Court, and Madame la Princesse de Cadignan had the cleverness to lay at the door of these political crises her ruin, which was really due to her prodigalities. The Princess heretofore so celebrated – queen of all queens of fashion under her first name La Duchesse de la

Manfrigneuse, retired from the world to a small apartment, consisting of no more than five rooms, where she devoted herself to her son's education.'

The Princess was married when she was sixteen to her mother's lover, the Duke de Manfrigneuse, and when the Princess tells the story of her life to d'Arthez, the great writer whom Balzac probably meant for himself, she speaks thus of the Duchesse d'Uxelles.

'Well, I never was angry with the Duchesse for having loved Monsieur de Manfrigneuse better than poor Diana, and this is why. My mother knew very little of me: she had forgotten me: but she conducted herself towards me in a way which is wicked between women and horrible between mother and daughter. I knew nothing; I was incapable of guessing the secret of this alliance. I had a handsome fortune. Monsieur de Manfrigneuse was overwhelmed with debt. If I learnt later what it was to have debts I was at the time too ignorant of life to suspect it. The economies the Duke was enabled to make by the help of my fortune sufficed to appease his creditors. He was thirty-eight when I married him, but those years were like those of the campaigns of military men, and should count double. Ah! he was in truth more than seventy-six. At forty my mother still had pretensions to good looks, and I found myself between two jealousies. What an existence was mine for ten years! Ah! if it were known what this poor, little, suspected woman has suffered, watched by a mother jealous of her daughter! Good heavens, you who write dramas will never invent anything so black, so cruel, as that! Oh, my friend, you men cannot guess what is an old man *à bonnes fortunes*. What life is with a man accustomed to the adoration of women of the world, and who finds neither incense nor censor at home, dead to everything and jealous for that very reason. I desired when the Duke de Manfrigneuse was wholly mine to be a good woman; but I came in rough contact with all the asperities of a chagrined mind, with all the caprices of powerlessness, with all the puerilities of folly, with all the vanities of self-sufficiency, with a man who was in fine the most tiresome elegy in the world, who treated me like a child, and amused himself by humiliating my self-esteem at every turn, overwhelming me with his experience, and proving me ignorant of all things.'

So did the Princess coo in the ears of the great man who sat at her feet listening to her 'as a neophyte in one of the first days of the Christian faith might have listened to the epistle of an apostle.'

Understand that the actors in this scene from Parisian life are a princess who has dissipated many fortunes, her own and those of her lovers, who knows all sensations except love, whose drawing-room is her temple, and whose ritual is love confidences; the other is a man of genius, who knows the world theoretically, as Balzac knew it, and who in practice was as child-like as Balzac himself. Arthez was chosen for that very reason, for as the Marquise d'Espard said to the

Princess when the two friends sat together regretting they had never loved any one of their many lovers: 'Fools love well sometimes,' said the Marquise. 'But,' replied the Princess,

'for this' [that is to say, to believe in the speakers] even fools would not be sufficiently credulous.' 'You are right,' said the Marquise, laughing. 'But it is neither a fool nor yet a man of talent that we should seek. To solve such a problem a man of genius is necessary. Genius alone has child-like faith, the religion of love, and willingly allows his eyes to be banded. Look at Canalis and the Duchesse de Chaulieu. If you and I have met geniuses, they were perhaps too far from us, and we were too occupied, too frivolous, too carried away, too taken up with other things.' 'Ah! I would not leave the world without knowing the delights of true love,' cried the Princess. 'It is nothing to inspire it,' said Madame d'Espard, 'the difficulty is to feel it. I see many women who are only pretexts of a passion instead of being at once the cause and the effect.'

It is out of conversation, a few sentences, one of which I have translated, between the princess and Madame d'Espard that the action of the story springs. 'Qui a bu, boira,' the Princess grown tired of solitude and motherly duties, yearns for a new emotion, and Daniel d'Arthez is sought, Rastignac and de Trailles are commissioned to draw him from his studies. Infinite genius meets infinite worldly sagacity, and with what art is the web spun, and with what art is the accomplished charmer shown waiting, her lovely head leaned upon her long white fingers in the lamplight, an exquisite expression of tender melancholy. She is determined that this is to be no passing caprice, if she gives herself again it will be to a lover who believes her innocent, pure, incapable of untruth. The poor man of genius, sceptical, when sitting at his writing table, as Mephistopheles, is candid as a little child, sitting at the princess' feet. How true this is! The philosopher is as a child when he strives to put his knowledge into practice, the man of the world is a child when he strives to put his knowledge into words.

Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan might be entitled the seduction of genius by experience. It is animated by a sublime comprehension of the fascinating perversities of cerebral passion, and the confiding simplicities of a great man who, wearied, like Faust, with learning, desires the repose and consolation of love. *Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan* might also be entitled the philosophy of the drawing-room. It is the drawing-room in essence. The Princess is a being born of the drawing-room; she has been formed and coloured by the drawing-room as an insect by the chemical qualities and the colour of the plant upon which it lives. Her ideas of love, literature, art, and science are drawing-room ideas of love, literature, art, and science. The intonations of her voice, and every inflection of accent, have been produced by the drawing-room. Her weariness of life is drawing-room weariness of life. She is a creature of the drawing-room as the horse is a creature of the stable, as the eagle is a creature of the cliff. Balzac saw that the drawing-room was the great feature of civilisation.

Since Dickens, no one in England has had sufficient strength of imagination to get outside of his habit and seek the pathetic and the picturesque where Morris wall-papers and Liberty silk are unknown; and although an immense amount of wholly unnecessary scribbling is done concerning drawing-rooms, their decoration and flirtations, none has attempted to understand and to raise the drawing-room out of a dreary fictional *lieu commun*. To say that Lady So-and-so's drawing room is furnished in pink is sufficient for the English writer. But Balzac goes deeper; he saw that the drawing-room is perhaps the last expression of an exhausted civilisation, and he expressed the drawing-room in the *Princesse de Cadignan*.

I have said elsewhere than in this article that a book of maxims surpassing those of La Rochefoucauld might be garnered in Balzac's novels. Here are a few taken from this little story which does not consist of more than forty pages.

'Yes, when we are young we are full of fatuous stupidities; we resembled those poor young men who play with a tooth-pick to make believe that they have dined well.'

'What is to be gained by leaving your husband? In a woman it is an admission of feebleness.'

'One of the glories of society is to have created woman where Nature made a female, to have created a continuity of desire where Nature only thought of perpetuating the species; in fine, to have invented love.'

Adieu is an example of Balzac's romantic manner, and we shall see the enchantment he weaves about the beautiful word. Two sportsmen, tired after a hard day, wander out of the sun's way into the cool of a large wood, seeking a house or habitation of some kind. Presently they come upon open spaces, at the end of which is an Abbey partly in ruins.

'What disorder,' cried Monsieur d'Albon, after pleasing for a moment in the sombre impression that the ruins gave to the landscape, which appeared to have been struck as if by a malediction.'

Then, after a detailed description of the place, we catch a glimpse of a woman passing lightly as the shadow of a cloud from beneath the walnut-trees growing by the iron gate. The men find their way to the ruined Abbey, which they discover to be still used as an habitation. The strange woman again appears, and this is how she is described: –

'The two men were astonished to see her jump on the bough of an apple-tree and swing there with the lightness of a bird. She seized the fruit, ate, and then let the apples fall with that gracious softness which we admire in squirrels. Her limbs possessed an elasticity which relieved every slightest movement from appearance of effort or difficulty. She played upon the ground, rolled there as might a child; then suddenly

throwing her feet and hands forward remained stretched on the grass with the abandonment, the grace, and naturalness of a young cat asleep in the sun.

"Adieu!" cried she, with soft harmonious voice, but without the melody, impatiently awaited by the two sportsmen, seeming to reveal the slightest trace of sentiment or idea.'

But one of the men recognises the woman; he cries her name, and his emotion on seeing her is so great that he faints, and is taken home by his friend, who returns on horseback at his earnest request to make inquiries as to the identity of the mysterious woman. He learns her story from her uncle, who lives in the ruined Abbey.

The scene is on the banks of the Beresina; and Maréchal Victor had left there a thousand men in guard of the bridges, which they were charged to destroy when the Russians appeared. But instead of crossing the river the remnant of Napoleon's army encamped in the snow, feeding on horse-flesh, cooked before fires made of broken carts and wagons.

'The apathy of these poor soldiers cannot be understood except by those who have traversed those vast deserts of snow, without other perspective except a horizon of snow, without other drink than snow, without other bed than snow, without other nourishment than a frozen beet-root, a handful of meal, or a piece of horse-flesh.... Although the artillery of the left wing of the Russian army fired without ceasing on this mass, sometimes seen as a great black stain, sometimes as a great blaze in the middle of the snow, the indefatigable bullets seemed no more to the torpid crowd than one more discomfort.'

I would I had space to give some of the extraordinary details by which Balzac evokes the very motion, colour, smell, and sound of awful war. Among these war-stricken fugitives there is a general and his wife, and Philip de Susy is striving to save their lives, striving to get them to the bridge before it is destroyed by the troops on the other side. But his last horse has been seized and eaten. He steals, however, horses from the Russian sentries which are tied to the carriages, and they drive over the bodies of sleeping soldiers. "'You can't make an omelette without breaking the eggs," cries the grenadier, pricking the horses with his sword-point.' But the bridge is burnt before they can reach it; a raft is constructed, place is made for the woman, and she cried 'Adieu' to Philip. But the husband was thrown from the raft and killed among the ice, and, without a protector, lost in the disaster of the retreat, she followed the track of the army for two years, the plaything of every ruffian. In a word, she knew all the misfortunes of war, hunger, thirst, cold, and cruelty, until she was at last rescued from a madhouse in Germany and brought back to France. No words except Balzac's can tell how her lover in the woods about the lonely ruined abbey strives to win her back to reason.... Ah! the infinite pity of his efforts to coax her,

as he might a wayward animal, with lump-sugar, and all his various hopes and disappointments, until the old uncle finds him one day loading his pistols to shoot her.

““Poor little one,” cried her uncle, pressing the poor crazy thing to his breast, “he would have killed you, egoist that he is; he would kill you because he suffers. He knows not how to love you for yourself, my child. We will forgive him, shall we not? He is insane, and you are only crazed. Go! God alone should call you to himself. We think you are unhappy because you can participate no longer in our miseries – fools that we are! But,” said he, placing her on his knees, “you are happy, nothing annoys you; you live like the bird, like the hind.”

She rushed and caught a young blackbird, crushed it, looked at it, and left it at the foot of a tree without thinking anything more about it.

““Come,” cried Philip, taking her in his arms, “do you not feel my heart beating? I love you always. Philip is not dead. He is here, you lean upon him. You are my Stephanie, and I am your Philip.”

“Adieu,” cried she, “adieu!”

Balzac carries the story further, but for our purpose it is not necessary to follow it to its exquisite conclusion. The magic must have been already perceived by the reader. The imagination is exquisite, and its pathetic simplicity might have been equalled by Shakespeare if he had written prose fiction; he might have given an equally pure picture of the return of the human, through suffering, to the pure animal – that gracious wiping out, by benevolent nature, of thought when the burden became too great to bear.

There is in Ophelia much tender appreciation of the little breadth that divides the sane from the insane and the immensity of the responsibility which the transition, slight in itself, involves; but is the very haunting question, if we have gained in happiness since we have acquired the power of looking before and after, so tenderly insinuated?

In these days, when the domestication of literature is proceeding apace, and our standard of literary ability seems a negative one, namely, to write nothing that young ladies may not openly discuss in their drawing-rooms, the marvellous story of *Sarrasine* will find little favour; and not because it is immoral, but because it is unconcerned with the accepted ideals of the nineteenth century, the tea-table, the curate, the young lady who wants to be married, etc. To the nineteenth century, the abnormal is intolerable, even frank sensuality receives a better welcome. And as education proceeds, natural taste, that is to say, individual taste, withers, and man becomes blinder every day to the charms of the bizarre, and more intolerant to the exotic.

But the abnormal is found in all great writers, and though not their flesh, it is their heart. The abnormal must always be felt, although it may rarely form the subject of picture or poem. To make the abnormal ever visible and obtrusively present is to violate the harmony of Nature; to avoid the abnormal is to introduce a fatal accent of insincerity. But Balzac's mind being irreproachably pure, and his genius wholly valid, he was led to give the abnormal exactly the same prominence in the Human Comedy as it has in Nature; and his treatment and comprehension of it was nowise inferior to his treatment and comprehension of the great and primal emotions. Balzac has called genius a terrible malady: he was qualified to define it. But there is a marked element of health in all great work. Shakespeare's genius was unquestionably healthier than that of any of his contemporaries, yet he wrote the Sonnets; Balzac's genius was unquestionably saner than any of his contemporaries, if we except Hugo's, and yet Balzac wrote *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or*, *La dernière Incarnation de Vautrin*, *Une Passion dans le Désert*, *Séraphita*, and *Sarrasine*. Therefore it may be said that the final achievement of genius is the introduction and artistic use of the abnormal.

And this for a reason which will not be suspected by the casual student of fiction, and which when first stated will seem like paradox. But it surely is true, except for those who stand high among the highest, that the choice of any but the most ordinary theme will lead into commonplace. Even in the hands of a man of talent the abnormal slips into sterile eccentricity, which is the dreariest form of commonplace; but let the man of talent choose an ordinary everyday story, and in developing it any originality of mind and vision he may possess will appear to its very best advantage. Genius can, we know, do all things – it can even make the abnormal interesting: but even genius does not find in the abnormal the sublime moments of the soul that it finds in the normal, and truly it cannot be said that *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or* is worth *Le Curé de Tours*, or that any one would hesitate if choice were given him between *Sarrasine* or *Une Vieille Fille*.

Although somewhat lost amid numberless *chefs-d'oeuvre*, although rarely cited as a striking example of Balzac's genius, *Une Vieille Fille* is one of the first among the minor pieces. *Une Vieille Fille* seems to me to epitomise the most completely and the most perfectly the recourses of a mind at once so profound, and, at least in the conception of subject, so unfailingly artistic. I say so because I find in *Une Vieille Fille* that philosophic criticism of his own time, that power of contrasting and opposing it with its immediate past, so peculiar to Balzac, and which no other writer of fiction possessed before or since. I find also in this story three characters conceived with rare philosophic and imaginative incisiveness, and executed with an elaborateness and alertness of thought only to be found in his very best work; and I find, although these qualities predominate almost to excess in the 165 pages which form the story, some two or three rare and exquisite dramatic moments. Nothing more exquisite, according to me, than the scene where the fair laundress slips into the chevalier's room and confesses her trouble to him. He is far too

cunning to show that he disbelieves her story. With phrases, in delicious harmony with the traces of prosperous days that linger about the room – traces of the eighteenth century – he sends her away to lay the charge of seduction at the door of his rival Du Bousquier. The scene with Du Bousquier is equally good, for in it Balzac achieves his intention, which was to portray, and, in portraying, to show how these two old bachelors, who are both intriguing one against the other for the hand and fortune of Mlle Cormon, represent the ideas and outward appearance of two distinct epochs – the Chevalier de Valois, the aristocracy and elegance of the eighteenth century, Du Bousquier, the vulgarity and commercialism of the nineteenth. Another exquisite moment is when Mlle Cormon hears that the Vicomte de Troisville is a married man, and yet another when the Chevalier comes to ask the hand of Mlle Cormon.

'But this fine gentleman could only be killed in one way: he had lived by the Graces, and it was right that he should die by their hand. While the Chevalier had been putting the finishing hand to his toilette Du Bousquier entered the drawing-room of the disconsolate maid.'

The soul of the story is the desire of Mlle Cormon to be married, and the difficulties which beset her project. Through this simple subject Balzac passes as with a lantern in his hand, showing us how the conscription had affected the marriage market and how the republican spirit persisted, and, notwithstanding the restoration, was beginning to make itself felt in the social life of the remote provinces; we are made to feel too that the monarchy is ephemeral and that republicanism is the abiding force, that its eclipse is more apparent than real.

Yet the machinery of this story, in which so many grave subjects enter, is the very simplest, and it is put in motion by one of Madame Lardot's laundresses, who, as we have seen, thought first of laying a charge of seduction against the elegant Chevalier, but who was easily persuaded that it would be to her far greater advantage to lay the charge against his rival Du Bousquier. Here are a few extracts from Balzac's description of the elegant Chevalier which seem to me to display higher power of mind than any that Fielding, Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot would have revealed had they been called upon to describe an elderly gentleman, long, dry, and penniless, the greater part of whose youth had been passed in Paris, where, when he was about thirty, the revolution had surprised him in the midst of his conquests, but who now lived 'en Province' in two rooms above Madame Lardot's laundry, in the midst of grisettes, whom he looks kindly upon, making them presents of bits of ribbon and slight packets of chocolate creams.

'He dined out every day and he played cards every evening. He passed for being a witty man, thanks to a defect which consisted in telling numberless anecdotes concerning the Louis xv. and the commencement of the revolution. When these stories were heard for the first time they were considered to be well told, the Chevalier de Valois had the merit of never ascribing his bon-mots to himself, and of never speaking of his love affairs; but

his graces and his smiles were guilty of delicious indiscretions. This good gentleman availed himself of the privilege of an old Voltairean noble not to attend mass, and his irreligion was looked on with indulgence on account of his devotion to the Royal cause. One of his graces, and the most remarked, was his manner, doubtless imitated from de Molé, of taking snuff from an old gold box ornamented with the portrait of the princess Goritza, a charming Hungarian, celebrated for her beauty in the reign of Louis xv. Attached in his youth to this illustrious stranger, he never spoke of her without emotion; and it was on her account that he had fought with Monsieur de Lauzan.

'The Chevalier was now fifty-eight, but he did not admit that he was more than fifty; and he could permit himself this harmless deception, for amid the many advantages of those who are thin and blonde he preserved that juvenility of figure, which saves men no less than women from the appearance of age. Learn that all life, and all elegance that is the expression of life, exists in the waist. Among the Chevalier's belongings must be numbered the nose which nature had presented him with. This nose vigorously divided a pale face into two sections which did not seem to know one another, one of which reddened during the labour of digestion. This fact is worthy of remark at a time when physiology is so much occupied with the human heart. The incandescence took place on the left side.

'Notwithstanding the tall and slight legs, the meagre body and the wan complexion of Monsieur de Valois did not announce that his health was of the best, but he ate like an ogre, and pretended to be afflicted with a malady known "en Province" as a hot liver, hoping hereby to excuse his excessive appetite. The reddening of his face gave a certain credence to this story. But in a country where meals lengthen into thirty or forty dishes and last for four hours, the stomach of the Chevalier seemed to be a gift from Providence to this good town. According to certain doctors the flushing of the left side of the face denotes a prodigal heart. The fast life of the Chevalier confirmed these assertions, the responsibility of which happily does not weigh upon the historian. Notwithstanding these symptoms Valois had a nervous constitution, consequently vivacious. If his liver burnt (*ardait*), to employ an old expression, his heart did not burn less. If his face was lined, if his hair was silvered, a trained observer would have detected there the stigmas of passion and the furrows of pleasure. [A mixture of patois and bad grammar renders any but a conjectural translation an impossibility.] "En la *patte d'oie* caractéristique" et *les marches du palais* se montraient ces élégantes rides si prisées à la cour de Cythère." In this spruce Chevalier everything pointed to "un homme à femmes" (*ladies' man*). He was so minute in his ablutions that his cheeks were a pleasure to look upon; they seemed to have been washed in some miraculous water. That part of the skull which the hair refused to cover shone like ivory. The regularity obtained by constant combing gave a false appearance of youth to his hair and eyebrows. Without using perfume the

Chevalier exhaled a perfume of youth that "rafraichissait son aire." His gentlemanly hands, cared for like those of a "petite maîtresse," attracted the eye by their rose-coloured nails carefully trimmed. Without his majestic and superlative nose he would have been "poupon." We must, however, spoil this portrait by an admission of a weakness. The Chevalier put cotton in his ears, and still continued to wear there two little negroes' heads in diamonds, admirably made it is true; and he strove to justify these singular appendages by saying that since he had had his ears pierced he had no longer suffered from neuralgia. We do not offer the Chevalier as an accomplished man, but should we not forgive old bachelors whose hearts send so much blood to their faces? and their adorable absurdities, are they not founded perhaps upon sublime secrets? Besides, the Chevalier made up for the negroes' heads by so many other graces that society considered itself sufficiently indemnified.'

This long quotation seems to me to justify itself. For pure power of mind, combined with astonishing alertness of mind, I think it is unmatchable. It would be easy to set examples that surpass it in all qualities, except excessive alertness to seize every aspect of the subject, and power to see deep down into it, noting at once the hidden reason for every peculiarity of structure. It reminds me of a fine Holbein; it is as incisive as Holbein, but it has a dash which recalls the manner of Hogarth.

I pass over the interview between the enterprising laundress and Du Bousquier, from whom she extorted six hundred francs, going immediately afterwards to lay her distressful case before Madame Granson, the treasurer of la Société Maternelle. It was necessary that Madame Granson should have a son who likewise aspired to the hand of Mlle Cormon, but I confess that I fail to see why Balzac thought fit to hamper the action of his story, hitherto so simple and direct, by making Suzanne in love with the melancholy young poet. Indeed the error is more grave than would appear at first sight. For the suggestion that Suzanne is in love with Athanase turns what would have been a perfect short story into a novel which has accidentally been cut down to the limits of a short story. And if a critic were to urge this reason for assigning a higher place to the *Curé de Tours* than to *Une Vieille Fille*, I confess that I should find myself unable to advance any valid argument against his plea.

Balzac then paints the portrait of Mlle Cormon's county, her house and her history. We see the salon lighted up and the guests arriving on the famous Thursday evenings – the elegant Chevalier producing his box, gazing for a moment on the features of the princess Goritza, and then taking snuff. We see the brutal and arrogant Du Bousquier, and the pale and melancholy poet who loves Mlle Cormon sincerely; we hear the shrewd poverty-stricken mother Madame Granson whispering to him, 'Look at the Chevalier: study him, imitate his manners, see with what ease he presents himself; his air does not seem borrowed like yours. For goodness' sake speak: one would think you knew nothing, you, who know Hebrew by heart,' There is the Abbé

de Sponde, Mlle Cormon's uncle. All these people assemble in the great square reception room, with four doors and four windows, and modestly wainscoted with grey painted wood. One oblong mirror above the chimney-piece, and the windows are draped with heavy green curtains. Everything breathes the old and unalterable province. Having painted with rare insight her house and her surroundings, Balzac sets to work to paint the portrait of *la vieille Fille*, Mlle Cormon.

'...One gave one reason, another gave another, but the poor girl was as pure as an angel, healthy as a child, and full of goodness, for nature had intended her to receive all pleasures, all happiness, and all the labours of maternity.

Nevertheless Mlle Cormon did not find in her appearance any aids to her desire. She had no other beauty but that which is improperly called *la beauté du diable*, and which consists in the coarse freshness of youth, which, theologically speaking, the devil could not have unless we may justify the expression by the constant desire to cool himself. The heiress's feet were large and flat; her leg, which she often showed, but quite unintentionally, when she lifted her dress after rain, and when she stepped out of St. Leonard, could not be taken for the leg of a woman; it was a sinewy leg with a small calf, hard and pronounced like a sailor's. A thick healthy waist, a bosom like a nurse, strong and dimpling arms, red hands. Everything about her harmonised with rounded form and the fat white beauty of Normandy. Prominent eyes of an undecided colour gave to the face, whose outlines were without nobility, an air of astonishment, of sheep-like simplicity, not unsuitable to an old maid; if Rose had not been innocent she would have looked as she were. Her aquiline nose contrasted with the smallness of her forehead, for it is seldom that this shaped nose does not of necessity imply a fine brow notwithstanding the thick red lips, indicative of a great goodness, the forehead announced too few ideas for it to be possible that the heart was directed by the intelligence: she was probably good without being gracious. Therefore virtue is often reproached for her faults whilst one is full of indulgence for those of vice. Her light brown hair so strangely long lent to her face that beauty which comes of force and of abundance, the two principal characteristics of Rose Cormon. In her best days Rose affected a three-quarter view of her face, so that a very pretty ear might be seen showing between the azured whiteness of her neck and her temples, and the ear was brought into still further evidence by the enormous head-dress. Seen in this way in a ball-dress she might appear to be good-looking. Her protuberant form, her waist, her vigorous health, drew from the officers of the Empire this exclamation: "What a fine slip of a girl!" But with years the plumpness, increased by a life of virtue and tranquillity, had become insensibly so badly distributed over the body that it had destroyed its primitive proportions, and now no pair of stays could find her waist or her hips, and she appeared to be made in one straight block....'

Skipping some few lines of too minute physiological examination we come upon this passage: –

'But the poor girl was already over forty! At this moment, after having fought so long to acquire those interests which make a woman's life, but nevertheless being forced to remain a maid, she fortified her virtue by the most severe religious practices. She had had recourse to religion, that great consolation of carefully guarded virginities. Her confessor for the last three years had foolishly advised Mlle Cormon in the theory of mortification, and had counselled the use of the scourge. These absurd practices had begun to spread a monastic tint over the face of Rose Cormon, and seeing her white skin taking those yellow tones which announce maturity she despaired. The light down which adorned the corners of her upper lip threatened to increase and draw itself like a whiff of smoke. The temples had begun to look glassy. In fine, decadence had commenced. It was known in Alençon that she suffered from heating of the blood; she took the Chevalier into her confidence, enumerating the number of foot-baths, and consulting him concerning cooling medicines. The sly dog drew forth his snuff-box, and for form of conclusion contemplated the Princess Goritza.'

I do not think it too much to say that this passage is the origin of the intention of all that has been done since in fiction, and indeed of a great deal of writing outside of fiction. I will try and justify this assertion.

It will not be denied that what differentiates the literature of the nineteenth century from that of all preceding centuries is the art of doing, or attempting to do, with the pen what it has been the legitimate aim of the brush ever since a painter began to wield one. Until the end of the eighteenth century literature and painting were separable arts: literature being occupied exclusively with thoughts, and not concerned with the folds of the dress, their shape, and the tones they took in the shadow, and again the tones they took when the lady bade her lover good-bye, passing as she said the words into the light of the lamp which stood on a small table, and whose pink shade was clearly defined on the rich purple of the window curtains. Until the end of the seventeenth century women never shrieked and sobbed amid the blue cushions of the sofa, and Angelica had not stood in her ecstasy looking through the whiteness of the room. No fact is more indisputable than that the appearance of the purely pictorial in literature dates from the beginning of this century, and since the death of Balzac the discovery has been pursued with unabated vigour in almost every European language. In France and England hardly a great writer has refrained from the new method of expression. It would be curious to note the many talents the new art has called into existence, and how in turn it has been developed and burlesqued; but here I am only interested to state that the finest piece of pictorial writing was achieved by Balzac, the inventor of the method. He employed the method unconsciously, whereas, in Gautier and in Zola, the knowledge of the means they were

employing introduced an element of exaggeration which is not atoned for even by the many great qualities which enabled them to use the new method in a more striking manner than its inventor could. But besides the merit of unconsciousness – that first form of sincerity – Balzac's description of Mlle Cormon is something more than mere picturesque description; it is something more than Zola's phrase 'in ecstasy Angelica looked through the whiteness of the room.' For by being quite sincere, that is to say unconscious that he was laying the foundation of a new art, Balzac did not forget the intention of the old art, which was to lay bare the soul, and in writing the passage under consideration his intention was merely to give you Rose Cormon's soul, his genius leading him to do so by a road which had not been traversed before. For every physiological detail is a surprising revelation of the soul within, whereas Gautier's or Zola's description of surfaces reveal the soul rather less than did the brushes of the Dutch painters. And yet, notwithstanding his psychological intentions, Balzac's description of Rose Cormon is the most successful piece of pictorial description in existence. Is there another working from which ten painters would be more likely to produce ten pictures that would not widely differ one from the other? The soul of Becky Sharp is certainly distinct enough, but of her physical appearance we can form hardly an idea; we may imagine her soul in a hundred fleshly forms, but Rose Cormon's soul we can imagine only in the form that Balzac placed it in. When I came upon the description of her leg, the book dropped from my hand in admiration of the master's genius. The whole of Rose Cormon is in that wonderful leg. But the leg that would have meant so much to another was but an accent in Balzac's picture; he was sure of being able to give a culminating touch when he wished, no matter what had gone before, and with physiological detail he created the soul of Rose Cormon, endowing it with a life intense as any in fiction. She stands outside of the little drama in which Balzac saw her involved, and may be imagined in different dramas; we can see her outside of all story, as some one we have known intimately in real life. Greater praise I cannot give. For to create soul is to accomplish the work of God.

The story too is full of the most charming details, for Balzac possessed as strong a hold over dialogue as he did over description, and he rarely failed to supply his characters with the right words. For instance, how admirably suited to the occasion this is:

'Mademoiselle,' said he, in great haste, 'your uncle has sent you an express messenger: the son of Mother Grosmort has arrived with a letter. The chap started from Alençon before daylight, and he has arrived all the same. He ran like Penelope [Penelope is Mlle Cormon's bay mare]. Shouldn't he have a glass of wine?'

'What can have happened, Josette? My uncle, could he –'

'He would not have written,' said the lady's-maid, who had guessed her mistress's fears.

'Quick! quick!' cried Mlle Cormon after having read the first lines. 'Let Jacquelin harness Penelope at once. And do you, my 'good girl, see that everything is packed in half an hour. We return to town at once.'

'Jacquelin!' cried Josette, stimulated by the sentiment which Mlle Cormon's face expressed; and instructed by Josette, Jacquelin came forward saying –

'But Penelope is eating her hay!'

'What's that matter; I want to start at once.'

But, Mlle, it is going to rain.'

'Well, then, we shall get wet.'

'The house is on fire,' said Josette, a little piqued by her mistress's silence, for after reading her letter she re-read it again and again.

'Finish your coffee at least; do not upset yourself; see how red you are.'

'I am red, Josette,' said she, going to a glass whence the quicksilver was peeling, and therefore gave back a distorted reflection of her face. 'My goodness,' thought Mlle Cormon, 'if I should look ugly.'

Her worthy uncle had written to his niece that Monsieur de Troisville, a military officer who had seen service in Russia, the grandson of one of his firmest friends, intended to come and live at Alençon, and had asked for hospitality, whilst reminding him of the friendship which the Abbé had borne for his grandfather the Vicomte de Troisville, *chef d'escadron* under Louis xiv. The importance of this visit in the life of Mlle Cormon was what Waterloo was in the life of Napoleon. Of the household arrangement I will only tell that Mlle Cormon turned her boudoir into a bedroom, and a new bed was bought to suit the room, and she fainted in full view of all her guests on hearing the Vicomte reply to a question put to him by the Chevalier, that he has been married for the last fifteen years, and has four children.

Rose's disappointments in her marriage, her desire of children, the entire philosophy of the married life of an old maid who has married an old man, is given with an insight and a power of wide comprehension of life and things that Balzac has never surpassed, and because the last pages of *Une Vieille Fille* are unsurpassable.

One excellent reason for believing that the genius of Balzac can be approached through the minor pieces is the existence of the *Curé de Tours*. In this short story, which hardly reaches to a hundred pages, his genius attains its highest, purest, and completest form. The *Curé de Tours* is the genius of Balzac in epitome; and a reader of first-rate intelligence, reading it for the first time, knowing nothing of the author, would say 'this man is great among the great ones of the world, the brains herein are inferior to none.'

It is the finest short story ever written. Look at it from every side and you will find no fault. Unlike many of Balzac's short stories it is not a novel reduced to the limits of a short story – a bundle of events excellently well imagined, but hastily arranged, and showing bad cutting and awkwardly sewed seams on every side. The *Curé de Tours* is perfectly proportioned: it begins at exactly the right point; the development proceeds without long waits; nowhere is there an unnecessary line; and it ends in sequences rhythmical and as final as those which unite the parts of Beethoven's finest symphony. It would be vain to look anywhere for fault or flaw. The art displayed in the composition is equal even to that which seemed to be always at the command of Turgueneff – the art is as fine, as delicate, and as decisive as the Russian's; I will not compare it with that implacable directness which in Maupassant has captivated the minds of the unwary and the superficial. Not Turgueneff nor Maupassant nor Bret Harte has exceeded the mastery of handling manifested in this story. True that Turgueneff, Maupassant, and Bret Harte in their best short stories are far too consummate artists to leave fag-ends undipped or litter lying about. True that they do exactly what they want to do. The difference between their work and this story is that Balzac desired greater ends than they, and accomplished them as faultlessly as they did their lesser ends. A man juggles with three, four, and five billiard balls, but if another comes and performs the same feats with cannon balls?

We have heard what Shakespeare produced by the mere dropping of a handkerchief. In the *Curé de Tours* the means are even slighter. True that neither murder nor suicide results – it is purposely but a storm in a teapot; storms in which are involved the lives and the happiness of human beings, are equal, – the intensity and not the extent of the storm is of importance; and there may be light and darkness in the narrowest sky that awaken sensations of the widest universe. Quite certain it is that such were Balzac's opinions while composing the *Curé de Tours*; it was composed with the intention of exhibiting this truth, too often disregarded or not understood. This is obvious almost in the first lines, when he shows us the Abbé Birotteau going home, happy at heart, for he has spent a delightful evening at Madame de Listonière's. His prospects of being made a canon have been discussed, and all there agreed that he would be appointed. There are other reasons for his feeling singularly content with himself and the world. It is not very long since the Abbé Chapelaud left him by will the books and the furniture which the poor Abbé had not coveted, but which had been his *hoc erat in votis* for the last dozen years.

The hope of a lifetime, realised only a year ago, and the memory still an active principle in him, and the pleasure of assurance that still further fortune awaited him, combined to render him almost indifferent to the danger of the shower in which he had been caught and the possible touch of gout it might result in. It seemed to him strange, however, that Marianne should keep him waiting some minutes before opening the door; and when Marianne, to excuse herself, said that she had only obeyed orders received from Mademoiselle, the Abbé received a shock, the more violent because falling in the midst of his happiness. But when he found that his candlestick had been left outside his door instead of in the kitchen, according to custom, he entered his apartments in mute amazement. There another surprise awaited him – there was no fire; and the time that Marianne took to light one! The Abbé lay in the handsome bed which he had inherited from the Abbé Chapelaud, unable to sleep, overcome and terrified by the presentiment of immeasurable misfortune. For he could not banish from his mind that the delay in opening the door, the removal of the candlestick, and the absence of the fire in his bedroom could be attributed to accident. And the poor Abbé fell asleep, hoping that the morning would enlighten him concerning the motives of Mlle Gamard's displeasure.

But the secret motives of Mlle Gamard's displeasure were destined to remain for ever unknown to him. Mlle Gamard was an elderly maiden lady who had always had priests as boarders. The Abbé Chapelaud had lived with her in the most perfect comfort for over a dozen years – nowhere a grain of dust, beautifully washed linen surplices, and aubes smelling of iris, etc. On the ground floor the tall, angular, yellow-tinted Abbé Troubert, liked by nobody and not received by Madame Listonière, lived in a damp, bare apartment. He, too, had his eye on the wide, airy apartment on the first floor, filled with the beautiful furniture that the Abbé Chapelaud had left to the Abbé Birotteau, and he says when the Abbé Birotteau is away spending the evening at Madame de Listonière's: 'The Abbé Birotteau does not find us amusing. He is a wit – a *gourmet*! He likes fashionable society, brilliant conversation, and the gossip of the town.' It is thus that we hear for the first time of the terrible Abbé Troubert, who afterwards becomes so powerful: 'his hands in Paris and his elbows on his table in Tours.' But a word of explanation is necessary to make clear the terrible significance of the Abbé Troubert's words. It had long been Mlle Gamard's ambition to have an 'at home,' and when the Abbé Birotteau came to occupy the apartment of the Abbé Chapelaud, he lingered after dinner in Mlle Gamard's drawing-room, played Boston with her, and helped her and himself to pass an agreeable evening. The Abbé Birotteau, although quite witless, was good, kind, and amiable, and his presence in Mlle Gamard's drawing-room attracted several other friends, and for a moment it seemed as if Mlle Gamard was about to realise the ambition of her life. But the Abbé, although himself a fool, like many another fool, could not bear the conversation of fools, and when he took to passing his evenings at Madame Listonière's, he brought away with him many other guests, and Mlle Gamard was obliged to give up her *soirées*.

It is easy to imagine how this cruel thwarting of her social ambitions engendered in the heart of this old maid a ferocious hatred of the Abbé; it is easy, I say, to imagine this hatred; yes, it is easy to do so as we imagine things; but Balzac's imagining is quite different from ours; and using this simple theme as a loom he weaves a world of human passion, folly, goodness, and fashionable selfishness. This short story is a foretaste of the Human Comedy. For no writer of the first magnitude ever epitomised thus concisely all the great qualities of which his genius was composed. In *La Vieille Fille* we have the great thinker and the great social critic, but we have not the great artist; in the *Curé de Tours* we have the thinker, the critic, and the artist, and, as it should be, each enforces the other.

The story is one of pure observation – a great mind directed on what is commonly termed the minutiae of life. But are not things only great and small in proportion as we think of them; the world is but man's thought, and in the envelope of Balzac's mind the little folk in the city of Tours rise up at once as large, as mean, and as pathetic as life itself – the little folk who are determined for a moment to defend the dear Abbé in the persecution that is being directed against him, but who, a moment after, are forced to abandon him to protect their own interests, which are being menaced by the terrible Abbé Troubert.

The story is fortunate in every way. Besides the even more than usually brilliant envelope of thought, in which Balzac never failed to enfold all he wrote, the *Curé de Tours* is extremely well written. The composition is balanced within and without, and so evenly, that no one of the epigrams which light up the pages starts out of its setting or frets, or, for one moment, fatigues the eye. Here are a few: –

'Every fresh choice implies disdain for the object that has been refused.'

'If great things are simple to understand and easy to explain, little things demand an elaboration of detail.'

'Morality and political economy are opposed to the individual who consumes without producing, who holds a place without distributing good or evil; for evil is but good, the results of which are not at once visible.'

'Nevertheless these trifles made up the sum of his entire life; his dear life full of occupations in emptiness, full of emptiness in occupations; a life colourless and grey, and where deep sentiments were pain, and the absence of emotion felicity.'

'Jealousy in Touraine, as is usually the case in provincial life, formed the substance of the language.'

'Celibates replace sentiments by habits.'

'If we do not always know where we are going we always know the fatigues of the journey.'

Out of this handful of maxims there are at least four that would hold their own against the best that could be found in La Rochefoucauld, and they were gathered almost at haphazard from a short story written in the space of a couple of nights, printed with others in one of the fifty volumes which form the Human Comedy!

We have seen therefore that among the minor pieces the *Curé de Tours* is the finest example of Balzac's realistic method; in *Adieu* he touches high-water mark in his romantic manner. Among his studies of the abnormal *Une Passion dans le Désert* and *Sarrasine* are the best. The former is founded on a story, told to him by a showman, of a pantheress, that met a soldier starving in the desert, and taken with a sudden fancy galloped off and brought him back the hind quarter of an antelope, and in such wise continued to feed the soldier for many months. A cat when it likes you will bring in a rat and lay it at your feet; and Balzac tells the story of this strange caprice with rare intensity, and a subtle comprehension of the affections of the feline. *Sarrasine* is a rare and wonderful piece of work, but the conventionalities of this century prevent me from speaking of it.

After the *Curé de Tours* perhaps the most celebrated among the minor pieces is *Massimilia Doni*. I am aware of the great admiration that students of Balzac hold it in; but I confess that I do not share this admiration. There are some exquisite passages in this story, but it is disjointed and ill-proportioned. This is my opinion, but I am bound to say that Balzac himself held this story in the very highest esteem. Therefore it is incumbent upon me to attempt to justify my disparagement.

In the first place, the musical criticism seems to me to be a grievous disfigurement. On the subject of digression we should be indulgent, if the digression is interesting or valuable. But the eulogy of the *Moses in Egypt* shows no critical discernment, nor does it reveal any natural love of music. A naive notation of his own impressions would have been more interesting, but crude technical praise of a work which has not stood the test of time is never very interesting however eminent the critic.

It has been said that Balzac had not time to live; it might be added that he had not time to think. Thoughts came to him intuitively, as notes come to a bird. He had never time to hear, he had never time to think about music. But one of the vulgarly seductive phrases of the *Moses* haunted in his ear, and before it had departed some plausible criticism must have met his eye and generated in his mind a scheme for a musical novel – the Israelites languishing in Egyptian

captivity.... The modern equivalent? – the Venetians under Austrian rule. That is the genesis of Massimilia Doni.

Emilio is a young Venetian whose whole fortune does not consist of more than sixty or seventy pounds a year; he lives in the palace of his ancestors amid precious marbles and works of the highest art, no portion of which he may sell. He is in love with Massimilia Doni as Dante was in love with Beatrice, and one night, after an ecstatic evening, as he returns home in his gondola, he sees his palace decorated and lighted as if for festival. Thinking that it is some surprise that Massimilia Doni is preparing for him, he asks no questions, but seats himself at the supper table, which he finds spread with rare comestibles and wines. He eats and drinks so heartily that he immediately afterwards yields to an overpowering somnolence. Soon after a woman enters, a woman that 'reminded you of a fantastic English engraving invented for a forget-me-not, *une belle assemblée*, or a Book of Beauty,' The Prince trembles with pleasure. 'His soul, his heart, his reason e turned from the thought of any infidelity; but the brutal and capricious infidelity dominated his soul.' But the woman is not alone; she is followed by a monster, a fearful duke, who is of course Massimilia Doni's husband. The duke is a melomaniac, and the last pleasure left to him is music. The lady with him is a great singer, upon whom he expends fortunes so that he may accompany her voice on the violin, for certain harmonies convulse him with delight. But it would be profitless to follow the story into its many circumlocutions, and tell how the great singer is persuaded to yield the young man to Massimilia Doni, and how Massimilia Doni is induced to descend from palace of reserve and purity. The intrigue surely savours of comic opera. So beautiful a theme – a young man hesitating between the real and the ideal – should have been worked out on the simplest and most natural lines. That the beauty of the theme survives the vulgarity of the treatment is the highest tribute I can here pay to Balzac. *C'est du mauvais romantisme...* that is the true criticism of this story. And the second-rate romanticism of the composition penetrates and permeates the execution. An extract will explain my meaning. This is how Balzac describes the monster, the melomaniac who accompanies the woman: –

'Like that of Neapolitans, the costume of the unknown consisted of five colours, if the black of the hat is admissible as a colour; the trousers were olive, the red waistcoat glittered with gilded buttons, the coat verged upon green, and the linen inclined to yellow. This man seemed to have accepted the task of justifying the truth of the Neapolitan that Gerolamo always introduces into his theatre of marionettes. The eyes seemed to be of glass. The nose shaped like an ace of clubs was odiously prominent. The nose kindly covered a hole which it would be a libel upon man to call a mouth, and where showed three or four white tusks loose in their sockets, lapping one over the other. The ears drooped by their own weight, giving to this man an odd resemblance to a dog. The complexion, apparently containing several metals infused into the blood according to the prescription of some Hippocrates, verged upon black. The pointed

forehead, badly hidden by flat sparse hairs which fell like filaments of spun glass, crowned with red lumps a grotesquely comic face. In fine, although thin and of ordinary height, this gentleman had long arms and broad shoulders; but notwithstanding these deformities, and although you would have said he was seventy, he was not without a certain cyclopedian majesty: his manners were aristocratic, and he had that air of security which belongs to the rich. For those whose stomachs were sufficiently strong to observe him his story was written by passions upon a noble clay that had turned to mud. You would have divined the great lord, who, rich in his youth, had sold his body to Debauch at the price of excessive pleasures. Debauch had destroyed a human creature and made another to its purpose: thousands of bottles had passed beneath the purple arches of that grotesque nose, leaving their lees upon the lips. Long and wasting digestions had carried away the teeth. The eyes had faded in the light of gaming-tables. The blood was charged with impure principles which had exhausted the nervous system. The play of the digestive forces had absorbed intelligence. Love had scattered the brilliant tresses of the young man. Like a greedy inheritor, every vice had left its mark upon a still living corpse. When we observe Nature, we discover in her jests of a very superior irony; Nature has placed toads next to flowers, and in such wise was this duke near to this rose of love.'

'Le style c'est l'homme' is an old saw, and one that has been repeated in and out of season: my excuse for citing it is that perhaps no better exemplification of it could be found were all literature ransacked for vindication of its truth. How easily we see the intellectual giant in this description, pushing forward in mad haste, crazed with ideas, impetuously fumbling for the right words, and finding expression at last. To show Balzac as he is, I have translated word for word, preserving, as well as I knew how, every ungainly edge. Sometimes, it is true, I have not understood, and I admit my entire inability to understand, and therefore to adequately translate, the following phrase descriptive of the Duke's mouth: *'Et où se montraient trois ou quatre défenses blanches douées de mouvement, qui se plaçaient d'elles-mêmes les unes entre les autres.'* The looseness of the original French is, of course, magnified in the translation, for in the original an association of ideas unites, or rather blends, the words, as an effect of light blends the different parts of a landscape; this enveloping film is, of course, removed in translation, and I have preferred to leave the body naked rather than to weave for it a veil upon my own loom.

...But no, this is but subterfuge; far better tell the truth about Balzac's style. It has been said that Balzac had not time to live, it might be added that he had not time to *write*. He lived in ideas: ideas were always about him, ideas on all subjects; and writing was merely the operation of noting them down. In Balzac there is neither question of bad style nor of good style; he simply did not write; he noted down his ideas, and his ideas are always so interesting that you read without noticing the impossibilities of verbal expression which he constantly slips into. It is not

until you translate Balzac that you fully realise his deficiencies. For instance, the phrase I left untranslated in the description of the Chevalier de Valois, *En la patte d'oie caractéristique et les marches du palais se montraient ces élégantes rides si prisées à la cour de Cythère*. *Patte d'oie* I always understood to be the French equivalent for crowsfeet; it is impossible even to conjecture what he means by *les marches du palais*, but letting that pass, I find myself quite unable to explain the grammatical construction of *se montraient* in the sentence. We find another equally bad on the same page: *Ses sourcils comme ses cheveux jouaient la jeunesse par la régularité que leur imprimait le peigne*. And what I can explain still less than the meaning of his ungrammatical sentences is the fact that until you come to translate or to read very, very attentively, the page appears to you to be not only well but magnificently well written. The constant supply of ideas, I suppose, is the explanation of so astonishing a deception.... But I see no sufficient reason to pursue the subject further. When it has been said that Balzac did not write, but that he found an idea for every sentence, all has been said that is worth saying.

Balzac lived in the midst of the romantic movement, and had his genius not been infinitely high and durable it would have succumbed and been lost in that great current which bore away all but him. But the realistic and critical method, of which he was inventor and creator, lived too strongly in him, and the romance which swept about him only tended to purify and ventilate the abundance of his genius: it was the romantic movement that saved him from drifting among the mud-banks and shallow shores of Naturalism. Rembrandt, a romantist at heart, lived in an age of plain realism, and for many a year he strove to reconcile the principle which he individually represented with the spirit of the time he lived in. I think he failed to do this in *Ronde de Nuit*, and I think he succeeded in that incomparable picture, the Good Samaritan in the Louvre; and in just the same way I think that Balzac succeeded in reconciling two discordant principles in *Adieu*, *Seraphita*, *La Peau de Chagrin*, *Sarrasine*, and failed to do so in *Massimilia Doni* and *Une ténébreuse Affaire*.

It would be foolish to argue that *Vanity Fair* is superior to the *Père Goriot*, that the *Mill on the Floss* is more beautiful than *Eugénie Grandet*, that *David Copperfield* is preferable to *La Cousine Bette*, or that *Tom Jones* is worth *Les Illusions Perdues*, but any one or all these propositions would be more tenable than, for instance, that Thackeray or Eliot or Dickens came in their shorter works within range of such marvels as *Le Curé de Tours*, *Jésus-Christ en Flandre*, *Une Vieille Fille*, *La Maison Nucingen*, or any other handful of stories that may be gathered on the endless shore of the Human Comedy. The Human Comedy is littered with stories, and each is a supreme invention, and each reveals absolute power to attain the end desired. To write a novel without a love-interest is a feat that only the very strongest may attempt, and this feat Balzac accomplishes whenever he chooses, as a matter of course. In *La Maison Nucingen* he sets himself a still more difficult task. As a party of friends are finishing dinner in a private room in a fashionable restaurant another party sits down to dinner in the room on the other side. The walls are thin, and what they say is overheard. This dinner party consists, as Balzac puts it, of

the four most celebrated vultures of Parisian society. Their conversation fills sixty-eight closely printed pages; and they tear Paris, plunging their beaks into the very entrails, dragging them forth. After sixty-eight pages of the most astonishing conversation, one of the party says, 'There is some one next door.' Bricou answers significantly, 'There is always some one next door.'

The volume which contains *Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan* commences with *La Maison Nucingen*, closes with a short tale, some half a dozen pages, called *Facino Cana*. Facino Cana, a Venetian nobleman, is, when the story opens, a poor blind musician who plays the flageolet at servants' weddings. But he was in his youth the hero of many an adventure. He was imprisoned in a Venice dungeon, whence by the aid of a broken dagger he dug his way through the wall, and all the while he is digging he sees the darkness full of gold and diamonds, for he is, according to his account, gifted by nature with the faculty of seeing gold. He stops, he says now, before the jewellers' shops, and the yellow of the dear metal flows through the empty orbits to his brain. After many months' toil he reached the vaults in which the treasures of the Doges were concealed. Then he entered into a conspiracy with his gaolers, and escaped by the sea, carrying a great part of the treasure with him. Being a writer of fiction myself I am not deceived by those superficial likenesses which are gathered by shallow critics and flung in the face of contemporary writers. Most foolish charges of plagiarism were urged against Mr. Rider Haggard on the publication of *She*; he was even severely criticised for introducing verses not written by himself into one of his books. While the controversy was raging, I remember wondering why the erudite Mr. Lang did not defend his friend by citing Balzac's conduct in precisely similar circumstances. The sonnets and verses which Lucien is supposed to have written are not by Balzac. The names of the authors are, I believe, known; but be sure every student of French verse can read the name of its author in the last lines of that exquisite sonnet 'La Tulipe': –

'Mais la nature, hélas! n'a pas versé d'odeur
Dans son calice fait comme un vase de Chine.'

As plainly as the author of *Les Emaux et Camées* is recognisable in that last verse, that thief Dumas is seen stealing *Monte Cristo* from *Facino Cana*. I have no faintest notion as to the date of the first publication of *Monte Cristo*, but were I possessed of all the riches of the Doges, I would stake all, yea, and my life to boot, that *Monte Cristo* was published after 1836. That is the date of *Facino Cana*.

To secure great work two things, as Mr. Matthew Arnold said, are necessary – the man and the moment; in other words, a man is great when all men are great. And Balzac lived when a concurrence of natural causes had combined to render France especially sensible to the reception of ideas. The revolution had loosened the fountains of human thought; Napoleon had passed like a wild dream through Europe, the fields of conventionality were laid waste,

religious, political, and literary, rendering the French mind again, as it were, virgin soil, ready and in season to receive the seed. In our own great literary epoch was it not even so? Was it not the Reformation and the discovery of America which resulted first in Marlowe and then in Shakespeare? And as Shakespeare seems to have expressed all ideas that poetry may sing, so does Balzac seem to have expressed all the ideas that prose may speak. The rivalry between these two great men seems to be between verse and prose, rather than between French and English genius. Is it better to reign despotically over a single country or to stretch your power vaguely over an entire continent? Balzac's empire is wider than Shakespeare's: his subjects are more numerous, and his sovereignty not quite so secure. But between him and any other writer working in prose fiction there is little comparison. He peopled his vast empire with surely a greater number of souls and ideas than did Dickens or Thackeray, or Fielding, or Eliot, or Turgueneff, or Tolstoi. On this point there can be no difference of opinion; and he spoke truly when he said, 'The world belongs to me because I understand it.' To me there is more wisdom and more divine imagination in Balzac than in any other writer; he looked further into the future than human eyes could see; and that I am finishing these pages with tears in my eyes, that I have written so many upon five or six short stories, and could have written as many more, so rich in thought is his very slightest page, is a tribute to his genius, if such a rushlight as myself may pay tribute to such a miracle of glory as he. Some will deem this hysterical and exaggerated praise, but only those who do not know the master, or those who think they know him because they have read the *Père Goriot*. To arrive even at a fragmentary and superficial knowledge you must have read at least thirty of the fifty volumes which go to make up that city of thought so well named 'The Human Comedy.' As God is said to have created Adam from a handful of clay, so did Balzac create the French novel. Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, Goncourt, Bourget, Maupassant, and Henry James have only taken and developed that part of Balzac which individually they superficially represent. In conclusion, I will say that as I understand criticism more as the story of the critic's soul than as an exact science, I confess that I would willingly give up Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, etc., for the yellow books.

Chapter 2. Turgueneff

The first and last time I saw Turgueneff was at the Elysée Montmartre. The Elysée Montmartre is a students' ball. It consists of a large room, used in wet weather; of a garden, with circles of white lamps set in the hanging foliage, used in fine weather.

It was raining: every one was in the ballroom, the band was clanging, the crowd was forming into quadrilles. Some one said to me, 'That is Turgueneff, the great Russian novelist.' I turned, and saw one immense man walking as if through a crowd of pigmies. A great, grey face, sad and weary alike of the world's folly and wisdom; a man about sixty; a man in whose face you read Russian in the first glance; *enfin, l'homme de ses œuvres*. All this is as clear and certain in my mind as if it were a memory of yesterday, – why, I cannot say, for at the time I do not think I was much impressed. We sat down at one of the beer-tables. Knowing I was English, and as I had been introduced as a poet – a much-abused word in the *quartier* – Turgueneff spoke of Rossetti and Swinburne. He spoke of the former as a *décadent*, and he deprecated that labouring after old forms of speech, that harkening after old ideals of beauty: 'In Rossetti I note the first signs of decadence in the English tongue. Swinburne, notwithstanding some imitation of Victor Hugo, is a genius; he is – ' What further criticism would have been pronounced on Mr. Swinburne must remain unrecorded, for at that moment I caught sight of the girl to whom I was engaged for the dance, and, regardless of the dignity of the person I was sitting with, I said, 'Vous m'excuserez, je suis engagé pour cette danse.' Turgueneff smiled, bowed; he was evidently a little amused, but the author of *Les Eaux Printanières* was not a man to be angry because a very young man preferred dancing a quadrille to discussing English poetry at the Elysée Montmartre. When I returned, he said, as he may be easily imagined saying, 'Eh bien, vous vous êtes bien amusé?' 'Very much indeed,' I replied. 'You were speaking of Swinburne – But the conversation was now firmly fixed in French fiction and the naturalistic method – the *Assommoir* was then appearing in *La République des Lettres*. 'For the first time Zola has created a human being; Gervaise is a woman: I feel her; I know her; she is true.... Still the same vicious method pervades the book – the desire to tell us what she felt rather than what she thought.' "Je me demande qu'est-ce que cela peut me faire si elle sue au milieu du dos ou sous les bras." It is difficult to conceive the vexed and difficult question of how far a writer should proceed in physical description better put than Turgueneff put it in this pithy sentence: What does it matter? The most specious sophistry would fail to convince the veriest dullard that it mattered much; and any one gifted with a ray of artistic understanding will see that as everything cannot be related, if for no other reason, for want of space, a selection is inevitable. Shall we tell low people perspire or how people think? It will not do to venture out on the treacherous ice of theory and attempt definitions of what is worthiest of selection; far better say let perspiration be admitted into the domain of art, but let perspiration take the place in art that it does in nature. So think the physiological school, but the school of adventure are of a different opinion: never

mind how she thinks; give us the spot of perspiration; tell us how So-and-So killed the negro. As there is no difference (thought being abstracted) between a spot of perspiration and the killing of a negro, it will be seen that Mr. Rider Haggard is a disciple of M. Zola when M. Zola is at his worst, both being then recorders of mere facts. For it is thought, and thought only, that divides right from wrong; it is thought, and thought only, that elevates or degrades human deeds and desires; therefore turgid accounts of massacred negroes, and turgid accounts of fornicating peasants, are in like measure distasteful to the true artist. Whether the writer should intrude his idea on the reader, or hide it away and leave it latent in the work, is a question of method; and all methods are good. What I wish to establish here is that it is a vain and fruitless task to narrate any fact unless it has been tempered and purified in thought and stamped by thought with a specific value. This seems to me a suggestive comment on Turgueneff's happy remark, and hereby we arrive at a more comprehensible classification of novelists than has hitherto been attempted – the thought school, and the fact school: this identification is surely less liable to misinterpretation than Romantiques and Naturalists, Realists and Idealists.

To the thought school Turgueneff belonged from the first, and he was true to it just as much when he sought after a plain and passionless narration of physical phenomena, as in the volume entitled *Etranges Histoires*, as when he stepped to the edge of the gulf of didacticism in *Terres Vierges*. His desire was always to give utterance to a thought, to awake consciousness of that thought in the reader. His idea of things, and not the things themselves, was all to Turgueneff; his idea of things, not the things themselves, was what he longed and laboured to express; and this love of the idea was so constitutional and so inveterate in him that, had he not been the marvellous artist he was, his pursuit of his idea would have lured him into all disaster, and he would have been overwhelmed and lost in the shoaling waters and quicksands of instruction and purpose. But although he steered his bark perilously near those dangerous shores he always was able to put the helm up in time and get off into the deep water of human emotion without a started plank or loss of a single spar. The most skilful yachtsman that ever lived was not more completely master of his craft than he of his art. His artistry is unfailing; it is invincible; and so delicate and subtle was his power over his material that he leads the reader at will; the reader follows helplessly; go he must, although he may feel certain that the path leads nowhere, that there is no fruit nor even haws to gather. But there is always a suggestion in the end which is equivalent to fruit. In *Les Récits d'un Chasseur* the slightest events are fashioned into marvellous stories. The wheel of a carriage becomes loose, the sportsman has to spend a night at an inn; there he meets – no, not a young girl, but a dwarf, who is supposed to be an adept in sortilege. The dwarf begs to be allowed to accompany the sportsman out shooting; they find no birds, and, lying on the grass, the sportsman questions the dwarf on his mode of life. A long dialogue ensues: a little girl appears; she is strangely like the dwarf. That is all; but that told by Turgueneff is a *chef-d'oeuvre*, and is as superior to our ordinary magazine short stories as a ballad by Villon is to a ballad by me. This excessive delicacy and certainty of touch has caused some eminent writers to speak of him as *une plante un peu grêle*. This is not surprising; it is

certain that these qualities forbid him the fire and explosion of Balzac, and in reading him we are conscious of a thinness, of an irritating reserve. He has often seemed to us to have left much unsaid, to have, as it were, only drawn the skin from his subject. Magnificently well is the task performed; but we should like to have seen the carcass disembowelled and hung up. Balzac would have done this no doubt; but we do not propose to compare one with the other. Balzac was greater than Hugo, and equal to Shakespeare; he was lyrical, analytical, and metaphysical at will, and he blended and made all three styles his own, and carried you away in the tempest of his genius. Turgueneff could not do this, but he is nevertheless a leading light in the school of thought, and he stands beside Thackeray and Flaubert. He wisely refrained from attempting to measure his strength with Balzac; he loved his country; he felt her to the ends of his finger-tips; he watched her face from near and from afar; he strove to reproduce each line and lineament; Russian thought was in his brain, and you find it in his pages unadulterated. An idea has been improvised from a knowledge of his long residence in France that he is more western in form than his illustrious compeers Tolstoï and Dostoieffsky; but it would be hard to point to a trace of this denaturalisation in his works. Tolstoï I have not read, but Dostoieffsky I know to be little more than Gaboriau with psychological sauce, and that of an inferior kind. For the origin of Turgueneff's literary finish we must look further back than his residence in France. His taste for scholarship was from the first pronounced, and in this natural taste and the opportunities fortune gave him for developing it, we find the seeds of the qualities which enabled him to pioneer Tolstoï and Dostoieffsky, and prepare the western mind for the immense bumpers or vats of admittedly real Russian home-brew which are being now consumed in every civilised country. I once heard Henry James say, speaking of a well-known novelist, 'He gives me the idea of a man who had never spoken to a lady in his life.' I cannot say that the reverse of this is true of Turgueneff; that would mean that he only cared for those who are in society. Turgueneff knew the serf as the gentleman knows the serf; he knew the gentleman as the gentleman knows the gentleman; and he looked on and judged both as a scholar and a philosopher, without small-beer cynicism or that air of which Thackeray could never divest himself, of having been in society after the success of one of his books. While reading him we are always conscious of being in the company of a gentleman and a scholar – a scholar who has chosen to work in the novel, and who is putting into it the highest and best thought.

We also know, and very well too, that we are with one who has suffered, who is sad at heart, a pessimist who believes little in regeneration, who is convinced that we turn and turn in a circle, uttering little cries until overtaken in the great oblivion. But he is not the ferocious cynic who, having drunk and found gall, would spit gall into every cup within reach, but a man who, having learned the lesson thoroughly well, knowing that we must live, since nature has so willed it, is inclined towards kindness and pity; who would say, 'Obey nature's laws, be simple and obey; it is the best that you can do.' In various forms this philosophy finds expression in his books. His advice to young people was always to marry; only in the calm and naturalness of

home is happiness found. For an exemplification of this theme let us look into the charming novel, *Fumée*.

Fumée begins amid the babel of the Baden of old days. Idleness and sunlight, bands in the open spaces, chairs under the trees, the odour of restaurants, the glitter of gold, a town of generals from all countries, of strange costumes, of ephemeral passions, above all, a town of Russians – Russians talking of the future of Russia, of *l'oeuvre nationale et spontanée*, Russians declaring that Russia had invented nothing, that her most important productions, the samovar, bark shoes, and the knout, were not even invented by her. There we find Litvinof, a young man of eight-and-twenty, waiting for his *fiancée*. One day, on entering his hotel, he found a letter on the table. 'It 'is from Tanea!' he cried. But as he was about to break the seal his attention was stayed by a penetrating and agreeable odour that was not unknown to him. He looked up and saw a bouquet of heliotrope in a glass. It reminded him of something far away, of something he had almost forgotten, and could not quite recall. He rang the bell, and asked the servant who had brought the flowers. The servant said a lady had brought them. The lady refused to give her name; but he thought she must be a Russian countess. 'Why do you think she is a Russian countess?' 'Because she gave me two florins.' Litvinof then read his letter; it was not from his *fiancée*, but from her father; it came from the steppes, and it reminded him of the hard, rude life there, and it seemed to him especially opportune to read this letter at Baden. He went to bed, but he could not sleep; the odour of the heliotrope pursued him. Remembering that the odour of flowers is unhealthy in a room at night, he placed the bouquet in an adjoining room; but still the fatiguing and enervating perfume followed him; it swept over his pillow, it slipped under the sheets. Then came thin and shallow sleep, and suddenly starting up he exclaimed, 'Is it she? It is not possible!' For, some years ago, Litvinof was engaged to be married to a beautiful girl; she jilted him. Irene is now the wife of a general officer; she is now in Baden, and she seeks out her former lover. She cannot deceive a second time, and, full of remorse, fear, and anguish, he is drawn into the temptation and overpowered by it. One day Irene comes and throws herself into his arms. Then he exists but for her; he writes a cruel letter to his *fiancée*, breaking off his engagement; he tells Irene that they must go to the ends of the earth and live for one another; he has sacrificed all for her. She consents; but when the time comes to go she writes to say she cannot. 'I cannot; I am yours for ever; but to fly with you, to leave everything.... No, no, no!... Ah, how delicious it would be! but how 'impossible! Oh, my friend, treat me as a feeble, worthless woman, but do not abandon me.... We are returning at once to St. Petersburg; come there; *nous t'y trouverons de l'occupation*.' "*Nous t'y trouverons de l'occupation!*" cries Litvinof. "*Voudrait-on faire de moi un gentilhomme de la chambre, par hasard? Qu'est-ce nous?*" It would be difficult to praise too highly, and it would be impossible to give sufficient idea of the intense charm of the scenes in which the young man is led, as if by a silken thread, into destruction – scenes for the most part in dialogue, where no one phrase is remarkable or striking when read separately, but when taken with the context continues the picture – a picture tense with emotion, a well-nigh fabulous photograph of the mind.

Painters speak of indications; some are peculiarly happy in indications, and an object skilfully indicated has a charm that the complete painting cannot have. Turgueneff was peculiarly skilful in his indications. He had, when he showed us Irene in girlhood, to indicate the writer of the letter that was latent in the girl. This is how he does it:

'Once he ran from the university to see her in a worn and seedy frock-coat, his hands covered with ink. She came towards him with her usual impulsiveness. Suddenly she stopped. "You have no gloves," she said, insisting on each word; and then she added, "Fie, you are only a student." "You are too impressionable," replied Litvinof. "Oh, you are only a student, *vous n-êtes pas distingué*," and turning her back upon him she left the room. It is true that an hour after she begged of him to forgive her.'

Turgueneff is full of these subtle and soul-revealing touches.

Les Eaux Printanières treats of the same subject: the theme is the same, the variation consists in working it out through simple and honest middle-classes instead of the effete elegant and corrupt society of Baden, in choosing the spring-time rather than the summer of life. As the title indicates, everything is fresh, innocent, and impulsive in *Les Eaux Printanières*. In 1840 Sasine, a young Parisian, was walking through the street of Frankfort on his way home after a pleasant and instructive journey in Italy. Suddenly he was surprised to see a young girl of the most astonishing beauty rush out of a confectioner's shop, her shoulders and arms bare, her hair undone. She seized him, he being the nearest person to her, and begged of him to succour her brother who was dying. He was dragged through the shop, and in a back room he found a boy about fourteen in an apoplectic fit; he loosed his collar, sprinkled his face with water, and the boy was restored to consciousness. One word succeeded another: the people in whose house he was were half Italians; he spoke of Italy; they asked him to call in on the following day. Then he was introduced to the young girl, *fiancée*. She was called Gemma, and her *fiancé* was a young shopman of elegant appearance. He professed himself very grateful for the assistance Sasine had so kindly lent in a moment of extreme difficulty, and he invited him to lunch in the country on the following Sunday. A glance from Gemma made him accept the invitation. But at the restaurant a most unfortunate accident occurred. There were some officers luncheon at an adjoining table, and one who had lunched a little too well came to their table, drank Gemma's health insolently, and took away a rose she had laid on the table. The *fiancé* contented himself with abusing the military, and refusing to tip the waiter, but Sasine, who had already fallen in love with Gemma, went over to where the officers were sitting, and in very plain language told them what he thought of them. A duel – the most delightful in literature – was the immediate result; then Gemma broke off her engagement with the shopman and engaged herself to Sasine. But before the young people can marry, Sasine will have to return home and sell his property, for it has been arranged they shall live at Frankfort. While considering how the sale may be well

and speedily effected he sees an enormously fat man walking in front of him, whom he recognises as an old school-fellow. He accosts him, and presently he learns that the fat man is the husband of a very wealthy woman, and it also transpires that she is buying property in the neighbourhood in which Sasine's land is situated. The husband says he never interferes in his wife's business, but his wife is now staying some dozen versts from Dresden, if Sasine wishes he will drive him over, and he can negotiate the affair at his leisure. Sasine is received by many servants, and is shown through great staircases and graceful saloons. The fat man's wife is a beautiful woman, but she is evidently of common origin; there is in her beauty, the French would put it, *quelque chose de populacier*, and her vicious, animal-like sensuality is indicated by the frequent dilation of the thin nostril and the clenching of the little teeth. She will not tell Sasine at once if she will buy his property. She cannot tell him before three or four days. The game of seduction is played out at the theatre and in a riding excursion in the mountains. Sasine writes to Gemma imploring forgiveness, and leaves Frankfort for Paris with this almost vulgar siren. The husband interferes in nothing. She married him as she hires her lackeys, and he is content so long as he eats and drinks his fill. His gluttony is beautifully indicated in the drive from Dresden:

'Polozoff, as if stupefied, swayed slightly, a cigar between his lips; he spoke but little, and did not look out of the window once. The different views of the country did not interest him; he even declared that scenery bored him to death. Nor did Sasine talk much, nor did he admire the landscape; his mind was too full of other things. He was absorbed in thought. At every stage Polozoff added up his bills: he calculated the time, and rewarded the postilions little or much according to the zeal they had displayed. When they had accomplished half the journey he took two oranges from the provision basket, chose the better, and gave the other to Sasine.'

The reader has followed the story? The fat man is the pander to his wife's caprices; he is bringing a very young and a very handsome man to her. See how full of imagination and delicacy is the first scene, and imagine what it would have been in less dexterous hands! Sasine has washed and dressed himself, and has come down to the prince's apartments, for Polozoff is a prince.

'He found that prince seated in the most luxurious velvet arm-chair in the middle of a splendid saloon. Sasine's phlegmatic friend had found time to take a bath, and to return attired in a sumptuous satin dressing-gown; a red fez cap covered his head. Sasine approached, and examined him for some time. Polozoff remained immovable, like an idol; he did not even turn his face to look at him; he did not frown; he did not hear a sound; he was a spectacle really full of solemnity. After having admired him for nearly two minutes, Sasine was about to break this irritating silence, when suddenly the door of the adjoining room opened, and on the threshold there appeared a young and

beautiful woman, in a white silk dress trimmed with black lace, diamonds on her arms and throat. It was Marie Nicolaievna herself. Her thick brown hair fell on both sides, plaited but not pinned up.

XXXIV.

"Ah!" said she, with a half confused, half mocking smile, seizing quickly the end of the tresses, and fixing Sasine with her grey, luminous eyes, "Pardon me, I did not know you were already here."

"Sasine, Dmitri Pavlovich, a school friend," said Polozoff, without rising, and not even looking at Sasine, whom he was satisfied to indicate with his finger.

"Yes, I know; you have spoken to me about Monsieur. Charmed to make your acquaintance; but listen, Hippolyte Sidorovich (Polozoff); I wanted to ask you – my lady's maid is so clumsy – "

"You want me to do your hair?"

"Yes, yes, I beg of you. Pardon me," she said again, with the same smile, and addressing Sasine with a slight inclination of the head.

'She turned quickly on her heel and disappeared, leaving behind her an harmonious and fugitive impression of a charming neck, admirable shoulders, and a ravishing waist.'

Now I say I cannot conceive of anything better done than this; a difficulty is mastered absolutely, triumphantly; a physical and mental impression is given equally; and so well are they contrasted that each enforces the other, and both blend and are but one picture.

These are things that the artist sees better than the public, *des questions de métier*, but very interesting to those who would look behind the scenes and understand a little of the art of fiction. It is by such little touches that we judge our *confrères*; our approbation is won not by the big drum parts, or the violin solo which captivates the public, but by a little bit of – shall I call it instrumentation? that is to say, the sound of a certain sentiment at a certain moment; the introduction of physical phenomena, used either in alternate or combined effect with the theme of suffering or joy which the characters are uttering. Flaubert's work is full of these devices, but they are too apparent; they are forced down our throats as if with a steel fork. In Turgueneff they are so subtle that they do not weary, and they keep their place in the picture. Flaubert reminds me of Mr. Holman Hunt, that is to say, his faults remind me of those so religiously and so implacably perpetrated by Mr. Hunt.

Pères et Enfants is considered by many to Turgueneff's best book, but although fully alive to the fact that it contains Bazaroff, his most thorough and most vital creation, I must profess myself adverse to this opinion. The book is wanting in those simple lines which are the characteristics of the best fiction – So-and-so did so-and-so; such a thing happened, therefore the result was... It will be urged that notably *Vanity Fair* is not composed in accordance with this theory of composition. Without in the least professing to have invented a definition that will include all good stories, I will say that although *Vanity Fair* is not composed on one set of simple lines, it is composed on sets of simple lines – the Crawley, the Sedley, the Osborne, and the Sharp; and these sets of lines are placed in such juxtaposition with each other that the picture balances just as the parts of an elaborate decoration balance and unite. This is what the different parts of *Pères et Enfants* do not do, and we remember little of the book except Bazaroff. But he is a real creation, not a modernisation of some Shakespearean or classical conception, but an absolutely new and absolutely distinct addition made to our knowledge of life. There are moments when we are not sure that we have not seen Bazaroff, that he was not once one of our intimate friends. Very often we think of him as we might of some tutor, some adviser, and we dream of him as a possible character for a novel or play. Who among the many who have thought of turning the troubles of Ireland to literary account who has not thought of an Irish Bazaroff; looking over a photograph album we say he is like Bazaroff; in a word, Bazaroff is the concrete image of a section of human thought. To evoke a soul so vital and so knowable is the ultimate result of genius. None but the greatest have achieved this, even they only rarely: Turgueneff never before, never afterwards.

I have been at some pains to show that this writer's special power seems to be in his skill in instantly laying bare not the body but rather the nerve of an emotion or passion, in indicating that which is most individual and constitutional in a character. Of this there is a very admirable instance in the novel under notice, so admirable that I cannot refrain from giving it. Bazaroff, this savage, cynical, and hard-minded student, who scorns the romance of love and believes in nothing but the natural sciences, falls in love with Madame Odentsoff. He is attracted by her elegance and refinement, and she by his savagery and rudeness. It is necessary to show why she will not marry Bazaroff should he propose to her. After a couple of pages of abstract analysis Turgueneff thus crystallises the analysis and gives it in the form of an image.

'Often in the morning as she came warm and weak from her perfumed bath it came upon her to muse on the vanities of life, on its sadnesses, its troubles, its labours.... A sudden daring then animated her heart; she was conscious that noble aspirations were awakening in her, but an open window allowed a cold breeze to flow into the room, and, trembling, Madame Odentsoff complained; it was with difficulty she suppressed a movement of anger, and at that moment she cared for nothing but that that horrid wind should cease.'

Turgueneff continues the analysis, but when employing this method it is his habit to conclude with a second image, and over the page we find the following suggestive passage:

"What a strange man the doctor (Bazaroff) is," she repeated to herself as she thought of him. She stretched herself in bed, smiled, and passed her arms over her head; then, allowing her eyes to wander over a page or two of a stupid French novel, she let the book fall and fell asleep, white, pure, and cold, in her perfumed bed.'

But Turgueneff's most complete work, the best synthesis of his talents, is after all *Terres Vierges*. You find there the same subtleties, and the story is clear, precise, and absolute. The theme is at once eternal and modern, and is instinct with all the choral music of fate. For it is certain that in all complex civilisations there will come a time when a reaction more or less violent will make itself felt, and man – man who has ceased to believe in a future life – will long for a more simple state, will cry out against the nerve-suffering of his life, will strive to go back to the original stock. For the illustration of this theme Turgueneff takes a young man, a sort of Russian Hamlet, who, although he is mortally ashamed of his weakness, cannot refrain from writing verses. We are shown this young man, Nejdano, for a moment amid the Nihilists, then he is offered employment as a tutor to a little boy in the house of a rich man. There he meets two people who decide the way of his life: a young girl and a poor landed proprietor who believe in the regeneration of the masses. In indicating the magnetism of idea Turgueneff is, as may be surmised, at his best, and it is impossible to imagine anything better in its way than the manner in which he shows us how Nejdano is drawn toward Marianne and afterwards towards Markelo, and although in both idea is the primary cause of the effect, yet we are made to feel in one the fibrous affinities of sex, and how they determine that the first call shall be passed from man to woman, and then it is repeated and passed on from man to man. And what makes it still more subtle is that the young people do not really love each other; there is no bond of flesh between them. They are watched and harassed by a jealous woman, and this makes it necessary that they should play at lovers. They escape together. The subtlety of their relations to each other in the factory, where they have taken refuge, is beyond all praise, and the conclusion is as perfect as if Balzac or Shakespeare had conceived it. It is this Markelo who believes that the time has arrived for action; he preaches revolution to his beloved peasants, and he is bound hand and foot and delivered up to the enemy by them. Nejdano strives to continue the propagation of the faith by distributing pamphlets among the peasants. His account of the reception his efforts meet with is pitiful enough: one peasant cannot read, another won't listen, another threatens; another asks stupid and sottish questions; he is out of touch with them; he cannot make them understand; and he returns defeated, overcome with a hideous sensation of his own uselessness and the futility of all human effort. He has ceased to believe; he confesses his loss of faith to the woman he has run away with, who has united her destiny with his. She is an heroic soul; there is more stuff in her than him; she does not flinch; she will marry him if he

wishes it; she believes in the ultimate success of the cause. But he cannot marry her; he does not desire her, nor even life; as he puts it, 'Je n'ai pas su me simplifier.'

Terres Vierges will hold its own in any selection of novels that deal with human thought that may be made, but it is not until we come to the *contes*, the short stories, that we find Turgueneff standing quite alone, towering above all competitors. The analytical novel is distinctly a product of Western invention, but the *conte* is Eastern in its origin, and has never been handled by us as forcibly as by its inventors; and it is therefore natural in dealing with Russian literature to expect him who is most thoroughly Tartar to write the best *contes*. This is my answer to those who assert that Turgueneff was a Frenchified Russian, and that you must go to Tolstoï or Gogol for the real genius of the Slav. What have we, or what has France, that can be for one moment compared with *Les Récits d'un Chasseur* or the volume entitled *Etranges Histoires*? In these stories the genius of Turgueneff is seen in its original splendour. They sometimes consist of no more than three or four pages, sometimes they extend to sixty or seventy; and in reading them the litterateur is conscious of something absolutely new; they are absolutely new in form as in matter, nor can they be traced back to any root; and if an analogy must be drawn to convey some idea of their character, I will say that they remind me of *The Thousand and One Nights*, so very Oriental are they in their abruptness and freedom of psychology. I would select *Le Gentilhomme de la Steppe* as being especially representative of this quality; *Le Roi Lear de la Steppe* is another; *Toc Toc* another. From the first line the narrative rushes forth; there is no hesitation, there is no stop, nor is the reader warned of what is going to happen. This is not necessary, for so perfectly are the events chosen that they follow without jostling or discord, and as each comes into the reader's mind he is surprised at once by its naturalness and unexpectedness. The illusion is complete; it is just, as the phrase goes, like life itself. And what is still more marvellous perhaps is that a mere narrative, I will say a bare narrative, should possess the same intellectual charms as the psychological novel. Flaubert attempted and achieved this in *Un Coeur Simple*, but the execution is wire-drawn; it is too much like a painting by Mr. Holman Hunt, and the artist's intention is unpleasantly obvious from the first; but Turgueneff's execution is light, facile, and yet certain, even as that of a landscape by Corot.

After praising, it is usual for a critic to execute a change of front as adroitly as he can and covertly attack; this is done with the best intentions, the pretext being that the reader must be shown both sides of the picture. What is unfortunate in this method is, that it presupposes that the writer under discussion would have been a greater writer if his temperament and instincts were altered so as to conform more closely to the critic's ideal. It is easy to see that this is nonsense, but at the same time it is impossible to admit that perfection has been attained. This dilemma seems to me to arise solely from a misinterpretation of the word fault, which is popularly supposed to be a moral stain that a little goodwill will remove as turpentine will grease from a cloth coat. This is not so. What are critically known as the faults of great artists are the absence of certain qualities occasioned by the abnormal presence of other qualities. If the

statement of an artist's merit was sufficiently precise it should not be wholly impossible to arrive *à priori* at a very fair opinion of what must be wanting in him; so if the critic makes it manifest that an author is infinitely subtle, it is reasonable to presume that he is never grossly vigorous or highly coloured; if his style is quaint and rococo, it is certain that he is often vague, wordy, and affected. Let the critic not inveigh against excess; let him remember rather that anything carried to excess is genius: Rabelais and Swift are supremely gross; Shelley is supremely spiritual; Turgueneff is supremely subtle – subtle even to the exclusion of almost every other quality. Never, except in the case of Bazaroff, did he create broadly and boldly. His characters speak and act with absolute naturalness, but they are natural rather as Gainsborough is natural than as Rembrandt and Balzac. He is careful never to intrude his personality, to warm his work with the light and fire of his soul, that it often seems thin, sometimes even meagre. You look in vain for any sudden lights and personal shadows, for any richness of colour. He is neither Titian nor Turner, and yet his characters are real – they are so real that they teach you only as life teaches; they puzzle you as life puzzles; they perplex you even as a Terburg perplexes. He would show you a face, and he would not stoop to impress you by the exaggeration of a single feature; a little, a very little, human passion seen carefully, seen at a curious, but not too curious, an angle, will do. A married woman who intervenes and destroys the happiness of a young couple is a favourite theme. Not having married himself, and not having found life all happiness, the only possible conclusion is that he bungled his life by not marrying. A strain of the interference of the married woman runs through all his books. You cannot say if he regrets the society of the time of Alexander I., or prefers that of Alexander II., but he must tell of his own suffering soul.

The impersonality of the artist is the vainest of delusions; Flaubert dreamed of it all his life, but *Madame Bovary*, with the little pessimistic flip at the end of every paragraph, is the most personal of books. Turgueneff attained absolute impersonality of diction; but that which had influenced his life he put forward prominently in his books, and had Turgueneff's talent been less subtle, he would surely have drifted on the commonplace in dealing with such a time-worn theme, for he attempted no rearrangement of the dry bones – his imagination clothed them merely with new and splendid raiment. I have no personal knowledge on this point, but I should say, judging from certain internal indications, that he borrowed his stories, and that, so far as their structure was concerned, he left them very much as he found them. *Fumée*, I should say, was based upon the author's personal reminiscence; *Les Eaux Printanières*, upon a story that was told to him; three stories out of the four in the volume entitled *Etranges Histoires*, viz., *Une Etrange Histoire*, *Le Roi Lear de la Steppe*, and *Toc Toc*, were, I should say, certainly written from information arrived at either through conversation or the public press. I will add to this list the greater part of *Les Récits d'un Chasseur*, notably *Un Gentilhomme de la Steppe*. A footnote tells us that the second part of this story was composed several years after the first. Now the first part I feel sure was a personal experience, the second an anecdote that was related to him, and in which he saw instantly the completion of what he had left as a fragment. I also believe in the

impotency of Turgueneff to evolve a human soul out of his inner consciousness, and that for the same reasons as obliged him to have recourse to adventitious assistance in the composition of his stories. He was obliged in his drawing of character to confine himself to the direct and absolute delineation of his friends and acquaintances. Nor do I feel sure that he always even understood his model. Bazaroff's characteristics were so strongly marked that he could not fail to perceive what was eternal in him. And Bazaroff, who should have belonged to Balzac, embarrassed Turgueneff, for he was obliged to fit him into an original story, and this is how I account for the fact that *Pères et Enfants* alone among Turgueneff's novels is a series of scenes held together by the personality of the leading character. I fail to perceive any difference between Litvinof and Sasine, the two young men in *Fumée* and *Les Eaux Printanières*; they might be passed from one novel to the other without the plot being affected or the reader's psychological sense being disturbed. And this last book will serve for excellent illustration of what was said of Turgueneff's illuminative rather than creative imagination. For, unlike *Fumée*, which consists solely of the hero's love of the married woman, *Les Eaux Printanières* is made up equally of Sasine's passion for the two women. Nothing can be more finely imagined than the cajoleries of Marie. The scene in the box at the theatre is as fine as it could be – I at least can conceive nothing better. It is at once eternal and modern; it is the final achievement of the nineteenth-century analytical photographic method. I like the scene on horseback less. When the story had to be moved forward Turgueneff had to fall back upon the well-known paths; he could not strike out a way for himself; he was supreme only in mental analysis; he did not even grasp the situation the characters suggested. A more powerful imagination – let us say Balzac – would have said the point here is first to differentiate between the young man's love of the married woman and the young girl; secondly, to show how even love is not exempt from the law that nothing is lost in nature, and therefore the second passion must have an accumulative force that the first has not. Shakespeare does not fail to do this in *Romeo and Juliet*, nor is Rosalind a married woman. The Elizabethan poet's imagination told him easily that the man who is led away by the charms of a young girl is somewhat callous to the seductions of a married woman.

But to whom shall we compare Turgueneff? It would be vain to speak of Miss Austen; her charm is too special, too peculiar to herself. Balzac's genius lies in his universality, Miss Austen's in her parochialism; the former was infinitely daring in attempting almost everything, the latter is infinitely daring in attempting almost nothing. She seems to have formulated her poetic system as follows: I know nothing of the natural sciences, of politics, of metaphysics, nor have I attempted to plumb the depths of the human soul; I am a maiden lady, interested in the few people with whom my lot is cast. If you care to hear how So-and-so married So-and-so I will tell you, and the simple tale I will relieve by an elderly gentleman whose faith is in gruel, and who strives to obtain converts to his favourite nourishment; but if you want to be astonished or instructed go elsewhere; I can do neither, nor will I pretend to. Now if the reader can imagine a beautifully cultivated islet lying somewhere between the philosophic realism of Balzac and the

maiden-lady realism of Miss Austen, he will have gone far to see Turgueneff as I see him. Or shall I refer him to Mr. Henry James, who may be said to be allied to the Russian novelist more than any other writer. The obvious aim of both is subtlety, and both are reserved. On many occasions both have no doubt said, 'I shall gain more by not saying the word than by saying it. Is not nature very often vague? People come and go we know not where or how.' But Turgueneff had a more intellectual audience than Mr. Henry James, and no matter how strong the artistic temperament may be, sooner or later the audience has its way with the artist; and reservation with Mr. Henry James often drifts merely into good-breeding; he is often merely social, and, notwithstanding his great qualities, too often like a fashion-plate.

Our author's verbal execution is all that now remains to us to consider, and here I can only speak from hearsay. Turgueneff is considered by Russians as one of their greatest prose-writers, if not indeed their very greatest. I only know him through a French translation; those published by Hetzel et Cie. strike me as almost brilliant, certainly adequate.

His anonymous translator did not, it is true, do for him what Hugo did for Shakespeare, what Baudelaire did for Poe; the style does not precisely attract attention; it is straightforward and in no way deformed; it bears, I should think, the same relation to the original as a pleasant-faced housemaid does to a refined and beautiful mistress.

Chapter 3. A Great Poet

I write about a poet whose verse, whose name, and whose life are unknown in England — of one who even in his own country is known only to the *élite* — of one who, although he has published beautiful books for more than a quarter of a century, remains to this day unhonoured and unrecognised by the general reading public in the most distinguished literary centre in the world — in Paris. His name is Verlaine. Is not glory the sunlight of the dead? and standing to-day on the last verge of life he sees glory rising out of the chasm beneath him. And when he steps into the chasm, the faint light that now gilds the last rocks and peaks of life shall ascend into those heavens out of which no light sets. In the meantime, he lives in poverty, if not absolute hunger.

I have always held that real talent is invariably recognised. It may be passed by for an hour or a day; but the hours and the days are short. The one invincible thing is a good book; neither malice nor stupidity can crush it. I have often challenged the production, not of a single good poem, but of a single good verse that is not notorious. The challenge has been issued in vain. No one has ever been able to tell me one. I say more. I believe that if a man were to write a good sonnet and drop it in the middle of the Sahara, the fate that has watched over good poetry through so many centuries would catch it up, and carry it somehow into common repute. A good unknown poem is a contradiction in terms. How, then, is it that Verlaine is unknown? I answer that just as there are many ways of being 'stone-broke,' so there are many ways of being unknown. No man, however great, is known to everybody, and no man, however solitary, is known to nobody. Among men of letters Verlaine is as well known as Victor Hugo; to the occasional reader his name is as unknown as that of the *concierge* over the way, or the *cocher* turning the corner of the street. And this, because the general reading public cares little for poetry? No. But because Verlaine is of all men of genius I have ever met the least fitted to defend himself in the battle of life. He is quite incapable of any slightest thing except the occasional writing of beautiful verses. And verses that have no other characteristic except beauty may be said to be an almost unsaleable commodity. His instincts are entirely aesthetical — the religious emotion of a monk painting the joys of heaven above the dim altar, the sensuousness of the same monk delineating the tall adolescent angel. His instincts are neither patriotic nor popular. But every cadence the French language may inflect haunts his ear. Verlaine is exclusively a poet, and so natural and instinctive is the music of his verse that it often seems to be no more than the melancholy unarticulated voice which nature speaks, penetrating and profound by reason of its vagueness and utterness.

'O triste, triste était mon âme,
A cause, à cause d'une femme.

Je ne me suis pas désolé
Bien que mon coeur s'en soit allé.

Bien que mon coeur, bien que mon âme
Eussent fui loin de cette femme.

Je ne me suis pas consolé,
Bien que mon coeur s'en soit allé.

Et mon coeur, mon coeur trop sensible
Dit à mon âme: Est-il possible,

Est-il possible — le fût-il —
Ce fier exil, ce triste exil?

Mon âme dit à mon coeur: Sais-je,
Moi-même, que nous veut ce piège,

D'être présents bien qu'exilés,
Encore que loin en allés?

Is not this plaintive as water gurgling underground and sad as reeds sighing in eventide?
Verlaine is exclusively a poet, and may leave for no moment the immortality of his verse for the daily bread of prose. His rhythms become disintegrated in prose, his thoughts — gentle reveries — die in the looseness of prose.

But besides the disadvantage of being entirely and exclusively a poet, the disorder of his private life has reckoned heavily against Verlaine. For many years hardly any newspaper dared to print his name; only the ephemeral reviews that the ardour of enthusiasts called into existence for a season published his verse. He has lived the prey of strange passions that have ruined and dishonoured him. He has been in prison, and has lived many years in exile, sometimes gaining a precarious livelihood as a French teacher in English schools. Of late years sickness has not left him; from hospital to hospital he has dragged a pitiful body, and when discharged partly cured he has found shelter only in distant quarters of the town, among the working folk that herd together, *dans le quartier du Temple*.

I once saw Verlaine. I shall not forget the glare of the bald prominent forehead (*une tête glabre*), the cavernous eyes, the macabre expression of burnt-out lust smouldering upon his face. He had promised a friend of mine, a young enthusiast *décadent et symboliste*, a sonnet on Parsifal for his review. The sonnet had not arrived, and the review was going to press. Nothing for it but to

start in search of Verlaine. My friend asked me to accompany him. I raised objections. First, I did not care about knowing him; secondly, I was not inclined for the trip. My objections were overruled. My friend said: 'In ten years hence, when he is dead, you will regret that you did not see him. You had better take advantage of this occasion, another may not occur; he will probably not last out a couple of years.' I recognised the validity of the argument, and away we went. We got into an omnibus and then we got into a tram. Then we took a cab and I believe we had to take another tram. We passed factories and canals, and at one moment I thought we were going to take the boat. We at last penetrated into a dim and eccentric region which I had never heard of before; we traversed curious streets, inhabited apparently by people who in dressing never got further than *camisoles* and shirt sleeves; we penetrated musty-smelling and clamorous courtyards, in which lingered Balzacian *concierges*; we climbed slippery staircases upon which doors stood wide open, emitting odours and permitting occasional views of domestic life — a man in his shirt hammering a boot, a woman, presumably a mother, wiping a baby. I remember the address. I give it for the sake of local colour and in proof of my veracity, and not because I think it will be of use to any of my readers: 'C'est là-bas, là-bas, là-bas — à la Bastille, mais plus loin, rue Moreau, cour Saint-François, 6, Hôtel du Midi.' In a dark corner, at the end of a narrow passage situated at the top of the last flight of stairs, we discovered a door. We knocked. A voice made itself heard. We entered and saw Verlaine. The terrible forehead, bald and prominent, was half covered by a filthy nightcap, and a nightshirt full of the grease of the bed covered his shoulders; a stained and discoloured pair of trousers were hitched up somehow about his waist. He was drinking wine at sixteen sous the litre. He told us that he had just come out of the hospital; that his leg was better, but it still gave him a great deal of pain. He pointed to it. We looked away.

He said he was writing the sonnet and promised that we should have it on the morrow. Then, in the grossest language, he told us of the abominations he had included in the sonnet; and seeing that our visit would prove neither pleasant nor profitable, we took our leave as soon as we could. But I remember one thing that seems characteristic. Speaking of a career for his son, whom he had not seen for twenty years, he said he regretted he had not brought him up as a *garçon de café*, avowing his belief that he could imagine no trade more advantageous than that of a *garçon de café*. Take note that this was said with no notion of paradox, but quite simply. The remark was steeped in the same simple sincerity as characterises his own verses.

In speaking of Verlaine in my book *Confessions of a Young Man*, I spoke of his devotional poems as being the result of poetic calculation; their originality I said was attained, as Edgar Poe puts it, negatively rather than affirmatively. Perhaps this is not quite clear. In one of his essays Edgar Poe says that no one is original by temperament; that we become original by a deliberate effort of reason, by desiring originality, and declining to write in this way and that way, because these methods have been appropriated by other writers, and not because they are unnatural to us. When I wrote the *Confessions* I was only slightly acquainted with Verlaine's later work, and

being at a loss to reconcile beautiful, pitiful pleas for pardon addressed to Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother with the well-known disorder of his life, I hastily concluded that Verlaine was a striking exemplification of Poe's theory of originality and how it may be acquired. I have since discovered that I was mistaken. Nature is more subtle than our logic, even more subtle than Poe's. Verlaine believes in the Roman Catholic Church as earnestly as the Pope himself, but in Verlaine there is only belief — practice is wholly wanting in him. Nor do I think he ever quite realises how he lives or how he writes. For, after having given us an abominable description in abominable language of the sonnet he was pondering, after having sent my poor friend away in despair, Verlaine sent him that most divinely beautiful sonnet which I quote in the book already referred to. Here are the last six lines:

'Avec la lance qui perça le flanc suprême
Il a guéri le roi, le voici roi lui-même
Et prêtre du très saint trésor essentiel;
En robe d'or il adore gloire et symbole,
Le vase pur où resplendit le sang réel,
Et, ô, ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole!'

At first it would seem that these verses had been laboriously hammered out and cautiously filed. The false rhyme so exquisitely placed in the middle of the fourth line, the total suppression of the caesura, with the sixth syllable falling upon the first syllable of *adore*, the daring originality of following up this verse with another constructed, so far as the caesura is concerned, in exactly the same manner, and the hiatus in the last line, seem to announce premeditated art; but I am convinced that this is not so. I feel sure that these strange cadences are an integral part of the man's ear, and are as spontaneous and unconscious as the thought. In Verlaine, mental and corporeal life are distinct and separable things working almost unconsciously of each other. Nevertheless, these verses, although found in his last volume, *Amour*, are in a measure a survival, a recrudescence of the complex forms of *Les Fêtes Galantes*; for as Verlaine's art developed it grew simpler, until it reached the colloquial naturalness of Wordsworth. For instance, that more than beautiful poem *A la gare d'Auteuil*, beginning:

'Ame, te souvient-il, au fond du paradis,
De la gare d'Auteuil et les trains de jadis
T'amenant chaque jour venus de La Chapelle'

and ending with the strange enchantment of the line:

'Mon pauvre enfant ta voix dans le Bois de Boulogne.'

How simple and yet how subtle is the music of this poem — music that had lain for centuries dormant in the French language, and this music that some dead singer should have sung sounds strange in modern speech.

In considering Verlaine's claims to high poetic fame we are more concerned with his two last volumes, *Sagesse* and *Amour*, than with the earlier ones, beautiful though they all most certainly are. For it is in *Sagesse* and *Amour* that we are most fully treated to the astonishing spectacle of a man writing purely devotional poetry while leading notoriously a more than profligate life. In the Middle Ages, when faith in God was firmer than it is now,, it was not infrequent to find the devout Christian saying prayers in the morning and committing murder and robbery in the afternoon or evening. Villon is a case in point, and between Verlaine and Villon there is some analogy. In both lives there were terms of isolation from the world, though for different reasons; and to find the seed whence sprang the devotional verses of Verlaine, I look in vain through French poetry until I happen across Villon's Ballade to his Mother. Unconsciously and without suspicion of plagiarism, Verlaine has elaborated that beautiful poem into many volumes, and were Villon unknown to me and I were shown the refrain of the ballade in question: '*Dans cette foi je veux vivre et mourir*,' I would stake my very existence that it was a line of Verlaine's, and probably to be found in *Sagesse*. But it must be remembered that in this ballade Villon is not speaking in his own person, but in that of his aged mother; and the note of complete humility which we find in this ballade is absent in nearly all his other poems, as it is absent in the poems of all other poets. Some poets write to tell how well women have loved them, others seek to record their exploits in the battle or the hunting-field, others desire to convince the reader of their excessive erudition; all show pride more or less hidden on some point, and they write with the object of acquainting the world with their excellence or their peculiarity in this or that respect; but I am not aware of any other poet except Verlaine who has written solely to tell how weak, helpless, and undistinguished he is in all ways and things. Nowhere do we find a trace of personal pride; even his afflictions he relates gently and without bitterness. He is in his books what the poor old woman is in Villon's ballade. She goes into the church to pray: in the painted windows she sees saints in heaven playing lyres, sinners in hell are being boiled. She is only a poor, ignorant Christian woman, utterly unlearned; she knows only that one vision gives her pleasure, the other gives her pain, and in that faith she wishes to live and die. Verlaine in his poetry is no more than the poor woman of the ballade. He is a poor Christian, devoid of riches and all distinction, who believes and hopes to find grace hereafter with his sovereign Lord and Master.

The whole man — his poetry, his life, literary success, and his failure — is contained in an all-embracing sense of his own unworthiness; he keeps it continually before you; he tells you of it in a hundred different ways, for he is the most personal of poets. He writes of nothing but himself; his own life is his only theme. Sometimes he confides it in personal narrative, sometimes it assumes some slight and obvious disguise. His unworthiness is all he has to

tell you, and it is most affecting, for it is the whole man. The conversation I had with him in his astonishing lodging, *Cour Saint François, 6, Hôtel du Midi*, swept away any doubts of the sincerity of his art which till then had lingered in my mind. He spoke of his miserable condition, but without adjectives or emphasis — just as the old woman in the ballade might have done; he deplored the discomfort that the lack of the very smallest sums of money involved, but without even suggesting that after all it was a man of genius who suffered. I remember we spoke of Tennyson. Verlaine knows English very well, and he deeply regretted that he had not the necessary money to take him straight to Lord Tennyson, so that he might obtain permission to publish a volume of translations. I went to the Macmillans, and asked them if the matter could be arranged, but I heard no more of it. Lord Tennyson has, therefore, missed being translated by one who in a sense is greater than he; and to convince Lord Tennyson of his loss I have only to quote one sonnet from a set of sonnets each one of which is great even as Milton's sonnets are great:

'Mon Dieu m'a dit: Mon fils, il faut m'aimer. Tu vois
Mon flanc percé, mon coeur qui rayonne et qui saigne,
Et mes pieds offensés que Madeleine baigne
De larmes, et mes bras douloureux sous le poids
De tes péchés, et mes mains! Et tu vois la croix,
Tu vois les clous, le fiel, l'éponge; et tout t'enseigne
A n'aimer, en ce monde amer où la chair règne,
Que ma Chair et mon Sang, ma parole et ma voix.
Ne t'ai-je pas aimé jusqu'à la mort moi-même,
O mon frère en mon Père, ô mon fils en l'Esprit,
Et n'ai-je pas souffert, comme c'était écrit?
N'ai-je pas sangloté ton angoisse suprême,
Et n'ai-je pas sué la sueur de tes nuits,
Lamentable ami qui me cherches ou je suis?'

Chapter 4. Two Unknown Poets

Have not all young men of the last quarter of this century come within the magnetism of the name of Shelley? Have not all at some time felt that the pale ethereal poet was walking by them, that he was their friend? Have we not all experienced the nympholepsy of La Pompadour? Have not many more young men sighed at her feet in this generation than in the brief years which she surrendered to a king's caprice? We all have surely been touched with the love and knowledge of the body and soul of one that the earth is over, we all have surely at some time felt ourselves mysteriously interested in a name, a name in whose syllables there is evocation, a name around which hangs some suggestive story, a name that some fortunate description has awakened into life. Is there one among us so common that he has never felt intimately qualified to know men and women that death, distance, or the multifarious accidents and barriers of life have irreparably separated him from?

And the two young poets of whom I am going to speak have always attracted me. My sympathies were engaged by the strange and sad stories which surround them, and were confirmed by the personal talent manifested in all they wrote. Their names? — Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue, names for the first time printed in an English newspaper. But it is not infrequent for me to introduce French genius to the few among us who are willing to allow themselves to be interested in artistic work. It was I who introduced that adorable poet, Paul Verlaine, to English readers; it was I who wrote first about that ineffable book, *A Rebours*, the value of which has since been so copiously acknowledged. Possibly the same success will attend my present adventure, and in a season the plagiarist and his pursuers will make riot amid the tender beauties of *Le Miracle des Roses*, *L'imitation de Notre Dame la Lune*, and *Les Premières Communions*. Be this as it may, I concern myself with my sensations of these strange poets, whose talents and whose tragic ends have interested me so singularly. The poet that death has nipped in the first blossom of his talent. The girl that dies in her bridal month. The first poems, the first kisses, my soul goes out to one as to the other. And I know that I should have proved singularly capable of understanding that young Bohemian who came to Paris composing beautiful verses when he was fifteen, and who in a few years anticipated in some half-dozen prophetic poems all the poetic revolution of the last twenty years. Truly it was but the promise of May, and the blossoms fell before the fruit had begun. The blossoms fell, but those who love beautiful French verses have treasured them: *La Saison en Enfer*, *Le Bateau Ivre*, *Les Premières Communions*, *La Mort des petits Poux* — strange titles, strange as the poems, strange as the life of the poet — the miraculous boy who came to Paris when he was fifteen, with such a poem as *Le Bateau Ivre* in his pocket — that extraordinary boy who has fled from civilisation, and whose brief life is involved in legend and mystery, fantastic and impenetrable. We know that it befell him to meet Verlaine almost immediately after his arrival; how or where there are no means of discovering. It is certain, however, that Verlaine was the hourly companion of the younger poet

for some years, and it is therefore impossible not to speculate sometimes how much the genius of the poet who has since realised his aestheticism depended on the genius of him who made formal renunciation of the laurel wreath. Rumour has busied itself with this friendship, but little is truly known — one fact only, and that is written on the sky of palest legend in letters of blood. It is known that one night, in a house of ill-repute in Brussels, in some drunken quarrel that had suddenly sprung up between them, Rimbaud was stabbed by Verlaine. For this crime Verlaine spent two years at Mons. Rimbaud was taken to the hospital, where, after lingering some weeks between life and death, he eventually recovered. The poets only met once again. The account we have of this meeting rings strange and hollow as an old-world story. For the story is that in the years that had divided them Rimbaud had learnt to understand the immediate necessity of repentance, and it was only in the vain slight hope of inducing his friend to follow him into a purer life that he consented to see him again. But Verlaine's hour of grace had not yet come, and instead of listening to Rimbaud's exhortations, he sought to dissuade the young disciple from his resolve to abandon the vain glory of art, and consecrate his life to the redemption of his soul from sin. But Rimbaud closed his eyes and ears to allurements and temptations, bade Verlaine farewell, and left Europe to immure himself for ever in a Christian convent on the shores of the Red Sea; and where it stands on a rocky promontory, he has been seen digging the soil for the grace of God.

The medievalism of this strange story has always had a singular fascination for me. I have dreamed the meeting of the poets at Stuttgart in many an unwritten poem, and I have seen the desolate convent and the single figure digging in the eastern twilight in many a picture. The story is singularly romantic, especially when looked at in the light of Verlaine's subsequent conversion and the beauty of his religious poems — poems that take you back to the simple unquestioning faith of medieval Christianity. Verlaine's genius has quite lately come to be accepted even by the general reader, and we are sure, though poor and afflicted with bodily ill, that he stands on the verge of glory, but of Rimbaud few know anything. The now Christian monk, the whilom scorner of all law, human and divine, left the poetic revolution to be achieved by Verlaine, and of this Marlowe of 1870, not killed in a tavern broil, but awakened by wounds to a sense of sin, there remain but a few poems and a few fragments, hardly more than remain of Sappho, sufficient, however, to show that he carried in his heart all the riches of a great poet. To prove decisively that my words are not vain exaggerations, I need only quote *Les Premières Communions*, or *La Mort des petits Poux*. But I have no wish to prove anything. My object is rather to convey a sensation of this strange boy, and I cannot make more sure of doing this than by quoting a sonnet (never, I believe, before published), written between fifteen and sixteen, before Rimbaud came to Paris:

MA BOHÈME
(*Fantaisie*)

'Je m'en allais, les poings dans mes poches crevées;
Mon paletot aussi devenait idéal;
J'allais sous le ciel, Muse! et j'étais ton féal;
Oh! là, là! que d'amours splendides j'ai rêvées.
Mon unique culotte avait un large trou.
Petit-Poucet rêveur, j'égrenais dans ma course
Des rimes. Mon auberge était à la grande Ourse
Mes étoiles au ciel avaient un doux frou-frou.

Et je les écoutais assis au bord des routes,
Des bon soirs de Septembre où je sentais des gouttes
De rosée à mon front comme un vin de vigneur;
Où, rimant au milieu des ombres fantastiques,
Comme des lyres, je tirai les élastiques
De mes souliers blessés, un pied près de mon cœur.'

Did a child ever write such verse before? I think not. But I have now to bring in a few English words, sensation of the delicious talent of Jules Laforgue — delicious, delicate, and evanescent as French pastry? Can I help you to see this Watteau de café-concert? I will ask you to think of the beauty of a moth fluttering in the soft twilight of a summer month. Touch it not, lest you destroy the delicate dust of its wings. I hold it on my forefinger now, examine the beautiful markings. *L'Imitation de Notre Dame la Lune, Fleurs de Bonne Volonté, Les Moralités Légendaires, Le Miracle des Roses*, etc. Is there not in these titles something like genius? and is it possible that any one not touched with genius could have invented *L'Imitation de Notre Dame la Lune*? I have called Laforgue a Watteau de café-concert because his imagination was as fanciful as that painter's, and because he adopted in his style the familiarity of the café-concert, transforming, raising it by the enchantment of his genius. What I am writing should in truth be delivered in a literary academy with closed doors. But do not gather up your skirts, for in the end I may be able to leave on this page some faint shadow of my beautiful moth. Here is a little poem which appears to me to be wholly exquisite, and scintillant with French grace: —

Mon père (un dur par timidité)
Est mort avec un profil sévère;
J'avais presque pas connu ma mère;
Et donc à vingt ans, je suis resté!

Alors, j'ai fait d'la littérature,
Mais le démon de la vérité
Sifflotait tout l'temps à mes côtés:
"Pauvre, as-tu fini tes écritures?"

Or, pas de coeur à me marier;
Étant, moi, au fond, trop méprisable!
Et elles pas assez intraitables!!
Mais tout l'temps là à s'extasier!

C'est pour quoi je vivotte, vivotte...
Bonne girouette aux trent'-six saisons,
Trop nombreux pour dire oui on non
— Jeunes gens que je vous serv' d'ilote!

Surely I bring a little weed that we have not met before in the poetic garden, and, notwithstanding the form, must we not admit it as literature? Nor did we ever meet with such precious little fruit — hips and haws, if you will — as the paragraphs which I take from *Le Miracle des Roses*: —

Jamais, jamais, jamais cette petite ville d'eaux ne s'en douta, avec son inculte conseil Municipal délègue par les montagnards rapaces et nullement opéra comique malgré leur costume.

Ah, que tout n'est-il opéra comique!... Que tout n'évolue-t-il en mesure sur cette valse anglaise, *Myosotis*, qu'on entendait cette année-là (moi navré dans les coins) au Casino, valse si décemment mélancolique, si ésotériquement dernier, derniers beaux jours!... (Cette valse, ah! si je pouvais en inoculer d'un mot le sentiment avant de vous laisser entrer dans cette histoire!) — O gants jamais rajeunies par les benzines! O brillant et mélancolique va et vien de ces existences! O apparence de bonheur si pardonnable! O beautés qui veilleront dans les dentelles noires, au coin du feu, sans comprendre la conduite des fils viveurs et muselés qu'elles mirent au monde avec une si chaste mélancolie!...

Petite ville, petite ville de mon cœur.

I think that even these, the first twenty lines of *Le Miracle des Roses*, prove that Laforgue was possessed of a style, full of grace and fancy, and incurably his own. Nor can I easily imagine anything more beautiful than his evocation of this watering-place, and the story sketched with crow-quill pen and mauve ink — the story of the consumptive Ruth, dying amid tea-roses, the blood-red roses that she loves having been forbidden her. Nor can we help being doubly attracted to this story when we consider its significance and its foretelling of the poet's own end. For if Rimbaud's fulgorant verses corresponded in colour and sound to the passions which forced him eventually to fly from life and seek the repose of the convent, Laforgue's graceful

fancies harmonise equally with the facts of his blameless and sad existence, so little and so sad. We know that he was reader to the Empress of Germany — happy indeed was the selection. For my part I envy more than the bauble of her wealth the hours she passed with Laforgue. But one day of winter at Berlin, Jules saw a girl skating as none ever skated before — the grace of the waist, the flowing boa, and the feet lifted beneath the dark skirt, filled him with happiness. The beautiful skater was an English girl. I hardly remember the name, but I know that in sound it was linked to Annabel Lee, as, indeed, the story of this love recalls a tale by Edgar Poe. Jules resigned his place as reader to the Empress and married the beautiful English girl. They came to Paris in the hope that he would be able to make enough to live on with his pen. No vainer dream. Laforgue's genius was of such kind as to win the sympathy of the elect, but surely there was not a penny in it, altogether too light and fragile for the journalism of the boulevard. So instead of making his living with his pen Jules grew more and more consumptive. The young couple lived in a poor little apartment consisting of two or three rooms. Can you not see the beautiful English girl, now stricken with the dreadful malady passing between the rooms with *tisanes*? A few friends used to climb the high stairs to see them on Thursday evenings, and a few admirers attended Jules's funeral, and published the volume he left in his desk, *Les Moralités Légendaires*. The girl died soon after — two or three months after — but who attended her, or how she lived during the brief interval, or where she was buried, I know nothing. And yet of these little folk, whose lives were so essentially little, I have a very separate and complete sensation. I was their friend although I never saw them, and I shall not forget them, though I never visit their forgotten graves, nor shall I cease to cherish *L'Imitation de Notre Dame la Lune* and *Les Fleurs de Bonne Volonté*, though the ordinary readers of verse allow these books to lie in the limbo of embryonic things.

Chapter 5. 'Le Rêve'

The realistic novel is the *rara avis*, and should be welcomed as such. At the present moment there are not a dozen in the world, nor is there likelihood of the number being appreciably increased. An unusually intellectual generation may produce from three to five; but each separate man may write twenty volumes of poetry, of philosophy, of history; therefore, as time wears on, poetry, history, philosophy will so multiply that the most eager for study will turn away dismayed, and the learned will not even know the names of their predecessors. It does indeed seem certain that with the single exception of the realistic novel, literature in all its forms will extend beyond the knowledge of the most omnivorous student.

But some one cries – Zola, Zola who produces one a year. I reply that Zola's novels are poems, and have nothing to do with realism. If you seek a synthesis, you pass from observation into poetry and philosophy; and Zola's work is as obviously and as wholly synthetical as Victor Hugo's. Strictly speaking, realistic writing has never been attempted except by Henri Monnier and Jane Austen. But it becomes necessary to define: the realistic novel is the expression of a phase of life which the writer has lived through. Having this definition well in mind, look round literature and convince yourself *a posteriori*. In France the *Père Goriot*, fragments of *Les Illusions Perdues*, and *Madame Bovary*. I have not read all Daudet. I dare say he has written a realistic novel: we might admit *Sapho*. In England *Tom Jones*, *Emma*, *Vanity Fair*; possibly there may be two or three more. Realistic literature is unknown in Germany, Italy, Spain; and to make up the first dozen we have to turn to Russia.

By no stretching of the meaning of the word 'realistic' can we include as such any of M. Zola's novels – no, not even the *Assommoir*. The observation on which it is based is far too general, far too subjective. In judging M. Zola critics have examined the matter and closed their eyes to the form, and so have been deceived; and it has become necessary to remind them that mire is not more real than clouds. The error concerning M. Zola, though it originated in the matter, has found foothold in the form. For the great and unique gift of this writer lies not in his descriptive powers, magnificent as they are (that is to say, not in what is usually understood as descriptive power – the power of rendering in words surfaces and aspects of things, as did Gautier, De Quincey, and Hugo), but a power of lifting detail into such intense relief that the illusion of life is more vivid in his works than in those of any other writer.

Deceived by the brilliant lighting and by the ingredients used, M. Zola has been written down a realist; but no popular judgment was ever more shallow or incorrect. From the beginning M. Zola held the power of evoking and setting forth, with strange art, detail; and without wavering, without faltering, and continuously he has exercised this power; and with it he has conquered the world. If you read Zola from this side, you will find him a man of magnificent

genius; you will find he has done what no novelist – and I do not except Balzac – has done: he has created a distinct and recognisable form of novel, a form that owes all to his genius and will perish with it; for the form is narrow and sterile, like the form of Racine, and admits of no further development.

Genius and stupidity never stray from their respective paths; talent wanders to and fro following every light; it is impossible not to be moved by the sublime inflexible march of this man from the first to the sixteenth volume of the Rougon-Macquart series. Though you be friend or foe, it seems to me impossible not to admire such fixity of idea.

Last year he wrote *La Terre*, which, for coarseness and sheer brutality, carries us back to Rabelais and Swift; this year he writes *Le Rêve*, which, for pure passion and beautiful imagination, sometimes recalls Shelley and sometimes Shakespeare. And surely a writer who can do this deserves something better than such literary justice as a jury and a judge may administer. *Le Rêve* is at once the most commonplace and original story in the world. It is, in short, the story of King Cophetua and the beggar. But with what admirable genius Zola has narrated the story! Angélique is the illegitimate daughter of Sidonie Saccard, the sister of Saccard, the great speculator in *La Curée*. When nine years old, Angélique was found in the snow, and adopted as their child by some childless vestment-makers in the town of Beaumont. In an old house where the Huberts had embroidered chasubles and mitres for a hundred years she grows up *très passionnée et très pure*. There is the ancient cathedral, whose history, mingling as it does with that of the great family Les Hautecoeur, is, as told by Zola, one of the enchantments of the book; and how admirably the woof is woven, for it is the son of the Archbishop, the last of the Hautecoeurs (M. de Hautecoeur took orders on the death of his wife), who, disguised as a painter of stained glass, falls in love with Angélique as she sits at her window embroidering saints and angels. The girl has read nothing but the legends painted in the windows; and as she embroidered many stories of miracles with silk and gold thread, she embroidered them also in her heart. She waits for a knight to come for her, and she is not disappointed; and when the young man whom she saw vaguely in the moon-lit garden beneath her window comes in a blouse to mend the cathedral windows, she knows instinctively it is a disguise. And she is right. The Bishop's son, the last of the Hautecoeurs, loves antique religious art, and he affects the artisan of old time. Nothing more youthful and beautiful than the Romeo and Juliet, when Félicien climbs the balcony and remains with Angélique till daybreak; nothing more grand than the scene in sepulchral silence of the cathedral beneath the gathering shadows of the columned arches in the coloured twilight of the legended panes, when Angélique begs the consent of the stern prelate who has come to pray to be assuaged of the too carnal love of his dead wife which still lingers in him. In the hallowed light she kneels; her garden hat has fallen back and her gold hair is like an aureole about her; she is now like St. Agnes in the window, whose story she has embroidered so often. Only one word is spoken by the prelate, 'Never!' Nor does he relent until he comes to give extreme unction; and then he says, 'Si Dieu veut, je veux.' Angélique seems to

recover, and in the great cathedral, white with surplices and aflame with candles, alive with its faithful people and priests, her dream is realised. She weds fortune, beauty, and power, above all hope. She smiles, knowing she carries death within her in the midst of this joy and celebration of her victory; and as she passed over the threshold of the great door, at the top of the stair leading to the street, she sank on her bridegroom's arm. Is it not there the joy of life ends? 'She raised herself with a last effort; she put her mouth to Félicien's mouth, and in that kiss she died.' The last words of the book are: 'The vision having come from the invisible, returned to the invisible. It was but an appearance that fades after having created an illusion. All is but dream. And on the summit of happiness Angélique disappeared in the little breath of a kiss.'

Even this cursive analysis should make it clear that *Le Rêve* is a work of genius, at least in conception; of the execution I can give no idea – an extract would not suffice. I can only say that though it contains some admirably written pages, M. Zola's style seems to me more personal here than elsewhere; and this personality and independence are achieved not by exaggeration and distortion of language, but by increasing strictness of phrase, at times of an almost classical frugality. The last literary schools in France – les Décadents et les Symbolistes – have affected much admiration of ritual and love of stained glass. M. Zola has here appropriated and absorbed all their puny aestheticism, decoration, and false piety, and given it out in his own triumphant way.

The weaknesses of the book are so consequent upon, so clearly the offshoots of, its strengths, that it seems unnecessary either to point out or explain them. M. Zola has never attempted to grapple with mental problems, or to follow the strange and complex mysteries of the mind's mechanism; had he done so, the Zola novel would not be as recognisable in style as it is. His one weapon, it has been said, is a unique power of the evocation of detail; and as he never ceases to exercise this power, he does not fail to create an acute illusion of life, *dans son ensemble*. But of this *ensemble* nothing must be stirred. You cannot take any one of the characters and imagine her or him in other circumstances and surroundings. Angélique is a purely mental conception of passion and purity, which through the extraordinary force and intensity of its environment rises into a sort of shadow life.

Midnight is dark outside, and the sleepers do not yet know that it is M. Zola who knocks at their doors with the lamp of Romance. Will Mr. Lang awake and let him in?

Lately it has been discussed with alternate anger and gravity, that if you want romance you must accede the right to dig a hole in Africa for some one to fall into. I am not sure I am quoting correctly; but such is the impression left on my mind of the recent controversy regarding magic potions and pirates of the Spanish Main. No one has ventured to insinuate that they are not as

essential to romance as eggs to an omelette; and trembling before the varying tint of the maiden's cheek, we labour after a roar of schoolboy laughter.

Such is our literary work. In it *Le Rêve* will not find a place; but *Le Rêve* will not remain unread, should any linger among us who, not having finally decided that romance consists solely of digging holes in Africa and blowing up pirates on the Spanish Main, incline to the old heresy that Romance lies rather in the eternal aspiration after such overflowing measure of strength, fortune, and love as life has not for giving.

Chapter 6. Le Revers d'un Grand Homme

An interesting article might be written on the part accident or luck plays in the composition of works of art. For Edgar Poe did not take the initial accidents of inspiration into consideration when, in the *Philosophy of Composition*, he told how he wrote *The Raven*. But his was a mind that would have seen the oversight had it been pointed out, and would have confessed that in the strain and stress of other thoughts, this, the very corner-stone of the theory he was constructing, had escaped him. To supply a deficiency in our analytical literature, I will suggest that some writer should take his best-known book and tell the tale of the luck that followed him in the composition of it, showing thereby how the book would never have attained the form in which it exists, had it not been for the adventitious aids of special circumstances. Waiting the advent of this modest essayist, I will say that two things are necessary for the success of every enterprise – the chance and the man; a book is no exception to this law. A paragraph in a newspaper, a word dropped in conversation, the sight of a special landscape in a special light, a moment of *ennui* or of joy, it is such things as these that dictate the first idea of a book. Philosophically, of course, there is no such thing as chance; but, accepting the word in its everyday meaning, who can say that chance has not a large share in the creation of a work of art? To-day the artistic mind is healthy, and fit for fecundation, but the breeze sets from the wrong quarter, and no pollen comes to fertilise it; to-morrow the mind is indisposed, unready to receive, or may be the pollen that the breeze brings is not of prime vigour; the fecundation is, nevertheless, accomplished, and the process of cerebral gestation begins.

The value, therefore, of the incentive chance is, surely, incalculable. When the rich thought falls into the rich furrow, each reinforces the other, and every day the writer finds his field growing more luxuriously, and flowering in unexpected places. But, alack the hour when the thin thought falls into the furrow, rich though the soil be, it exhausts itself in vain efforts to infuse life and health into the seed – a short, scant harvesting is the inevitable crop.

What writer, as he turns his thoughts over, has not longed for the kindling word, for the incentive suggestion. Sometimes it lies for months forgotten in the fallow of the mind, sometimes for years; then, and only then, a tiny shoot appears. With what joy it is hailed, and how soon it grows and spreads! What writer, as he throws thoughts, dry as withered leaves, restlessly aside, has not basely envied another writer his subject, or regretted that some dramatic event, divorce or suicide, now in progress through the newspapers, was not whispered to him as he walked home some evening, or sat brooding over the fire listening to the chirping of thoughts he is weary of.

Such regret laid fast hold of me when I had read a few pages of that extraordinary book lately published by Messrs. Fisher Unwin, *The Letters of the Duke of Wellington to Miss J.* 'Oh, what a

subject for a novel,' I cried. 'Why did not some angel or demon whisper it to me?' Here is the subject: Miss J., a young lady of marked religious tendency of mind, succeeded in converting a hardened criminal who had been convicted of murder, and was awaiting the death sentence. The man had resisted the efforts of the Protestant and Catholic clergymen; but the influence of Miss J. produced such an effect on him, that he confessed his guilt, and 'professed repentance and conversion.'

The result of this success convinced Miss J. that she had been called to do great work. Scanning the horizon of life from her little lodgings in Kensington, she espied the Duke of Wellington, and decided that he would suit her purpose very well indeed. Miss J. was one of those women who believe that they are born to influence the destinies of great men; and Miss J. was more qualified for the task of influencing the Duke than she knew, and this is paying a high tribute to Miss J.'s modesty, for she was a beautiful girl. The first letter of a correspondence which lasted over seventeen years, the editor says, is unfortunately missing, and Miss J. gives no extracts from it in her diary. The editor is right; the absence of this letter is regrettable, for it would have settled whether the Duke knew that his correspondent was a beautiful girl of twenty, and not an elderly lady of fifty. A most important fact, this, as all who receive letters in their public capacity will testify. After the series of letters, 'I understand you and you understand me, let's go under the willows and weep,' he who has found a skinny spinster of fifty, extending to him a sisterly hand, will take care to make sure of the fair incognito's age and personal appearance before he risks himself in another adventure. That Miss J.'s first letter, notwithstanding the nauseating religious phraseology it was most assuredly couched in, did convey some slight inkling of the charms that awaited his Grace, should he come to see her, I think there is little room to doubt. The biblical cant in which she must have wrapped up this necessary bit of worldliness must remain a matter of conjecture.

Technically, the hypocrite is one who is conscious that he is passing himself off upon others for what he is not, by means of moral disguisements. But in actual life no such being exists. Hypocrites are not distinctly conscious of their hypocrisy; otherwise they would deceive no one. Miss J. was undoubtedly a religious woman; at the same time she undoubtedly used religion as a cloak under which she might advantageously ensnare the Duke into a promise of marriage, or, at least, procure a compromising letter from him. In England, self-deception is a common vice; it is found growing plentifully in nearly all places, especially in the shadow of pulpits and newspaper offices. In the case of Miss J., the dividing line between truth and untruth is so faint as to be practically indefinable; yet we are sensible that it is there, just as we are sensible of the horizon's line, although we cannot follow it through the mid-day mist and glitter of the sea.

The Duke having been assured, as I beg leave to suggest, that his correspondent was young and fair, replied with alacrity, 'He 'regrets that he will be detained at Walmer Castle for more than a fortnight, but suggests 'that Miss J. should write informing him if she would be then in town?' A

meeting was arranged, and it took place in the back-parlour. Miss J. armed herself with a large Bible; but in spite of the weapon, the Duke seized her hand, exclaiming, 'How I love you! – how I love you!' On being questioned by Miss J., concerning who had caused him to feel thus towards her, he replied, 'God Almighty.' The account of this strange interview is taken from Miss J.'s diary. 'During the next visit from the Duke,' Miss J. writes, 'that the Duke, speaking of his feeling for me, exclaimed, "This must be for life!" twice over successively. He then asked me if I felt sufficient for him to be with him a whole life, to which I replied, "If it be the will of God." I observed much excitement about him, and, in a very hurried manner, he told me he was going on a visit to 'the King.' She did not see the Duke again for some time; and in the meantime reflection led Miss J. to suspect the propriety of these visits, and she wrote him her usual long pietistic rigmarole, interlarded with scriptural quotations, out of which I pick the following, as being indicative of the Duke's desires:

'I cannot place myself in the power of one who, however honourable and noble, seems occasionally to forget that he is confided in by a 'being,' etc.

Then again,

'That you should 'think of me, notwithstanding your occasional forgetfulness, with any other than the most honourable feelings is, of course, as impossible as,' etc.

To this missive the Duke answered:

'My dear Miss J., I have received your letter and inclosures. I beg to remind you of what I said to you the second day that I saw you; and, if you recollect it, you will not be surprised at my telling you that I entirely concur in the intention which you have communicated to me.'

We know all about the critics who will not impute evil motives, and who are sure that the world is not half so bad as some people would try to make it out to be; but surely every man of the world must smile as he reads the Duke's letter, and reading the wealth of meaning that lies locked between the lines he will roar with laughter, remembering the celebrated 'Fanny! publish and be damned.' But although the Duke was willing to let the woman go, the woman was by no means inclined to let the Duke go, and for seventeen years she continued to bombard him with pietistic letters, tracts, Bibles, etc. She was Exeter Hall in epitome. The efforts the poor man made to rid himself of his tormentor, the patience with which he bore with her, the time he devoted to reading her letters, and to answering them, cannot be described. Quarrels, because the Duke had not signed his name in full. Quarrels, because the Duke had not sealed the letter with his own seal. Marvellous, indeed, the picture that these letters create of the man with his name wide in the world, standing, as it were, under the very eye of Europe, and this poor crazy

woman, receding out of all sight and hearing, becoming day by day more and more like a forgotten tract on a forgotten shelf. It is pitiful as life; it is as real as life. What a subject for a novel! But in a novel you want proportion, you want crescendo, and in these letters there is neither.

I said that I regretted that some one had not whispered the theme to me as one suitable for a novel. But is it suitable for artistic treatment? We can only find out by examining how those novelists who would be drawn towards such a theme, would treat it.

Mr. Henry James would probably leave the story exactly as it is. The Duke would make some absent-minded advances, which in an absent-minded way would be repelled, or I should say avoided, slurred over. Then the flirtation would drift into vague and undetermined efforts on the part of the Duke to shake himself free, and on the death of the Duke the lady would return to Boston. Zola would probably allow the Duke to become the lady's lover. The remorse of the lady would be indicated by lavish descriptions of the cathedrals she visited. Finally, the Duke would tire of her; Miss J. would follow him through his dissipations, distributing tracts as she went. The book would end by the description of the Duke's funeral, interwoven with the description of the violent cold in the head that prevented the lady attending the ceremony.... She sat on the Kensington hearthrug on a narrow cane-bottomed chair, her knees pressed forward almost against the bars of the grate. 'Susan, give me another pocket-handkerchief!' 'There are no more, mam, I gave you the last one ten minutes ago.' Daudet would describe the Duke lying in Miss J.'s house, and the various subterfuges resorted to by the family to close Miss J.'s mouth.

Guy de Maupassant would show the Duke tiring of the homilies with which this religious maniac's bedroom was ever garlanded. Maupassant would re-introduce H., the young man whom Miss J. had rejected because 'he had never known a new birth into righteousness.' The Duke would approve of the marriage of the young couple; in a quiet suburban chapel he would give her away, not forgetting, however, to settle a handsome fortune upon her and her husband and their heirs for ever.

I think this is the way the subject should be treated. Miss J. would succeed in entangling the Duke sufficiently to make it imperative that he should marry her; for it would be pleasing to show the glory of Waterloo fading in the ridicule that would follow and fasten on the absurd marriage; above all it would be delightful to determine how far this lady's religion was true, by testing it in the crucible of court life, and the book should be called *Le Revers d'un Grand Homme*.

Fighting over again the battle of Waterloo in the back-parlour would be a glorious possibility, one that Balzac might have been able to realise. Given the subject, he would have recreated it, building it strangely by the sheer edge of some blind abyss, and even when night was darkest

some spires, like tiny fingers, would be seen pointing to the stars. He would have made of it something terrible and something pitiful, but he, too, would have recoiled from the subject had he been shown the letters, knowing well that their relentless truth was beyond his painting. Nature appears in this book in all her shocking nakedness, in all her crudity. Not Balzac, nor Thackeray, nor Stendhal, nor yet any one has done what is done here; and I am as astonished as a painter in the fifteenth century would have been at a photograph. But Art is always something more and something less than Nature, and none but the fool will enter into a competition where defeat is inevitable. In these letters the characters of the Duke and Miss J. are painted with that complete and vivid truth which is not Art but Nature, and Nature is not the end and aim of Art – she is, at most, the means to an end. In the representation of any object, an accident of light, a sentiment, a touch that reveals the artist's soul is necessary. But in this book the Duke and Miss J. are shown to us as in a mirror.

You see an astute statesman and a religious hypocrite, and he and she bore you exactly as such persons would bore you in real life, one by interminable streams of pietistic exhortations, the other by solemn care to say nothing that might not be printed in the newspaper next morning.

Chapter 7. An Actress of the Eighteenth Century

Some four or five years ago M. Goncourt announced his intention to refrain from writing any more novels. He has kept his word, and has since confined himself to extracting from his diary such passages as he judges may be published during his lifetime, and to completing the series of historical studies of the actresses of the eighteenth century, which he began years ago in conjunction with his brother. He has lately published the biography of Mile Clairon, 'by means of her secret and intimate correspondence, by the aid of the divulgations of the police reports on her private life.' His object has been, he says, 'to reconstruct the character of the illustrious tragedienne and pseudo-German Princess in all its crude reality, and the material routine of her existence.' M. Goncourt has done miraculously well what he set himself to do. I doubt indeed if he has ever written a better book, and I do not except those he wrote in conjunction with his brother, nor do I attempt to differentiate between his novels and his historical studies. His biography of Mlle Clairon has interested me exactly as his novels have interested me, only perhaps in the biography the charm is more enveloping and more naturally seductive. I have never read a book with greater interest. My knowledge of life has been definitely increased, and at this moment I know no one so intensely and so completely as Mile Clairon. Greater praise I cannot give, and out of the innumerable accidents and countless passions with which her life was shaken I select for the purpose of this article these three or four.

When Mlle Clairon was a child, her mother, a workwoman, who could not afford to pay any one to look after her, often left her under the guardianship of lock and key in the bedroom. To pass the time, the child used to climb on a chair and look out of the window. Then she could see into an apartment opposite where an actress was engaged in rehearsing her part. She watched the actress closely, studying her gestures, and practising them when she had finished; and her industrious and persistent mimicry was of such value to the child that her mother agreed to allow her to attend school. Her manner of coming in, going out, and sitting down was entirely changed, her little body took new graces, her intelligence developed. But her secret weighed heavily upon her, and she confessed it all to a man who used to come to the house and who treated her less harshly than the others. He told her that the actress was Mlle Dangeville, explained to her what was the Comédie Française, and finally obtained permission from her mother to take her to see a performance of *Le Comte d'Essex et les Folles Amoureuses*. What passed within her on that evening Clairon was never able to tell very clearly. She remembered only that she could not utter a word, and her absorption was so great that her mother was about to turn her away when she returned home. *Allez-vous coucher, grosse bête!* She fled to her bed, but instead of going to sleep, she spent the entire night in turning over and over in her little brain what she had heard declaimed on the stage, and next day the stupefaction was great among the frequenters of that house at hearing the child repeat more than two hundred verses from the tragedy and two-thirds of the little play. But this effort of memory was nothing compared to her assimilation of the manner of every actor, the grasseyement of Grandval, the stuttering of Poisson, the regulated mimicry of Mlle Dangeville. Henceforth, notwithstanding all the abuse and blows her mother showered upon her, she refused to learn to sew. The child, finding, even then, in her little dramatic soul one of those tragic phrases, one of those claironades which, in after years, she made such frequent use of, crying, as she drove back her

childish tears, 'Kill me, you had better do so, for if you don't I shall be an actress.' And nothing could force Clairon to give up her vocation, and her mother seeing that she was losing her health, was obliged to give way, and Clairon joined, soon after, the Italian Comedy, and was given instruction in writing, in dancing, in the Italian language. She was hardly fourteen when she made her first appearance.

Love adventures naturally began soon after. In her *Mémoires* she is very silent regarding those early years, years of poverty and low vice; but the police reports of which M. Goncourt speaks, and from which he gives some astonishing citations are more explicit. Her lovers seem to have been of all kinds, and as numerous as the sand on the shore. At Gand, my lord the Duke of Marlborough offered her an immense fortune, which, however, for patriotic reasons she declined to accept. There were captains and colonels, there were authors and abbés; like the lady in Congreve's comedy, lovers were to her like curl-papers, she made them as fast as she pleased, and then if she pleased she made more. It is not, however, until we find her established a great actress in Paris, creating the leading parts in all the great tragedies of her time, that any lover appears upon whom she bestowed any more than the favour of a passing caprice. Sometimes her lovers were rich, sometimes poor; sometimes she ruined them, oftener it must be confessed they ruined her. And the end of all these leave-takings were poverty and trouble. And the letters written about this time have for refrain: *Je suis sans le sol*. And at every moment she was obliged to have recourse to her friends and her former lovers. Looking over her life I find three love stories which represent especially well the three most usual phases of her character, and these stories seem to me to be not only typical of the woman, but of life itself. The first of these three lovers was Marmontel, a young and fashionable author, whose tragedies were played constantly at the Comédie Française. According to him, Clairon was a mistress full of vivacity, gaiety, and all the characteristics of an amiable naturalness without admixture of any caprice, having but the one desire to make her lover happy.

But at the end of a few months this love, which was to last for ever, she said to Marmontel, who was supping with her at a friend's house: – 'N'y venez-pas ce soir, vous seriez mal à votre aise; le bailli de Fleury doit y souper, et il me ramène.' 'J'en suis connu,' lui répondait naïvement Marmontel, 'il voudra bien me ramener aussi.' 'Non, il n'aura qu'un vis-à-vis.' Marmontel à ce mot devinait tout, et laissait voir sa surprise sur la figure. Est-il bien vrai, parlez-vous sérieusement? 'Oui, je suis folle quelquefois, mais je ne serai jamais fausse.' A few days after Marmontel received a letter from Clairon asking him to come and see her on a matter of importance. He went, and the matter of importance was that she liked him far better than le bailli de Fleury, and begged to be reinstated in his affections. This Marmontel refused; but when his next piece was read at the Comédie, to the astonishment of the actors, and even of Clairon, he gave the principal part to Mlle Clairon. A quarter of an hour after she arrived at his house, accompanied by a friend: 'Take it, sir,' she said, speaking as she would on the stage and throwing the MS. at his feet. 'I cannot accept the part without the author, for both belong to me.' Marmontel explained that he belonged to her as a friend, and that any other sentiment only made them unhappy. 'He is right,' cried Clairon; 'my folly makes us both miserable. Come then, my friend, and dine at your friend's house.'

On this amorous liaison, so gallantly broken off by mutual agreement, during the course of the rehearsals of the *Aristomène* there was founded a friendship which lasted for thirty years unshadowed by a single cloud.

It is difficult to imagine anything more deliciously eighteenth century than this anecdote. But more deeply human is the story of the actress's love for Larive. Larive was a young actor in whom Clairon took the warmest interest, and her correspondence with him shows the actress amid her daily occupations. We see her starting to promener son importance au Bois de Boulogne, we learn that her sprained arm is better, and that her cook has left her. It is Clairon who looks after the money of the young actor; and she tells him never to deprive himself of any real necessary, for to do so narrows the heart; and throughout these gossiping letters a slight moral tone prevails, the grave words of a father or of a loving mother. Sometimes she upbraids him, but she is quick to beg forgiveness for a harsh word addressed to the spoilt child of her heart. He sends her every new part he plays, and she instructs and advises him; nor does she fear to open the chapter entitled Women; indeed she returns to it often. Caprices she will permit him, but begs of him to beware of any serious attachment. And always behind a mask of pure affection we find ourself in the presence of the passion of an old woman for a young man. A warm and sensual tenderness penetrates these letters. Nor do I know anything more strangely dramatic than those written when Larive began to think of marriage – those dolorous cries with which she tells him that she will not be able to see him again. 'Good-bye, be happy; this is the only consolation I ask from you, and whatever may happen to me you will always serve to remind me of the instability of human things. I said yesterday that I counted on you as on myself, that you would be the delight of my life, and to-day I am forced to tell you that we are lost to one another for ever.'

The third lover who left his mark on her life was the Comte de Valbelle. This liaison lasted for nineteen years – it is true with help of a certain number of coadjutors. In the first years of their liaison, the Comte had very little money, and to gratify his taste for good living, Clairon was frequently obliged to sell all that was not absolutely necessary, and live in the greatest poverty. Thousands of women have done this; but there is, to my mind, something strangely grand and noble in the passion for a memory which allows a woman to write to a lover and, mind you, to a lover who had left her in reply to a letter saying that although he had four thousand a year, he had not twenty-five louis to lend to une amie: 'I shall be glad to send you fifty louis if you want them; I have them, and if I hadn't them I would sell all I have, as I have done before, so that I might give them to you.' A few weeks after she sold her jewellery, her furniture, her wardrobe, all she had, so that she might lend him the money he wanted. 'I forgive you the misfortunes you have caused me, and I beg of you to cherish my memory.... Tears prevent me from seeing what I am writing. Adieu, Val.'

In writing of this strange woman, so multiple and so diverse, and yet single-natured when you come to study, and through study to understand her, I have addressed myself entirely to the human, I will say the fleshly side of her character; but it is necessary now that I should allude, even if I can do no more, to that splendid intellectual nature which made her Mlle Clairon, and which is her claim upon the consideration of posterity. Her intellect was as passionate as her flesh, and we know how that was attuned to all emotions. The woman was strung with passion, and vibrated all her life like a harp in the wind. Like her physical nature her intellectual nature

was passion, yes, truly, she was as passionate in her art as she was in her loves. Life came to her in two great passions – love of art and love of man; she sacrificed all else for these, and occasion never came in her life when she found herself obliged to choose between them. Space is wanting to tell of her life-long rivalry with Mlle Dumesnil. Suffice it to say that these two actresses disputed the dramatic sceptre at the Comédie Française for many a year. One was the first tragédienne that dared to speak on the stage, the other remained in the empyrean of the old-fashioned grandiloquent tragedy, the tragédienne of thunder and lightning. One with a more modern talent, newer, more prescient of the future; the other with perhaps more genius. It must, however, be remembered that if Mlle Dumesnil was the first to speak on the stage, that Mlle Clairon was the first to appear on the stage without paniers. It is to her that we owe the reform in theatrical costume, and it was she who inaugurated the first movement in the direction of local colour. No space remains to me to speak again of her letter of farewell to the Comte de Valbelle, of her life at the Margrave's Court, of how she was supplanted in the affections of the Margrave by Lady Craven, and how, after seventeen years of absence, she was obliged to return to France. Still I would not close this article without saying a word on the old age of Clairon.

M. Goncourt says: 'An old age of passions badly calmed, of resentments unappeased, without any softening of the heart, without charity in the soul. Never in Clairon a pretty regret for the past, one of those smiling melancholy moods of the aged sinner, as in the case of Sophie Arnold; never a gentle and witty mocking at the suffering of the body.' ...I think that M. Goncourt judges the character that he has created, or, should I say, resurrected from the past, somewhat harshly. The strange passionate woman, whom we have seen as a disobedient child refusing to learn to sew, whom we have seen at the little supper parties in the Rue Bussy and the great supper parties in Racine's old apartment, whom we have seen as the illustrious tragédienne of the Comédie Française creating all the leading parts in Voltaire's greatest plays, whom we have seen a sort of German Princess at the Margrave's Court, and whom we now see sitting alone, deserted by all in her solitary house at Issy, I confess, affects me differently. Yes, I am inclined to judge her more lightly. I am inclined to think of her kindly, even when she writes to a would-be visitor describing her wrinkles and her want of teeth in exaggerated terms, obviously because she would not have that he should be too shocked at her appearance. This terrible sensibility, this passion of life that years could not quench, is not wholly unsympathetic to me. It attracts me, and when I find the old woman, now eighty years of age, writing: 'I know I am eighty, but my heart is between five-and-twenty and thirty,' I am filled with wonder and admiration for the vital energy that could find such words after so many years of passion and adventure, and having regard for her great love of life it seems to me impossible to withhold from her our forgiveness and love.

Chapter 8. Mummer-Worship

An actor is one who repeats a portion of a story invented by another. You can teach a child to act, but you can teach no child to paint pictures, to model statues, or to write prose, poetry, or music; acting is therefore the lowest of the arts, if it is an art at all, and makes slender demands on the intelligence of the individual exercising it; but this age, being one mainly concerned with facile amusement and parade, reverences the actor above all other beings, and has by some prodigy, that cannot be explained by us, succeeded, or almost succeeded in abstracting him from the playwright, upon whom he should feed in the manner of a parasite, and endowing him with a separate existence of necessity ephemeral, but which by dint of gaudy upholstery and various millinery has been prolonged beyond due limits and still continues. We of the nineteenth century have witnessed this, and stranger and more wonderful things even we have witnessed, and we bear testimony to them. For according to ancient books and traditions, the actor and actress of past times – those times when Shakespeare and Jonson lived – may be compared with a careless lad and wench who, having tired of the ties of home and ways of respectability, threw off galling restraint and roved, after their own hearts' fashion, on the outskirts of society, telling poetry to the joyous who like them cared little for beads, ashes, and repentance. Such manner of dramatic life found favour to the close of the last century, and did not fall into complete desuetude until about twenty years ago. Then a great and drastic change came; the mummer grew ashamed of his hose and longed for a silk hat, a villa, and above all a visit from the parson. Nothing more touching than the shame which suddenly came upon mummers, male and female; and now, in full fig, that is to say in a villa, in a silk hat, and with the cards of the parson and his wife in their hands, they lay claim to our sympathies and demand our household affections. Their women assure us that they are excellent mothers and have not known the joys of lovers; the men invite us to their club, and speak of aristocratic connections. So the mummer has changed his garb and name; he is now the actor, and wears a silk hat. Can the leopard change his spots or the Ethiopian his skin? The modern mummer sits on the lawn outside his villa in St. John's Wood; his boys play beneath the leafage; his wife, a portly lady on the verge of forty-five and society, tells you of the many acts of Christian charity she is performing and of the luncheon parties to which she has been asked. His house is full of letters from eminent people, cuttings from newspapers, and portraits of himself and his wife, for as he was civilised (up or down, which is it?), his vanity has grown as weed never grew before: it overtops all things human, and puts forth religious blossom.

Genius and respectability for the actor, genius and virtue for the actress, is the cry from the modern stage. Grant us this and we'll be still. He who has met the young actress in a Bayswater drawing-room has heard her say, 'Why shouldn't a girl be virtuous on the stage as well as elsewhere... and a great deal more so too?' And the young lady's aphorism finds echo in the newspapers. It would be profitless, it would be vain, to seek for the John and Paul of the new

gospel. So numerous are they that their individualities have been lost, and suffice it for the purpose of this article to say, its apostles are everywhere. The Word is preached, miracles are recorded, and in that Jordan, the Roman Church, the black are made white, and turned bleating into society's fold. Every day the strength of the movement calls new preachers into existence, and we must needs seek sermons in skirts and prayer in the wings. Five years have not passed since we heard for the first time that a favourite actress nursed her children, read prayers, and gave tea and tracts to naughty chorus girls. A favourite American actress has improved upon the Englishwoman's initiative, inasmuch as the details concerning her private life which are offered for our delectation are of a more refined nature. When the first rumour of her refusal of the Duke's hand had been adequately contradicted, we were informed that she went to church every Sunday, and lived a holy and retired life with her mother, and latterly it has transpired that she will never marry: virtue is not enough for this young lady, she must have the sacredness of the vestal; and so a corner-stone of the convent has been added to the Church of the Drama. And as a Lyceum tragedy is burlesqued at the Gaiety, so did *danseuses* and others burlesque the moral tone that came from Wellington Street, and we have had to listen to persistent asseverations of virtue from notorious 'professional' ladies who accept presents of jewellery and sup with the young dogs of the town. The trade in stage virtue waxes fast and furious, and it seems not unlikely that signs of it will soon be put over theatrical doors.

Mummers interrupt our path in life – their virtue, their beauty, their successes, their books – for lately they have taken to writing books; books about what? about themselves. There is but one subject of interest to the mummer, and, like his clothes, his talk, and his virtue, his books excite the curiosity of the public. We have had five editions of the Bancroft *Memoirs* – two bulky volumes of five hundred pages each. Mr. Toole's *Memoirs* are promised, Mr. Grossmith's [*A Society Clown*, by George Grossmith] have appeared, and Mr. Corney Grain's are announced; and the daily press, letting pass the rarest prose and verse without a word (I believe no notice appeared of Mr. Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* in the *Telegraph*, *Standard*, or *Chronicle*), eagerly gives up dozens of columns to praise and quotation of the stupid anecdotes that any one who has held or played in a theatre chooses to write out. And when not engaged in compiling the stories of their virtuous and successful lives, the mummers discuss their social grievances in the evening papers. What is the social status of the actor? is argued as passionately as a frontier question of European importance. Mr. Grossmith writes to the duke, before he consents to accept ten pounds to sing a couple of songs, to ask if he will be received as a guest or what?... Or was it that the duke wrote to Mr. Grossmith and asked how he would like to be received? Be this as it may, something went wrong, and Mr. Grossmith declares that he scored over the duke by taking a countess down to supper. Neither doctors, lawyers, nor dentists stipulate how they are to be received when they attend. And it will seem to many that when a gentleman accepts a fee for singing in a drawing-room he would prove his blue blood better by declining to consider himself in the light of an ordinary guest than by afterwards discussing his claim to be received on an equal footing with those whose presence was not paid for. It would also be well if, on

retiring from the stage and entering society, actresses would refrain a little, not criticise too severely the morals of the ladies around them, and not wonder in stage whispers why Mrs. So-and-So is received. I know how easily the present may be depreciated by comparing it with a past which time has hallowed and the imagination must needs idealise, knowing it only in its noblest aspects; but facile, common, and unjust as the expedient generally is, it seems to me impossible to consider the state of our drawing-rooms without glancing at those that preceded them. I will attempt no description of an eighteenth-century *salon* – a mention of Mr.

Orchardson's picture will bring my reader's thoughts to the desired point. Such representation of the eighteenth century, even when we have exaggerated what time has taken of ugliness, and allowed for what the imagination lends of beauty, must be admitted as proof that our manners have declined out of all reckoning. We should have looked in vain for mummers in the *salon* of Madame Récamier, and it is to the honour of ladies of old time that we do not find them ostentatiously love-making with inferiors. Love then spread his wings in court phrase and political intrigue; now he is a vulgar parrot that speaks by rote and screams before the foot-lights. He who thinks society has lost nothing of dignity and elegance must call to mind Mr. Orchardson's picture as he walks into a London drawing-room. Here is a specimen of a modern *salon* in a fashionable house wherein the mummer has gained a footing. Look with me at the company. First here are some young Jews whose long locks do not conceal their Whitechapel origin. One is at the piano. The eyes of many middle-aged ladies are fixed on him; he ogles them in turn; on his especial patrons he lets a single glance fall; he strikes a chord with his right hand; he lets his left drop by his side and utters the last note. The song is done, the middle-aged ladies remove their eyes and sigh with admiration. His place is taken by a girl of wild and unsettled look. Her dress is loud, her hair is perhaps touched with dye; she plays and sings, acts and recites, and is said to make a great deal of money. She is always engaged to a young mummer, and she is now playing the accompaniment for her future husband. Like the others, he is exceedingly lovely, and everywhere you hear of his loveliness. When he gives a concert the hall is filled with women mute with delight or talking incoherently. Will any one assert that this is not true, and, being true, that it is not decadence? The individual standing in the doorway left the army some years ago; there is still a look of the officer in his mild face – a face made mild by long association with folly, vanity, and caprice. As usual, he is waiting for his wife; as usual, she stands at a little distance, in the middle of the room, talking of herself. She explains that she is a popular favourite, and how, in the event of not getting an engagement, she will give another *matinée*. How much money has the poor man spent on *matinées*, on tours, on seasons at the Opéra Comique, the Globe, the Olympic, the Strand? There are always people in his house, principally dramatic authors – unkempt dramatic authors from the Strand; erudite and melancholy dramatic authors from Oxford; foolish and foppish dramatic authors from Mayfair. They read plays after breakfast, after lunch, and after dinner, and the readings are only interrupted by fashionable men who come from the clubs and make up parties to go to the theatre. The poor husband sits on the stairs with his only child on his knees; the child says, 'When will mother come home, father?' The elderly man who sits talking to an old lady was

stricken in early life with a hatred of dressing for dinner and afternoon calls, and to escape from what he hated he lived with an actress. His social experiment succeeded for a time, but as society became disorganised the lady succeeded in scrambling through some unguarded loopholes, and when she married her protector she determined to make up for lost time. No more loose jackets; no more smoking in the drawing-room; no more Bohemian friends, but society select and rare; and the little man has now to take in double doses that which he hated – afternoon calls and formal conversations. He is not only obliged to dress every day for dinner, but he has to give entertainments in the open air – they give him violent colds; afternoon calls interfere with politics, but every day you can see him crumpled up in his wife's vast carriage. The horses step out, her bosom stretches forth, and away they go to leave cards. Deluded little politician! Had he married a lady he would have escaped with half his present visiting, and might have been allowed to dispense occasionally with evening dress.

In the *salons* of the eighteenth century love was interwoven between literature and politics. Now our love passages twine round a criticism of acting – how So-and-So used to play the part walking up the stage with his hands in his pockets, whereas So-and-So used to play the part walking down the stage with his hands behind his back. 'I want you,' says the actor to his lady, 'to come to the theatre to-night, for I have invented a new bit of "business": while So-and-So is singing his sentimental song I pretend to have lost my tobacco pouch, and so that the public shan't get tired of it I intend to vary the "business" next week by pretending that I have got a pebble in my shoe.' Over such points the season goes mad, falls prostrate and licks the boots of mummerdom. Every prostration has been performed, every servile contortion has been made; and these changed creatures, with hymn-books in their hands and their pinchbeck virtue oozing through their speech, come up every staircase shaking the dust of their past careers from their garments.

For the last ten years the actor has not only demanded acclamation for what he does, but he has striven to obtain, and has succeeded in obtaining, praise for what he is, thus emulating all priests and sacred apes. He demands more than they: by right of his office he claims intelligence as his inalienable right. Even priests and sacred apes have refrained from this last audacity. When I say the actor claims intelligence, even genius, by right of his office, I do not mean that the claim has ever been put into writing – in the form of a deposition read before the Lord Mayor, who will listen to depositions on all subjects – but by his attitude of late years the actor has not only made, but has maintained, his right to genius. Not only all he asked has been conceded, but he has been encouraged to come again and ask for more.

I pass without comment the banquets that have been given to him on leaving for America, of the inordinate use made of the telegraph-wire in proclaiming his victories; it would hardly be to the point to speak of the reporters who go to his ship when the anchor-chain has run out, write of his health and his impressions in endless columns, and style him 'great chief.' Let all this be

waived. So many have been treated so, that such consideration and recognition is valued little by them. So Mr. Wyndham must have thought when he planned his continental tour. 'America, what is it? At best a land of dollars. I will go where there are Emperors – to Russia and Germany.'

Our contention is a threefold one; first, that acting is the lowest of the arts, if it be an art at all; secondly, that the public has almost ceased to discriminate between bad and good acting, and will readily grant its suffrage and applause to any one who has been abundantly advertised, and can enforce his or her claim either by beauty or rank; thirdly, that the actor is applauded not for what he does, but for what he is – that of late years the actor has been lifted out of his place, and, in common with all things when out of their places, he is ridiculous and blocks the way. A plain account of Mr. Wyndham's continental tour will fully prove these three indictments. Mr. Wyndham is an actor who has played very well indeed in numberless adaptations of French farces, and his plea for seeking the suffrages of Emperors is that he was at school in Germany, and knows French as an educated Englishman knows it. Miss Mary Moore (the 'leading lady' at the Criterion Theatre) tells the story of her qualifications for the tour in question in the *Evening News* of March 24 [1888]; and it is worthy of repetition here, if only to show the slight preparation and training which are now necessary to gain a footing on the 'boards.'

'Well, I began my stage career at Bradford, in Yorkshire, in the first touring company of "The Candidate," sent out by Mr. Wyndham. I went out as understudy of Miss Eveson in the leading part of "Lady Dorothy." At Bradford Miss Eveson was taken ill, and I had to go on at very short notice. I need not tell you how dreadfully nervous I was. It was a very severe trial, but I managed to get through it. *It was actually my first appearance on any stage. I had no previous experience, even as an amateur.*'

The italics are mine; I would ask those who think I have unjustly depreciated the art of acting in relation to the other arts, to think if they can of a man painting a picture without 'previous experience,' or modelling a statue, or composing a sonata, or even playing a piano.

'When Miss Eveson returned to London I continued with "The Candidate" company, playing the leading part all through the tour.... My first appearance in London was at the Criterion Theatre, in October 1885.... One day I received a cablegram from Mr. Wyndham, asking me whether I would play "Ada Ingot" in German at Berlin in October. It was a startling proposal, for we were already in the latter part of August, and I had never kept up my familiarity with the German language since my school-days. But I made up my mind to do it if it were at all possible.... *In order to get as much practice as possible in the foreign tongue in which I had somewhat rashly undertaken to play, I took my passage in the North German Lloyd steamer "Saal."*'

The touching simplicity of this confession deserves italics. A new amateur goes to Germany and Russia to play in German and French, neither of which she is more than superficially acquainted with. Only those who have lived ten years abroad and speak a foreign language with fluency and conversational correctness, and therefore know how skin-deep their knowledge of the language is, may appreciate at its full value the exquisite absurdities that this very English couple must have been guilty of. The newspapers told us that they were applauded and received floral tributes, but so would a band of Hottentots who came to Europe to flourish clubs; and no doubt Mr. Wyndham and Miss Mary Moore will be applauded and will receive floral tributes if they go to Paris and play there in Russian; and I would advise them to do this, for Russia is all the fashion in Paris. The Parisians will nod their heads and say, *Que c'est charmant... quelle jolie langue... harmonieuse*, etc. But to return to their German tour. Telegrams came from Berlin, Frankfort, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, announcing Mr. Wyndham and Miss Mary Moore's triumphant success. Evidently the passage in the North German steamer bore fruit, and I can imagine them preparing their French by engaging ticket-collectors in discussion. When they returned home there was more banqueting and more floral tributes, and for a big bomb the Chancellor of the Exchequer was invited to supper on the stage of the Criterion Theatre and he made a speech. I regret that I cannot lay hands on a verbatim report, but, in default, I give some lines of a description of it which appeared in the *Era*: –

'Mr. Charles Wyndham will need all his natural modesty to prevent his becoming intoxicated by his recent achievements. It was much to carry the flag of the British drama to Berlin; it was more to win the admiration of Russian royalty; but to get Mr. Goschen to bear eloquent tribute to the actor's merits was, indeed, something remarkable. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is, as everybody knows, the embodiment of the practical. Stern, shrewd common-sense has always been his most striking characteristic. To find him the sympathetic and admiring laudator of the buoyant and volatile actor-manager who has recently returned to the Criterion Theatre with all his blushing honours thick upon him is, indeed, as Mr. Coborn would say, "a surprise." Mr. Wyndham has, indeed, been curiously fortunate in his connection with political' magnates. It was at the Criterion Theatre, it will be remembered, that Mr. Gladstone sat on the very evening when the fall of Khartoum was announced. Much political capital was made out of the circumstance; and both parties had reason to be grateful to "The Candidate" on this occasion. The Liberals must have been thankful for the much-needed relaxation afforded to their sorely harassed chief, whilst the Conservatives did not fail to make a vast amount of political capital out of the coincidence, comparing the "grand old man" to Nero fiddling whilst Rome was in flames, with other pleasant parallels of a similar nature. And now a Chancellor of the Exchequer holds forth in polished terms at a banquet on the very Criterion stage, and sings the praises of the British drama of the day. Mr. Goschen's knowledge of German theatrical taste enabled him confidently to pay a tribute to the reality of Mr. Wyndham's success. After a pun, that Mr. Toole might have

envied, about "Garrick on the Spree," Mr. Goschen went on to say that a new form of British competition was being carried into the heart of the German Empire. It was said, remarked Mr. Goschen, that the Germans were pushing us hard in many directions; they were said to be depriving us of a portion of our trade; they were said to be our most formidable rivals in all quarters of the globe; but though German men-o'-war might plant the German flag in the Navigator Islands, Mr. Wyndham had planted the Union Jack of Old England on the Court Theatre of Berlin. People had talked about the Panjdeh incident; but what was such an incident compared with the incident of "David Garrick" acted on a Moscow stage? "The Germans," continued the Chancellor of the Exchequer, "have long admired, with proper reverence, the splendid works of our great dramatists; but till lately they scorned the efforts of those who endeavoured to render them on the stage."

C'est gigantesque, as Flaubert used to say when some more than natural enormity of the *bourgeoisie* was brought under his notice. But we will not draw attention to any particular sentence, either by italicisation or comment; each is a flawless gem of the rarest human stupidity, and the whole forms the most perfect and complete diadem of nineteenth-century sottishness that we can call to mind. 'Tout est là, rien ne manque.'

It would seem therefore that our contention, namely, that our century delights more in parade and gross satisfactions than the centuries that immediately preceded it, and therefore accords worship to the mummer, less for what he does than by right of his mummerhead, is not a light paradox founded on fancy, but a solid truth resting on a substantial basis of fact.

Cruelty was the vice of the ancient, vanity is that of the modern world. Vanity is the last disease. To-day we all seek admiration – that is to say, admiration in its original sense of wonderment. It matters not at all to us if we obtain approbation – instinctively we eschew it, fearing all that might tend to diminish the sentiment of wonder which we eagerly strive to create. The stage therefore catches the great part of the attention of modern society. Painting, music, and poetry demand special talents – ability is required to compose even a bad opera, a bad epic, a bad picture – but any one can play Juliet and Hamlet badly; besides, to compose even bad operas, epics, and pictures, solitude and long concentration of thought are needed, and with solitude and long concentration of thought the young ladies and young men of to-day will have nothing to do. Desiring parade and wonderment, they turn their eyes to the stage. Our generation has ceased to care for work; we all want to live well, to enjoy life. In the lowest as well as the highest I note the same desire. Twenty years ago farm labourers were paid by the piece and they worked on till eight o'clock in the evening; now they are paid by the week and they strike work at half-past five. This general inclination to take pleasure and ease is of course more acutely marked in society than in the fields. Young sons shrink from the counting-house and shudder when the name of Manitoba is mentioned. The arts offer them as a pretext for remaining at

home. So the arts are encumbered with young men and women. The most intelligent and the least carnal go to literature, painting, sculpture, and music; the stupid, the vain, and the fleshly go to the stage. Not in vocation and original impulse must we seek the reason of the thousands of pictures that yearly line the walls of the public galleries and the piles of novels that crowd the stalls of the booksellers, but in vanity and idleness; and the dull-witted, uneducated, over-dressed young men who speak of being on or of going on the stage in Kensington and Bayswater drawing-rooms, are too cowardly to enlist, too lazy to face the hardships of colonial life. They would pull plums out of the mummer's pie, but they will not go into the kitchen where it is made and baked.... The profession must be raised, elevated, etc. If I except a couple of princesses and a duchess in perspective, I know no young lady who has not at one time or other expressed a regret that she was not an actress. Women are quite as foolish and quite as vain as men – which is saying a great deal – and they desire the stage for the same reason as their brothers. But for the young ladies there is at least an excuse: now that we have a surplus female population it is clear that all women cannot marry, they cannot enlist, nor yet go out to the colonies and become domestic servants. So they sigh after the stage. 'What are we to do with our daughters?' is a vital question. The young ladies cry in chorus, 'Put us on the stage, mamma;' but mamma still hesitates, and the question is debated: 'Can Ethel, Harriet, and May sing in the chorus – not in Mr. Farnie's operas, but in Mr. Gilbert's and remain as good and pure young ladies as if they had continued to do crochet-work in the drawing-room at home?' The parents oppose for a while their daughters' wishes, but in their heart of hearts they think it would be no bad thing if Ethel, Harriet, and May were to earn each thirty shillings or two pounds a week. Such is the 'psychological moment' in Kensington and Bayswater, and out of it come all the various hypocrisy, subterfuge, and sophistry which we may read under such headings as 'Church and Stage,' 'Social Status of the Actor,' etc.

Ethel, Harriet, and May take lessons in elocution. They assure their parents that to be taught to read Shakespeare by Mrs. A. is just the same as to be taught to dance by Mrs. B. At Mrs. A.'s they make acquaintances, they invite their new friends to come to their house or they go to their new friends' houses, where they make more acquaintances, all more or less connected with the drama. If they are lucky, Ethel, Harriet, and May are engaged at small salaries as under-studies. They leave home at eleven in the morning for rehearsal, and they spend several hours wandering about in the twilight of the stage, or sitting in the darkness of the wings. There are the dangers of familiarity. The stage-manager calls them 'dear,' puts his arm round their shoulders, and walks across the stage with them; and he is a bullying, blaspheming fellow when he is at work, a coaxing, sensual fellow when he is idling. 'And how is she to-day?' he asks Ethel. The young girl rebukes him, but she is laughed at by her companions and told she is ruining her chances. Harriet may feel faint: if so, she is led out into the air by the young man standing next her, and he presses her to drink a glass of wine. At rehearsal the formality of introductions is dispensed with. A friend of the manager arranges a lunch, and if our young ladies refuse the invitations so graciously extended to them they are looked upon with

suspicion in the theatre. Bouquets and presents are left for them at the stage-door. In the dressing-rooms they meet all sorts and conditions of girls; they have to dress in their company; they have to listen to their conversation, which is often sometimes more than a trifle coarse. They have not been on the stage a month, and already into what shadow has not home faded, with its familiar restraints, associations, and influences! At the end of the season Ethel, Harriet, and May go on tour. They are friendless, they are lonely and a little afraid; and the instinct is inherent in woman to look to man for love and protection. Now a long railway journey, passed amid enervating conversations and card-playing, is over; the girl is tired; there is a rush for lodgings. 'Come along, my dear,' cries one of the principals; 'I'm going to the "Hen and Chickens;" you'll be able to get a room there.' She spends months with this man for sole companion, sometimes living under the same roof with him. After having knocked around for ten years, and danced and sung in long clothes and short, and been loved much and often, Ethel returned to London, where she is sometimes engaged to play small parts at a salary of five pounds a week. Harriet married an actor; she is now divorced. May ran away with a banker, who promised to marry her, but didn't; she went to America; she tried to 'get' on the stage again; now she is drinking herself to death. And as I have sketched it, so might the fate be of three young ladies taken from a Bayswater drawing-room, and turned into the dramatic profession to make their living; I mean three average young ladies who, meaning to be good girls, turned to the stage for the usual reasons vanity, weariness of home, and ordinary love of change. I do not say adventure: grant love of adventure, and you draw perilously near vocation. The young lady who, wild with love of adventure and masquerade, beats her wings against the plate-glass window of her prison, and looks to the dark doorway as the lark to the bright sky, will possibly fight her way to the front. Nature has chosen her for the battle of the footlights. The ranks of the chorus will be better filled by those who enlist of inclination than by those who have been led by false promises out of their way of life.

Far less than art or government a philosophic idea is understood; but how much suffering might be avoided if the truth could become generally recognised and acted upon, that no world can be wholly pure or impure – that some proportion of vice, as well as virtue, must find its way into human life! The entire removal and abolition of either would mean death to the race. Mr. Lecky, in a magnificently eloquent passage, inspired by a profound philosophy, has described the harlot as the guardian angel of our wives and daughters. Our every-day moralists would do well to master such primary truths before they seek to subvert entirely the present order of vice and virtue.

The stage was once a profession for the restless, the frankly vicious – for those who sought any escape from the platitude of their personality; the stage is now a means of enabling the refuse of society to idly satisfy the flesh, and air much miserable vanity. Such change has come. No change is more than superficial, and dramatic art has not risen above the law that governs human things. To-day the stage is as moral as it was a hundred years ago as much so and not

one jot more. The alliance between church and stage is a subject wherewith the hypocritical may trade on the eternal credulity of mankind; the alliance between the stage and society is unfortunately a reality, and I have attempted to explain its genesis. The dramatic profession has been, is, and always must be, a profession for those to whom social restraints are irksome, and who would lead the life their instinct dictates. The ideal mother cannot be the great artist. The ancients knew this well, and did not waste time in striving to unite the cradle and the *chef-d'oeuvre*. And since, in the eternal wisdom of things, we must find a place for vice as well as for virtue, for the Bohemian as well as the housewife, I believe that little will be gained by emptying the *coulisse* into the drawing-room, and the drawing-room into the *coulisse*. We have no belief in the amalgamation of classes, and still hold by the old distinctions. We do not prefer vice to virtue, or virtue to vice, but believe both, since both exist, to be necessary; and our morality consists mainly in striving to keep them apart and refraining from experimental mixing. Victor Hugo in his last book, *Choses Vues*, has a chapter entitled 'Mlle Georges.' The great actress comes to see him in a moment of great distress, and he records her conversation:

'Voilà la verité. Je suis dans la misère. J'ai pris mon courage et je suis allée chez Rachel, chez Mlle Rachel, pour lui demander de jouer *Rodogune* avec moi à mon bénéfice. Elle ne m'a pas reçu, et m'a fait dire de lui écrire. Oh! par exemple, non! Je ne suis pas encore là. Je suis reine de théâtre comme elle, j'ai été une belle catin comme elle, et elle sera un jour une vieille pauvre comme moi. Eh bien, je ne lui écrirai pas. Je ne lui demande pas l'aumône. Je ne ferai pas l'antichambre chez cette drôlesse! Mais elle ne se souvient pas qu'elle a été mediente! Elle ne songe pas qu'elle le deviendra! Mendiante dans les cafés, M. Hugo; elle chantait et on lui jetait deux sous! C'est bon. Dans ce moment-ci elle joue chez Véron à un louis et elle gagne ou perd dix mille francs dans la nuit; mais dans trente ans elle n'aura pas deux liards et elle ira dans la crotte avec des souliers éculés! Dans trente ans elle ne s'appellera peut-être pas Rachel aussi bien que je m'appelle Georges. Elle trouvera une gamine qui aura du talent et qui lui marchera sur la tête et elle se couchera à plat ventre, voyez-vous.... Je dois dix francs à mon portier. J'ai été obligée de laisser vendre au Mont-de-Piété les boutons de diamant que je tenais de l'empereur. Je joue au theatre Saint-Marcel, je joue aux Batignolles, je joue à la banlieue, je n'ai pas vingt-cinq sous pour payer mon fiacre. Et bien, non, je n'écirai pas à Rachel, et je me jetterai à l'eau tout bonnement.'

This seems to me truth – truth for yesterday, for to-day, and for all time. Hypocrites shall write about the church and stage, and new devotees shall fall before a single shrine of shovel-hattedness and motley; young ladies will think more than ever that the stagedoor will lead them from the irksomeness of chaperons to fame and fortune, and Kensington matrons will incline a more and more docile ear to that which they are now seeking to believe – that their daughters may be virtuous actresses; the flame of mummer-worship shall be blown higher; society shall embrace the mummer, the mummer shall return the embrace more ardently; we

shall hear of another queen of the boards who nurses her children, and another who goes to church every Sunday; many strange things shall come to pass, but such phases of stage-life are ephemeral and circumstantial – gnats on the surface of a well, and in the end the abiding and important truth will be found unchanged at the bottom; and I have not found it more strikingly expressed than in the words of the unfortunate Mlle Georges.

Chapter 9. Our Dramatists and Their Literature

When we reproach our dramatists with the illiterate puerilities of their stories, they reply that the public will listen to nothing more sensible; and it is clear they hope we shall infer from this statement that they are capable of rising to very superior heights of fancy and imagination, and were not at all intended by nature to grovel; and then, bewailing their lot, they point with despairing glances to the trough full of guineas, and with leisured gait return to the unclean straw of melodrama and farce.

Our dramatists' apology for their foolish plays, and their plea for the genius that might have been theirs, but which lies a wreck submerged beneath the waves of popular taste, might have been allowed to pass with an incredulous smile for sole comment, if, by a series of unwise attempts to follow us into book literature, they had not proven that they are no better than we expected they were – third, fourth, and fifth-rate men of letters; and, as all our leading dramatists have written essays, novels, newspaper articles, and even poems, it seems to me that before examining their plays it would be well to cast our eyes over what they have produced when liberated from the thralldom of the public, the actor, the flare and tinsel of the stage, and the many various disadvantages they labour under. In their novels, their poems, and their essays, they should have found an escapement for the genius which they so confidently assure us exists in them. Let us then examine these. It is not possible to conceive that a man should be capable of writing with thought and eloquence in the strictest form, and being only capable of expressing the most hackneyed commonplaces in easier forms of composition. The converse is of course not true; many have written excellent books and ridiculous plays, but no one who has written great plays has written foolishly when he wrote sonnets, poems, or novels. And for these reasons, the validity of which will not be questioned, we shall be able to determine the exact measure of intelligence now in the service of the stage by an examination of the book literature of our dramatists.

Mr. Gilbert has assumed a sort of headship of dramatic authors, and in deference to that headship we will begin with him. He has written a volume of comic poems; and the little poems really deserve all the popularity they obtained, so prettily are they versified, and many he has since elaborated into successful plays. And the measure of his success has always been determined by the measure of his faithfulness to these ballads; and if we examine them we find they contain in essence the whole of his literary perceptions. Surely the veriest tyro in criticism could detect the hand that wrote the *Bab Ballads* in *Gretchen* and *Pygmalion* and *Galatea*. Mr. Gilbert has contributed short papers to the Christmas annuals, but I am not aware of any piece that rose above a seasonable piece of jocosity. His prose plays, with the exception of two acts entitled *Sweethearts*, have varied between sterile eccentricities and profitless commonplace; and after the production of the last he thought it necessary to redeem his imperilled reputation by

promising to confine his efforts for the future to the fabrication of libretti for Sir Arthur Sullivan, an art in which he pre-eminently excels.

Mr. Burnand, the genial editor of *Punch*, has written *Happy Thoughts*, which ranks as high in English prose as the *Bab Ballads* do in English poetry, and in equal degree both works have contributed to the amusement of suburban drawing-rooms. Mr. Burnand has published a number of parodies of Ouida's novels; the best known, I believe, is *Strapmore, by Weeder*. Also a parody by him of Hugh Conway's *Dark Days* fell in with some readers during the period of the popularity of the original. Unlike Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Burnand has never attempted serious work, and he would, I am sure, repudiate a proposal to judge his writings by any other standard than a desire to conform to the passing mood of a middle-class public. Similar judgment is applicable to the works of Mr. George R. Sims. Indeed, his appeal to the intellectual habits of the middle classes is so frank and undisguised that no part of his work can be said to come within range of literary criticism. He provides certain fare, he calls it through the area railings, and the *Dagonet Ballads* are bought, sold, and consumed like necks of mutton and loaves of bread. If the 'middles' like the *Dagonet Ballads*, they like them, and if they don't like them – well, they don't like them; but in neither case would the interference of a critic be justified. Lest this should seem like unrelieved bitterness, I will say that *Mary Jane's Memoirs* appear to me a good subject spoilt through inadequate treatment. It is realism in its naïvest form, but Mr. Sims is not a realist because he writes about Mrs. Three-doors-up, any more than Mr. Buchanan is an idealist because he observes life badly.

Mr. W.G. Wills has written, I believe, many novels, but as no slightest trace of them remains, their mediocrity may be assumed. Four or five years ago he published an epic, and it has gone the way of his novels.

Immediately the success of the *Silver King* was established, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones wrote some long letters to the *Era* on dramatic writing, and he published in the *Nineteenth Century* an article on the union between the pulpit and the stage, or some similar theme. At the same time Mr. Jones declared himself the sole author of the *Silver King*, and accused his collaborator, Mr. Herman, of inability to write the simplest English sentence. He has since written other articles, all of which prove that he is more fitted for play-writing than for literature.

Mr. Grundy has published a few short stories in the magazines, but they attracted no one's attention. Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Augustus Harris have occasionally contributed to the Christmas annuals; and I have seen some slight verses of Mr. Pinero's in similar publications, but they did not strike me as being anything but those of a very minor poet. Mr. Robert Buchanan is, past question, the most distinguished man of letters the stage can boast of, and Mr. Robert Buchanan is a minor poet and a tenth-rate novelist. As a poet he was beyond all question outpaced by at least six men of his generation – Mr. Swinburne, Mr. Rossetti, Mr. Arnold, Mr.

William Morris, Mr. Coventry Patmore, and Mr. George Meredith; and to be outpaced by half-a-dozen men of your own generation, not to speak of the two giants of the preceding generation, is complete extinguishment in poetry. In prose fiction, Mr. Buchanan is either commonplace or ridiculous, and it is a matter of surprise how a man who can at times write such charming verse can at all times and so unfailingly write such execrable prose. His novels are clumsy and coarse imitations of Victor Hugo and Charles Reade. The best is *The Shadow of the Sword*; and it is so invertebrate, so lacking in backbone, that, notwithstanding some fine suggestions, no critic could accord it a higher place than in the second class. *Foxglove Manor* and *The New Abelard* are, in thought and in style, below the level of the work that the average young lady novelist supplies to her publisher. It is, therefore, in accordance with my views of the relation of stage literature to literature proper that Mr. Buchanan should have turned from the latter to the former.

I cannot recall the name of any other dramatic author who has dabbled to any appreciable extent in literature. The writers of comic operas and farces are men whose names are unknown beyond the stage-door and the play-bill clerks from the Government offices, or the obscure contributors of obscure journals.

It must be granted that the relegation of the entire dramatic literature of an epoch to writers of the third and fourth class is a unique literary phenomenon. By the examination and study of such phenomena we may understand the dominant forces of our century, and learn in some measure whither the civilisation we are so proud of is tending. And it is difficult to find a test more just and more conclusive of the state of the popular mind than the open and spontaneous verdict expressed in a theatre. The poet and the novelist may sacrifice the present, but in the case of the dramatist such sacrifice is not possible, for his work hardly exists off the stage, and depends upon the temper of the public mind. The most successful play of the year contains therefore in a state of essence the sentiments and feelings agitating the multitude during its period of stage life; and by having regard for the intellectual idiosyncrasies of some four or five representative plays may we not arrive at a very fair comprehension of the normal comprehension of our epoch?

The most popular play produced in 1889 is without question *Sweet Lavender*. We are introduced to an impecunious, drunken barrister, and with him is living a young man, who instead of reading law makes love to the laundress's daughter. (Laundress is Temple slang for charwoman.) The charwoman is represented as a person who, although she lives in the kitchen and washes dishes, is as a matter-of-fact a most refined person, and is endowed with such sentiments as would become the superior of a convent. Her daughter, although she helps her mother in her duties of cleaning and scrubbing, wears white muslin dresses and large straw hats trimmed with wild-flowers, and talks with the ease and refinement that is expected from young ladies educated in a high-class boarding-school.

The young man is loved by his cousin, who in turn is loved by an American, who follows her, asking her to marry him; and, blind to all rebuffs, continues his courtship in a manner unparalleled in real life except perhaps by Mr. Rouden. In the second act the uncle of the young man comes to town and finds his nephew engaged, not to his cousin as he thinks, but to the laundress's daughter; and the situation is still further complicated by the arrival of a telegram announcing a bank failure, which involves the uncle in complete ruin. Here it is necessary to remark that the complete ruin of the uncle is necessary for moral reasons, for it was he who seduced the laundress eighteen years ago. In the third act the ruined uncle and his relations come to live in the chambers of the impecunious barrister, and we find everybody sweeping and cleaning and cooking. The American is still proposing to the girl, and he insists on following her in and out of the kitchen and helping her with her work. We are in the third act, and every one must be made happy. Listen! The impecunious barrister inherits fifty thousand pounds, and pays the ruined uncle's liabilities; the young lady consents to leave off loving her cousin and to marry the crazy American, whom she really loved all the time; the ruined uncle marries the laundress; and the nephew marries her daughter. This is the story of a play which London has been going to see for nearly two years.

In *The Profligate* Mr. Pinero had a better subject. A young woman, truly loved by a virtuous young man, prefers a profligate, and only begins to learn his past when her honeymoon is waxing to fulness. Thinking it was Mr. Pinero's intention to show the disaster that must result when a man brings an amorous temperament into family life, I said: Should Mr. Pinero have the strength to let his hero remain a profligate, this play will be the best since *The School for Scandal*. But his hero ceases to be a profligate at the end of the first act; and the relapse into vice anxiously awaited by me did not happen. Indeed his regard for virtue is as thorough as St. Augustine's after his conversion, and the title is as untrue to the character as it would be were the saint himself the hero of the play. The only other intention that may be attributed to Mr. Pinero was a wish to show how a vicious nature might be reformed by the beneficent influence of a pure woman. If this was his intention, he should not have chosen the honeymoon for time and an Italian terrace for place.

But it is improbable that Mr. Pinero intended anything more than a collection of incidents, what children call a story; indeed, the fact that the reconciliation of the wife to her husband was a concession made by Mr. Pinero at the earnest request of Mr. Hare proves that this is so. For were the profligate to shoot himself as originally intended by the author, the play would be shorn of all meaning and would fall into a mere collection of incidents more or less ingeniously strung together. Mr. Hare saved Mr. Pinero's play from irrevocable shipwreck, he endowed it with its one idea – namely, that in the first stress of horror and disappointment caused by the discovery of her husband's past life, the young wife leaves him, but leaves him only to learn that no life exists for her apart from him. She forgives him, or, I should say, is reconciled to him, but her

heart is full of fear for the future; she now knows that women attract him, as the magnet attracts steel

Mr. Pinero speaks the language of the stage with rare fluency; he is well armed with pointed repartee and various verbal excellence, and these qualities show him to the very best advantage in the opening acts. There, the presentation of the hero – his scorn for his virtuous friend, his easy admission that his marriage with the school-girl is inspired by ennui of facile loves, his careless assurances of reform is work of the highest kind. And the second act deserves but few words of reproach. All is admirably indicated – the real change of the girl into woman – a blossom broken to flower in the warmth of the Tuscan night, and the seeming change in the profligate, whose heart is at least temporarily won by the beauty and the charming youth and gladness of his wife. But in the third act the play becomes inconsequent and untrue.

It is unfortunate that the maidservant whom the profligate seduced is not a mother, for a girl does not denounce her seducer unless he has made her a mother. We denounce those who have done us material injury; mental injuries are not spoken of, for we know instinctively they would not be understood. Then instead of a simple, pathetic explanation between the women interrupted by the profligate, his entrance into the tumult of his wife's grief, his explanation that the past concerns his wife not at all, his assurance that no matter whom she had married she would have encountered the same sin, that hers is the lot of all women, that her own father probably had a similar sin on his conscience before he married, we have a game at cross purposes, and the servant-girl goes down-stairs crying, 'Kill me, kill me, kill me!'

Perhaps Mr. Pinero means that the girl cries for some one to kill her because, thinking the elder and not the younger man is the husband of her benefactor, she sees no harm in denouncing him as her seducer. If this is so, Mr. Pinero's ideas of dramatic climax do not stray beyond an ordinary stage misunderstanding. But if Mr. Pinero had seen or had not turned from the true situation, so thrilling in its plain psychological truth, we should have had one of the finest plays of modern times. The scene I have indicated, written in simple words and spoken in simple tones, would have electrified the house. I can see men moving nervously in the stalls, avoiding each other's eyes.

I am drawn to sympathise with Mr. Jones's talent because he desires the new. He is in touch with modern life and thought; he says almost what he wants to say and he wants to say far more than any other dramatist, and having obtained a remarkable mastery over that most obstinate vehicle of literary expression – the stage, one that seems to rebel against all innovation – he introduces into his work far more personal observation of life than any other writer. What, then, is wanting to complete a very real talent? Taste: a vein of commonness degrades, if it does not wholly ruin his best work.

In his play of *Wealth* Mr. Jones started with an excellent idea, one which Balzac might have welcomed. This is it. A man pursues without halting his passion for money-making, piling fortune upon fortune, until his brain weakens, and a thought begins to haunt him that he may die after all in the workhouse. To develop a latent force into an active force an event is necessary, and it is in the invention of this event that the common side of Mr. Jones's talent reveals itself. He can think of nothing better than to make the father turn his daughter out-of-doors because she refuses to marry the man he desires her to take. And this treatment of the subject Mr. Jones has defended in the course of a long essay. It would seem that he has not learnt that it is not time nor repetition that ages a story. Some themes are eternally young, others were always old – have never been young. A father sacrificing himself for his daughter is an example of a theme that never grows old; a father turning his daughter out-of-doors because she denies his right to choose a husband for her is an example of a theme that was always old. The youth or the age of a theme is determined not by years, but by the amount of truth to human nature the theme represents. A father turning his daughter out-of-doors because she would contract a marriage which he, with his superior knowledge of the world, foresaw could not fail to lead her into unhappiness, would have been better, suggesting as it does a conflict between instinct and experience; but that would be the basis for a new story, not the pivot on which a theme already chosen might be happily worked upon. Mr. Jones required a pivot, and the pivot he chose was as common as the story he wished to tell was refined.

The same vein of commonness runs through *The Middleman*. Passing over all such crudities of execution as placing in the middleman's mouth the very arguments which the enemies of our system of labour and capital would have used against him, which he is supposed to speak unconsciously, I go straight to essentials. Mr. Jones did not see that to effectually satirise the middleman, the middleman must triumph over the inventor; if the fly kills the spider, it is clear that the spider is a subject if not for pity at least not for satire. Yet in the play it is the inventor who ruins the middleman, and this stupid blunder obviously deprives the play of all *raison d'être*. And he dramatises the theme of this play just as he dramatised the theme of his other play. True, that he does not make the middleman turn his son out-of-doors because he wants to marry the inventor's daughter; he stops on the brink of this precipice, but only to fling himself over another. The middleman's son seduces the inventor's daughter! It seems strange that Mr. Jones could not think of something better, and how he could

write the wholly stupid and irredeemably vulgar comic love-scenes which disfigure a really beautiful third act, is also a matter which tantalises the curiosity of the critic. It would seem that last acts are of necessity absurd, and many of the childishnesses of Mr. Jones's last act are no doubt deliberate, and have been perpetrated with the view to secure a popular success, but the incident of the loan, when the successful inventor offers to lend the ruined middleman 'a fiver,' and in the middleman's house, out of which the inventor is about to expel him, is an example of that vein of commonness which pollutes Mr. Jones's best aspirations.

I was in Paris when *Judah* was produced, and shall not easily forget the stupor of astonishment with which I read Mr. Clement Scott's article in the *Daily Telegraph*. I remembered how easily a generous emotional nature may be led out of all critical judgment and calm discrimination by the febrile agitation and excitement always on the move during the first performance of a new play, and how this hysterical abandonment of critical reason is fomented in the red pepper hours of spontaneous composition in a printing-office. Even then, I could not reconcile Mr. Scott's extraordinary eulogies with what I knew of Mr. Jones's talent, and the expansion which I believed it to be capable of in fortunate circumstances. I read of 'literature,' 'the redemption of the stage,' 'originality,' genius.' I read in amazement that George Eliot had done nothing better than the dissenting clergyman in *Judah*. And when I returned to London I went at once to the Shaftesbury Theatre to see the play that had turned the heads of the London critics, transforming them one and all into a pack of yelping urchins, a little drunk with the sunlight, a little unduly excited with tea and 'caike.' But although I could not see *Judah* in the light in which the critics saw it, it seemed to me useless to drop critical salt into any one's jam-pot. Let the treat, I said, go on to the end unembittered with any salt of doubt. There will be plenty of time for my little pinch when all the happiness is over.

The subject of the play is good, but so are all the subjects of Mr. Jones's plays. A nobleman's daughter is dying of consumption, all remedies have been tried and have failed. But a girl is said to be working miracles in the neighbourhood, and in the decline of hope from the natural sciences he is tempted to ask aid from this itinerant dealer in the supernatural. His guests, who are eminent scientists, endeavour to dissuade him, and one undertakes to prove that the girl is no more than a vulgar charlatan. This is the root of Mr. Jones's subject, and it seems to me to be difficult to imagine one more beautiful or more human, or one more characteristic of the mind of the nineteenth century. But only in his primary ideas is Mr. Jones original: the moment he moves to develop a first notion he degrades it, and the first movement of his mind in this instance was to associate the miracle-monger with a dissenting clergyman. True it is that a clergyman comes well into the subject, but the girl should have met him in the nobleman's house; for the whole beauty and originality of the subject lay in the unprotected entrance of the girl into the midst of her natural enemies the scientists. Daniel among the lions! Henceforth every step Mr. Jones takes in his story is a step in the wrong direction. The girl does not believe in herself, and pretends to fast only to procure belief in her supernatural powers; with duplicity and not with faith does she enter the battle. And her imposture would have been proved if the clergyman who loves her did not give false testimony in her favour. The play then resolves itself into a discussion regarding the sin of lying. The clergyman makes a full confession, the girl confesses too, and they both declare their intention of sailing for foreign shores and living happily for ever afterwards. And while the lovers are publicly denouncing themselves, the poor consumptive child who has placed her faith in the miracle girl is juggled out of the room and we are asked to take no further interest in her.

But is it impossible that a mad fanatic who believes she possesses supernatural powers should be able to induce belief in others even to the point of curing them of mortal maladies? The secret of life still escapes our ardent research, the mysteries of hypnotism and auto-suggestion have not yet been fully unravelled. And why should not a maid with faith for sole arm – faith, that weapon of the ancient world, be still able to refute and confute the incredulities of a band of semi-ignorant scientists? Science is still in its infancy, and the old world may win a last triumph over the new. And this new Joan might rise to the giddiest height and only fail and fall when like the first Joan she began to doubt, and deem that her mission was ended. And how such a story would recall the world's eternal stories, the ancient symbols of eternal truths! I have tried to indicate on which side lay the great classical highway, but Mr. Jones does not seem to me to walk firmly even in the by-path.

When the curtain went up for the second time disclosing a romantic castle with moat and ivied tower, I felt that the note was a false one; and the act proceeded amid comic love-scenes, as good and no better than a set of drawings by De Maurier taken from the pages of *Punch*, and the attempts to supply the girl with food were puerile and far too suggestive of conjuring. The difficulties and the paraphernalia of ordeal had not been solved by the author, though his solution had been accepted by the audience; as for the human side of the ordeal it was not even touched upon, and when the curtain went down for the second time the words that came into my mind were: 'Le ventre n'a pas crié et le coeur non plus.' I missed the brutality of the stomach. Every great writer would have gone to the stomach of the starving girl for originality, Shakespeare as well as Zola, Balzac as well as Hugo, the execution in every case would have been different, but the intention would have been the same. And how splendid it would have been to have exhibited the man with love upon his lips and the girl with starvation in her stomach! It would have been the ideal and the real, heaven and earth in their accustomed strife set facing one another in the same scene – the two deepest instincts in man striving for mastery, wound one within the other, an epitome as it were of life itself. Had Mr. Jones for a single moment suspected how near he was to the highest work, his play would, perhaps, never have been produced, for it is hardly probable he could have collected sufficient strength even to dimly sketch what some great master of living in a great age would have set the seal of immortality upon. For Mr. Jones there was nothing in the scene but the more or less successful attempts of a charlatan miracle-monger to place meat lozenges where his daughter might find them, and so deceive the science-labelled old gentlemen who wander through the play.

There are many other points where Mr. Jones fails. He fails particularly to do what Mr. Scott, overcome in the nervous emotions of a first night, fondly imagined he had done – namely, to develop the character of the dissenting clergyman. The Welsh minister who had fed his flocks on the hills, and had never dreamed of love, is wood from the first word he utters to the last, and never awakes for a single instant to life. I wanted the words that reveal the burning heart,

the words that bring little shudderings into the flesh of the listeners, but I heard only vague hollow commonplace – 'You are more beautiful than an angel.' But it would be useless to discuss minor failings or minor beauties in a work in which the author has failed where it was imperative he should succeed.

I have heard dull and even stupid plays applauded at the Français, but a really low-class play would not be tolerated there, and I confess I was filled with shame at the attitude of the public on the production of *A Man's Shadow* at the Haymarket Theatre. It is not necessary that I should wade through every part of the story, it will suffice my purpose to say that *A Man's Shadow* is an adaptation of *Roger la Honte*, and when I say that *Roger la Honte* first appeared as a roman feuilleton in *Le Petit Journal*, and was afterwards dramatised and produced at the Ambigu Comique, the readers of the *Fortnightly* will have no difficulty in divining how intimately the story must reek of the good concierges of Montmartre. That the Haymarket Theatre should have sunk to the level of the Ambigu Comique! Imagine a Surrey or Britannia drama, a dramatic arrangement of one of the serial publications in *Bow Bells* or the *London Journal*, being translated into French and produced at the Français or the Odéon! Imagine the audience of either of those theatres howling frantic applause and cheering the adapters at the end of the piece! Imagine a leading French actor – Coquelin, Delaunay, Mounet-Sully – playing the principal part! The mind refuses to entertain such impossible imaginings; but what is impossible to imagine as happening in France has befallen us in London. Hume did well to call us the barbarians of the banks of the Thames.

Almost equally reprehensible is the entertainment provided by Mr. Irving at the Lyceum, and if it is not so unpleasant it is only because fewer words are spoken on the stage. For some time past the tendency of Mr. Irving's management has been in the direction of pantomime. The production of *Faust* (of the Irving *Faust*) was the first decisive step, and the success of this experiment in witches and blue devils showed him that the utmost licence would be allowed in the substitution of scenery and his own personality for the text of the author. Having ascertained the debased state of the public mind, he proceeded to speculate upon it, and in *The Dead Heart* has approached marvellously near to pure pantomime. One step nearer and even his well-fed critics would have had to cry, halt! It would be interesting to learn how many words are spoken on the stage during the performance of the play as given at the Lyceum. I should say not more than six or seven thousand; of this I am certain, that the Lyceum text is not a quarter the length of another play that occupies the same time in representation.

The first scene is laid in a garden. There is of course a lavish display of foliage and lanterns, and there is a fountain with real water. Mr. Bancroft comes on and mumbles some incoherent, and, as far as I could judge, irrelevant remarks; then there is an elaborate dance, and for ten minutes the audience is entertained by an exhibition of dancing so elaborate, that the thought of a succession to Mr. Turveydrop's academy is irresistibly suggested. Then there is a front scene,

and Mr. Bancroft mumbles a few more irrelevant remarks until the scene is set behind. The third scene is Miss Terry's bedroom. She makes a few remarks concerning a scarf she is about to wear; a man enters by the window and declares his love. Mr. Irving enters and declares his anger; he is arrested and sent to the Bastille. Surely not a thousand words are spoken in this act! The second act opens with the taking of the Bastille. There is a brass cannon and a heterogeneous crowd that howls and climbs upon barrels, etc.; great doors fall down, and then everybody dances, and the dance lasts several minutes. When the dance is done various prisoners are exhibited to the audience, very much as strange animals are exhibited in a show; eventually Mr. Irving is brought out, and, in such crazed and dilapidated condition as seventeen years in a dungeon would produce, he lies down in front of the audience, moaning from time to time. Inconceivable as it may seem, he elects to lie there for several minutes, holding the attention of the audience by the help of occasional moans or grunts and furtive grimacing. I have long known that the actor secretly chafes against the author, who he believes robs him of a part of his triumph, but I did not think the press would have allowed such a childish manifestation of vanity to pass in silence.

The next scene is an apartment in a palace in which the Abbé Latour (Mr. Bancroft) makes an incomprehensible declaration of love to the Comtesse de St. Valéry (Miss Terry), and this is followed – stay, it is preceded – by some mysterious allusions to a debt which the Comtesse's son has contracted in a café of which the Abbé Latour is a part proprietor. But it is as like as not that I am wrong, so incoherently is the scene played, and I think written. A number of scenes follow, all very useful to prolong the piece, but absolutely unnecessary. There is no story to develop, but there is an incident; it is this. The Comtesse de St. Valéry's son is condemned to death, and his mother beseeches Landry (Mr. Irving) to save his life. To prolong the fourth act Landry sends for his old enemy, the Abbé Latour, who goes to the guillotine next morning and challenges him to a duel. The duel serves the same purpose as the dance in the first act, the taking of the Bastille in the second, it appeals to the vulgar appetite for stage realism, and it fills up the time. When the Abbé Latour has been killed, Mr. Irving takes the place of the son of his old sweetheart, and mounts the scaffold with all the lights of apotheosis playing upon his face and hair.

Mr. Irving is credited, and he takes credit, for having contributed to what we must call the development of artistic tastes. I confess I do not perceive very clearly how the production of such pieces as *The Dead Heart* can advance artistic taste. I do not deny that the taking of the Bastille is exciting, but so are a rat-hunt and a prize-fight, and I should say that a rat-hunt was a less depraving sight than a performance of *The Dead Heart*. A rat-hunt is an appeal to our animal instincts pure and simple. We enjoy it, and have done with it, but stage realism corrupts our intelligence by easy satisfactions instead of stimulating the imagination, which should create all from the words of the poet.

Mr. Irving understands better than any one the baseness of modern taste, and he appeals to it more flagrantly than any other manager. He was, of course, well within his right in appraising and selling his goods in the largest market, but I am acting well within my right when I attempt some criticism of the value of his supposed contributions to the development of dramatic art. He dresses out his theatre as Octave in *Au Bonheur des Dames* dressed out his shop; he has invariably appealed, though never before so outrageously, to the sensual instincts rather than to the imagination. Others may praise him for this; but I look back to those times when theatrical audiences did not require real fountains and real trees, believing that they who did not require these realities were gifted with a sense that is wanting in us.

Some months after the publication of this criticism of modern dramatic writing, the subject was reviewed by Mr. Crawford in the pages of the same Review, and the discussion was continued two months or more by the daily and weekly press. Mr. Crawford's article strikes me as thoughtful and suggestive; but it is sometimes contradictory, always uncertain and hesitating. As a man of cultivated literary taste, Mr. Crawford does not fail to perceive that the plays produced in the London theatres are unsatisfactory; he tries to determine why this is so; but his criticism is no more than haphazard beating of coverts. He beats every possible bush, fluttering a quantity of sparrows; now and then an owl flies out of a tangled growth of ivy; but he does not seem to me to have started game anywhere.

The cause of deterioration of stage literature must be sought for far down in the constitution of modern society. The prevalence of the three-hundred-night run dams the current, and a free current is necessary for the development of every literature; secondly, it forces the author to compose strange compounds of farce, comedy, drama, and sensationalism. Thirdly, it forbids all originality of thought and treatment, for such might prove dangerous; mediocrity will alone find favour in the eyes of a million or so of people drawn from all classes of society. And the fact is significant that in the great French dramatic revival of 1830 plays did not run for more than forty or fifty nights; and in France, as in England, since the three-hundred-night run became an essential condition of success, dramatic literature has steadily declined. For some years I held to the belief that the real cause of the decline of dramatic literature was the three-hundred-night run; but while I still continue to regard it as an evil, my views have modified, and I am inclined to think that we must look still deeper for the real cause. The real cause for the decline of dramatic literature is cheap books. In the time of the Greeks there were no books; in the time of Shakespeare there were few books, and for stories the people had to go to the theatre. We, on the contrary, when we want stories, stay at home and read them – we go to the theatre for what we do not find in books – pretty faces, brilliant costumes, scenical display, and acting. The Elizabethans went to the theatre for fine language, and their dramatists wrote in verse, even if the subject was not poetic in itself, because verse lent itself more easily to declamation than prose; and as the art of declamation declined, so did the art of writing blank-verse plays. When a tail became an inconvenient appendage man lost his tail; but were man to take to living in

trees again I have little doubt that in a hundred thousand years the rudiments of a tail would begin to show, and I have no doubt whatever that if newspapers and cheap books were suppressed the art of declamation, and with it that of writing good blank verse, would again become popular. I do not argue that it would be well to sacrifice book-literature, were such a sacrifice possible, so that we might have a new poetic dramatic literature. I am merely minded to examine certain effects and to report upon the causes that produced them.

Perhaps it is possible to create artificially a dramatic literature. It would be pleasant to have a subventioned theatre which could afford to produce plays that in all likelihood would not run for three hundred nights, a theatre from which *le spectacle coupé* would not be entirely banished – for I regard as one of our greatest misfortunes that in the present ordering of things a one-act comedy finds every door shut against it. But the State-subventioned theatre is a dream so hopeless that it is not worth dreaming. Mr. Crawford admits that this is so, and he flutters in the wake of various will-o'-the-wisps, considering many social changes that might do what a solid subvention of £10,000 a year would do. In one paragraph he imagines that when permission is granted to the music-halls to produce stage plays, and the 'gods' are finally got rid of, that a more critical state of things may come into fashion. I disagree with Mr. Crawford. The coster is a better critic than the City clerk – a more intelligent and, above all, a less conventional critic. The coster and the man of genius are the only critics – one is self-educated, the other is uneducated. But the man who has been educated is a hopeless lump of conventionality. Napoleon did not seek for generals among the middle classes; they would have come with ledgers in their hands and pens behind their ears. He went to the people, and there he found brains and swords; and were a new Othello to be produced to-morrow, the criticism the author would have to fear most from would be that of the second-rate dramatic critic. The man of genius would applaud it at once, the coster would be equally prompt in his applause, but the man who has been educated is inaccessible to new ideas, and he would hiss the piece – no, he would not even do that; he would go away talking languid nonsense. To get rid of the 'gods' would be fatal; they are what is most spontaneous and natural in our theatres.

Then Mr. Crawford speaks of a movement which he says is now on foot for the establishment of a Théâtre Libre in London. Who is concerned in this movement? Who are the authors who will write for this theatre when it is established? Without giving any information on these points, Mr. Crawford expresses vague belief that such a scheme might be of service, and in the next sentence he ventures to doubt if it could seriously affect the London stage? I agree with him; I do not think it could, for there are no plays to represent, except the conventional rubbish that has been refused because it is too conventional even to find favour with a manager. Literary adventure is not a characteristic of modern London.

Then there is no hope? Yes, I think there is. Although the State may never give £10,000 a year to support a literary theatre, it does not follow that a private individual may not do so. Men have

committed suicide so that their names might appear in the papers; men have spent hundreds of thousands upon women who deceived them, and who bored them; men have wasted thousands on race-courses, on the conversion of the Brahmins, on many conceivable and many inconceivable follies. Why should a man not endow a theatre? There is no reason why he should not, except that it would be an uncommonly intelligent thing to do. This is, I admit, an almost unanswerable argument against the realisation of my ideal theatre. But while fostering vanity, civilisation curtails the means of gratifying it. War is becoming rarer, duelling is prohibited, the whole world has been discovered or soon will be, but vanity is daily seeking more uneasily than ever an outlet for its gratification, and no better outlet will ever offer itself than the endowment of a theatre. This being admitted we have only to imagine a millionaire slightly less stupid than his fellows saying,

'For ten thousand a year, for perhaps five thousand, I can procure an immortality that time will not destroy, a most honourable and a most glorious immortality, and so cheap too – ten or five thousand a year! Why, on the turf that would only procure me a few years of dubious notoriety. I'll do it.'

Such is the psychological story of the subvention theatre which we shall soon possess.

It would be pleasant, but perhaps this would be too wild an expectation, to think of its founder as being sufficiently intelligent to realise the fact that the man who gives pleasure is as charitable as he who relieves suffering. Looked at in this light it would be equally meritorious to endow a theatre as a hospital; but the patron of the drama who will give us our national theatre and free us from the thralldom of farcical melodrama and melodramatic farces will not go deeply into the philosophy of the question; he will be attracted by the assurance of high renown while he lives, and a most durable immortality when he is dead. Everything happens, and sooner or later this will happen; an endowed theatre is inherent in our civilisation, and, article, go forth and whisper thy Secret of Immortality!

Chapter 10. Note on 'Ghosts'

The representations at the Théâtre Libre are but private theatricals. Private individuals subscribe a certain sum yearly for these entertainments, and once the doors are opened a thousand pounds would fail to procure you a seat. But M. Antoine is always anxious to oblige a *confrère*, and, although he expected that Ibsen's great play of *Ghosts* would draw an exceptionally large audience, he promised to do his best to find me a place, warning me, however, that a *strapontin d'orchestre* would be all that I might hope to receive. But we go to the Théâtre Libre to see fine plays and fine acting, not to digest a heavy dinner; and we do not mind sitting for three hours in a dark corner on some small ledge that unhooks from the wall. A dark corner, deep hidden in a passage, and beyond this passage some ten feet of gallery; and as the *ouvreuse* and the late comers are engaged in an unintermittent wrangle concerning umbrellas and overcoats until the clock strikes ten, you are apt to lose your temper, and declare a visit to the Théâtre Libre a useless suffering. Needless to say that the discussion relative to umbrellas, coats, and seats, is likely to reach its highest pitch exactly at the moment when it is indispensable that you should hear what is being said on the stage. In addition to all these disadvantages the acoustics of Le Théâtre des Menus Plaisirs are acknowledged to be lamentable, so you may conclude, and, indeed, you will conclude rightly, that I did not hear every single word of Ibsen's play. But M. Antoine will have a theatre of his own next year, and when we think what were the beginnings of Le Théâtre Libre – from what it sprung – we can but feel surprised that he has got in five years even so far as the Théâtre des Menus Plaisirs.

I was especially anxious to see the play of *Ghosts* acted, for I was anxious fully to test a certain conviction which, notwithstanding the many excellent arguments I have heard urged against it, I have never been able completely to abandon. Plays read to me exactly as they act – only better, and I find myself still unable to admit the possibility that a play that reads well should act badly; when I say reads well, I mean reads well to him who follows each exit and entrance, seeing each part dovetail into the succeeding part, seeing all the parts in their relation to the entire play. No single passage or number of well-written passages would, I think, blind me to the inherent weakness of the play as a whole; nor do I think that the representation would reveal an incongruity in character or situation that I had not already discovered, and the well-known fact that actors are so often absurdly, incomprehensibly wrong in their judgment of plays, I can only explain by supposing them to be deficient in those higher imaginative faculties which enable us to see through the mere print every gesture of the characters involved in the action of the story. That Mr. Willard should have for one moment imagined that *Dick Venables* was a good play is one of those conundrums which life, with strange jocosity, tempts us to solve. I confess I am devoured with curiosity and would willingly pay a sovereign to hear Mr. Willard unbosom himself on this matter, and were he to give a *matinée* for this purpose it would be well attended by all interested in stage literature.

But to return to the Théâtre Libre and Ibsen. I had read *Nora* and *Ghosts*. The first play seemed to me, in the reading, hard, dry, mechanical, and illogical. I could discover in *Nora* neither philosophy nor character-drawing. In the representation, the woodenness of Nora and Helmer came upon me with redoubled force; there were times when I felt as if I were being beaten with a mallet. Candidly, I could make nothing of it – nothing, nothing, nothing. Shortly after reading *Nora* some friends of mine begged me to come to a reading of *Ghosts*. I went, and before half the first act had been read nothing but the play existed for me. The remorseless web that life had spun, and the poor boy entangled in it, I watched, even as a child watches the fly that chance had thrown into the spider's web. I saw life represented as blind, senseless, insatiate. We had done with free will, and nature was shown working out her own ends, deaf to our appeal. The sins of the fathers shall descend upon the children even to the third and fourth generation. The Hebrew writer might have said to the hundredth, ay, and the thousandth, and what makes the play so unutterably terrible, what makes it so shocking, that is to say so human, is the intense consciousness of the boy. He knows that the sins of his father have descended upon him, and that there is no redemption. Scenes between mother and son, be what they may, scenes of forgiveness, of expostulation, of counsel, of love, are to me the most strangely pathetic that life can afford. There is something strange, mysterious, something not quite expressible in words in such confidences, and in such confidences the root of the play of *Ghosts* is set. The play abounds in these confidences, from the first act, when the boy tells the mother what the French doctor told him regarding the sinister pains he experiences in his neck, to the last, when, knowing that idiocy is nigh upon him, he begs of his mother to save him with poison from his fate.

Never in these modern years has such a scene been written as that one, nor have I ever felt so divine a horror as I did when the mother, declaring that she cannot do what is asked of her, breaks into the natural cry: 'I, who gave you life!' The son answers: 'A nice kind of life it was that you gave me.' Then the mother, overcome, rushes from the room. She is followed tumultuously by the son, and the stage is left empty – empty and not empty – for its emptiness is the symbol of the horror that we feel, the blank stage becomes at once the symbol of the blank insolvable problem which is life. And when mother and son return – their exit was no more than a brief venting of their anguish in animal movement – and continue the scene, the terror moving among the spectators becomes suddenly unbearable, and each one and every one is ready to rise to his feet and cry to them on the stage, 'Say, oh, say, that it is not true.' Many, indeed, are the great scenes that might be selected from English or French literature as perfect examples of wild passion and solemn awe, but I know of none in which the truth, the truth from which we may not escape, assails us so determinedly and conquers us so triumphantly as here.

The play acted even more grandly than it read. Céard, with whom I discussed the question, whether plays acted as they read, while waiting for the rehearsal of *Ghosts* to begin, said, that he did not think it would act as well as *Nora*. *Ghosts* had seemed to him vague and undetermined

in the reading, but when the third act was over (the rehearsal was called only for the third act) I heard his voice in the tumult of praise congratulating Antoine. He confessed that he had misjudged the play; the dimness and vagueness that he feared in the reading had in the representation been changed into firmest outline.

Antoine was superb in the part of Osvalt. The nervous irritation of the sick man was faultlessly rendered. When he tells his mother of the warnings of the French doctor, at the moment when he loses his temper at her interruptions – she seeks not to hear the fearful tale – Antoine, identifying himself with

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the simple truth sought by Ibsen, by voice and gesture, casts upon the scene so terrible a light, so strange an air of truth, that the drama seemed to be passing not before our eyes, but deep down in our hearts in a way we had never felt before. 'Listen to me, mother. I insist upon your listening to me,' he says, querulous already with incipient disease. And when comes the end of the first act, when the mother, hearing the servant-girl cry out, goes to the door, and seeing the son kissing the girl, cries, 'Ghosts, ghosts!' what shall I say, what praise shall we bestow upon a situation so supremely awful, so shockingly true?

Owing to many new disputes, or violent continuations of former disputes, concerning cloaks and umbrellas, and seats which had been taken possession of during temporary absences, or *strapontins* which should exist, but did not exist or could not be found, I heard even less of the second act than I had done of the first; the entire discourse of the workman with the wooden leg was lost to me. During the third act there was less wrangling, and I heard nearly all. And in that half-hour I lived through a year's emotion. It was terrible when Osvalt came in smoking, and, puffing at his pipe, and with an air of familiar contentment, he tells his mother how much he

likes the maid-servant, and how he always wishes her to be near him. The maid-servant is there. He calls to her, and the distracted mother is forced to reveal the secret – the maid-servant is his half-sister. And the scene is simple in its dire and doleful humanity. Even the servant-girl recognises that the fatal taint inherited from their common father has descended on her. She upbraids Mrs. Avling (Osvalt's mother) for having brought her up as a servant, and tossing her head, and looking bitterly at the champagne, she says: *mais cela ne m'empêchera pas de boire du champagne avec les gens comme il faut.* Mrs. Avling asks her where she is going, and she answers significantly that she knows of a house where she will be welcome. *Mrs. Avling:* 'Regina, you are going to your ruin.' *Regina:* 'Oh, stuff!' (She goes out pushing violently through the swing doors.) Then comes the awful, the drastic, the overwhelming scene of the play, and most assuredly nothing finer was ever written by man or god. Its blank simplicity strikes upon the brain, until the brain reels, even as poor Osvalt's brain is reeling.

In the last moments of his sanity, before darkness comes upon him, he calls his mother to him, and mother and son sit, side by side talking. Talking of what? Of the father whom he never knew, but who has nevertheless laid upon him the irreparable fate of idiocy, idiocy that even at that moment is creeping upon him, and will overtake him as night overtakes the day. The mother calls upon him to cherish his father's memory, and the boy answers not in tragic phrases, but in the words so simple and so true, that listening, the heart turns to ice. And all the while they talk the dreaded malady is creeping upon him. Night is closing, and in the last moments of the twilight of the brain Osvalt shows his mother the poison, and tells her that he will not live helpless as a little child that must be dressed and fed. It is true she will always look after him. But she may die before him, he may fall into the hands of strangers. The doctors have told him he may live for years. The mother answers: 'I, who gave you life!' 'A nice kind of life it was that you gave me, and now you shall have it back again.' Startled by some incoherency in his speech, she calls in terror to him. The scream rescues him for a moment out of the night that is deepening in his brain, that is approaching blackness, and for a few moments more he speaks reasonably.

The sun has risen, the world is bright with the dawn. Mrs. Avling draws the curtains, letting the sunlight into the room. But Osvalt still sits with his back to the light, now mumbling in toneless voice, 'The sun, the sun.' Mrs. Avling stares at him in speechless terror, her hands twisted in her hair, and he still mumbles, 'The sun, the sun.'

The tragedy of fate Ibsen has taken out of the empyrean of Olympus and hexameters, substituting the empyrean of science, and in the simple language of a plain Norwegian household, we learn that though there be no gods to govern us, that nature, vast and; unknown, for ever dumb to our appeal, holds us in thrall.

Out of the story the characters evolve themselves sufficiently; they are not forced into any sharp visibleness; we are merely in the presence of a mother and son; it is the idea that Ibsen seeks to express, and not special types from which the idea may be deduced; the art of Ibsen is rather that of Sophocles than that of Balzac (the exact opposite to what is generally understood, but that, of course); the mother and son could not be defined more sharply without loss to the play. But what shall be said of the parson? Who is there, I ask, who could utter one word in praise or even in mild defence of this dreary old bore, who spoils so far as it is possible the first and second acts with such intolerable sermonising as would empty the church of any nonconformist minister? I make no exception either in favour of Mr. Ibsen or Mr. Archer; neither could find a reasonable word to say in defence of this parson. Considered as the parson, he is an effigy, wooden in Ibsen's most wooden manner; but what is wanted is not *the* parson, but *a* parson, hard and cold if you will, but with a vein of geniality in him, not much – any too loud a note would jar the harmony of the picture. Ibsen was big enough a man to know that what was wanted was not an Abbé Constantine, 'the practical dramatist' would have rushed an Abbé Constantine into the play, sure of finding in him 'sympathetic relief'; the humanisation of the stern figure that the play demanded was not an easy task, but it was just such a one as the highest genius would have asserted itself in.

On hearing the play read, I foresaw the boredom of the parson, and my judgment was verified in the representation: the actor could do nothing with the character. Mlle Barny was excellent as the mother, and the other parts (there are only five characters in the play) were sufficiently well filled. Paris artistic and literary was in the stalls and boxes, and since the memorable night when Tolstoi's *Puissance des Ténèbres* was given, the Théâtre Libre has won a triumph either so deep or so pronounced. An evening at the Théâtre Libre is now looked forward to with the keenest interest, and instead of there being too few subscribers, Antoine is now obliged to refuse subscriptions until he can get a larger theatre. Why have we not a Théâtre Libre? Surely there should be no difficulty in finding a thousand persons interested in art and letters willing to subscribe five pounds a year for twelve representations of twelve interesting plays. I think such a number of enthusiasts exist in London. The innumerable articles which appear in the daily, the weekly, and monthly press on the London stage prove the existence of much vague discontent, and that this discontent will take definite shape sooner or later seems more than possible.

Chapter 11. Théâtre Libre

An idea, that is to say, a general law deduced from the observation and the comprehension of natural phenomena, is seldom, if ever, the exclusive honour of one discoverer; the idea is often declared simultaneously in several countries by several individuals having no acquaintance with each other, or knowledge of the direction in which their thoughts have been travelling. To offer illustrations of this would be vain; half-a-dozen must have already risen up in the mind of every reader. Still, so far as the actual publication of the idea is concerned, there must always be a first, and I think there can be no doubt that it would be easy for me to establish my claim to having been the first to introduce the discussion now waging in review and newspaper, regarding the present condition of the stage. My article, entitled 'Our Dramatists,' published in the *Fortnightly*, first drew attention; but I had expressed myself on the subject many years before, and the arguments of later writers are little more than the development of certain root ideas vented by me even so far back as 1884. So far back as six years ago, I wrote an article in another paper, since dead, in which I attributed the decline of dramatic writing to the three-hundred-night runs. I explained at some length of what a piece must consist that could draw crowded houses for such a space of time, how it forbade all experimentation, the risk being too great. Turning to history, I called attention to the fact that dramatic literatures arose when new plays were produced in rapid succession. In England, in 1600, plays ran for ten or twelve nights; in France, in 1830, plays ran for thirty or forty nights; but since long runs have obtained possession of the French stage the art of writing plays has steadily declined.

The article entitled 'Our Dramatists' was too violently conceived and vehemently written to produce fruitful discussion; but when the sullen anger it occasioned had worn itself away, many were moved to consider for themselves the question I had thrown into the arena, and Mr. Crawford's intelligent and suggestive article has resulted in the provocation of so much discussion that it would seem that we are within measurable distance of the realisation of our hope – the founding of a theatre which, by producing some thirty or forty new plays every year, will allow us to say what we have to say, and in the form which is natural and peculiar to us. Mr. Beerbohm Tree and Mr. Jones will tell us all they know about the artistic advantages and disadvantages of the actor-manager system in the next *Fortnightly*. Mr. Tree will be, I know, all for Art and the Artist. I shall have no fault to find with any of his theories, and have only to regret that his practice does not more nearly coincide with them. Mr. Jones will – well, we shall see what he has to say. In the meantime it will be interesting whilst these two distinguished men continue to tempt and tantalise the public with ingenious conjecture and fanciful dream, to hear what has been done in France towards opening the theatrical ways, hitherto so strictly barred, to literature, and freeing the drama from the fetters of convention and prejudice. Since we have arrived within measurable distance of the time an English Théâtre Libre will open its doors to a play written on the new lines, since it has been more than hinted that the man is now among us

who will organise the new theatre, it will be surely well for his encouragement and instruction, and for the encouragement and instruction of those who may support him, to furnish some exact information concerning the period of adversity through which the Théâtre Libre has passed and the splendid future into which it is now about to enter.

Before me lies a square book bound in red paper. It bears for sole inscription the words: Le Théâtre Libre. The copy on my table is probably the only one in England. Antoine has just issued the book for private circulation among his subscribers. The book is exceedingly explicit, and could not fail to interest any one concerned in the redemption of the drama. Here are the passages which especially attracted my attention.

It is hardly three years since the first performance was given in the Théâtre Libre.

In the commencement of 1887 the organiser of the Théâtre Libre, then an employé in the gas company at a salary of about £30 a year, had never acted in public; he was one of a modest circle of amateurs who occupied their leisure time in acting the ordinary stock pieces. One day he advised his comrades to produce the unacted plays of young and unknown authors, so that they might hold out to the Press an inducement to attend their performances.

This advice was happily listened to; the result was the performance of 30th of March 1887. It bore the simple inscription: "Le Théâtre Libre," and the performance took place in the *passage* de l'Elysée des Beaux-Arts. Four one-act pieces were played, one of which, *Jacques Damour*, was immediately accepted by the management of the Odéon.

The expenses of this evening were defrayed by the subscriptions of friends, principally out of Antoine's monthly salary; he fixed the date for the 30th because it coincided (as did that of the second representation fixed for the 30th of the following May) with the payment of the employés of the gas company.

After the evening of March 30th money was not forthcoming, and the second performance could not take place till the end of May. It comprised *La Nuit Bergamasque*, by Emile Bergerat, and *En Famille*, by Oscar Metenier.

The second performance not only exhausted the funds of the newly-founded theatre, but it was impossible to appeal again to the generosity of the first subscribers, and a heavy debt, amounting to some £10 or £12, seemed to close all hope of any further performances.

It was then that Antoine conceived the idea of having recourse to the world of fashion for annual subscriptions which would secure the continued existence of his project. To succeed it was necessary that he should be able to offer an entire season's programmes, seven or eight performances. And so, that he might devote himself exclusively to his idea, Antoine resigned his place in the gas company at the end of July, without considering the possibility of failure, in the single hope of bringing his project to successful issue.'

An idea can be formed of the difficulties, the obstacles, the deceptions and heart-breaks that he met with from the following letter. It would have discouraged most young men, and it was sent to him by one of the highest and most influential journalists of the time in answer to a letter begging for the aid of the notoriety of his name.

Here are two or three passages: –

'You think that ten lines from me will extract from the cash-boxes the 8000 francs you require.

I will tell you first that the question of Le Théâtre Libre does not enter within my province. Vitu is at the *Figaro* to write on such subjects.

I add that the public is not very much interested in your laudable enterprise. Free theatre or no free theatre, what does it matter? the public will remain deaf to your appeal, and will not subscribe a penny.

The question is to find seventy or eighty people who will give a hundred francs each – managers, fashionable writers, and perhaps a few journalists. If such a movement in favour of the Théâtre Libre should arise all will go well; *but I cannot and will not take any initiative.* – Albert Wolf.'

Nevertheless, in October 1887, the Théâtre Libre commenced its first season with 3500 francs subscribed, from which it was necessary to deduct about 1000 francs of debts; for it had been found necessary to hire and furnish the premises in the Rue Blanche so that regular rehearsals might be assured for the works in preparation. The rehearsals of the first performance took place in a public-house in the Rue Lepic, those of the second in an unoccupied flat in the Rue Breda, lent by a *concierge* who was a theatrical fanatic. To save the postage, friends offered to deliver the invitations. The performance was, however, an immense success. It was too successful, for the proprietor of the little theatre in the Passage de l'Elysée des Beaux-Arts, fearing that so great a crowd endangered his fixtures, the strength of which seemed doubtful, gave Antoine notice to quit on the following day. It became therefore necessary to seek another

theatre, and the penniless Antoine sought admission in all the little outlying theatres. He was driven even as far as Montparnasse. When the season was over, Antoine, who had to collect eleven thousand francs, found himself face to face with a serious and troubling deficit, and a theatre in a more central situation became a matter of absolute necessity. But to tell the story of all the obstacles that Antoine met with would take too long; let us remember that the Théâtre Libre was in the end able to take up its quarters in the Théâtre des Menus Plaisirs, and that Antoine signed an agreement with the manager which assured his enterprise against all further eventualities.

The subscription for the second season realised 40,000 francs, and this has enabled Antoine to produce his plays with suitable scenery and to pay his actors and actresses. The theatre is packed from floor to ceiling at every performance. Every day Antoine receives numbers of subscriptions which he cannot accept. In 1889 he tried for the Vaudeville, the Porte St. Martin, and the Ambigu, but meeting with insurmountable obstacles he is obliged to take advantage of the clauses in his present agreement which allow him to remain some months longer in the Menus Plaisirs.

The Results Attained

In the tentative performances of March and May, '87, eight new acts; in the season of '87- '88, thirty-seven; in the season '88-'89, forty; in the season of '89-'90, forty; total, 125 new acts in three years. Thirty authors whose plays had never been acted before, fourteen authors who had only been acted once before. On the programme of the Théâtre Libre will be found the following names: MM. Aubanel, Théodore de Banville, Emile Bergerat, Leon Cladel, Duranty, Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, Henrik Ibsen, Catulle Mendès, Comte Léon Tolstoi, Ivan Turgueneff, Verga, Emile Zola.

Why The Théâtre Libre Has Succeeded

First, the indifference of the public to plays that are always the same. The dramatic output is limited to a dozen or fifteen writers who go from theatre to theatre, monopolising the bill and serving up always the same mixture dissimulated by a change of label. Each one has his mark, all tolerably alike by the way, each rewrites the same play a little worse every time, for age intervenes, and the hand grows heavier. Managers, however, do not tire of offering to the public these fruits of decrepitude, but the public, disgusted, turn from them and pass on.

Another Reason, The High Price Of Places

By a constant upward tendency, the illogic of which is surprising, by a strange reversal of that social transformation in progress beneath our eyes, when 'the cheapest market' has become

within the last fifty years the universal law, when the price of newspapers has constantly diminished, when the means of transport have become easier and less expensive, when trade has ingeniously contrived to make and sell its productions for less and less money, when one can go from Bercy to Auteuil for three sous, and can cross France for a few louis, why should the theatres, setting themselves against an irresistible force, have raised their prices continuously, and to this extent that now a stall costs three times more than it did forty years ago, that a private box is unprocurable, and unless you are very rich you are obliged to climb up to the second or third galleries, to wedge yourself into a place where you are as badly seated as on the top of an omnibus, plus the heat and minus the pleasure of the street.

The result of such a state of things is that, unless by virtue of a free pass, – that vice which avaricious and unwise managers have called into existence, which they have complacently developed, and to which they attribute their misfortunes, – unless by virtue of a free pass, the theatre which was in other times within the reach of all pockets has become a luxury, has reduced its supporters, diminished its receipts as it raised its prices, and driven the great paying public to the music halls.

Another reason for the decline of the theatre is the disorganisation of theatrical companies. The first thing that the interpretation of a play demands, a quality so essential that it can dispense with all others, is *l'ensemble*, a condition without which a literary work is mutilated and disfigured *as a musical work would be if the musicians did not play in tune*. Managers have substituted a star system for the system of *l'ensemble*, and about a favourite actor or actress we find a number of 'sticks,' whose ignorance and stupidity serve to bring the star into prominence.

These are the principal evils which we must seek to abolish. The reforms that have become necessary are: *New pieces, comfortable places, low prices, and an ensemble in the interpretation.*

Chapter 12. On the Necessity of an English Théâtre Libre

It must be clear to all of us that there are plays which, although they would not draw large audiences for a space of a year, would prove highly interesting to the three or four thousand people, who are more or less directly interested in literature and new artistic manifestations. It is these three or four thousand people who call for a Théâtre Libre, a small minority tired of conventional plays, good and bad. The point I wish to make clear is that there are three or four thousand people who are tired of good conventional plays – that is to say, of all the plays now being performed in the London theatres. It is, therefore, evident that if it is no part of the intention of the manager of the Théâtre Libre to produce the class of play which we see in the London theatres, it is still less his intention to produce the class of play which is heard of at *matinées*. Then what kind of play do you wish to produce? Plays which a manager of a regular theatre will not produce, not because they are bad, but because he thinks there is no money in them. What kind of plays are these? Plays in which the characters, although true to nature, are not what are known as 'sympathetic characters,' plays in which there are no comic love-scenes – plays which contain no comic relief – plays which deal with religious and moral problems in such ways as would not command the instantaneous and unanimous approval of a large audience drawn from all classes of society – plays in which there is no love-interest, plays composed entirely of male or entirely of female characters, etc. You see the list is a long one, do not ask me to complete it, try to think it out yourself, for by doing so you will bring yourself into sympathy with and learn to understand my project. It was by producing such plays that Antoine succeeded, and it is necessary to understand, once and for all, that it is as imperative for an English as for a French Théâtre Libre to refuse good conventional plays as bad ones. It behoves the founder of the new theatre to understand this clearly and definitely, beyond subterfuge, equivocation, or evasion, nor can he even take the first step towards the realisation of our project until he has mastered this elementary truth.

Society will not subscribe for the performance of plays, the representation of which must of necessity be inferior to that of the plays performed in the regular theatres, unless the plays are different from any plays to be witnessed elsewhere. To get the *fine fleur* of society literature and art, the Théâtre Libre must offer a supremacy of sensation – the strange, the unknown, the unexpected. The plays need not be great plays – great plays are out of question – they need only to be plays with something in them; even though that something is not always deeper than the charm which we find in a piece of *bric-à-brac*, or a piece of old delft china. Do I make myself understood? 'Oh, yes,' cries a cynical reader, 'you want to set up a dramatic curiosity shop.' An epigram is not an argument, and I repeat, that to justify its existence as much here as in Paris, a Théâtre Libre would have to devote itself exclusively to the representation of unconventional plays. What proportion the *bizarre* would take in our programme it would be useless to conjecture, but it is certain that the most absolute eclecticism should prevail, and that no

preference be given to one form of art more than to another. That the play should be rare should be the first and almost the only qualification necessary to secure for it right of representation.

But are *rare* plays written in England? Ah, now we come to the point on which the question turns.... The money question presents no difficulties. A hundred to a hundred and fifty subscribers at five pounds would be easy to obtain. For seven hundred and fifty pounds it would be possible to give ten performances – a year's programme; for of course during August and September no performances would be possible. About finding the money I really do not think there would be any difficulty, if a full year's programme, and perhaps something over, were forthcoming. In half an hour I could myself find twenty subscribers, and while writing this very line ten more names have come into my mind. But to find even five subscribers it will be necessary to show a year's programme, ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty unconventional plays. I confess that the prospect frightens me not a little. Let us consider.

Mr. Tree says that he reads, perhaps it would be more correct to say informs himself, for after all life is short, concerning all plays that are sent to him, and that he never meets anything except ineffectual attempts to write conventional plays. It may be doubted whether Mr. Tree would dare produce a really unconventional play if he had one to produce, but I am sure he is capable of recognising and admiring original work when he sees it, and when he says he never receives it, I am sure he does not. Nor is corroborative evidence wanting. Mr. Archer tells me that out of the many plays that have been sent to him only two proved to be even passable attempts to write good conventional plays. And Mr. Archer has seen all the plays that have been produced in London for the last ten years, and as he puts it:

'I have never met with any play at a *matinée* that aimed at anything higher than an attempt to write a conventional play, never did I meet among these any of those curious literary experiments in dramatic writing which Antoine produces in the Théâtre Libre. Now as we know that *matinées* are almost invariably paid for by the author, we have to fall back on either of two alternatives: That no one attempts to write unconventional plays in England, or that those who do have no money to produce them. The unconventional plays cannot always be written by those who have not and cannot obtain' money.'

After leaving Mr. Archer I consulted another friend. He said:

'I have read an immense number of plays for Wilson Barrett; I have met two or three that I asked him to read, but not because I thought them either interesting or novel, but because I thought with a bit of pulling together they might do to make money with. *I never met a play that was literary either in conception or in language.*'

Does it follow then that it would be useless to found a Théâtre Libre in London? I think not. True it is that my optimism does not carry me into the belief that the creation of the demand would instantly produce a new dramatic aestheticism and a crop ripening at hand – the three acts, the five acts, and the one act calling to us to gather them; nor do I propose to set translators to work on Antoine's published stock. We want an English Théâtre Libre, not a translated Théâtre Libre. But Antoine himself has not relied entirely on France for plays, he has turned to Norway and to Russia; and if we can find a dozen or fifteen plays, half of which are English, we might make a start. I propose that we neither demand nor seek anything further than one year's programme, that is to say, sufficient dramatic matter for ten performances. If we succeed in this there will be cause for congratulation.

First let us consider what we have got, and then whither we may go to get more. We have got, and it is certain that we had better begin with, *The Dominion of Darkness*, by Tolstoi. We have got *Ghosts* by Ibsen, and I suggest that *La Mort du Duc d'Enghien*, and *Jacques Damour*, by Léon Hennique, likewise *En Famille*, by Oscar Méténier be translated; – for the moment I cannot say what other plays I would choose from Antoine's repertoire, nor does it matter. There are plenty that are admirable. It is not until we come to the English plays that we experience any difficulty. Frank Danby has spoken to me of an adaptation of *A Babe in Bohemia*, and with the scenes in the Salvation Army this would be of the very highest interest; indeed, it would be exactly the kind of play that we want. Of all Michael Field's works what I most admire is *William Rufus*. It is many years since I read it, but I cannot think without a thrill of those splendid forest scenes. I see the endless colonnades touched with the setting light. I hear miles and miles of silence broken at last by the sound of a distant chase, and then comes the startled deer and then the swish of the arrow. I cannot say now whether it would be possible to act this play, but it would surely not be impossible to induce the talented authoress to rearrange her work so as to bring it within the scope of the unconventional stage. It is so long since I have read *Chastelard*, that it is impossible for me to say if I think it could or could not be acted. Shelley's *Cenci* has been tried; and little would be gained by trying it again.

The young man who undertakes to carry the scheme through will have to go to Mr. George Meredith, and ask him if he has a play, and if he has not, Mr. Meredith might be induced to dramatise a very beautiful story that he published some years ago in the *New Quarterly Magazine*. Mr. Hardy should be applied to, and he might consent to write, not a play that could be played by Mr. and Mrs. Kendal, but unconventional scenes of the sordid avarice and crime that lurks among sheepfolds and hayfields as well as a city's slums and by-ways. Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Henley have written some plays in collaboration; I have heard of one, I think it is called *Beau Austin*. The title is attractive. I have not read the play, and it may be no more than an ineffectual attempt to write a Haymarket piece. But we want neither effective nor ineffective Haymarket plays. The question is whether Mr. Henley will write an unconventional play, whether he can write an unconventional play; for strange as it may seem, it is nevertheless true

that the moment we sit down to write dialogue we immediately become changed beings, and the most original are at once possessed by comic relief, and happy endings. But if Mr. Henley could write as unconventionally in dialogue as he can in verse! Ah, if he would give us something like his hospital poems; if he would take Mr. Stevenson's *A Night with Villon* and turn it into a one-act play in three scenes. First scene in the thieves' kitchen, the murder, etc, exactly as in the story; second scene, a front scene, Villon in the street finding the two coins, exactly as in the story; third scene in the old baron's chambers, with that marvellous dialogue between the baron and the poet; and the play ending exactly as the story ends on the departure of Villon. These are the plays that we want for the Théâtre Libre. Were I the founder of the Théâtre Libre, I would apply to all the novelists: gold is found in the most unexpected places. I would apply also to some two or three dramatists. For instance, I would go to Mr. Pinero and to Mr. Grundy. I would ask them if they had anything to say on the moral and ethical problems of the day. I would say to Mr. Grundy: 'You have, I know, odd views on the religious and ethical questions of our day; will you forget *Le Théâtre de Monsieur Scribe* and give us your views in dramatic form?' I would press Mr. Jones to say that he is haunted with an idea which he cannot use on the regular stage.

You must see now, I think, that the possibility of getting seven or eight unconventional English plays does not seem so hopeless as it did at the end of the paragraph in which I related my conversation with Mr. Archer. Mr. Archer is a little gloomy, a little disposed to throw cold water, but let the scheme be once put into shape and I am sure he will be one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the new theatre. There are a hundred other questions to be gone into, but I have said enough to bring the project to a head if it be really in the air.

The composition of the programme for the first year is the first thing to do. When we have arranged a satisfactory programme we shall be able to ask for subscriptions. I avoid discussion anent actors and actors; this is a delicate question but not one I think that presents any special difficulties. The first thing to do is to get the plays. Regarding the theatre, the present time is most propitious. The Novelty has been unoccupied for months, I might say for years; it would suit us as well as any theatre in London and no doubt the proprietors would be delighted to let us have the theatre; for if our ten performances proved fairly successful, we should double the value of their property.

Our hundred and fifty or two hundred subscribers would include all that is rare among the intelligence and fashion of London, and our monthly performances would be celebrated in the press even as the annual exhibitions at Burlington House or the State Balls at Buckingham Palace.

Chapter 13. Meissonier and the Salon Julian

In 1868 M. Julian founded an academy of painting in the Passage des Panoramas, in the very rooms in which the illustrious Markouski had taught two generations how to dance. A few biographical and personal details will be of interest concerning a man who, in the opinion of many competent judges, has done much to popularise and improve French art; concerning a man who, in the opinion of an equal number of competent judges, has done much to degrade and destroy it; concerning a man who to-day is the most notorious and powerful personage in the Paris art world, whose studios are in every quarter of the town, almost as numerous as *brasseries*, whose pupils, in the past and present, are numbered by thousands, fear and hatred of whom have occasioned irreparable schism in La Société des Artistes Français, dividing it in twain, one half remaining at the Salon under the presidency of M. Bouguereau, the other half following M. Meissonier to the Champ de Mars, there to found another society, La Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.

M. Julian was once a shepherd in the south of France. In his native village he established a reputation for extraordinary strength and artistic capacity. He had thrown every young man within twenty miles in the wrestling contests, and he had astonished every one by the skill he showed in drawing. For a time his fate hung in the balance. A great wrestler or a great painter, which was it to be? The village decided that he was to be a painter and sent him to Paris. The young provincial walked about and wondered, read Balzac, dreamed, studied at the Beaux-Arts. But his artistic talents were slight, and a certain *succès de scandale* gained in *Le Salon des Refusés* for a picture in illustration of the last scene in *Rolla* did not help him in the least towards selling his work. It is curious to note that in the same salon, *Le Salon des Refusés*, two men of undoubted genius – Manet and Whistler – laid the foundation-stones of their future reputations. But the public could not then distinguish between the *Rolla*, by Julian, the *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, by Manet, and the *Femme en Blanc*, by Whistler. All three pictures provoked an equal amount of sarcasm in the press, and an equal amount of laughter among the sightseers. Two of the three painters had genius, and were able to continue their art and conquer the public; the third, a subtle, crafty southerner, whose peasant blood had been but warmed in the sacred fire, found himself forced to seek a livelihood in artistic commercialism. His student days were over, he could expect nothing more either from his village or his parents, the time had come when he must support himself. But how? At some time all who have sought a livelihood in art have been asked this question; and never, I believe, was it put more pitilessly than to Julian. Too proud to return home, confess failure, and take up his crook, Julian said No – the word reverberating in his brain as he questioned his garret walls, for his eyes fell only upon the coarse and crude art from which, notwithstanding his very real intelligence, he could not escape. He examined it in despair; and the iron of a despairing conviction forced him to admit that the struggle was hopeless. We may only work in conjunction with nature; none may war against her successfully;

and the wise man is he who judges if nature's opposition to his desire is real or only apparent; if it is real he abandons the battle. But Julian possessed just sufficient talent to obscure the truth, even to a point of rendering any certain reading of it an impossibility. There is the *Rolla*, truly not a bad piece of painting. The naked flanks and back are full of colour, the drawing is hard and coarse, but, *ma foi, c'est assez crâne*.

Is not an insufficient talent the most cruel of all temptations? Julian could not surrender his cherished hope, and yet he could not improve upon his *Rolla*. Worse still, the creative faculty withered in those days of poverty and privation; he did not exhibit again for two years, he was forgotten, it became harder than ever to obtain a meal, and his thoughts turned swiftly surveying every horizon. Julian used to tell us stories of those days, making us feel how implacable nature had told, not the whole truth at once, but bit by bit in her own cruel fashion, and how she urged him at the same time to seek by other means the sweets of life for which his southern nature craved. He told us how suddenly, through some dreams of the old days, of the luminous south, of the great wrestling contests, the thought struck him that Paris knew nothing of these sports, and that, to grasp fortune securely, he had only to bring the champions, Coeur de Lion, OEil de

Boeuf, Bras de Fer, to Paris, and show the Parisians the splendid *Lutte Romaine*. Hardly was the thought conceived than it was put into execution. A capitalist was found, and a light wooden circus was run up on a piece of waste ground somewhere between the Rue Lafitte and the Rue Chateaudun. Julian departed for and returned from the south with five-and-twenty of the most famous wrestlers, and to stimulate public curiosity still further, with one announced to be unconquerable – *L'homme masqué*. Soon all Paris was tremulous with curiosity to know who was the mysterious person in black hose and black mask, who came at the end of every performance and overthrew the victor in the preceding contests. The movement and press of bodies strain forward, even to the great danger of the precarious building! Now the unknown man, his mask securely chained about his head, has appeared. See, he throws down his white glove to any who may choose to accept his challenge. In the abandonment of the moment Sculpture awakes from her sleep of ages, and the circus seems like the frieze of an antique temple.

A member of the Jockey Club paid Coeur de Lion a thousand francs to tear off the mask, but the heralds were able to intervene in time; spies were stationed at all the exits, *l'homme masqué* was followed by the swiftest horses, pursued far into the country, and when his carriage was overtaken it was found to be empty. It was said at the time that Julian himself was *l'homme masqué*, and to prove that this was not true he showed himself among the spectators while *l'homme masqué* was in the arena.

At the end of the season Julian found that he had cleared over a hundred thousand francs. It would have been well if he had then sent the wrestlers home and sold the circus for firewood, for the novelty of the entertainment had worn off, and the heat in the following year was

tropical. Julian lost all the money he had made, and once again had to turn to painting as a means of livelihood. He bethought himself of pupils, and becoming the tenant of the whilom halls of the illustrious Markouski, waited in the company of a model as patiently as he might. Julian was then a stout man of about thirty. The legs short and slightly bowed, the trunk that of a Hercules, an enormous width of shoulders, short, heavy arms. A dark beard covered the lower part of the face; large brown eyes interested you, likewise a voice soft and flexible; add to this the charm of much visible strength, and the gracious, winning manner of the sensual south. Although without capital and friends who could assist him, nature had, as the following anecdote will show, intended him to succeed in this new enterprise. Day after day passed; Julian trembled at every noise on the staircase... a pupil? One had come, that is to say, one was hesitating on the threshold. The model yawned over her knitting, the easels were set out in line-like squadrons as if on a review day, the chairs were empty. It was a solitude comparable to that of the auditorium of the Odéon on a night when a tragedy is being played. Julian saw that the pupil was hesitating, that he was frightened by the mournful silence, and was seeking escape. Poor pupil! full of faith in the old legend he had expected the noise and gaiety of youth. Julian called him back gently, and in a voice tremulous with emotion said, 'You are going, sir; what is there that you do not approve of? Tell me what you wish to have changed and it shall be changed immediately.' 'Oh, nothing, nothing, but...' 'If you do not like the model she shall be changed.' 'Oh no, on the contrary, I like the model very much.' 'Then I think I can guess your reason; because you don't see any one here; but you will be able to work better without neighbours; besides, I did not engage to provide you with neighbours.' 'No, no, that is quite true.' 'Well, then remain.'

Do we not see clearly that such qualities of tact and *bonhomie* would stand Julian in good stead, and win for him many subsequent victories? Three or four pupils, then a dozen. After the war, when work was resumed, the studio numbered about twenty. It was then, about the year 1872, that Julian succeeded in persuading Jules Lefebvre and Boulanger to pass round the room amongst the easels, giving words of advice on alternate weeks. But notwithstanding this advance in artistic tuition, the studio had not yet lost its character of a little family gathering; nearly all who worked there were Julian's intimate acquaintances, if they were not his friends, and he used to go with us to Mendon and Bas Mendon, and after a long day spent in painting some picturesque old staircase, full of sunlight, or a quiet waterway lost in the shadows of an island, we would dine together in some humble river-side auberge, and then not unfrequently, as we sat smoking in the porch, the hot evening would awake in Julian some memory of his beloved South, and he would tell of his first years in Paris, when, a lone boy, with only Balzac for a friend, he would pass along the cemeteries, stopping to peer through the railings, trembling lest he might meet the ghost of Rastignac or La Palfarine; or he would tell the story of *l'homme masqué*, and then his descriptions taking fire in our hearts, we demanded instruction in attack and counter-attack, and soon the moonlight was filled with straining and prostrate forms. But as the studio filled with new faces Julian found it necessary to withdraw from

companionship with us, and his last confidence to us I remember was when the Government had closed the schools in the Beaux-Arts for some more than usual cruelty or barbarism perpetrated by a jocular student. Then Julian said to a friend with whom he was walking in the Salon: 'One day all this will belong to me.' On being questioned as to his meaning, he answered: 'Now that they 'have closed the Beaux-Arts, all the great painters that the next ten years may produce will come from my studio.' It is hardly to be thought that Julian entertained at the time even a remote suspicion that he was speaking but the plain and literal truth. The closing of the Beaux-Arts could not but prove to his advantage, and he interpreted the chance that had come to him as any other Gascon would have done. Do not all who come from the south, in Zola's books, speak of *La Conquête de Paris*? A few weeks after Julian appeared at the studio with a medal in his hand.

To succeed in England you must offer a new reading of the Book of Genesis; to succeed in France you must offer medals. There are as many societies for the distribution of medals in France as there [are] associations in England for the propagation of dissent. We laugh at our religious crazes, our friends across the Channel laugh at their medals, but neither our national characteristics nor theirs are affected thereby. We distribute tracts, the French distribute medals. Hairdressers and tailors have academies which award medals. The societies of mutual help, gymnastic and shooting societies, choral and philharmonic societies have medals, palms, and crowns. The various societies for the preservation of human life are covered with medals; these medals are purchased; the Belgian diplomas cost from eight to ten francs, and on St. Nicholas-day every one walks about proudly, his breast covered with medals and multicoloured ribbons; yet not one out of every ten ever saved a fly fallen into a milk-jug from drowning. Pork butchers, bakers, the makers and the sellers of insect powder, rag-pickers, and itinerant musicians, all have medals. Without this explanation of a Frenchman's love of medals it would not be possible for the English reader to realise the real emotion produced in the studio, when Julian appeared at the door of his private room leading into the studio, holding a medal in his hand. He said, 'Everywhere in France there are medals! why should there not be medals in my studio? I have therefore decided to offer a medal each month for the best drawing or painting. Those who wish to compete ' will send in their drawings and paintings on the last Saturday of the month, and on the following Monday M. Lefebvre will award the medal. And knowing well the necessities and temptations of a student's life, and foreseeing that the winner of a gold medal might find himself forced to dispose of it, and as he would get nothing like the original value for it, I have decided to give a hundred francs and a bronze medal. The first competition for this medal begins to-day.'

Julian's appeal to the instincts of his countrymen met with immediate response. Before three months had passed every square foot of parquet in the whilom halls of the illustrious Markouski was occupied by an easel, and Julian had to seek for new premises; the fame of his medals soon reached England and America; every mail brought him new students. Events too

were running in his favour. Wearied by the constant protestations of the artists against its administration of the Salon, the Government, in 1881, surrendered its right to nominate the jury, giving up the Palais de l'Industrie to the artists, with full power to manage their own affairs. Art was at last in the hands of the artists, art was free at last, no more oppression, no more injustice, no more lagging behind in the mire of old aestheticisms. This time there were to be no mistakes. The exhibitors should elect their own jury. It is difficult to imagine anything more frankly democratic. But in art the democratic is always reactionary. In 1830, the democrats were against Victor Hugo and Delacroix. When the *Pall Mall Gazette* started a plebiscite to determine which was the worst picture in the Academy, the intelligent 'middles' selected a very fine portrait by Mr. John Sargent; and when the three thousand exhibitors elected their own jury, their selection proved to be no more than a consecration of the art of M. Bouguereau. When we learn who are the three thousand exhibitors, no one will wonder. All people who have once in their lives exhibited a drawing have a right to vote. Among the three thousand are found waiters in cafés, hackney-coachman, lawyers' clerks. An elderly spinster copies a drawing, it is accepted by accident, and she obtains a vote. Sketches are done by an artist and sent in the name of one of his models, so that he may have many votes for those who, he thinks, will look after his interests. The Salon had not enjoyed democracy more than three years when it came to be noticed that the best places were occupied by pictures painted by *les élèves de Julian*, and that a large proportion of the medals were distributed among them. Julian had turned his business into a company, of which he was managing director, at forty thousand francs a year; M. Bouguereau received ten thousand francs a year for his professorial services, and it is said that more than one of the professors has money invested in the studio. Branch-establishments had sprung up in every quarter of the town, eighteen in all, some of the larger ones numbering two hundred pupils. A large proportion of these students could do a piece of painting that would pass muster; those who could not, had drawings done for them, and so it came to pass that *les élèves de Julian* elected a jury devoted to their interests, and headed by their own professors. In return for the honour paid them, the professors gave the best places to their pupils and covered them with medals. The more medals the more pupils, and so the studio waxed prosperous.

Julian had conquered. He was omnipotent in the Salon. But a turning-point comes in the affairs of all men, and the Universal Exhibition was to Julian what Leipzig was to Napoleon. The Universal Exhibition being Government business, the election of the jury became the duty of one of the Ministers. It was undertaken by M. Proust, whose knowledge of art and advanced aestheticism are well known, and he elected a jury more representative of France than of Julian's studios; and this jury, being unconcerned with any but national interests, awarded some four hundred and odd recompenses, including medals, *exempts*, *hors concours*, and *mentions honorables*, to foreign artists. These *exempts* and *hors concours*, unless they meant free admission into exhibitions at the Salon, would mean nothing whatever, unless, indeed, they were considered as so many practical jokes played upon foreign exhibitors. But MM. Bouguereau, Lefebvre, Tony Robert-Fleury, Benjamin Constant, and the many other professors of painting

and sculpture in Julian's studio, thought that it was far more important that *les élèves de Julian* should have good places in the Salon than that the foreign exhibitors should not be publicly insulted, and it was voted, at a meeting of Le Comité de la Société Française, that neither medal, nor the *exempts*, nor the *hors concours* awarded by M. Meissonier's jury at the Universal Exhibition should have effect in the Salon. Very naturally M. Meissonier, and those who had sat with him on the jury of the Universal Exhibition, protested very bitterly, denying the right of the committee to pass any such resolution. It therefore became necessary to call a general meeting of La Société des Artistes Français; in other words, of the three thousand exhibitors whose claim to artistic suffrage I have already alluded to. They assembled in their thousands – café waiters, hackney-coachmen, professional models, etc. Needless to say that a 'whip' marked urgent had been sent round the studios, and at the head of many hundreds Julian arrived in person at the Salle Jean on one of the last days of December. This big man with bowed legs and colossal shoulders, this shepherd from the south, this ancient wrestler, a sort of modern Tamerlane, directed the applause and urged his men to the ballot-boxes without further parley. It was the fight of a studio for its life – one of those dramatic scenes of contemporary life with which Zola has irrevocably associated his genius.

The mutterings of an approaching storm were heard along the extremities of the vast hall, and the annual reports of work done were listened to with indifference. It was not until M. Tony Robert-Fleury spoke of the Universal Exhibition that he succeeded in obtaining public attention. Then you might have heard the proverbial pin drop. He wound up his speech with a solemn appeal for the maintenance of peace and mutual agreement. 'Do not forget the value and power of the association; think of the way we have trodden together now for several years; think of the difficulties we have surmounted together. Think calmly of the best means of arriving at some agreement, and let us, my dear colleagues, unite in one body, so that we may 'defend this society which, in a burst of enthusiasm, we founded to guard our interests, our dignity, and our liberties.' This peroration was received with unanimous applause. Then M. Bouguereau, in the name of the Committee, submitted to the assembly Clause 7 in the orders of the day.

Here is the clause: –

The Committee ask the General Assembly to decide by a *yes* or a *no* whether the awards given at the Universal Exhibition will prevail in our Annual Exhibitions, that is to say, will they carry with them the right of *hors concours* and *exempts*?

In turn, and sometimes together, M. Bouguereau, M. Tony Robert-Fleury, and the many other professors and shareholders in Julian's studio, urged the meeting to vote that the awards given at the Universal Exhibition should carry with them no right in the annual exhibition at the Salon.

Here is their argument: –

During the nine years – this year 1890 is the tenth – that the artists have managed the Salon, there have been distributed each year about 85 medals thus: painting, 40; sculpture, 21; architecture, 12; engraving, 12; and this brings the sum-total of *hors concours* and *exempts* to 1586; if there be added to this sum the 498 given to foreign artists in the Universal Exhibition, we obtain a total of 2079 *exempts* and *hors concours*.

As each of these has a right to send two works to the Salon, if they use their rights, we obtain a total of 4158 works that are passed without examination by the jury.

In 1876, there were 2095 paintings exhibited; in 1881, 2248; and in 1888, 3586; this gives an average of 2310 works exhibited yearly in the Salon; there would therefore be 1848 *exempts* and *hors concours* for which places could not be found. We should aim at the opposite result; for, in the opinion of the committee, 1500 places are necessary for the young artists.

To this Meissonier replied: –

My dear Colleagues, I must tell you that the high distinction which has been accorded to me is a decoration which is shared by you all; it is a manifestation which places the arts on a level with the most beautiful things.

I must explain to you that the new awards cannot cause any prejudice to the members *non-exempts* of the Société des Artistes Français; the *exempts*, who, it is true, have the right, will not all send two works. To prove this, it is only necessary to read the figures of the last three years. These are the figures relating to painting: in 1887 there were 875 *exempts*; they only sent 621 canvases and 21 drawings; in 1889 there were 929; they only sent 562 canvases and 89 drawings. You see that the new *exempts* are less terrifying than you were led to believe; and in architecture and sculpture, without fear of falling wide of the mark, we may base our calculation on these figures.

A great deal too much has been made of the 493 foreigners, and it has been used as a means to frighten you. But an equal number cannot be found again for the next ten years. It would require a universal exhibition. Foreigners will not find every year governments and syndicates to pay for the transport of their works.

M. Meissonier could not continue; his speech was interrupted by the Julian cohorts massed in front, and by cries of 'Tais ta gueule' on his right. Turning to them, he said: 'Mes chers confrères, car je veux bien vous encore appeler ainsi;' but with still more horrible cries he was howled

down, and in the unearthly din Julian was seen urging his legionaries to the ballot-boxes. A few of the committee declared that they would resign. Fearing, however, that they might reconsider their determination, Roll asked them to sign their names; and there were but nine, including Meissonier: Puvis de Chavannes, Carolus Duran, Duez, Dagnan-Bouveret, Gervex, Roll, Walter. A few minutes after, Meissonier reascended the platform: and having read out the names of the dissident members of the committee, and stated again the reason of their resignations, he said: –

But before I leave you, my dear colleagues, let me tell you it is deplorable that artists should band together like you; that men of heart and honour, Frenchmen before all, cannot rise to a region sufficiently high to understand that above the interests of particular groups and societies there is a sentiment of patriotism which, after the triumph of the Universal Exhibition, ought to overrule all, and that France by no faction of her children should seek to diminish the value of the awards that foreigners received thankfully at our hands with public acknowledgment.

This protest, delivered, it appears, with all the fire and energy of Gambetta in his best moments, was received with some slight applause in the midst of an extraordinary tumult which Tony Robert-Fleury and Garnier strove vainly to calm. Then again did Julian excite his legionaries onwards to the ballot-boxes. But without waiting for the poll to be taken Meissonier left, declaring 'that from no point of view could he admit a vote upon a question in which our national honour was compromised.'

He retired with his followers to Ledoyen. There happened at that moment to be a man distributing the prospectuses of some obscure studio. 'Never mind your prospectuses,' said Roll, 'here are four francs, and keep shouting for the next hour that M. Meissonier has retired to Ledoyen to arrange the constitution of a new society.' Roll spoke at random, but the words were happily chosen, and, half-an-hour after, some fifty or sixty eminent painters had severed their connection with the old society and given in their adhesion to the new and yet unborn society. This number of painters included some twenty-five members of the committee of the Société des Artistes Français, and it was resolved that these should go, with Meissonier at their head, and explain how they had come to resign their connection with the old society of fine arts, and their plan for the founding a new and truly national one, which would be able to offer that hospitality to the foreign artists which the Salon had refused. M. Meissonier spoke as brilliantly as before, but his eloquence could not prevent the question: How many are you? twenty-five out of how many? eighty-five? M. Tirard, who had till then been listening with singular satisfaction to all that Meissonier had to say in defence of the national honour, could not but feel himself obliged to advise the twenty-five dissidents to return and arrange their differences as best they could. He was, it appears, on the point of dismissing the delegation, when one of those comic incidents occurred which so often turn the scale. Some one, it never was discovered who, cried out, at the last moment: – 'Mais toute la province est avec nous.' 'Then,' cried M. Tirard, rising as

if he were impelled by the sudden loosing of a spring, 'if the provinces are with you, I am with you too. I will speak, and you are at liberty to make my words public.' He told them that they had his entire sympathy; he authorised them to make known the step they had taken. The same delegation proceeded immediately to M. Fallières to explain to him the reasons that brought about the dissidence. M. Fallières answered that the society in progress of formation had all his sympathies: and he shortly after placed at its disposal the galleries of the Exhibition in the Champ de Mars.

Every day fresh artists withdrew from the old and went over to the new society; the secession increased, and the Société des Artistes Français, seriously alarmed, called another meeting, where a resolution, proposed by M. Garnier, to do away with all *exempts*, was unanimously adopted. This being done, MM. Guillaume, Garnier, and Bonnat called on Meissonier to name a commission that might suggest a way out of the difficulty. But Meissonier refused categorically to enter into discussion with the old society. 'The new society,' he said, 'has been founded; its statutes have been approved of; it is too late for compromise.' This phrase afforded Meissonier's followers much gratification; it shows the amount of animus that existed, and it is probable that, if all their demands had been granted, they would not have returned to the Salon under the headship of M. Bouguereau. Until then the plea of patriotism had alone been put forward as the motive of the secession, but under the elegant phrases about the honour of France and justice to the foreigners who had contributed so largely to the success of the glorious exhibition, there lay a second motive, as important in determining the action of the dissidents as the first. The first was flown in the face of the world, a pennon; the second was sunk deep in the heart, an anchor. And a good stout anchor too, did hatred of Julian's studio prove in the swift-running tide of secession. Deep fixed it lay, unmoved, keeping the vessel's head well off shore, and never alluded to in public speech until all shoals and sandbanks were cleared. 'The plan of Julian's studio,' said Meissonier,

since it has become necessary to name it, was prepared long ago, and executed in every detail. Even those who proposed the adjournment of the meeting, ran to the ballot-boxes, Julian himself exciting the waverers.

And it is in fact Julian's studio that endows the secession of the French Artists in the Salon with a deep and grave significance, that raises it from the triviality of a petty dispute and makes of it a matter of national, perhaps I should say international, importance. Very little does it matter to us whether M. Bouguereau and M. Meissonier hold different exhibitions in the Champs Elysées and the Champ de Mars, or abjure their differences, and in perfect communion open one exhibition to the artists of the whole world; but what does concern us, and very deeply indeed, is that we should preserve unsullied our own beautiful English art traditions – I mean the eighteenth-century traditions bequeathed to us by Gainsborough and Reynolds, and worthily continued even unto the present generation by Millais and Orchardson.

Twenty years ago the mischief began. It began then to be generally regarded as a truth that it was necessary to go to Paris to learn painting. Twenty years ago we began to tire of the *naïveté*, the quaintness, the simplicity of our English drawing, because it did not measure so correctly with the model as that done in the Beaux-Arts; and we became infected, about the time I speak of, with a desire of construction, that is, the mapping out of the figure into so many dioramic shapes, some to be filled with light, some with shadow. We began then dimly to understand that the figure should be 'built up,' that to draw by the character, as we had hitherto been content to do, was but the infancy of art, whereas to draw by the 'masses' was its manhood and apotheosis. So we went to France to learn to draw by the 'masses,' and there we heard of 'solid painting,' and we were told that all other painting was primitive and barbarous. The special temperament of the artist, we learnt, was nothing to the point; there was *la bonne peinture, la peinture au premier coup*, which was produced in such and such a way, and if we could not learn the trick, it was clear that nature had not intended us to be artists. And we were introduced to the nude model, propped up on boxes, or standing in a conventional pose, hand on hip. We were told to count the number of heads, and to mark them off on our paper; then with the plumb-line we were shown how to determine the sway of the figure. It drops through the ear, the right breast, the hip-bone, passing, let us say, through the heel. The leading measurements and general lines being thus obtained, note was taken how much of the body fell to the left and right of our plumb-line, and we were instructed to sketch in, drawing by the masses of light and shade. This was the way, and the only way, to learn to draw, we were assured; we needed not to think of anything but the studio model; the world in the fields and the streets, that living world full of passionate colour and joyous movement, was but an illusive temptation; the studio model was the truth, the truth in essence; if we could draw the nude, we could draw anything. For the success of the studio it was necessary that this should be accepted as an article of faith. In the highest sense to draw the nude is well-nigh impossible; in another sense, it is almost as easy to draw from the nude as from the flat. I have seen hundreds draw the posed studio model fairly well, but to catch the movement of a man's hands, say, as he lights a match, is quite another thing. To do that at all satisfactorily demands great skill and knowledge, and no one can learn of another to do it well.

But it will be argued that those who are geniuses of the first rank will separate themselves from Julian's. This is not so certain as some of us think, but I will let the point pass; I am concerned rather with the preservation of the character of our art as a whole than with the genius of the favoured few, and I will ask those who think this of no consequence to look at some ordinary English work done fifty years ago and compare it with the best work done at Julian's. The English work is simple and racy of the soil, full of an engaging ignorance, '*au moins les figures ne sont pas bien construites.*' The French work is cosmopolitan and pedantic. A drawing by Westall, for instance, would not measure very correctly with the model, but Westall's drawing is homely and English, and we love it for its old-fashioned air, for the sentiment of the time that it

reflects so naively; and in the decoration of a room it takes a hybrid place, existing somewhere between an artistic *biblot* and a work of art, something more than one, something less than the other. But what charm will any of the mechanical drawings and paintings done in Julian's studio have in fifty years' time? not more I think than that of a machine-painted plate. Another example: Stubbs was not a great artist, but his pictures exhale an English air that will always be pleasant; and this particular air he acquired by remaining at home, by remaining ignorant of all but English influences. The artists of the last century and the artists of the beginning of this century were content to till one plot of ground, planting there always the same flower, they were content with the only true genius – *le génie de terroir*. Only by being parochial, in the first instance, may any man's art become ultramontane in the end.

Our art came to us from Holland. Vandyck inspired Reynolds and Gainsborough, and from them proceeded all that is worthy and valuable in English art. Alone among English painters, Turner succeeded in the golden romantic Italian manner, and though we may not deny his *Carthage*, we may ask with excellent reason if the grey, sad, meditative note which came from Holland, and which he professed with so exquisite an art, is not preferable and more valid.

I had seen a beautiful Gainsborough at an Exhibition des Portraits du Siècle at the Beaux-Arts, and speaking to Sir John Millais one night I told him how much it had been admired by French artists. Sir John said: 'Ah, yes, they would understand Gainsborough – they would understand him through Watteau.' This remark seemed to me to be just one of those magical criticisms which no one but a great artist could make. The truth of Sir John's words was obvious, but why, I asked myself, should Watteau enable Frenchmen to understand Gainsborough; and if I had asked Sir John how the resemblance came about – Watteau a painter of court life in the reign of Louis XV., Gainsborough a painter who had never left England – he might have been puzzled to say. Sir John may have been content to merely note an analogy without troubling himself as to the cause of it. However this may be the idea haunted me, and I sought an explanation of a fact which seemed to defy explanation until one day while examining a picture of Watteau, my thoughts turned suddenly into some remembrances of Rubens' palette, and I recognised the analogy between Rubens and Watteau. I then recollected that Watteau was born in or on the confines of Flanders, and that the first pictures he saw were Rubens'. Rubens was Vandyck's master, and it was Vandyck who founded the English school.

The influence of Vandyck on Reynolds and Gainsborough was about the same, the genius of both was about equal, but Reynolds went to Italy, and Italian influence destroyed in part his native English simplicity, as it had destroyed that of many a Dutchman; and as Italian influence destroyed the art of the Low Countries in the sixteenth century so French influence is destroying English art in the nineteenth. But how much more disastrous is the journey to Paris than the journey to Rome! Reynolds went to Rome when he was in full possession of his art, he went there to see great works, to muse, to think, to reflect. But to-day young men go to Paris

knowing nothing; and they go there not to visit the Louvre but to shut themselves up in a studio from eight to ten hours daily, accepting blindly an elaborate system of education organised on principles as purely commercial as those at the Bon Marché. Is such expatriation and such instruction suitable to the preservation and the development of English talent?

Those who think that it is not must agree with me that the first step in the artistic education of this country, is to persuade students that it is not necessary to go to Paris. If this cannot be done, I would save them at least from Julian's studio, where, as we have seen, all is corruption and commercialism.

It is well that the dignity of art should be upheld, and our *confrères* should have our full sympathy in their efforts to wipe away all suspicion of intrigue and favouritism from their exhibitions; but our concern in the matter lies far deeper than theirs, far deeper than the false distribution of a few medals, for we are concerned to preserve what remains of our artistic tradition. The commercialism of Julian's studio is the most flagrant, its appeal to England and America the loudest, but its influence on our art is hardly more detestable than that of another Parisian studio. True, had I to choose I would accept Duran's instruction in preference to Bouguereau's, but, exercised on English talent, or even genius, both are disastrous, for both are un-English. So, if it behoves French artists to separate themselves from all alliance with Julian's studio, it is doubly desirable that English artists, English art critics, all interested in English art to whom the ways of public speech and writing are open, should, forgetting all internecine broils, unite in upholding our own Academy, which at least is not corrupt, and endeavour to teach love of England to the youth within and without its walls, who, discontented with the naive simplicity of our tradition, are turning their eyes towards Paris.

Chapter 14. Art for the Villa

Feudalism is extinct, war is becoming less frequent, palaces are disappearing, and a new tendency, exclusively utilitarian, mildly artistic, concerned wholly with the interests of home-life, is growing and becoming national. I come to invite artistic acceptance of the tendency of our modern ideal – the villa.

Constituting myself exponent and advocate of the wants of the artistic villa, I will ask my readers to consider if a room decorated with plates, etchings, drawings, etc., is not pleasanter and prettier than a room hung with oil pictures. That large subject-pictures in heavy gold frames are beginning to be deemed old-fashioned I am disposed to think; but though there is vague feeling in the air for lighter forms of decoration, little has been evolved out of general sensation into definite idea and distinct expression. Tradition grips firmly, and many would fear to admit that they preferred etchings on their walls to oil-paintings; others probably think that if they could exchange their hundred-pound landscape by Brown, and their hundred-and-fifty-pound cattle-piece by Jones, for a couple of two-thousand-pound pictures by Mr. Tadema and Mr. Orchardson, that all would be well. But the villa owners might hang Raphaels and Leonardos, and still find that etchings, china, and drawings were pleasanter to live with. A lion in an African forest is noble and picturesque, but a lion, even if he be kept on a chain, is inconvenient and disagreeable in a back garden; and for continuous unpleasantness in a villa I am convinced that the *Mona Lisa* in the drawing-room would run the lion a close race.

We do not want great ideas thrust into our little homes. That mysterious ever-smiling female – a hesitating smile that starts some one from an arm-chair to slice her dimpled cheeks with the carving-knife! Imagine the fulgorant glories of the *Ariadne* for ever spreading aspiration in the parlour. That homely room would speedily become uninhabited, and if the exigencies of family life did not permit of its complete abandonment, we should read of death resulting from an over-dose of Titians, and suicide consequent upon an obsession of Da Vinci. For who would bear with life were they forced to live in front of a perpetual performance of *Hamlet* or *Tristan und Isolde*?

To witness tragedy or opera at undetermined intervals, to raise the eyes from a too beautiful page of De Quincey and dream in the hush of a winter's evening, to pass from the noise and clamour of public ways through the swing-doors of the National Gallery, to feel the soul flow into the golden spaces, to feed the eyes on the miraculous poise of body, these are delights which almost compensate us for the trouble of living, and these enchantments linger in us when we re-enter the tedious routine of daily existence.

But who would choose to eat their daily dinner beneath a great picture? Great pictures are out of place in private houses. Tapestry, mirrors, marbles, all sensuous ornamentation, gently rests or gently stimulates the fancy; great pictures demand the soul, the entire soul, and in return give annihilation of past and future, creating a momentary but ecstatic present. In a private house great pictures may even fail to impress; they require the lofty light and peace of the gallery; as the albatross requires the boundless ocean. Upon deck the bird is ungainly, and, as Baudelaire says, the sailors tease it with their short pipes.

In a house where I am sometimes asked to balls, there are a large Turner and a large Constable. Perhaps both are inferior specimens; or may be my mind was distracted by the difficulty of helping ladies to select from a various and complicated menu, may be – We will not pursue the analysis any further; certain it is that neither picture brought me emotion. I saw these pictures by Turner and Constable without seeing them, and it is perhaps pertinent to add that out of the hundreds who throng that supper-room on the nights of Lady – balls, I never noticed that any one bestowed more than a vacant passing glance upon either picture. Now if a picture fails to impress, it fulfils no purpose; for I am venting no paradox if I say that, considered merely as material, the ugliest chair the Tottenham Court Road ever brought forth is beautiful compared with a gold frame enclosing a piece of coloured canvas. Let us pause here for a moment – only for a moment – to consider the effect that any one of Mr. Long's annual rows of Egyptians and mummies, viewed from the point of view of house decoration, would have in our dining-rooms, and, lest Mr. Long should think I am treating him unfairly, I will add in our drawing-rooms, or indeed in any room, from the attics to the cellars.

It may be argued that those who buy expensive oil-paintings, though they represent nymphs or mummies, have private galleries to hang them in. This is not the case; those who buy pictures hang them in their dining-rooms and drawing-rooms. There are not a dozen private picture-galleries in London.

A private picture-gallery is a monstrous and ridiculous anomaly which no one would build but a retired cheesemonger, and which no one could at all bear with except a duke who spent the greater part of his time abroad. Is not a private picture-gallery a room fifty feet long with an oak floor and some chairs and an ottoman – a something which jars the harmony of the rest of the house, reminding you disagreeably of an hotel sitting-room – a place wherein the owner walks once a month – and, standing with his hands behind his back, looks at his favourite Gainsborough? A private picture-gallery would not be a suitable place to bring your guests after dinner; nor would a private picture-gallery prove a perfect place even to give a ball in. The owner would be asked to remove his pictures that the dancers might lean with more comfort against the walls. You cannot sit and talk beneath great pictures.

I have never seen a private sculpture gallery, but I have seen halls and vestibules filled with groups and single figures in white marble. A replica of Gibson's *Venus* stands in a house I used to visit when I was a boy; and have not I forgotten the effect of this statue seen against an adjacent book-case, and lighted by a moderator lamp. Out-of-doors white marble fulfils no purpose except the disfigurement of our streets, and within doors white marble is a discordant and discrepant note in modern decoration. The material is unsuitable, and this brings us face to face with the question: are we learning to love the material for its own sake, independently of the idea expressed in the material? This is the root-idea of my article, and its trunk and branches are: the rehabilitation of the artisan in art, with allusion to such economic changes as will simplify the subject-matter of pictures and reduce their dimensions and their price.

Last May, as I stood rapt in admiration of Rodin's beautiful bust, I heard some one close to me and just behind me say, 'Michelange à la coule.' Turning, I met the eyes of a singularly handsome young man. He was well dressed; and yet there was something in his blue cloth jacket buttoned across the throat, in his manner of wearing it (or was it the large trousers, cut somewhat after the pattern of the white ducks of a house-painter?), that suggested the artisan. We exchanged a few remarks, and he told me he was a sculptor. We walked about criticising, and when I was about to wish him good-day, he said,

'Would you care to see some sculpture of a different kind? A young friend of mine, a provincial, is exhibiting his bronzes in Passy. He will not exhibit here; he finds himself out of sympathy with all this Greek tradition. But a lady who is interested in his work has allowed him to exhibit his bronzes in her house. If you have nothing better to do?

I replied that I was in Paris to see art. We got into a cab, and after a long drive, arrived at a villa – a real French villa full of iron-work, pink silk, tapestry, carved and painted ceilings. The rooms were filled with some thirty bronzes and various models in wax. My young friend took me before a half-length figure, which he told me was a portrait of the sculptor. It represented a man in a blouse. One arm was stretched forth – a stiff and rigid gesture, but it had the proud and lofty grandeur of an Indian god. Impossible not to be struck by the blending of the blouse with the pedestal, by the naturalness of the execution, and the independence of mind displayed in the treatment of every fold; and fascinated by the novelty of the workmanship, I did not perceive that the original of the wax model was standing by me. Having introduced me to the lady of the house, he said, 'I must leave you now. I will meet you an hour hence at the Café l'Etoile.' I promised to meet him, but unfortunately was forced to break my appointment.

An appreciative article by Albert Wolff in the *Figaro* a few days after told me his name, which I have forgotten, but I have not forgotten his genius. I said to myself,

This young man's art is Oriental, not Western; he is not pre-occupied with any thought of rendering his idea of innocence, beauty, voluptuousness, etc.; he loves the material; the bronze is as dear to him as to a Japanese. He is not a man who makes a design in clay and gives it to a workman to execute in marble; he has made it all with his own hands; he is the artist-artisan.

Then I smiled, thinking how the man's inner nature was revealed in his clothes. He had evidently said,

'Marble was right for the Greeks; they had blue skies and seas to see it upon; they lived in the open air; but we have but grey skies, and spend three parts of our lives within-doors; we live amid upholstery and hangings. Bronze and wax are therefore the suitable materials for the ornamentation of our houses.

This young man was the first to express such beliefs; but we are all thinking with him. A distinct love of the material for its own sake is observable in modern art, and this movement in artistic perception is in harmony with, indeed it is consequent upon the social tendency of our day. The aestheticism of the young sculptor I met in the French salon is seeking expression everywhere. Witness the exhibition of the arts and crafts and Mr. Morris's writings; Mr. Morris's whole working life is a vehement expression of belief in the rehabilitation of the artisan in art; and that means no more than a revival of the love of the material for its own sake.

The unpleasantness of living with a great ideal has already been shown; also the still greater unpleasantness of living with great canvases, such as Mr. Long's mummies, or Lady Butler's soldiers; and many – even those who do not hold, as we do, that these pictures are merely dreadfully ugly things – will agree that they do not lend themselves to any scheme of decoration, and could not for purely decorative reasons fail to prove an eyesore in any drawing-room or dining-room. Having therefore carefully considered the advantages of not possessing large subject-pictures, it now behoves us to inquire into the relation between the price of such articles of luxury – not Mr. Long's or Lady Butler's pictures, which are worth thousands of pounds, but the ordinary large subject-picture, *Louis XIV. receiving his Court*, three feet by six, hung on the line in the Royal Academy. This picture is generally priced at three hundred or four hundred pounds. But the majority of our friends spend from a thousand to two thousand a year, so I am tempted to ask how he whose income is two thousand a year can spend four hundred pounds on a picture? The artist cries,

But my *Court of Louis XIV.* cost me three hundred pounds to paint – studio models, costume, a journey to Versailles.

'Very likely it did, my good man, but why ' paint pictures which cost so much to paint?

I must paint something; what shall I paint?

That's your affair, not mine. I am a critic of life and manners; and notice there is hardly any market, and soon will be none at all, for the "carefully" painted *Border Foray*, price £400, and the "honestly" painted *Court of Louis XIV.*, price £300. I tell you so; it is for you to cut your canvas to suit the civilisation you live in. Civilisation is destroying palaces and building villas; civilisation is stealing away from public life and fortifying itself in the family circle; civilisation is distributing a modicum of comfort and education, and creating a large suburban class living in villas. These people demand art – not historical art in heavy gold frames, but pleasant and agreeable art that will fit their rooms and match their furniture – art that is art – and, above all, art at a price that will not disturb too violently the balance of their weekly bills.

This is the art we need, and this is precisely the art to the production of which few have turned their thoughts and taste – an art which is at once an art and a handicraft, a hybrid between the picture and the *bibelot*.

Ours is an age of *bibelots*. 'Give us *bibelots*, and we'll buy,' cry the villas – '*bibelots* varying in price from ten pounds to fifty.' The *bibelot* which is at once *bibelot* and a work of art exists or has existed in Japan. From Greece man started on his pilgrimage in quest of Idea. He holds the sublime flower withered in the light of the setting sun, and he must retrace his steps, pass the Caucasian Mountains, and in the land of the rising sun, amid the wisdom of the ancient races, learn again to love matter.

The Oriental spirit, introduced into our Western art by Mr. Whistler, made itself felt by rejection of subject, the pictorial setting forth of a fable, the representation of a human passion or sentiment, by relying on the harmonic arrangement of tints for effect, and by the introduction of the artistic scheme of the picture into the frame, which had hitherto been considered as a separable thing. Mr. Whistler was the first to refuse the brightly gilt carving of the frame-maker, and institute sweet marriage between paint and gilding. What wealth of design this man has rescued from the Japanese albums! What beauties he has found there, what genius he has assimilated! The discoveries he made in these albums are alone sufficient to establish his claim to immortality. As he pored over these precious books, he must have often felt like Cortez, 'silent upon a peak of Darien;' he must have often chuckled, like Blücher when he was shown London, 'What fine plunder!' By his appropriation of Japanese genius Mr. Whistler indefinitely enlarged the artistic horizon, and formulated the conditions of the modern movement in art – viz., the abolition of all interests except colour and line in painting, and the theory of the indissolubility of the frame, the picture, and, I may add, the wall on which it is hung. The wave

pattern and the check pattern discovered by him we meet again in Mr. Menpes's frames – sometimes in their entirety, sometimes in many beautiful modifications. These frames are so beautiful in themselves that the etching which they are intended to contain is almost superfluous – the beauty of the pattern, of the gold, of the copper tint, of the old Dutch etching-paper laid upon the sheet of white Whatman is enough; without delay they can be hung upon the walls, and in due course the artist will introduce some slight design, an excuse, a pretext, if such be needed, for the existence of the beautiful frame.

Honour to him to whom honour is due, and it is to Mr. Whistler to whom we owe this fresh impulse in art. From him it sprang, and it was he who pointed out the way the art of the century would have to tread. But though he made and pointed out the way, he has not walked in it. Nor could it be otherwise; for although the artist is the child and thrall of the years in which he lives, the land of immortality, which genius may not quit, is narrow, whereas talent by its very nature must walk in vast districts, temporal and circumstantial. And it is to Mr. Menpes that we owe the first victory of the art-*biblot*. I know little of this painter's work, and what I have seen suggests the link between the handicraftsman and the artist. His exhibition, I believe, represented him as a designer of *des objets d'arts*, and these took the form of luminous spots of colour set in gold panelling of exquisite tone and design.

It will be said, and it will be said with truth, in relying so much on the frame and the colour of the wall, Mr. Menpes is passing, or rather has passed, over the undefinable but easily recognisable frontier that divides the artist from the decorator. But to me at least any movement will be welcome in English art that tends to crush out the anecdotal school of painting. On this point I am anarchist pure and simple, 'destroy, I say, the taste for the anecdote, and then we shall see what will happen.' Such revolution must come before Englishmen will again return to painting, before they will again be content to do what the Dutchmen did – namely, to paint the portrait of their country miraculously well.

Tradition wears slowly from the mind; a certain vague sense still survives that it is meritorious to paint King Lear cursing his daughters, and undignified to paint the waterbutt in the back garden. Too many still fail to realise that there is more beauty in a sideboard by Chippendale than in all the pictures that Mr. Frith, Mr. Maclise, Mr. Mulready, and Mr. Faed ever painted; it is therefore not astonishing that the importance of the fact of an artist who might have won honours on the Academy walls taking in preference the position of a designer of *des objets d'arts* is both overlooked and misunderstood. If Mr. Menpes were a dreamer who thought he could serve his art better by painting *bibelots* than 'carefully' painted pictures of Louis XIV. receiving his Court, the art-world might sneer and turn its nose up at ease; but if ideas may be overlooked and misunderstood, pounds, shillings, and pence will not allow themselves to be either overlooked or misunderstood; and the fact has to be faced that while those who ask three or

four hundred pounds for a 'carefully' painted Border Foray are starving, Mr. Menpes is piling up gold by selling his sketches at prices varying from ten to thirty-five pounds.

Of the many enigmas which life offers for our distraction, I know none more insoluble than the prices artists put on their pictures. The reformation set on foot is therefore most salutary; it should deal a death-blow at the Court of Louis XIV., should open up a new field for the display of artistic industry, and it should enable those whose incomes vary between one thousand pounds and two thousand pounds a year to possess some pieces of charming artistry. As prices now stand, even very rich people do not care to buy; and all must ask themselves, as they look round the Academy walls, 'Who are the people who buy these pictures? They must be very ignorant or very rich.' They are both. To instance the gulf that for ever yawns between the villa-owner and the possession of a work of art, I need not stray from the Chelsea School.

Mr. W. Stott, of Oldham, is a painter with whose aims I am in entire sympathy, and whose work I often sincerely admire. Some years ago he exhibited a pastel at Suffolk Street; the picture was on exhibition in the Grosvenor Gallery this winter – two feet of canvas filled with the sky of a real summer's day; and the sky soars as a sky will soar when you lie under a hedge with half-shut eyes. Below, a slice of green field where some sheep drowse. So charming was this picture that I strongly advised a lady to buy it, and begged of her not to let the occasion pass. 'You will,' I said, 'be able to get it for thirty or forty pounds.' She consented, and we went to ask the price: it was eighty pounds. In the same exhibition Mr. W. Stott, of Oldham, exhibited another picture – a large picture some six feet square: long reaches of wet sand with naked boys. This was priced at six hundred pounds. At that price the number of purchasers must be very limited.

The picture is an admirable picture, a picture full of interest, and yet I should not know what to do with it; it would fall in with no scheme of decoration, and would jar the aspect of any dining-room or drawing-room; but the sky picture would blend and harmonise with almost any scheme, and would be to the inhabitant of any room an ever increasing source of delight. The boys bathing would be out of place anywhere except in a picture-gallery.

For the villa we want light work. Mr. Whistler's etchings and his nocturnes, Degas' ballet-girls, and nearly all Manet's work, look as well in a private house as in a picture-gallery. And so do all Mr. Albert Moore's beautiful decorations, so intensely personal, and therefore so intensely modern, and some indefinable but inherent harmony of idea binds them to and blends them with their surroundings. Such quality is commoner in ancient than in modern art. Ancient art is closely allied to the architecture it is intended to adorn. Who will say that a picture of Veronese does not evoke the palace of a doge?

The work of Raphael surely seems more cognate with the feelings of his age, and more in concord with its environment, than the work of Mr. Watts is with the thought of to-day and the

architecture of to-day. True it is that a Raphael is beautiful whatever local habitation chance bestows upon it; but few may possess genius, even if they cared to brave the danger of introducing it into their little homes; and no god may multiply Raphael and feed five thousand people. But though genius may not reign in the parlour, harmony and concord may enter that lowly door.

And this brings us back to the subject of this article. Art for the villa, art suitable to the size of the
modem house, above all, an art that will be well within the reach of incomes varying from one to two thousand a year. The artist must come down from high prices and high art; he must forget the picture-gallery and remember the drawing-room. Art is not a superfluity, but a necessity in the life of man; it is bread and cheese and beer in another form, that is all; and the artist serves his art best by supplying the community in which he lives with the mental comestible which their taste asks for. No one acted up to this principle more thoroughly than Shakespeare, and artists of to-day will produce more lasting work by supplying the villa with an art suitable for the villa than by supplying it with a traditional art descended from the palace or the cathedral. Art is merely the embodiment of the dominant influence of an age. The dominant influence of the fifteenth century was the cathedral, therefore the fifteenth century gave the art of the cathedral; the dominant influence of the seventeenth century was the palace, therefore the seventeenth century gave the art of the palace; the dominant influence of the nineteenth century is the Hampstead villa, therefore the nineteenth century should give the art of the Hampstead villa. It may do this supremely well; it must paint the *Sacrifice of Abraham* supremely badly.

Chapter 15. Degas

One evening, after a large dinner party, given in honour of the publication of *L'Oeuvre*, when most of the guests had gone, and the company consisted of *les intimes de la maison*, a discussion arose as to whether Claude Lantier was or was not a man of talent. Madame Charpentier, by dint of much provocative asseveration that he was undistinguished by hardly any shred of the talent which made Manet a painter for painters, forced Emile Zola to take up the cudgels and defend his hero. Seeing that all were siding with Madame Charpentier, Zola plunged like a bull into the thick of the fray, and did not hesitate to affirm that he had gifted Claude Lantier with infinitely higher qualities than those which nature had bestowed upon Edouard Manet. This statement was received in mute anger by those present, all of whom had been personal friends and warm admirers of Manet's genius, and cared little to hear any word of disparagement spoken of their dead friend. It must be observed that M. Zola intended no disparagement of M. Manet, but he was concerned to defend the theory of his book – namely, that no painter working in the modern movement had achieved a result proportionate to that which had been achieved by at least three or four writers working in the same movement, inspired by the same ideas, animated by the same aestheticism. And, in reply to one who was anxiously urging Degas' claim to the highest consideration, he said, 'I cannot accept a man who shuts himself up all his life to draw a ballet-girl as ranking co-equal in dignity and power with Flaubert, Daudet, and Goncourt.'

Some four, or perhaps five, years after, one morning in May, a friend tried the door of Degas' studio. It is always strictly fastened, and when shaken vigorously a voice calls from some loophole; if the visitor be an intimate friend, a string is pulled and he is allowed to stumble his way up the cork-screw staircase into the studio. There are neither Turkey carpets nor Japanese screens, nor indeed any of those signs whereby we know the dwelling of the modern artist. Only at the further end, where the artist works, is there daylight. In perennial gloom and dust the vast canvases of his youth are piled up in formidable barricades. Great wheels belonging to lithographic presses – lithography was for a time one of Degas' avocations – suggest a printing-office. There is much decaying sculpture – dancing-girls modelled in red wax, some dressed in muslin skirts, strange dolls – dolls if you will, but dolls modelled by a man of genius.

On that day in May Degas was especially anxious for breakfast, and he only permitted his visitor to glance at the work in progress, and hurried him away to meal with him – but not in the café; Degas has lately relinquished his café, and breakfasts at home, in an apartment in the Rue Pigalle, overlooking a courtyard full of flowering chestnut-trees.

As they entered the apartment the eye of the visitor was caught by a faint drawing in red chalk, placed upon a sideboard; he went straight to it. Degas said, 'Ah! look at it, I bought it only a few

days ago; it is a drawing of a female hand by Ingres; look at those finger-nails, see how they are indicated. That's my idea of genius, a man who finds a hand so lovely, so wonderful, so difficult to render, that he will shut himself up all his life, content to do nothing else but indicate finger-nails.'

The collocation of these remarks by Zola and Degas – two men of genius, working in the same age, floating in the same stream of tendency, although in diverging currents – cannot fail to move those who are interested in the problem of artistic life. Perhaps never before did chance allow a mutual friend to snatch out of the oblivion of conversation two such complete expressions of artistic sensibility; the document is sufficient, and from it a novelist should be able to construct two living souls. Two types of mind are there in essence; two poles of art are brought into the clearest apprehension, and the insolvable problem, whether it be better to strive for almost everything, or for almost nothing, stares the reader in the face; we see Zola attempting to grasp the universe, and Degas following the vein of gold, following it unerringly, preserving it scrupulously from running into slate. The whole of Degas' life is in the phrase spoken while showing his visitor the drawing in red chalk by Ingres. For no man's practice ever accorded more nearly with his theory than Degas'. He has shut himself up all his life to draw again and again, in a hundred different combinations, only slightly varied, those few aspects of life which his nature led him to consider artistically, and for which his genius alone holds the artistic formulae.

Maupassant says in his preface to Flaubert's letters to George Sand: –

Nearly always an artist hides a secret ambition, foreign to art. Often it is glory that we follow, the radiating glory that places us, living, in apotheosis, frenzies minds, forces hands to applaud, and captures women's hearts.... Others follow money, whether for itself, or the satisfaction that it gives – luxuries of life and the delicacies of the table.

Gustave Flaubert loved letters in so absolute a fashion that, in his soul, filled with this love, no other ambition could find a place.

With the single substitution of the word 'painting' for 'letters,' this might be written with perfect truth of Degas. To those who want to write about him he says,

'Leave me alone; you didn't come here to count how many shirts I have in my wardrobe?' 'No, but your art, I want to write about it.' 'My art, what do you want to say about it? Do you think you can explain the merits of a picture to those who do not see them? Dites?... I can find the best and clearest words to explain my meaning, and I have spoken to the most intelligent people about art, and they have not understood – to B –, for instance; but among people who understand words are not necessary, you say –

humph, he, ha, and everything has been said. My opinion has always been the same. I think that literature has only done harm to art. You puff out the artist with vanity, you inculcate the taste for notoriety, and that is all; you do not advance public taste by one jot.... Notwithstanding all your scribbling it never was in a worse state than it is at present..... Dites? You do not even help us to sell our pictures. A man buys a picture not because he read an article in a newspaper, but because a friend, who he thinks knows something about pictures, told him it would be worth twice as much ten years hence as it is worth to-day.... Dites?

In these days, when people live with the view to reading their names in the paper, such austerity must appear to many like affectation; let such people undeceive themselves. Never was man more sincere; when Degas speaks thus he speaks the very essence of his being. But perhaps even more difficult than the acceptance of this fact will be found the association of such sentiments with a sweet genial nature, untouched with misanthropy or personal cynicism. Degas is only really cynical in his art, and although irony is an essential part of him, it finds expression in a kindly consciousness of the little weaknesses of human nature when directed against those he loves. For instance, when he is in company with any one who knew Manet, his confrère and compeer in realistic pictorial art, and the friend of his life, he loves to allude to those little childishnesses of disposition which make Manet's memory a well-beloved, even a sacred thing.

'Do you remember,' Degas said, as he hurried his friend along the Rue Pigalle,

how he used to turn on me when I wouldn't send my pictures to the Salon? He would say, "You, Degas, you are above the level of the sea, but for my part, if I get into an omnibus and some one doesn't say M. Manet, how are you, where are you going? I am disappointed, for I know then that I am not famous."

Manet's vanity, which a strange boyishness of disposition rendered attractive and engaging, is clearly one of Degas' happiest memories, but all the meanness of *la vie de parade*, so persistently sought by Mr. Whistler, is bitterly displeasing to him. Speaking to Mr. Whistler, he said, 'My dear friend, you conduct yourself in life just as if you had no talent at all.' Again speaking of the same person, and at the time when he was having numerous photographs taken, Degas said, 'You cannot talk to him; he throws his cloak around him – and goes off to the photographer.'

A dozen, a hundred other instances, all more or less illustrative of the trait so dominant and decisive in Degas, which leads him to despise all that vain clamour which many artists are apt to consider essential, and without which they are inclined to deem themselves unjustly treated or misunderstood, might be cited. One more will, however, suffice. Speaking to a young man hungering for drawing-room successes, he says, and with that jog of the elbow so familiar in

him, 'Jeune M – , dans mon temps on n'arrivait pas, dites?' And what softens this austerity, and not only makes it bearable but most winsome and engaging, is the conviction which his manner instils of the very real truth, of the unimpeachableness of the wisdom which he expresses by the general conduct of his life and by phrases pregnant with meaning. Nor is it ever the black wisdom of the pessimist which says there is no worth in anything but death, but the deeper wisdom, born it is true of pessimism, but tempered in the needs of life, which says:

Expend not your strength in vain struggling in the illusive world, which tempts you out of your self; success and failure lie within and not without you; know yourself, and seek to bring yourself into harmony with the Will from which you cannot escape, but with which you may bring yourself into obedience, and so obtain peace.

In accordance with this philosophy, Degas thinks as little of Turkey carpets and Japanese screens as of newspaper applause, and is unconcerned to paint his walls lemon yellow; he puts his aestheticism upon his canvases, and leaves time to tint the fading whitewash with golden tints. They are naked of ornament, except a few *chefs-d'oeuvre* which he will not part with, a few portraits, a few pictures painted in his youth. Looking at *Semiramis Building the Walls of Babylon*, Manet used to say, 'Why don't you exhibit it, *cela fera de la variété dans votre oeuvre?*' There is a picture of some Spartan youths wrestling which Gérôme once ventured to criticise; Degas answered, 'Je suppose que ce n'est pas assez turc pour vous, Gérôme?' Not in his dress nor in his manner will you note anything glaringly distinctive, but for those who know him the suit of pepper-and-salt and the blue necktie tied round a loose collar are full of him. For those who know him the round shoulders, the rolling gait, and the bright, hearty, essentially manly voice are brimmed with individuality; but the casual visitor of the Café de la Rochefoucauld would have to be more than usually endowed with the critical sense to discern that Degas was not an ordinary man. To pass through the world unobserved by those who cannot understand him – that is, by the crowd – and to create all the while an art so astonishingly new and so personal that it will defy imitator, competitor, or rival, seems to be his ambition, if so gross a term can be used without falsifying the conception of his character. For Degas seems without desire of present or future notoriety. If he could create his future as he has created his present, his future would be found to be no more than a continuation of his present. As he has in life resolutely separated himself from all possibility of praise, except from those who understand him, he would probably, if he could, defend himself against all those noisy and posthumous honours which came to the

share of J.F. Millet; and there can be but little doubt that he desires not at all to be sold by picture-dealers for fabulous prices, but rather to have a quiet nook in a public gallery where the few would come to study. However this may be, it is certain that to-day his one wish is to escape the attention of the crowd. He often says his only desire is to have eyesight to work ten hours a day. But he neither condemns nor condones the tastes and the occupations of others; he is merely satisfied that, so far as he is concerned, all the world has for giving is untroubled

leisure to pursue the art he has so laboriously invented. For this end he has for many years consistently refused to exhibit in the Salon; now he declines altogether to show his pictures publicly.

In old times, after a long day spent in his studio, he would come to the Nouvelle Athènes late in the evening, about ten o'clock. There he was sure of meeting Manet, Pissaro, and Duranty, and with books and cigarettes the time passed in agreeable aestheticisms. Pissaro dreamy and vague; Manet loud, declamatory, and eager for medals and decorations; Degas sharp, deep, more profound, scornfully sarcastic; Duranty clear-headed, dry, full of repressed disappointment. But about the time of Manet's death the centre of art shifted from the Nouvelle Athènes to the Café de la Rochefoucauld. Degas followed it. He was seen there every evening, and every morning he breakfasted there – every year looming up greater and more brilliant in the admiration of the young men. Latterly Degas has abandoned café life. He dines with Ludovic Halévy and a few friends whom he has known all his life; he goes to the opera or the circus to draw and find new motives for pictures. Speaking to a landscape-painter at the Cirque Fernando, he said, 'A vous il faut la vie naturelle, à moi la vie factice.'

From the quotations scattered in the foregoing paragraphs the reader has probably gathered that Degas is not deficient in verbal wit. Mr. Whistler has in this line some reputation, but in sarcasm he is to Degas what Theodore Hook was to Swift, and when Degas is present Mr. Whistler's conversation is distinguished by 'brilliant flashes of silence.' Speaking of him one day, Degas said, 'Oui, il est venu me voir.' 'Well, what did he say to you?' 'Rien, il a fait quelques coups de mèche, voilà tout.' One day, in the Nouvelle Athènes, a young man spoke to him of how well Manet knew how to take criticism. 'Oui, oui, Manet est très Parisien, il comprend la plaisanterie.' ('Yes, Manet is a true Parisian, he knows how to take a joke.') Speaking of Besnard's plagiarisms, 'Oui, oui, il vole avec nos propres ailes.' Speaking of Bastien-Lepage's picture, *La récolte des pommes de terres*, 'C'est le Bouguereau du mouvement moderne;' and of Roll's picture of *Work*, 'Il y a cinquante figures, mais je ne vois pas la foule; on fait une foule avec cinq et non pas avec cinquante.' ('There are fifty figures, but I see no crowd; you can make a crowd with five figures, not with fifty.') At a dinner at Bougival he said, looking at some large trees massed in shadow, 'How beautiful they would be if Corot had painted them! And speaking of Besnard's effort to attain lightness of treatment, he said, 'C'est un homme qui veut danser avec des semelles de plomb.' ('He is a man who tries to dance with leaden soles.')

Of Degas' family history it is difficult to obtain any information. Degas is the last person of whom inquiry could be made. He would at once smell an article, and he nips such projects as a terrier nips rats. The unfortunate interlocutor would meet with this answer, 'I didn't know that you were a reporter in disguise; if I had, I shouldn't have received you.' It is rumoured, however, that he is a man of some private fortune, and a story is in circulation that he sacrificed

the greater part of his income to save his brother, who had lost everything by imprudent speculation in American securities. But what concerns us is his artistic not his family history.

Degas was a pupil of Ingres, and any mention of this always pleases him, for he looks upon Ingres as the first star in the firmament of French art. And, indeed, Degas is the only one who ever reflected, even dimly, anything of the genius of the great master. The likeness to Ingres which some affect to see in Flandrin's work is entirely superficial, but in the *Semiramis Building the Walls of Babylon* and in the *Spartan Youths* there is a strange fair likeness to the master, mixed with another beauty, still latent, but ready for afflorescence, even as the beauty of the mother floats evanescent upon the face of the daughter hardly pubescent yet. But if Degas took from Ingres that method of drawing which may be defined as drawing by the character in contradistinction to that of drawing by the masses, he applied the method differently and developed it in a different direction. Degas bears the same relation to Ingres as Bret Harte does to Dickens. In Bret Harte and in Dickens the method is obviously the same when you go to its root, but the subject-matter is so different that the method is in all outward characteristics transformed, and no complaint of want of originality of treatment is for a moment tenable. So it is with Degas; at the root his drawing is as classical as Ingres', but by changing the subject-matter from antiquity to the boards of the opera-house, and taking curiosity for leading characteristic, he has created an art cognate and co-equal with Goncourt's, rising sometimes to the height of a page by Balzac. With marvellous perception he follows every curve and characteristic irregularity, writing the very soul of his model upon his canvas. He will paint portraits only of those whom he knows intimately, for it is part of his method only to paint his sitter in that environment which is habitual to her or him. With stagey curtains, balustrades, and conventional poses, he will have nothing to do. He will watch the sitter until he learns all her or his tricks of expression and movement, and then will reproduce all of them and with such exactitude and sympathetic insight that the very inner life of the man is laid bare. Mr. Whistler, whose short-sightedness allows him to see none of these beauties in nature, has declared that all such excellencies are literary and not pictorial, and the fact that he was born in Baltimore has led him to contradict all that the natural sciences have said on racial tendencies and hereditary faculties. But there are some who still believe that the *Ten O'clock* has not altogether overthrown science and history, and covered with ridicule all art that does not limit itself to a harmony in a couple of tints. And that Degas may render more fervidly all the characteristics that race, heredity, and mode of life have endowed his sitter with, he makes numerous drawings and paints from them; but he never paints direct from life. And as he sought new subject-matter, he sought for new means by which he might reproduce his subject in an original and novel manner. At one time he renounced oil-painting entirely, and would only work in pastel or distemper. Then, again, it was water-colour painting, and sometimes in the same picture he would abandon one medium for another. There are examples extant of pictures begun in water-colour, continued in gouache, and afterwards completed in oils; and if the picture be examined carefully it will be found that the finishing hand has been given with pen and ink. Degas has

worked upon his lithographs, introducing a number of new figures into the picture by means of pastel. He has done beautiful sculpture, but not content with taking a ballet-girl for subject, has declined to model the skirt, and had one made by the nearest milliner. In all dangerous ways and perilous straits he has sought to shipwreck his genius; but genius knows no shipwreck, and triumphs in spite of obstacles. Not even Wagner has tested more thoroughly than Degas the invincibility of genius.

If led to speak on the marvellous personality of his art, Degas will say,

It is strange, for I assure you no art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament – temperament is the word – I know nothing. When people talk about temperament it always seems to me like the strong man in the fair, who straddles his legs and asks some one to step up on the palm of his hand.

Again, in reply to an assurance that he of all men now working, whether with pen or pencil, is surest of the future, he will say, 'It is very difficult to be great as the old masters were great. In the great ages you were great or you did not exist at all, but in these days everything conspires to support the feeble.'

Artists will understand the almost superhuman genius it requires to take subject-matter that has never received artistic treatment before, and bring it at once within the sacred pale. Baudelaire was the only poet who ever did this; Degas is the only painter. Of all impossible things in this world to treat artistically the ballet-girl seemed the most impossible, but Degas accomplished that feat. He has done so many dancers and so often repeated himself that it is difficult to specify any particular one. But one picture rises up in my mind – perhaps it is the finest of all. It represents two girls practising at the rail; one is straining forward lifting her leg into torturous position – her back is turned, and the miraculous drawing of that bent back! The other is seen in profile – the pose is probably less arduous, and she stands, not ungracefully, her left leg thrown behind her, resting upon the rail. The arrangement of the picture is most unacademical; the figures are half-way up the canvas, and the great space of bare floor is balanced by the watering-pot. This picture is probably an early one. It was natural to begin with dancers at rest; those wild flights of dancers – the première danseuse springing amid the coryphées down to the footlights, her thin arms raised, the vivid glare of the limelight revealing every characteristic contour of face and neck – must have been a later development. The philosophy of this art is in Degas' own words, 'La danseuse n'est qu'un prétexte pour le dessin.' Dancers fly out of the picture, a single leg crosses the foreground. The première danseuse stands on tiptoe, supported by the coryphées, or she rests on one knee, the light upon her bosom, her arms leaned back, the curtain all the while falling. As he has done with the ballet, so he has done with the race-course. A race-horse walks past a white post which cuts his head in twain.

The violation of all the principles of composition is the work of the first fool that chooses to make the caricature of art his career, but, like Wagner, Degas is possessed of such intuitive knowledge of the qualities inherent in the various elements that nature presents that he is enabled, after having disintegrated, to re-integrate them, and with surety of ever finding a new and more elegant synthesis. After the dancers came the washerwoman. It is one thing to paint washerwomen amid decorative shadows, as Teniers would have done, and another thing to draw washerwomen yawning over the ironing table in sharp outline upon a dark background. But perhaps the most astonishing revolution of all was the introduction of the shop-window into art. Think of a large plate-glass window, full of bonnets, a girl leaning forward to gather one! Think of the monstrous and wholly unbearable thing any other painter would have contrived from such a subject; and then imagine a dim, strange picture, the subject of which is hardly at first clear; a strangely contrived composition, full of the dim, sweet, sad poetry of female work. For are not those bonnets the signs and symbols of long hours of weariness and dejection? and the woman that gathers them, iron-handed fashion has moulded and set her seal upon. See the fat woman trying on the bonnet before the pier-glass, the shopwomen around her. How the lives of those poor women are epitomised and depicted in a gesture! Years of servility and obeisance to customers, all the life of the fashionable woman's shop is there. Degas says, 'Les artistes sont tellement pressés! et que nous faisons bien notre affaire avec les choses qu'ils ont oubliées.' ('Artists are always in such a hurry, and we find all that we want in what they have left behind.')

But perhaps the most astonishing of all Degas' innovations are his studies of the nude. The nude has become well-nigh incapable of artistic treatment. Even the more naïve are beginning to see that the well-known nymph exhibiting her beauty by the borders of a stream can be endured no longer. Let the artist strive as he will, he will not escape the conventional; he is running an impossible race. Broad harmonies of colour are hardly to be thought of; the gracious mystery of human emotion is out of all question – he must rely on whatever measure of elegant drawing he can include in his delineation of arms, neck, and thigh; and who in sheer beauty has a new word to say? Since Gainsborough and Ingres, all have failed to infuse new life into the worn-out theme. But cynicism was the great means of eloquence of the Middle Ages; and with cynicism Degas has again rendered the nude an artistic possibility. Three coarse women, middle-aged and deformed by toil, are perhaps the most wonderful. One sponges herself in a tin bath; another passes a rough night-dress over her lumpy shoulders, and the touching ugliness of this poor human creature goes straight to the heart. Then follows a long series conceived in the same spirit. A woman who has stepped out of a bath examines her arm. Degas says, 'La bête humaine qui s'occupe d'elle-même; une chatte qui se lèche.' Yes, it is the portrayal of the animal-life of the human being, the animal conscious of nothing but itself. 'Hitherto,' Degas says, as he shows his visitor three large peasant women plunging into a river, not to bathe, but to wash or cool themselves (one drags a dog in after her),

the nude has always been represented in poses which presuppose an audience, but these women of mine are honest, simple folk, unconcerned by any other interests than those involved in their physical condition. Here is another; she is washing her feet. It is as if you looked through a key-hole.

But the reader will probably be glad to hear of the pictures which the most completely represent the talent of the man. Degas might allow the word 'represent' to pass, he certainly would object to the word 'epitomise,' for, as we have seen, one of his aestheticisms is that the artist should not attempt any concentrated expression of his talent, but should persistently reiterate his thought twenty, fifty, yes, a hundred different views of the same phase of life. Speaking of Zola, who holds an exactly opposite theory, Degas says: 'il me fait l'effet d'un géant qui travaille le Bottin.' But no man's work is in exact accord with his theory, and the height and depth of Degas' talent is seen very well in the *Leçon de Danse*, in M. Faure's collection, and perhaps still better in the *Leçon de Danse* in M. Blanche's collection. In the latter picture a spiral staircase ascends through the room, cutting the picture at about two-thirds of its length. In the small space on the left, dancers are seen descending from the dressing-rooms, their legs and only their legs seen between the slender banisters. On the right, dancers advance in line, balancing themselves, their thin arms outstretched, the dancing-master standing high up in the picture by the furthest window. Through the cheap tawdry lace curtains a mean dusty daylight flows, neutralising the whiteness of the skirts and the brightness of the hose. It is the very atmosphere of the opera. The artificial life of the dancing-class on a dull afternoon. On the right, in the foreground, a group of dancers balances the composition. A dancer sits on a straw chair, her feet turned out, her shoulders covered by a green shawl; and by her, a little behind her, stands an old woman settling her daughter's sash.

In this picture there is a certain analogy between Degas and Watteau, the grace and lightness and air of fête remind us of Watteau, the exquisite care displayed in the execution reminds us of the Dutchmen. But if Degas resembles Watteau in his earlier pictures of the dancing-classes at the opera he recalls the manner and the genius of Holbein in his portraits, and nowhere more strikingly than in his portrait of his father listening to Pagano the celebrated Italian singer and guitarist. The musician sits in the foreground singing out of the picture. Upon the black clothes the yellow instrument is drawn sharply. The square jaws, the prominent nostrils, the large eyes, in a word, all the racial characteristics of the southern singer, are set down with that incisive, that merciless force which is Holbein. The execution is neither light nor free; it is, however, in exact harmony with the intention, and intention and execution are hard, dry, complete. At the back the old melomaniac sits on the piano stool, his elbow on his knee, his chin on his hand, the eyelid sinks on the eye, the mouth is slightly open. Is he not drinking the old Italian air even as a flower drinks the dew?

Another great portrait is Degas' portrait of Manet, but so entirely unlike is it to any other man's art that it would be vain to attempt any description of it. It shows Manet thrown on a white sofa in an attitude strangely habitual to him. Those who knew Manet well cannot look without pain upon this picture; it is something more than a likeness, it is as if you saw the man's ghost. Other portraits remind you of certain Spanish painters, the portrait of Mlle Malot for instance; and in his studies of the nude there is a frankness which seems borrowed from the earlier Italians. Degas' art is as he says himself based upon a profound knowledge of the great masters. He has understood them as none but a great painter could understand them, and according to the requirements of the subject in hand he has taken from them all something of their technique.

The following anecdote will give an idea of Degas' love of the great masters. In 1840, Degas set up his easel in the Louvre and spent a year copying Poussin's *Rape of the Sabines*. The copy is as fine as the original.

Degas now occupies the most enviable position an artist can attain. He is always the theme of conversation when artists meet, and if the highest honour is to obtain the admiration of your fellow-workers, that honour has been bestowed on Degas as it has been bestowed upon none other. His pictures are bought principally by artists, and when not by them by their immediate entourage. So it was before with Courbet, Millet, and Corot; and so all artists and connoisseurs believe it will be with Degas. Within the last few years his prices have gone up fifty per cent.; ten years hence they will have gone up a hundred per cent., and that is as certain as that the sun will rise to-morrow. That any work of his will be sold for twenty thousand pounds is not probable; the downcast eye full of bashful sentiment so popular with the uneducated does not exist in Degas; but it is certain that young artists of to-day value his work far higher than Millet's. He is, in truth, their god, and his influence is visible in a great deal of the work here and in France that strives to be most modern. But it must be admitted that the influence is a pernicious one. Some have calumniated Degas' art flagrantly and abominably, dragging his genius through every gutter, over every dunghill of low commonplace; others have tried to assimilate it honourably and reverentially, but without much success. True genius has no inheritors. Tennyson's parable of the gardener who once owned a unique flower, the like of which did not exist upon earth, until the wind carried the seeds far and wide, does not hold good in the instance of Degas. The winds, it is true, have carried the seeds into other gardens, but none have flourished except in native soil, and the best result the thieves have obtained is a scanty hybrid blossom, devoid alike of scent and hue.

Chapter 16. The New Pictures in the National Gallery

We are proud of our National Gallery. We know that it would be hard to name another so uniformly instructive and so pleasant to walk through. In the National Gallery bad pictures are surprisingly scarce, and good ones are visible almost everywhere. All the schools are well represented, and before we enter on the many wonders of our own adorable eighteenth century we are greeted by one of the most beautiful pictures ever painted – a picture that is a unique delight of imaginative design and colour – a picture as truly exquisite as any in the world. I mean the family group by Gainsborough which stands on the staircase. But though a magnificent prefatory page, there are many pages within the swing-doors that its beauty cannot discount – the Turners, the Constables, and the Cromes.

From the first days almost to the present hour the finest judgment has been almost always exercised by those who were and who are responsible for the collection in Trafalgar Square. So heavy is our debt of gratitude, not only to those who have gone, but likewise to him who now guides and induces the decisions of the Trustees, that it is with much reluctance and much diffidence that I take on myself the task of questioning the wisdom of many late purchases and the acceptance of many modern works as worthy of place in our National Gallery. And if I undertake the task of criticism, it is because inevitably there springs out of my admiration of what has been done to improve and perfect the collection a deep and sincere regret for the several grave errors which, in my opinion, have disfigured these last few years of management. Had only one error, or even two, been perpetrated, I should not have spoken, but error begets error, and the list of mistakes now threatens to become a long one.

The mistakes which I am about to criticise in detail began with the purchase of the Raphael for £70,000. The mistake was a popular one, and this is of itself a sufficiently grave impeachment, for it were surely a monstrous thing that the taste of the general public should be allowed to find expression in the National Gallery; and that is precisely what is happening, and flagrantly, as we shall see. The truth about Raphael is that he is far more popular with the general public than with artists. Art reached its height with Michel Angelo, and began to slip into decadence with Raphael – a great artist, no doubt, but so far as his genius is represented in England and France, he is nowhere sublime except in the Cartoons; there the beauty of his genius may tempt us into the folly of thinking him worthy of comparison even with Angelo. No doubt there are among his too numerous Madonnas some passages of exquisite colour and drawing; if it were not so, Raphael could not continue to hold the high place to which popular admiration has exalted him. Even in his most commonplace Madonnas there is always a distinction of line that commands the admiration of artists. But in this £70,000 picture the artist seeks in vain for some justification of the money and the applause that have been lavished upon it. Indifferent in design, indifferent in colour, indifferent in drawing, it bears, in truth, the same relation to the

Cartoons as Tennyson's prize poem does to *The Lotos-Eaters*. It is not possible to point to a distinctive passage in it, or, indeed, to any passage that foreshadows, however dimly, the genius to which he attained so soon afterwards. Whether it was painted before or after *The Marriage of the Virgin*, it is certainly in every way inferior to this picture. *The Marriage of the Virgin*, though feeble compared with some of the Madonnas, and puerile compared with the *Parnassus*, is, nevertheless, exquisitely original in design, and exquisitely graceful in treatment; but in this . £70,000 picture I fail, and I have examined it again and again and with the greatest care, to discover anything but an antiquarian interest; it is a document showing how Raphael painted at a certain period of his life, and no more. The student will not learn from it a single technical secret of his trade: any one of Raphael's drawings would prove infinitely more inspiring. Think of those drawings, so exquisite in their spontaneous grace—those that render the ascent of the staircases of South Kensington a matter of such long time. Ask any artist which has stirred him the most deeply, those drawings or that picture. And if a picture is not instructive and not a thing of beauty, its interest, if any, must be antiquarian. It will be said: admitted that it is not a good picture, calculated neither to inspire the student nor to delight the amateur, still it was necessary to possess a picture painted in Raphael's first manner. Frankly, I cannot admit the necessity. I repeat that the National Gallery is only in a very limited sense a museum, and if a picture is not a good one it should find no prominent place there. Above all, nothing but artistic work of the first class should be paid such sums for. £70,000!! What a sum, and when we think what we might have had for a half, a quarter, a seventh part of it. In the beginning of this year possibly the finest cattle-piece in the world was offered to the National Gallery for £10,000. I mean *La*

Vallée de la Tonque, by Troyon. The acquisition of this picture would have been a brilliant page in a chapter wholly missing in our collection – that phase of modern French art which is the direct result of the English influence which agitated France in the beginning of this century – namely, *le plein air*.

What is known as *plein air* was invented by the Dutchmen about 1680, notably by Paul Potter, who was the first to attempt to paint cattle as part of the landscape, quite a different thing from the method practised till then, which consisted in introducing cattle into a landscape. The moment it was perceived that animal life was but a part of nature, and not a centre round which nature revolves, a decisive and memorable step had been taken. If we look back, we find that he who gave the East its philosophy enounced the truth two thousand five hundred years ago. Paul Potter was, however, the first to introduce it into painting. But with Paul Potter and the Dutch school, the secret of atmospheric effect died, and it was allowed to slumber until Constable revived it. A great number of Constables went to France, there being but little sale for them in England, and they instantly inspired Troyon, who either consciously or unconsciously took up the art of Paul Potter exactly at the place where he had left off. For it must not be forgotten that Potter was only three-and-twenty when he painted his bull, and that he died four years afterwards in the midst of his glory, but before he had acquired his trade. And this is the

only cattle-piece of great size that could for one moment be compared with the superb *Vallée de la Tonque*.

The prodigious Dutchman was entirely self-educated, and was educating himself when he died; and it was only in his very last works that we lose sight of the engraver. In all that preceded the last few pictures the steel point is felt, even where the paint is thickest. Nor will it be denied that the composition of the picture of the bull is of the poorest kind. The picture has neither beginning nor end; the sheep are lumps of plaster; and as for the shepherd – no one attempts to defend him. Only two parts of the picture hold together – the immense sky and the bull. The *Vallée de la Tonque* is, on the contrary, one of the most perfect and the most complete works it is possible to imagine. How the sensation of the thunder-storm is represented in the unquiet grouping of the cattle round the brook that flows down the middle of the picture! In the foreground two cows descend into the water; from the left the great bull advances bellowing; in the middle of the picture a black cow stands looking at the thunder-cloud that hangs in the silvery sky; further away, horses gallop to and fro in the lurid gleams that stream across the landscape. The picture is but the song of the earth, the murmur of unending existence. In the atmosphere is hidden the secret of life, and it makes of the lowing cattle, the neighing horses, the growing grass, and the flowing brook, not several things, but one vague, dim mystery, manifesting itself in many forms of life. And yet this admirable picture was passed over – a picture of such historical importance in the history of English art, of such intense artistic beauty and so full of instruction for those who are still seeking – *le plein air*. And yet this beautiful picture was passed over – a picture of great historical importance in the history of English art, a picture full of the highest qualities, admirably drawn, and without the drawing being apparent anywhere except in the result. That brook, how perfectly it flows between its rugged banks; and that cow's side, painted with one tint disappearing as it passes into the shadow of the belly; that piece of light above the bone, with what certainty it was placed there, how true in value, and how well it says just what the painter wanted to say; that bull, how nobly drawn, how exact in width, and how the shadows float and mass themselves; with what science the palette has been composed, how each patch of colour takes its place in the picture, the light sky, the dark, shadowy plain, the severe green of the grass and elder-trees, the purple of the hills so ample in their perspectives, how they enfold the composition – does not the picture seem as if it was run out of a mould? the method, the system, the formula of the draughtsmanship is to be detected nowhere, how unlike the angular, the timid, the presumptuous, or the geometrical formulae in which modern drawing is confined. And the open air, how it circulates, catching every object, holding each in its own apportioned place. Was the open air ever painted more fully and yet so unobtrusively before? And in these days when every one's hobby is *plein air*, what an admirable example and lesson it would have been for all! For in our day all is painted out-of-doors. Teniers-like scenes – scenes that should be placed amid the darkness of kitchens – are now painted in clear tints; and artists have forgotten that, irrespective of *le plein air*, there is such a thing as *une atmosphère de tableau*, and that by suppressing all shadow they have suppressed all

balance, all weight. Objects float through their pictures like feathers. But the great bull in the Troyon picture could push down a barn-door. He is a ton weight if he is an ounce. Troyon painted *le plein air*, but he was an artist great enough to see that in every picture there must be weight. A tree in a picture by Corot carries the whole landscape away, a hand in a portrait by Manet brings the whole body down with it. But on this subject it would be easy to write a volume. I have said enough for my purpose, which is to show that it would have been better to have bought the *Vallée de la Tonque* for £10,000, than to have paid £70,000 for a Raphael, which teaches nothing and which does not call forth the faintest emotion in any one.

We have now to consider the latest purchases, their artistic value, and the price paid for them. £55,000 have been paid for three pictures – a portrait of a man by Velasquez, a portrait by Moroni, and a portrait-group by Holbein. Was the Director of the National Gallery well advised in asking the Trustees to spend so much money on these pictures? The portrait by Velasquez represents a man about forty years of age. He is dressed in trunk hose (the effect is of black velvet knickerbockers). The sleeves of the doublet are in a soft white material slightly stuffed; over the shoulders falls the wide lace collar, and a narrow white sash crosses from the collar to the sword-handle; tied round his waist is a crimson sash; in his left hand he holds a broad-brimmed hat, in his right hand what looks like a large ruler in some pale-brown wood. The black hair hangs in thick, heavy masses about his neck, and has been lavishly painted with the brush full of paint; the background is pale-yellow, fading sometimes to green, and the green tints have been swept into the black hair, and at the same time, just above the crown, the drawing of the hair is marked with the most direct and incisive strokes. The picture is extremely interesting as a revelation of Velasquez' method of work. It is in perfect preservation; not a colour has changed or altered, and it is the same today as when it stood a completed picture in the painter's studio. The sensation that this picture inspires in a painter is analogous to what a page of Thackeray inspires in the writer. The page of Thackeray is as simple in expression as ordinary conversation; this portrait is as free from artifice as the work of any academy student. And looking at this picture you think that Velasquez has yielded up to you all his secrets; in truth he has yielded none, he has no technical secrets to reveal, his art was unconcerned with formula. I know this, for I spent two years in Manet's studio, and what was Manet but *un petit Velasquez*? One had more genius than the other, but their aims, their aspirations, their temperaments were identical. Both men must have felt and thought in the same manner, otherwise it would have been impossible that Manet, without a suspicion of plagiarism, should have reproduced all the art of Velasquez. We have seen how Villon's voice found an echo in Verlaine, even after three centuries. To understand Villon is to understand Verlaine, and to understand Velasquez is to understand Manet. In this world all is echo. The temperamental characteristics which created Velasquez' art, and which were repeated in Manet two centuries after, were an extraordinary grasp of vision for all that was luminous and a strange sensitiveness to all that was crude and violent in nature, this sensitiveness resulting in admiration for that aspect of life which had startled it into consciousness. Such is the origin of

that frankness which has been called brutality and for which both painters have been ignorantly reproached; but they knew where their genius lay, and both must have exulted in trampling out whatever germs of mysticism and dream originally existed in them.

And looking now at this Spanish admiral, I think I see the well-known palette. I think I see again the quick grey eye raised from the paint-box, the hand pausing among the tubes, the grey eye apprehending at once the black velvet silhouette upon a ground of waning grey and green. Something in the studio, a bit of faded drapery, a shadow on the wall suggested the background, and the mind of the painter lusted in love of the crimson scarf so fortunately echoed by the ruddy face, and tense with desire the fingers squeezed out the few simple colours that instinct dictated. A palette abundantly spread with ivory black, flake white, Venetian red, vermilion, madder, yellow ochre, raw sienna, terre verte, ultramarine. I think I see the prompt agile hand sweeping over the canvas, acknowledging no formula, an instinctive art seeking almost unconsciously its own gratification. As Manet was, so Velasquez must have been; their art was personal from the first conception of the picture to the last lingering touch of the brush; and being based upon no rule, it was intransmissible, the direct opposite of the art of Rubens, which being based upon learned calculation was transmissible in all respects except the mysterious gift which lay somewhere – who shall say where? – beneath that vast and learned method which he followed unswervingly from the beginning of his career to the day when illness took him for ever from the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*. Tumult and passion and love and desire of the material beauty of things are as remarkable in the works of the great Flemish painter as in those of the author of *Germinal*, and method entered into the art and the life of the painter as markedly as it does into the art and life of the novelist. And it is interesting to note that this painter and this novelist have called into existence many various talents, whereas Velasquez and Manet – but I must refrain. The resemblances between Rubens and Zola are so surprising and so numerous, that they must form the theme of a separate article.

But the art of Velasquez and Manet was a pure instinct. I have seen Manet paint a head of yellow hair six or seven times, and the last painting was as fresh and as bright as the first, but how the miracle came about he was as incapable of explaining as I am. I know that before each painting he scraped the canvas smooth, and then with brushes filled full of yellow ochre, white, and umber, he laid on a fresh set of curls regardless of those of yesterday. And very much as Manet painted those yellow curls Velasquez painted the thick locks of the Spanish admiral. And looking from the Velasquez to the picture that Manet would have done had he painted the admiral, I notice that the drawing in Manet's work is more apparent, less subtle, and always less conclusive than that of the master. I notice too that the *pâte* is slightly heavier in Manet than in Velasquez; and continuing my study of both pictures I observe that there is slightly more artifice in Velasquez than in Manet; the master sets some store on transparency and paints those small eyes overhung with frowning shadow with raw umber broken with sienna, whereas Manet uses

opaque colour throughout the face; and the brightness of the admiral's cheeks Velasquez obtains by glazing, Manet paints them solid. Manet's work is only half as good as the master's.

And how superb is the master's drawing, how free from effort, how conclusive! The jaw-bone, chin, and quarter-side of the face appear, if you look into the picture, not to be too strongly drawn; but when you get to a proper distance, every line holds its place. How thoroughly well Velasquez has told you the man's natural temperament and how the influences of his life worked upon it, developing, affirming it. How well Velasquez has defined the man's social position; he is of his class and all his habits are upon him. Shall you forget that face? I think not. Henceforth it will form part of your sensation and knowledge of life. Everything in the picture contributes to enforce the idea. How fortunate it was in its initial conception – the velvet silhouette alone upon the pale grey-green background. Here the green note has passed into the hair and the yellow note is repeated in the fawn-coloured gloves, and the light-brown ruler remotely echoes it. Turning to another octave, we find that the face repeats the crimson of the sash. The great green hat is a single dominant chord, only faintly echoed through the background, in the hair, and the heavy shadow lying on the floor.

But is the portrait equal to that of Philip IV.? It was not without intention that I hinted that I understood the picture as if I had seen it painted; for I desired to suggest that the picture is wanting in mystery; charm it has, the charm that the wrestler exercises when he turns up his shirt and shows you his giant muscles, when he straddles his legs and asks you to step up on the palm of his hand. It would be impossible to say how the *Philip* was painted; I could not decompose that silvery enchantment and show you the palette. But in this new picture I can not only show you the palette but the exact frame of mind in which it was painted. Agreed that it was painted in one of Velasquez' great pictorial moods, still I feel sure that the mood trended towards a coarseness that verged on insolence. Painting is the most indiscreet of all the arts; the ennui of painting, the pleasure of painting, the model that bores you, the model that inspires you – all these things are told on the canvas, and I read in this picture a desire to parade the power and knowledge that the painter then held within him. I find nowhere an inspiration transmitted directly from the model to the painter. As I understand the picture, the model merely stimulated a mood already existent in the painter, and, swelling with arrogance in the consciousness of his power, he went ahead, his hand reproducing his mental state with astonishing fidelity, and the result is a piece of pictorial rhetoric of the finest possible kind, but for all that no more than a piece of pictorial rhetoric. We do not look, it is true, to Velasquez for *naïveté*, for simplicity; but in the presence of the king he lost himself in a dream of silver and aristocracy, and in this mood the hand forgot to display its strength so ostentatiously. I have only seen the new picture once, but I shall not like it better when I see it again, possibly less. Its beauty is apparent at first sight, too apparent, but the *Philip* is looked on with an ever-deepening interest and an ever-increasing emotion. As a work of art, the new portrait cannot compare with the *Philip*. It is nevertheless a pure *chef-d'oeuvre*, and as it represents Velasquez in an aspect

different from any in our possession, it was of high importance that the picture should be bought for the National Gallery.

By the side of the Velasquez hangs the portrait by Moroni, and there is very little to be said about it. It represents a gentleman in black hose, only not nearly so well painted as the other gentleman by him, also in black hose, that hangs in the next room. In the new picture, the gentleman is entirely in black, without those delightful white notes which delight us in the other portrait. This time the Italian gentleman stands against a marble wall, rising above his head, but relieved on the left by a small space of sky. On a broken column he has laid his helmet, and on it rests his left hand. The head is very small, and the cheeks and chin are covered with a red beard. The drawing is generally indolent, the painting is woolly, and the work betrays the indifference of the painter. Only in the expressive look in the dreamy eyes and in the drawing and painting of the left arm, which is clothed in chain-armour, do we find interest. We have seen it all before; no new thing has been said; and even if we look through certain repaintings, it is impossible to think that it was even in its best days anything but an inferior work. None will pretend that it can for a moment be compared with the three other pictures by Moroni which hang within a few yards of it. Then why was it purchased? Because it could be had cheaply? There could be no other reason for buying it, and that reason is no reason.

We have now arrived at the most important question – the vast sum that was paid for the Holbein. As I examined the Velasquez and the Moroni I caught sight of *The Ambassadors* once or twice, and even these involuntary and casual glances told me that I should not be able to acknowledge the merits that are imputed to it. I am aware that this picture is celebrated, and that, if it were put up again for auction, it would again fetch as much as was given for it. But, looking at it carefully, without hurry, and without consideration for anything except what I see and what I know of Holbein's greatest works – the portrait of the man writing in the Louvre, the portrait of the woman in black hanging in the next room, above all that wholly miraculous series of drawings exhibited last winter in the New Gallery – I find myself at a loss to account for the reputation that this picture possesses.

The work is ugly and ill-conceived. The painting is monotonous, heavy, glaring, and dry. The Ambassadors are dwarfs if they are standing up, and they are – for a moment I was not certain that the man in ermine was not sitting; neither is more than six heads high. True, the Ambassadors may have been dwarfs, but if they were, the spectator is not made to feel that they were; he is left rather under the impression that in composing the picture from drawings done by the master, some one slipped into an error of measurement. The Ambassadors stand on either side of a high table. He that stands on the left is in crimson and white fur; the crimson is at once thin and glaring in colour, the white fur is dirty and uninteresting in execution; and the green curtain which forms the entire background is false in value, and thin and repellent in colour. The light comes from every side, and yet there is no light in the picture. The table is

covered with a red-and-white tablecloth, in which there is not a single decisive bit of drawing or a single touch of living colour; the green globe is dull and lifeless; cubes are strewn all over the table, and not one fascinates the eye; under the table there is a musical instrument, equally uninteresting in drawing and in colour, and something lies on the floor the nature of which I am unable to verify. Many are the accessories, and yet the picture is not composed. The man on the right is wrapped in a brown robe. He likewise looks straight out of the picture; you may notice the emphatic drawing of the thick lips, but the modelling of the face is round, shapeless, and even more uninteresting than the rest of the picture. And from him the eye wanders back over the vast surface of the painting without finding a single point of interest. That it was painted by Holbein, I believe there is no doubt; if it were not, Sir Richard Burton, who is an expert, would not have acquiesced in the purchase; at the same time it is a fact that the *Ronde de Nuit* in the National Gallery, although it is known to be a copy, is still labelled Rembrandt. Looking again at *The Ambassadors*, I see that it is not wanting in what the French call *allure*. The Ambassador on the left is admirably placed in the picture, the silhouette is rhythmical and ample. Concentration there is, but it is attained by a false lighting of the face which starts out of the picture. The drawing is in Holbein's most brutal and most angular manner. There is power, but none of that incisive sweetness which endears his work to us. Go into Room XI. and look into the face of the woman in black – look into the thin pale oval of the face. Obviously the hand that drew that woman's face drew every one of that series of miraculous drawings exhibited in the Stuart Exhibition. But is it obvious that the hand that drew the face of the woman in black also drew the picture of *The Ambassadors*, so clumsy, so monotonous, so wanting in that alertness of observation without which no picture, even though drawn by Holbein, can be called a Holbein?

In the beginning of this article I have alluded to certain flagrant concessions that have lately been made, and which disgrace the harmony of the galleries which, until a few years ago, were but a gracious expansion of genius from end to end. The authorities in Trafalgar Square have thought fit to fill one of the first rooms with pictures by Frith, E.M. Ward, Landseer, and Armitage. I write these lines with reluctance, but unless the noble tradition of critical judgment that has so long obtained in Trafalgar Square is to be overthrown, we must sternly resist all pandering to contemporary vanities – Trafalgar Square, at least, must not be allowed to drift into an advertisement for painters. It is unseemly that the works of any living artist should be exhibited there, and to save our galleries from the influence of the dealer, it would be well if fifty years were allowed to elapse between the death of the painter and the time when his works might be admitted. Fifty years may be too long; twenty-five generally winnows most of the chaff from the wheat. Twenty-five years may gain for Mr. Frith an esteem which we do not extend to him to-day. Be this as it may, the verdict of our time is that his pictures are shockingly out of place in the National Gallery. It is, no doubt, well that nursemaids should be amused, but this desirable end can be attained by more legitimate means than hanging *The Derby Day* in the National Gallery. The pictures by E. M. Ward cannot be said even to amuse the nursemaids, and as art they are quite as bad as *The Derby Day*. Landseer was an artist, though he was not a great

artist, and we could well bear with one or two pictures by him. But surely the celebrated Newfoundland dog lying on the quay is an anomaly in the National Gallery – indeed, the presence of so many Landseers, none of which rise above mediocrity, does much to discredit a very real though somewhat superficial talent. And last, and worse than all, worse even than *The Derby Day*, is a picture by Armitage – *Judas offering to give back the Shekels of Gold*. Macaulay's schoolboy, even had he been educated in the most obscure Board School, would be able to advise the authorities rightly with regard to this picture.

Preface to the Second Edition (1913)

I

A publisher will not bring out a new edition without a preface, and we find prefaces difficult to write. Three weeks were spent on the preface to *Spring Days*, for a long screed had been contemplated containing many new and ingenious theories of literature; but as these did not seem to prepare the reader's mind for the book he was going to read, an anecdote was substituted, and a hundred newspapers related that the author had bought up and pilfered as many copies of the original edition as he could, and had thrown them into the Thames. We have nothing so picturesque to tell in the present preface, but merely that the author was sinking in a flood of public disfavour caused by *Spring Days*, and the book that followed *Spring Days* (its name we fear to pronounce), when *Impressions and Opinions*, like a big Newfoundland dog, dived after him and brought him to shore. And all that we have to tell of the further career of this book is that it seems to have retained the admiration it first inspired, and to have made some friends in the last twenty years. Those who read us and do not possess this book seem anxious to possess it, and those who do possess the book will not part with it except at extravagant prices. We have heard of three pounds ten shillings being asked for a copy, and when it became necessary to procure one for the preparation of this edition, we were asked fifty shillings. It would have been distasteful to us to spend so much money on our own writings. The story got about, and the book was brought to us one morning in a basket. Our butcher's son had been collecting our writings for some years, and had slipped it in with the beef; and looking at the copy which had come to us in so unexpected a way, we see that we may attribute to David Nutt the great store set upon the first edition of *Impressions and Opinions*. A book's first life, it is true, depends upon its contents, but two or three years after publication the pagination, the print, the paper, the cover, and the shape of the book begin to attract, and year by year they attract more and more until the book attains the glory of a Chinese vase in which there is nothing but a little dust.

We should have liked to reproduce the original edition of *Impressions and Opinions*, but the time comes when an author begins to look round the corner after a uniform edition of his works. The form in which *Spring Days* was published was chosen with that intention, and it was therefore an obligation that *Impressions and Opinions* should be uniform with *Spring Days*. A slight mistake was made in the pagination of *Spring Days*, but that will be rectified when the book is printed again, and as soon as that is done the two books will not too painfully disfigure the shelves of an old mahogany bookcase. In their new form they may be laid upon a satinwood table while the reader dozes or lies back to consider whether he prefers our earlier to our later style; both books are strictly in our first manner, and the reader will not be deceived by the fact that a short article on Zola has been replaced by a longer article; we have dared this alteration because the

longer article seemed to us a more energetic affirmation of our early style than the rejected article. It was written while *Impressions and Opinions* was being written, and may be taken as an example of a style which many critics prefer to our later and more polished style. Among these critics is Mr T.D. O'Bolger of Pennsylvania University who, while in England, did us the great compliment of enquiring out a copy of *Impressions and Opinions*, and when he had obtained one, of writing to us his appreciations, remarking that *Impressions and Opinions* was a much better book than *Memoirs of my Dead Life*. There was no page in this latter book, he said, that could compare with any page of *Impressions and Opinions* unless, perhaps, the opening pages of *Ninon's Table D'hôte*. Mr O'Bolger's literary perceptions are remarkable, for the opening pages of *Ninon's Table D'hôte* were printed verbatim from an earlier version of the story. But Mr O'Bolger's preference for the early manner is not so individual. It seems to us to be part of the literary humour of the present time, which is always to sneer at artistic accomplishment, and to praise the rude and rough manifestations of untutored genius. In the taste of the present day Assyrian sculpture is better than Egyptian, and Phidias is looked upon as being no better than Turgeneff. Balzac has had his day of favour, but is giving way to the more uncultivated imaginations of Dostoevsky. Even grammar is out of fashion; peasant speech yields a richer flavour; and as we would win by hook or by crook some of the popularity of our great contemporaries, we have not corrected any mistakes, but tried to see them as beauty spots.

II

Three weeks ago it had seemed to us that all the beauty spots might be accepted without demur, but on looking into the book again the article entitled "Art for the Villa," seemed to us such a ravelled skein that we could not do else than strive to knit it together; and as this proved to be a task beyond our skill a new article has been substituted entitled, "Une Rencontre au Salon," written, we admit it, in our later style. We might have parodied ourselves, put on paint, and powder, and patches; but Mr O'Bolger would be the first to detect such artifices, and we should have found ourselves for ever out of his favour. G.M.

Chapter 17 — My Impressions of Zola

Manet had persuaded me to go to the *bal de l'Assommoir* dressed as a Parisian workman, for he enjoyed incongruities, and the blouse and the casquette, with my appearance and my accent, appealed to his imagination. "There is no Frenchman living in London who occupies the same position as you do in Paris," he said, and I pondered over his words as I followed him through *tout Paris* assembled at the Elysée Montmartre, for the ball given in honour of the play that was being performed at the Ambigu. "But I must introduce you to Zola. There he is," he said pointing to a thickly built, massive man in evening clothes for, as Manet said, a serious writer cannot be expected to put on fancy dress.

Zola bowed and passed on, chilling us a little; Manet would have liked to watch him struggling into a new acquaintanceship, and we walked on together conscious of our failure, myself thinking how pleasant it would have been to have gone with them into a corner, and talked art for half an hour, "and what a wonderful memory it would have been!" I thought, and begged Manet a few minutes later to come with me in search of Zola. But he was nowhere to be found.

"He must have gone home," I said, and Manet answered: "It doesn't matter. You'll find him at home at Mèdan any day you like to go there."

For one reason or another it was not till some months later that I summoned courage and took the train at the Gare St Lazare. There is no station at Mèdan, the nearest station is – (the curious are referred to the time table for I have forgotten the name of it) – and Mèdan is a village known only to peasants, about a mile and a half from the station. Some chance had led Zola there, and being in want of a country residence he had purchased a cottage from one of the peasants, which he had just finished building into a sort of castle; an ugly place it seemed to me, a great red brick wall with a small door in it through which I was taken into the house, and left waiting in the billiard room.

It was not Zola that came down to me, but Madame Zola. She had forgotten me, though I had met her at Manet's studio, and it was only after many tedious explanations that she somewhat reluctantly led me through the house, up many staircases of polished oak, narrow and steep. On the wall of the last little flight there were Japanese prints depicting furious fornications; a rather blatant announcement, I thought of naturalism – but they were forgotten quickly, for in a few seconds I should be in the master's presence. She opened a door and left me, and I found myself in a place as large as the studio of an Academician, lighted by a skylight and a huge window. For a moment or two I lost my way among the massive furniture, and it was not until I passed a lectern that I discovered the master on a sofa by a window correcting proofs.

He did not rise to meet me, but contented himself with untucking his fat leg and motioning with his hand to a seat. His manner was terribly aloof and cold, and my embarrassment increased, for suddenly I remembered I had heard that Zola was never long in doubt as to whether he was talking to a fool or a man of wit, and that at the end of a minute a fool was dismissed peremptorily. "And he has discovered me to be a fool though I haven't said a word." I glanced at the terrible master who lay on the sofa, his glasses on his nose, reading me, divining the commonplace remarks that I was trying to conjure up. "If Homer and Shakespeare were suddenly introduced they would have to begin with remarks about the weather or the pleasure each had taken in the other's work" I said to myself, "and if this man would only give me as much rope as he would to Shakespeare or Homer I might think of something more interesting than the compliments that I am gabbling."

Zola was not then what he is now, a gracious, kindly man in the habit of receiving every one who chooses to call on him, and answering all sorts of questions. He was then the iconoclast, the idol-breaker, a bear that cursed the universe, and bade all comers begone. All the same his writings exhaled a certain large-heartedness and sympathy, and I had always felt while reading his weekly article in *The Voltaire* that we were intended to understand each other. I had imagined that when I went to see him he would come forward, his hands extended in benevolent gesture, taking me at once into his confidence. This Buddha lying on the sofa, fixing his glasses from time to time on his short, strangely square-cut nose, was in such strange conflict with my dream that I could hardly believe that this could be my Zola in those terrible moments during which I tried to improvise compliments. Not one had produced the faintest impression, no more than water flowing over a block of granite, and feverishly I sought for a subject of conversation, something, no matter what, that might interest him.

The power that the circulating libraries exercised on literature occupied my mind a good deal at that time, and I hurried to the subject, seizing the first transitional phrase.

"The position of the novelist in England is that of a slave," I said, "for books are not bought in England, but hired."

"But if a man writes a book that interests the public, the public will find it."

"The public will find it in time no doubt," I answered, "but the man may starve in the interval."

"Yes, he may; and your difficulty is no small one, a middle-man always between you and your public."

"Ah, he's beginning to see I'm not such a fool after all," I said to myself, and as soon as I had explained the power that their monopoly gave to Mudie and Smith I deflected the conversation

dexterously from the practical to the moral question, dropping some disparaging remarks about Puritanism as an artistic influence. Zola, who had been waking for some time out of his slumber, was now wholly awake.

"What you say," the great man said, "is extremely interesting. I have written an article on the influence of Protestantism on art; it will appear in to-morrow's *Figaro*, and I make this statement, that Protestantism has never produced great art. Milton is the one Protestant writer. The Elizabethans, Shakespeare, and Jonson lived before Protestantism had taken hold of the national spirit, the genius of the nation, and so on."

The conversation then became friendly and pleasant. Zola asked me about George Eliot; which did I think was her best book? What French writer was she most like? Though I felt I was risking my newly-acquired reputation, I had to admit that I could think of no one to compare her with. The conversation paused a moment, and to my surprise and pleasure Zola began to tell me about the novel he was writing. We must have talked for three-quarters of an hour, and then, fearing to outstay my welcome, I bade the master good-bye. He took me downstairs, vivacious all the time, and asked me to come to see him again. Then I knew I had made a friend. "I have made a friend," I repeated to myself as the carriage rolled through the flat, green French country, my eyes noting the mystery of the long low horizon, the poplars pointing to the first stars. A train shrieked across the solitude. "I have made a friend," I repeated to myself as I listened to the distant rattle, and as the rattle died away in faint echoes, absorbed one by one in the dusky night of the long low plain I said: "Yes, he is the very man I had imagined from reading his articles. A clear, well-balanced mind, a sympathetic nature, passionate in his convictions, loyal to his opinions. A little roughness at first; possibly what I mistook for roughness was mere shyness; besides it cannot be amusing to be told to your face that you are a great writer. I shouldn't like it myself."

Years passed. I had written many books. *A Mummer's Wife* had been translated into French; it had been published in *The Voltaire* and the *Vie Populaire*. Charpentier was about to issue it in book form, and Zola had promised to write a preface. The *Confessions of a Young Man* was appearing in *La Revue Indépendante*, and the report had gone abroad that the next instalment would contain a scathing attack on *La Terre*. I wrote to Zola saying that this was not true, and proposing to spend Monday with him. "On Monday morning you will receive the new number of the *Review*, and we shall be able to discuss the matter at breakfast. "I knew that the number contained – well, some frivolous remarks about naturalism; these I hoped to be able to explain away. But I did not feel quite at ease, so I called on my way for the faithful Alexis – bulky Alexis's placid temperament would serve as a buffer when the discussion became strained. However happily it might end there could hardly fail to be moments when – I don't think I finished the sentence at the time; I will not seek to do so now.

Our walk lay by the river shimmering like watered silk between green banks full of the lush of June, and beyond them the green French country seemed to rejoice in the sunshine like a living creature. We sauntered, talking about our books, and I took exquisite pleasure in the poplars growing so tall and straight out of the plain, and the white clouds hanging between the trees. And when remembrances of Zola interrupted my reveries I told Alexis exactly what I had written, and the dear fellow assured me that Zola could not take offence at such light criticism.

"Yes, Alexis, but you always say what is agreeable to hear."

As before, Zola was lying on the sofa by the window and after a few words of greeting, he said:

"I'm afraid, my dear friend, that I shall not be able to write the preface. You have made it impossible for me to do so."

The phrases I had used when subjected to a close critical examination proved more difficult of explanation than I had anticipated. The discussion was painful, and the breakfast bell was a welcome relief. "It's over at last," I said to myself; but to my horror instead of answering my thought the master said:

"We are going down to breakfast now, but after breakfast we will go into the matter thoroughly; I will read the passages aloud to you."

"Good Heavens! "I thought, "I wish I hadn't come."

After breakfast Zola, Alexis, and myself walked in the garden talking of indifferent things for an hour or more. Then Zola said:

"We will now go upstairs." He led the way, and I followed, feeling very much as I used to feel at school when ordered a flogging. The master lay on the sofa; I took a small chair; he said: "You'll be more comfortable in a larger one."

The passages were already marked, and they were read to me in a low and deliberate voice. I listened, thinking what was the best defence to set up; Zola commented on every fresh sarcasm.

"How can I write your preface after that? I want to, you know, but I ask you how can I? Listen!"

"Don't you see, my dear friend, that that book is not my real opinion about life and things, but rather an attempt to reduce to words the fugitive imaginings of my mind, its intimate workings, its shifting colours? Has it never come to you to think differently about things? To find your mind in a ferment of contradiction? "

"No," he said, "I do not change my opinions easily. There is Alexis" (he was indeed there, round as a barrel with the inevitable cigar between his teeth); "I have known Alexis these five and twenty years, and I think of him to-day exactly as I always thought of him. With me an opinion is like a heavy piece of furniture; it is moved with difficulty."

"But," I said, "the passages you have just read are from a chapter entitled 'La Synthèse de la Nouvelle Athènes' ... and must be taken as an expression of the opinions of the various *ratés* who assemble there."

"I will admit that as a legitimate defence, but you see the opinions expressed in the café coincide exactly with those which you express yourself in an earlier part of the book."

I had to fall back on the original defence, that a man changes, contradictory thinking should not be taken for the opinions which he holds by and abides by.

"How often do we hear Christians make jokes against Christianity?" I thought the argument specious, but Zola did not notice it. He continued reading: "After what you have written about Goncourt," he said, "you never can go to his house again."

"I don't want to; he isn't a friend."

"The disciples, the childish vanity, the *bric-à-brac*, even the accusation of making copy out of his brother's corpse, *tout est là, rien ne manque*. What you say of me is nothing compared with what you say of Goncourt." I hastened to concur in this opinion, but Zola was not to be wheedled.

"No, my dear friend," he said gravely and sadly, "you don't call your book *Mémoires d'un Jeune Anglais* you say *Confessions d'un Jeune Anglais*, and when we use the word *Confessions* we mean that at last we are going to tell the truth. I have gone through these pages calling attention to the expressions used, not because I am angry, but because I want to convince you that you have made it impossible for me to write the preface to your *Mummer's Wife*. What you think of me does not affect me, no, I won't say that; we are old friends. What you say about me does affect me, I mean that nothing that you can say can affect my position.... You admit in your book that you owe your first inspiration to me. I am proud that this is so, and thank you for saying it. I am sorry you have changed your opinions; after all it is the eternal law – children devour their fathers. I make no complaint. Nature has willed it so."

He spoke these words sadly as he walked across the room. The twilight was gathering, the great furniture loomed up like shadows. There were tears in my eyes. Never did I feel so distinct a sensation of my inferiority; the man was great in his simplicity. "The man is greater than his books," I said to myself, "and that is a great deal, for he has written some very fine books."

I have told the story of these two meetings with some levity, but I was deeply moved at the time, and I am troubled even now, for is it always right to wear one's heart on one's sleeve, and to publish one's opinions as they come up in one's mind? Or is it better to look upon one's opinions as heavy pieces of furniture that are moved with difficulty. Alexis had devoted months to the correction of the translation that Charpentier was about to issue, and looked to Zola's preface to recoup himself for the labour he had spent upon the book, and a few casual words of mine had wrecked these hopes. He did not reproach me with having cost him some monetary losses; he merely said, "*C'est Charpentier que va boire un bouillon. Mille francs de corrections.*" The grey-green country stretched out before us, flat and dim – a dark mass of trees in front of us, a poplar striking out of the long plain. Alexis lectured me as we walked through the solitary country, but I did not listen. All the while I thought of Zola's last words as he bade me good-bye. "I hope you understand that our personal relations are the same as they always were, only you have made it impossible for me to write the preface."

At this time Zola was a fat man; soon after he became a thin one. By abstaining from drink at his meals he reduced his weight thirty-six French pounds in two months. He seems to have accepted Balzac's maxim, that the elegance of life exists mainly in the waist. As his waist narrowed his manner of life became more expansive. No longer is he the recluse of Mèdan; he has added a tower to his country house – with what intention I never fully understood – and he lives in a spacious mansion in the Rue de Bruxelles, which he has furnished with oak carvings, tapestries, portraits of archbishops and wrought-iron railings. A plaster cast of the Venus de Milo stands on the balustrade that encircles the staircase. The house seems to reveal a large coarse mind, a sort of coarsely woven net through whose meshes all live things escape, and that brings to shore only a quantity of *débris*. "From the *Rue de Lafayette*," I said. Why should he consider it incumbent upon him to collect these things? Great artists need not be learned in *bric-à-brac*. Manet lived all his life amid red plush furniture; and I am not sure that I should have spoken of Zola's furniture (has it not been described by reporters and reproduced in photography in every illustrated periodical?) if it had not been that with the acquisition of a waist and much general *bric-à-brac* a definite mental change has come upon Zola. I once heard him say he was going to give a ball. I don't think he ever carried the project into execution. However this may be, his house has, for the last three years, been open to visitors, and he has answered the ten thousand heterogeneous questions that the eleven hundred and fifty-seven interviewers have put to him with unfailing urbanity, and I am bound to admit, with extraordinary common-sense.

His mind is not as intense or penetrating as Tourguèneff's, but it looks with admirable lucidity over a wide surface, and he can answer the most foolish questions reasonably. An elderly lady's appletart has been upset in the Place Cliche, and a reporter calls on Zola for his opinion. He says that he has no precise information on the subject of apples, but he believes that apple-

growing is a very large industry in the north of France. If the apple sellers of Montmartre are prevented from exposing their wares for sale, the liberty of the individual is called into question, and a very large and important industry is possibly affected. At the same time the streets cannot – and so on. But even these platitudes he will relieve with some touch of rare common-sense. This touch I have left out, it is the incommunicable secret of his genius. But if any reader of this article should desire to hear Zola talk, I will recommend him to a book called *Enquête Littéraire* by Jules Huret. Huret's interview with Zola is an astonishing piece of literature. In this interview we perceive, as we should in a long intercourse with Zola himself, that his genius is but the triumph and apotheosis of common-sense. For his genius is wingless, it never rises towards the stars; it maintains itself at what I may term the level of superior mediocrity, and it is with him always, on small as on great occasions. Take his answer to an interviewer who called on him at the Savoy Hotel. Zola had arrived late the night before, and had only just got out of bed. The question was: "What are your impressions of London?" The answer was: "My first impression of London was an excellent appetite. The train was late, and we didn't dine until nine o'clock, but we dined excellently well." Is it possible to answer a foolish question more sensibly?

I said just now that Zola's vision of life was not so intense, penetrating, or subtle as Tourguènéff's. It is radically different. Zola's mind is patriarchal; he is an old-world hero, a patriarch belated in the nineteenth century. Not Abraham himself encamped amid his flocks, herds, and a numerous servitude saw or thought more simply than he does. There are hackney carriages, washerwomen, and *châssepots* in the *Rougon Macquart* series, but these are merely adventitious attractions which affect in no way the general character of the work. Hugo is said to be the last of the old-world poets; but the real difference between Zola and Hugo is that one can, and the other cannot, write verse. Take from Hugo his genius of versification and you would get the novelist. He would have produced a set of novels very similar to the *Rougon Macquart* series. It would have been in twenty volumes, possibly in more, and would have sold as largely. Robbed of his versification, Hugo would have accepted the hackney carriages and the washerwomen. He could not have done otherwise, and both men saw life from the outside, and their tendency was to exaggerate the outside. All the same the hypothetical work would have differed from the *Rougon Macquart*. Hugo was more naturally an artist than Zola. His imagination was rarer, but it was not more powerful nor more fecund. Zola's imagination is one of the most extraordinary that ever found expression in literature. Think, you who have read the twenty volumes, of the hundreds of places he has shown you and familiarised you with, even as you are familiar with the room you live in. Can you not see incestuous Renée dreaming in her yellow boudoir, or feverishly flung on the skins under the malign shade of tropical plants in the great conservatory? Are not the market-places in your mind – the roofs for ever silhouetting against the pale sky? The smell of the fish and the hundred colours of the fish; the vaults where the children roll amid the feathers? And the scene where they chop the pigeons' heads, disputing how many so-and- so can bleed in an hour? And how intimately conscious we are of

the great garden of the Paradou and the adorable death of Albine, who dies asphyxiated by the flowers with which she has filled the room; the enumeration of the flowers, the evocation of an orchestra of scents, for every scent recalls the sound of an instrument, and the last phrase "Albine dies in a supreme hiccup of flowers"-- how wonderful!

And the modes of life, the trees, the various ways in which the human animal gains his livelihood! Do we not all remember the gold chain-makers in *L'Assommoir* and the vestment makers in *Le Rêve*? In *Au Bonheur des Dames* the work of every employé is explained; the phenomena of each passing hour is revealed to us. *Germinal* is full of every detail of miner life, the ropes, the pulleys, the furnaces, the trucks, the horses. But I must stay my pen or this article will degenerate into a mere catalogue.

But has Zola furnished these extraordinary evocations of the externals of human life with human souls? Has he created characters that will not suffer by comparison with Balzac's? Zola's evocation of souls is slight, nearly always fragmentary and shadowy. A soul haunts in Gervaise, and Coupeau, too, has a soul, and through the numberless pages a few shades flit vaguely recognisable as human souls. That is all. In the line of souls Gervaise is his greatest achievement, and that is why I place *L'Assommoir* above all his other books. There are other reasons. When he wrote *L'Assommoir* Zola was more than he ever was before, and certainly more than he ever was since, a pupil of Flaubert. The book is written entirely in Flaubert's manner, the short sentences relieved by the pictorial epithet. The old masters thought that originality was found in individual feeling and seeing rather than in mannerism, and as I share their opinion I think that it is regrettable that Zola did not continue to write in the style in which he produced his finest book. But the style became too laborious for him just as pre-Raphaelitism became too laborious for Sir John Millais, and after *L'Assommoir* his style became looser, and with every fresh book he seems more and more inclined to abandon himself to the ease of redundant expression. There are fine pages even in his worst books, but so far as my personal taste and interest are engaged in his work I would choose to have revised editions of his early works rather than the new novels he contemplates writing – *Lourdes*, *Paris*, *Rome*, etc.

Revised editions of Zola's works! How easily one drops into talking nonsense. His method of novel-writing does not admit of revision. As well might we ask the editor of a daily paper for concentration of expression in leading articles, dramatic notes, and reports of boat races. During the last ten or a dozen years a striking resemblance has grown up between the Zola novel and the popular newspaper. The novel and the newspaper seem to me to stand on the same footing; the intention of both is the same, and the means employed are the same. It is true that Zola's reports on the Franco-German war are better done than the reports of the war correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*. It is also true that the scenery at the "Lyceum" is better painted than the scenery at the "Surrey," but that is hardly a reason for confusing a set taken from *Much Ado about Nothing* with the pictures of Turner, Constable, and Wilson, and we find a like difference

between the battle pieces in *War and Peace* and those in *La Débâcle* – a difference not of degree but a difference of kind. Zola's novel is practically the daily paper. He has discovered a formula that suits the average man as well as the *Daily Telegraph* or the *Petit Journal*, and he chooses his subjects, not in obedience to an artistic instinct, but in accordance with public taste. Three hundred thousand pilgrims go to Lourdes yearly. Every pilgrim is a certain reader, and the afflicted in all countries are interested in the question. Between belief and unbelief he will steer a middle course just as he steered a middle course between France and Prussia. I heard him boast, without ever perceiving the enormous artistic significance of what he was saying, that he had written a French novel on the war without giving Prussia cause for offence. I take it that the sublime impartiality of the true artist is very different from the mock impartiality of the journalist who wants to get up a controversy. The true artist sees life as God sees it, without prejudice; life is for him – I think the phrase is Flaubert's – *une hallucination à transporter*.

Zola told me that he had gone into calculation, and allowing for a fortnight's holidays at Christmas, Lourdes would take him seven months to write. Five hundred pages in seven months! Tolstoy took six years to write *Anna Karenina*, ten to write *War and Peace*; Flaubert took seventeen years to write *La Tentation de St Antoine*, eight or nine to write *L'Education Sentimentale*; and seven or eight translators are already at work on *Lourdes*; it will appear in the *New York Herald*, and Mr Bennet has paid a thousand pounds for the serial rights. But adequate information regarding the various forms and languages in which this book will appear would be the subject of an article on bibliography. Suffice it to say here that it will bring Zola something like four thousand pounds before it reaches Charpentier in book form; it will then be read by everybody except men of letters – but their number is so small that the abstention will not materially affect the sale. If the book does not sell three hundred thousand copies it is a failure, and if the book on the Russian Alliance which will follow does not sell half a million it will be a failure. Did any great writer ever see literature from this point of view before?

The idea of conquest seems inherent in Zola. Five and twenty years ago he wrote a book called *Le Conquête de Plassans*. The idea of conquest cropped up again in *L'Oeuvre*, and this time it was Paris that was conquered. And now it seems that Zola meditates the conquest of the world. He came to England at the head of an army of journalists; rockets were let off at the Crystal Palace, and trumpets were blown in his honour at the Mansion House. He will probably proceed on a similar mission to St Petersburg (it has already been spoken of); he may even visit America. Why not? There are sixty millions in the United States, who through the medium of translation, may read the *Rougon Macquart*! The newspapers reported that Madame Zola, astonished at the length of our London suburbs, said: "This is a town that would suit you, Emile." Every house represented to her a possible sale of a novel, Charpentier edition, three francs fifty. If Zola were told that a *concierger* had not heard his name he would feel discouraged. An enquiry would be set on foot, and if a *concierger's* guild could be discovered he would arrange to address a meeting. He looks upon all men who do not read his novels as lost. Lost to what? Ah, that I

cannot say; not to art, for the quality of his writing does not seem to concern him any more than the quality of the things he buys. The carved woodwork and the iron railings may not be finely wrought, but they photograph all right, and every interviewer is received and every sightseer – Chinese, Peruvians, Esquimaux – all and sundry are granted audience, and the afternoon passes in talking of how books may be best put on the market.

Some translation of his works must appear in every dialect, and to discover one not yet reduced to written characters, and to arrange that the first work printed in it should be a translation of the *Rougon Macquart* series would be fame indeed. M. Bruneau comes in with the score of the music he has just written for one of the novels, and the gentleman from Paraguay jumps up and proposes to do the opera into the language spoken in his country; the Thibetian might do the same. Bruneau and Zola put their heads together. Hurrah! another outlet has been discovered, and the terms of the contract are discussed. Only the other day in an article on the lyrical drama, after coupling Wagner and Bruneau together, Zola explained that he would create a lyrical drama with human characters; and when he has done this "the colossal Wagner will grow pale on the high pedestal of his symbols." Zola believes that young French composers have not written great music because their libretti are not sufficiently human. In a word, he imagines himself writing various libretti to which the young French composers will add a little music as cream is added to *méringues*. Well, if a man will talk on all subjects. the time will come when he will talk nonsense. I am afraid that time has come for Zola!

I The desire of gold for its own sake is comprehensible in a way; but Zola has no love of money, he has squandered all he made on vulgar decoration and absurd architecture. The pleasures of life bore him exceedingly, so he says; but I am afraid that he has not acquainted himself with them. Of the pleasures of Art he is equally ignorant. His youth was beset with difficulties sufficient, be it admitted to his credit, to conquer all but the most resolute. He wrote for four hours every morning at a novel, and every afternoon he wrote an article for a newspaper, and those who have felt the pressure of a weekly article, while engaged on a work of the imagination, will appreciate the severity of the ordeal that Zola bore for many years unflinchingly. He had little time for reflection or study, and was only able to catch the few ideas abroad in his day as they passed him. He read his contemporaries, Flaubert, Goncourt, Daudet, and to obtain a platform whence he might preach his doctrine he read Balzac and Hugo; but with the heart of French literature, with Montaigne, St Simon, and La Bruyère it may be doubted if his knowledge is more than rudimentary. The influence of Manet and Flaubert and Goncourt persuaded him that he was interested in the external world, and we hailed *L'Assommoir* as a masterpiece, for we wished to group ourselves round some great writer. We hugged the belief that, set free from pecuniary anxieties, he would read, think, travel, and refrain from constant production, giving three or four years to the composition and the writing of each book. We believed that he would cultivate refinement of thought, and refinement of literary expression. But Zola was not naturally an artist. Instead of the books becoming more

and more beautiful, they have become larger, looser, and uglier, and they serve no purpose whatsoever, except to find money for the purchase of cock-eyed saints on gold backgrounds.

Alas! the ridiculous towers of Mèdan! Alas! the arrival of translators from Paraguay! Alas! the blowing of trumpets before the Lord Mayor of London in honour of *La Terre, La Débâcle, L'Argent*, and *Docteur Pascal*!

And, three times, alas, for are we not now menaced by a novel on Lourdes, on Rome, and on Paris? In these novels he will re-write everything that he has written before. His friends will drop away from him; he will be left alone; his excellent cigars will fail to attract us, and smoking bad ones in the café we shall regret his life and his works, and the mistake we made; and when the café closes we shall stand on the edge of the pavement wondering what the end will be. One of us will say, it will probably be Huysmanns: "In *Le Ventre de Paris* there is a pork butcher who, after having worked ten hours a day all his life is found dead sitting before a table *son nez dans le boudin*."

"And you think," I shall say, "that he will just drop from sheer exhaustion over his writing table *son nez dans le boudin*?"

Huysmanns will not answer, he will remember that Zola is the friend of his life. The little group will separate, and wending my way to my little flat in the *Rue de la Tour des Dames*, I shall think of Zola as a striking instance of the insanity of common-sense

Chapter 18. Une Rencontre Au Salon

In the May of '85, as I stood before a bust by Rodin, lost in admiration, saying to myself, "What an admirable portraitist he is, though he be nothing more!" I heard some one behind me mutter:

"Michel-Ange à la coule...."

The words caused me to turn suddenly, and I found myself face to face with a handsome young man, thoughtfully dressed, and yet there was something in his blue cloth jacket buttoned across his throat, in his manner of wearing it (or was it the large trousers cut somewhat after the pattern of the white ducks of a house painter?), that suggested the artisan.

"Alors pour vous Rodin est un Michel-Ange à la coule? Vous êtes donc sculpteur?"

He avoided answering my question, and I did not press him to do so, knowing well that the phrase *Michel-Ange à la coule* was a sculptor's; and we walked about discussing the groups, single figures and busts, myself interested in the young man's hatred of Salon sculpture, and curious to hear him tell why he hated it. For a long time he was indefinite, saying at last:

"I don't see any choice of material here. Wherever I look I see glaring white marble."

"You don't like marble? "

"It isn't so much that I don't like it, but it isn't the only material. It suited the Greeks very well, enabling them to express their ideas, but not one of the sculptors here has ever thought that he might express himself better in terra-cotta, in bronze, or in wax; he chooses marble from habit, and works it as if it were his slave instead of his collaborator."

"You like bronze better?"

"It is more suitable to a modern house. But if you would care to see sculpture of a different kind I will show you some. A young friend of mine, a provincial, is exhibiting his work in Passy.... A lady who is interested in his work has allowed him to show his things in her house."

We got into a cab and were driven to a real French villa, a Passy villa hidden away under chestnut trees, at that moment all in flower, the white blossom shedding itself over the sunlit steps leading to the portico. As we passed through the house we caught sight of tapestries through the open doors, and the corridors were lined with painted and gilded tables, laden with

Italian porcelain; and, going up a rich staircase, we came to the drawing-room, hung – or, shall I say, festooned? – with pink silk.

"I don't care for variegated ceilings, do you?"

My companion did not answer; he was thinking of the sculpture which filled the drawing-rooms; some twenty-five or thirty pieces, wax models, bronzes, and wood carvings were all around me, and picking up a block, seemingly a huge paper-weight, on which was carved the head and throat and breast of a Sphinx, I said, "You don't always disdain marble. This example of your work helps me to understand your art better than anything you have said. You looked at this piece of marble as a Chinaman looks at a piece of jade, thinking what form the grain of the stone was prone to take, and throwing back accordantly the arms like wings; and you have worked the marble with such loving care that it has become as beautiful as a piece of jade."

This appreciation satisfied the young man, and he began to talk of the Aubusson carpet, whose roses were as real as coloured thread allowed them to be.

"We must always seek reality, but we must seek it within the limitations of our material. If these roses – "

A faint rustling sound was heard; a lady came into the room, and he went towards her and muttered a rapid explanation which I did not catch. She came across the room, smiling graciously, and he said:

"This English gentleman is much interested in sculpture, and feeling sure that you would not mind if I brought him here – "

"On the contrary, I am most pleased. I should be sorry if he returned to England without having seen anything but the marbles exhibited at the Salon."

"It was very kind of this gentleman to bring me to see his friend's sculpture."

A slight smile appeared in the lady's face, and my companion took his leave abruptly, asking me if I would meet him an hour hence at the Café de l'Etoile. I promised to do so, and turned to the lady for information regarding her *protégé*. But the lady avoided answering my questions, and when it seemed to me that I had praised the sculpture sufficiently I thanked her for her kindness in allowing me to see it, and bade her good-bye.

"There is something in him," I said to myself; "something that will transpire later on... perhaps. He is at present thinking too much of the material, and for that reason his sculpture is a little empty."

In the street there was a great glare of light, and Passy is a long way from l'Etoile; and in pursuit of ideas I wandered up a very long and hot street, Rue de la Pompe, arriving tired and hot at l'Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, my inflamed feet hardly able to carry me across it. My young friend had told me that I would find the Café de l'Etoile at the corner of l'Avenue de la Grande Armée. For a long time it was sought in vain, but at last a *garçon* said to me: "*C'est ici, monsieur,*" and I wondered why my companion had directed me to a café not much better than a *marchand de vins*; in fact, a *marchand de vins* it was, and nothing more, with three workmen lounging over a zinc counter, and outside a few chairs under an insufficient awning.

On one of these I sat, resting my inflamed feet on another, thinking what folly it had been to come all this way. And for why? L'Avenue de la Grande Armée is one of the least interesting avenues in Paris; it contains three or four little roadways, and between each one is a line of trees, very small, uninteresting trees, and the houses are small and insignificant, and the avenue extends away and away in a straight line into an uninteresting district called Neuilly. We never see anybody interesting in l'Avenue de la Grande Armée, nobody one knows, and as soon as I was rested and my thirst assuaged I fell to thinking of art to pass the time.

All great art, all valuable art, is inspired by the surroundings in which men live. For instance, there would have been no frescoe painting if there had been no Gothic cathedrals. The romanesque cathedrals were gloomy, tomb-like places, and mosaics were sufficient ornamentations; but the Gothic cathedral was graver; men's minds were arising out of the gloom of the real Middle Ages, and as soon as the cathedrals were built the sculptors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries began to carve statues; and when the niches were filled the artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries covered the walls with saints, angels, and ecclesiastics. At the end of the fifteenth century interest in the Mass began to decline, and men began to build palaces for their pleasure in this world; and just as the cathedral had brought saints, angels, and ecclesiastics into art, the palace brought voluptuous women in embroidered gowns and young men in chain armour with velvet cloaks thrown about their shoulders. About the middle of the seventeenth century feudalism was a declining force; men began to build houses, and the house introduced family life into art; it inspired the Dutchmen continuously for nearly seventy years; they painted everything that could happen in the house and everything that could happen in the fields around the house. Their inventions include local colour, truth of effect and chiaroscuro; and upon Dutch art we have been living ever since; and we must wait for some architectural change before we can hope to find a new pictorial formula.

The villa! We have invented the villa. The word is the Italian for house, but in English it carries a suggestion of a somewhat archaic structure standing in the middle of a garden. When we go on Sunday to lunch with our friends who live in Surrey, long before we arrive at their suburban station we have in mind gable ends, tiled roofs, and false beams showing between the trees; and when we jump out of the train we find pa and ma and the girls and the boys all waiting to meet us, and we go up the smooth wide road together, a pleasant ten minutes' walk from the railway station, hearing all the while that the morning and evening trains are excellent. Kent, Sussex, and Surrey are crowded with villas, all run up within the last fifty years, and the question arises if our English villa will create an art peculiar to itself, as the cathedral, the palace, and the house have done.

Nothing seems more probable than that it will, for the younger generation has begun to perceive that the Royal Academy prices are incompatible with parties; and a drove of Highland cattle driven across the moors is relinquished at mother's instigation. She reminds father that the girls have been promised a month at Boulogne at the end of the summer. Father admires the work of the Academician, but mother finds a resolute supporter in Julia; Julia's opinions have to be

considered, for she goes to Camden Town three times a week for lessons in painting, and her advice to her father is that quality, not subject, should be sought for, and Highland cattle in heavy gold frames are out of place, she says, in white-painted rooms hung with chintz and muslin; she suggests to her father etchings in pretty Whistlerian frames for the drawing-room. "And she would agree with the young man whom I met in the Salon, and for whom I am waiting in this very hot and detestable little café, that if father is to buy sculpture at all it had better be in terra-cotta, or wax, or in bronze...."

It was pleasant to close one's eyes and to listen to Julia and the young man discussing the beauty of the material and its limitations till Julia begins to weary of Theseus and the Venus de Milo, and to long for talk about men and women....

"We may be," I said, "on the eve of a new artistic formula. We must be, for we can't go on painting Highland cattle and seagulls screaming round wintry rocks for ever and ever; and our houses are becoming more and more unsuited to marble. That is the discovery of the young man whom I am waiting for."

And I fell to wondering how it was that I had not perceived at once that he was aiming at Oriental art. His love of the material for its own sake came to him from the East, and his dislike of marble as a medium of sculpture is derived from his knowledge that no Oriental sculptor has used marble, and perhaps from some religious sense going back to ancient Egypt, where granite and porphyry were used in preference to marble, these materials being more solemn, more disposed to inspire awe. Marble went westward; the Greeks were the first secularisers, and ever

since the secularisation of the world has been going on continuously. On such an idea one can dream a long while, and five seconds or half an hour may have passed before I awoke and saw again the miserable aspects of the Avenue de la Grande Armée. After a little stare I muttered aloud:

"It is strange that I should not have thought of these things before. I'll speak to my young friend about the religious aspects of porphyry and granite as soon as he arrives. He will have to admit, I think, that both are too solemn for modern consumption. But I am with him; yes, I am with him altogether when he says that we do not consider the material sufficiently, and have but little interest in the handicraft on which the Oriental sculptors rely to make beautiful material seem more beautiful. He is quite right when he says that we have not a sculptor to-day who can wield a mallet; Rodin never raises one: he sends his plaster casts to Italian copyists, and the public prefers these copies to the bronze castings, though the bronze contains the sculptor's thought unadulterated."

Strange, is it not, that man should be so conventional? Any originality he ever attains to is the result of circumstance, and therefore it is quite possible that the villa will bring a new art along with it, an art dependent on the material employed and the use it is put to rather than upon ideas. The mark of a chalk pencil on a sheet of Whatman is not beautiful in itself, but a beautiful texture can be obtained with a chalk pencil, and it is certain that a drawing may give pleasure in which there is nothing but beauty of touch. No. one is blinder to proportions, anatomies, and gestures than Walter Sickert; from the point of view of – shall we say Ingres? – his drawing does not exist at all; he has only "quality," and his cleverness consists in always keeping well within his limitations, putting down upon paper and canvas only that which he can express well. It will be noticed that he always chooses subjects which do not tax his powers of drawing – street corners, for instance. A street corner may present much perplexing drawing, but Walter Sickert avoids these, choosing for preference a simple gable end. It taxes his capacity, but he gets it down, and once he has it down the rest is easy, for his art does not include values. Whosoever says "values" suggests chiaroscuro, and chiaroscuro brings endless difficulties into art, and Walter Sickert has discovered that it is unnecessary to seek a true relation between his gable end and his sky. According to his aestheticism, any grey tint will do for the sky provided the paint is nicely laid on, and with brown and a little Indian red the roofs and the shadows can be achieved. His one pre-occupation is beauty of touch, and he gets it in the curve of the pavement. He has invented a formula which leaves out almost everything, and is therefore suitable to his own talent and to the talents of a large following, principally ladies. For the last seven summers his pupils have been painting in our streets, and they have left London seeking gable ends in all the old English towns; they have spread over the Continent; Dieppe has not a wall left unpainted; they have reached Venice, and St Mark's affords endless opportunities for their art; they have gone on to Constantinople and to Egypt, applying their method unembarrassed by the fact that in Egypt the relations of the sky and earth are the reverse of what they are here.

Here the sky is pale and the earth dark; in Egypt the sky is dark and the earth light. But truth of effect does not trouble them. The strip of grey that sets off the tower in Smith's Square, Westminster, furnishes an equally truthful background for the domes and minarets of Egypt; and hundreds of small pictures of unvarying merit are brought back – faint designs in gold frames, inoffensive always, and sometimes soothing to the eye. A considerable number of their pictures are to be seen in the exhibitions of the New English Art Club, but not all, and this is a grievance which has been to some extent removed by the organisation of vast picture-shows at the Albert Hall. It is reported that as many as a thousand street-corners have been exhibited there; and among this somewhat bewildering array of gable ends we find portraits of chairs, jugs, basins, and brooms. The Dutchmen relied upon a ray of light or a shadow to give interest to some such simple object, but these ladies rely entirely on Mr Sickert's recipes.

The master is, however, a little more venturesome than his pupils; he sometimes leaves his street-corners for music-halls, and his method is as applicable to interiors as it is to exteriors. The stage box at the Bedford is represented by a patch of slate-colour – white broken with blue-black, and a gold arabesque; and his recipe for gold is a foundation of yellow ochre, with raw umber for the shadows, and Naples yellow for the high lights. Figures are sometimes introduced into the music-hall pieces, and he talks so well about the drawing he has omitted that we forget to examine what is there, and the stuttering and the stammering among the gallery boys are forgiven him for he never altogether lacks quality, and it is not easy to get quality in oil paint. No material is more rebellious, but he has tamed it.

"He must meet the young man whom I met this morning in the Salon," I cried to myself. "They have many ideas in common." "Before a dressmaker designs a dress," Sickert will say to him, "he asks himself what material the dress is to be made of, and I think we should do the same." And the two will agree heartily about the necessity of cheap art for the villa.

In his articles he has always advocated cheap art, deriding his friends in Chelsea for selling their pictures at high prices, for painting chintz in winter and castles in summer; and his friend Mortimer Menpes is also working for the villa, neglecting proportions, movement, and gesture, all that it was once the fashion to regard as the essentials of drawing, and thinking much more of the effect of a sheet of Whatman in a gold frame and the relation of the gold frame to the wall. Like Walter Sickert he was a pupil of Whistler, and Whistler was the first to draw the attention of the Western world to Oriental art. He has been in Japan and many other countries, and has brought back a great deal of local colour; he has given us not only Japanese, but Indian and Turkish, and, for all I know, Circassian dresses; spots of colour very often laid upon a gold background. He is also addicted to etching and, like Walter Sickert, leaves out all that he has not understood. The gold frame that he took from Whistler, and into which he has introduced many modifications of his own, enhances the beauty of the old Dutch paper laid upon a sheet of Whatman. And Helleu's etchings are nearly as suitable to the villa as Menpes's. In an indulgent

moment Degas described Helleu as *un Watteau à vapeur*; and thinking how his etchings are appreciated in villadom, I remembered a man whose merit is that he works in silver point, a medium so difficult that he claims dispensation from all drawing and design. "And there are others," I said. But it was too hot to seek out names, and my thoughts drifted on, dismissing the drawings of Conder, Brabazon, and Aubrey Beardsley as being too recondite for the taste of the villa; "and too expensive," I added. "*Garçon, encore une limonade!*"

Walter Sickert is an economist as well as an aesthete, and foresees that in about fifty years all and sundry will be living in villas, and that there is no end to the art that will be required for those who come after him. It is only here that we feel inclined to join issue with him. Is the villa the end of art? The last word? We think not. The bungalow will succeed the villa, and after a little while the bungalow will become a tie, and man will wander over the earth again, but not on a camel's back by day, sleeping in a tent by night; he will wander in railway trains, in Pullman cars, and the traveller returning to Paris from Cape Horn, *vid* Behring Straits, will need pictorial refreshment. Pictures will – . As the art of the Pullman car was about to rise up before me my reverie was interrupted by the sculptor whose acquaintance I had made that morning in the Salon before Rodin's bust.

"*A quoi rêvez-vous?*"

"*Je veux bien vous raconter mes rêves; seulement ce sera long;*" and while walking round the Arc de Triomphe he listened to me telling him the gradations by which we should reach the end of the Art age. "You kept me waiting so long in that café that I have had time to think out the question of nationality in art from end to end."

My companion laughed sympathetically, and encouraged by his laughter I continued my theory of nationality in art, telling him that if the Greeks had had the compass their ships might have reached the Red Sea, for a canal existed in ancient times; and through the Red Sea their ships might have wandered eastward, and if one laden with marbles had been wrecked off the coasts of Japan in the year 200 B.C. we should not have had Japanese art; Hokusai and Outamaro would not have existed.

"Degas would agree with you that segregation is the source of the artistic river."

"Degas! You know Degas?"

"Yes, I have known him for some time, and I met him soon after leaving you, and told him about our meeting in the Salon. He asked me to tell you that he is dining at the Nouvelle Athènes. He hopes you will come."

"Who would miss an evening with Degas!"

We walked down the Avenue Friedland together, talking of the hordes of young English and Americans who come to Paris to learn to paint, thinking that there is but one painting and no other, and that if they can get the recipe they will be able to produce the article required.

"A sort of international art; that is what the world is making for," my companion said. "International cooking is with us," and he related how he had asked the manager of the Splendid Hotel if the cooking in his establishment was international, and, smiling, the manager assured him that he could count upon the cooking as being of the very same quality as the Splendid Hotel in Rome, in Aix les Bains, in Munich, in Geneva; in fact, in all the capital cities of Europe. "Et vous n'avez pas de plats locaux!" I said to him.

"He began to suspect that you were poking fun at him?"

"A moment later he did, and assured me that notwithstanding international cooking they were still prepared – "

We laughed together, and our thoughts reverting to the subject of our conversation of international art, I said: "If you send a Japanese artist to Ville d'Avray he will bring you back a piece of Japan, and if you send a French artist to Japan he will bring you back a piece of Ville d,Avray."

"I'm afraid that isn't so," my companion interposed.

"How is that?"

"You forget that Eastern artists have already begun to imitate the Western. Japanese art ended with the opening up of Japan to Western ideas; and now all that Japan can do in the way of art is to imitate us or its old masters."

"Yes; isn't it sad? Art ended once before in the fourth century; a new idea came into the world, and from the fourth to the thirteenth there was no art except the cathedrals, no sculpture, no painting, no literature. Another new idea has come into the world, locomotion; and railways and steamboats have made art impossible; every man knows his neighbour; man is an imitative animal, and if he can imitate he will. There will be plenty of international art, and man's lot will be worse than ever."

"Pas de plats locaux."

"No," I answered, laughing sadly. "Great geniuses will be born in vain. Men of talent were born in the Middle Ages, but there was no artistic formula, and they remained mute and inglorious. Nature is always the same. What is art but intellectual formulae, and it requires three or four generations living in an obscure corner of the world to create an artistic formula. One of these corners still exists; we are going to the Place Pigalle, and the artists we shall see there to-night – Degas, Pissaro, Renoir are the last; Monet is in the country, so is Sisley, and together they are developing the Impressionistic formula. To-day there are no buyers for their pictures, but in about fifty years' time almost any price will be paid for them; the worst will be a masterpiece then. I didn't think of it before, if we only had a few hundred pounds we could invest it at a thousand per cent., and our children would be millionaires. But we have no money."

"We have better than money or children," my companion answered, "for if all that you say be right we have immortality; not on account of any merit we possess, but because of the mediocrity that will follow us. We are the demi-gods, and the demi-gods are to-night going to dine with the gods, with the last of the old world's gods."

Afterword

This ebook of *Impressions and Opinions* contains authentic text of the first English edition — London: Vizetelly & Co., 1 July 1887; and new material in the second English edition — London: T. Werner Laurie, 1 February 1913.

The text was transcribed from printed books and edited by Robert S. Becker, PhD, on behalf of George Moore Interactive LLC. Original spelling — British, French and idiosyncratic — are preserved; printing errors are eliminated. Paragraph breaks are changed from indent to single line space.