

T H E S I S

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Thesis: Anatole France as a critic of Romanticism:
a study of Anatole France's views on French
Romanticism based on his collected works,
his literary articles and his conversations.

by

ANNA E.O. GUEDATARIAN.

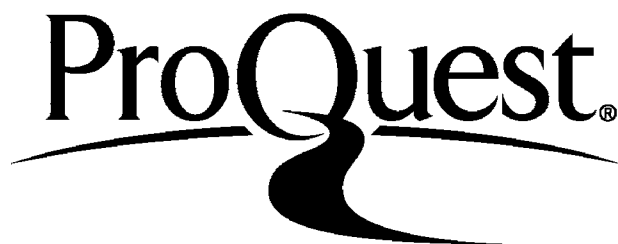
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Abstract: The purpose of this thesis is to study Anatole France's understanding and criticisms of the French Romantic movement during the latter half of the XVIIIth century and the first half of the XIXth century. I have been led to this study in consideration of the fact that his numerous interpreters have judged him to be extremely hostile to Romanticism but are not sufficiently explicit on this point. They have named him the last of the Classicists without taking into account that he shows himself deeply influenced by the Romantic spirit both in his thought and, very frequently, in his style. An examination of Anatole France's literary articles (in particular the uncollected articles which have not been sufficiently consulted in the past) reveal him to be both constructive and appreciative in his approach to the Romantic writers.

Accordingly this study is divided into two parts: Part 1 deals with the influence of Romanticism on Anatole France's childhood and adolescence - (Chapter I).

The nature of his hostility to Romanticism in his productive years. - (Chapter II).

The unconscious but nevertheless marked influence of Romanticism in his general thought and writings as seen through his understanding and treatment of certain Romantic motives:

Self-revelation and confession. - (Chapter III).

The development of the 'mal du siècle'. - (Chapter IV).

The supremacy of emotion and feeling. - (Chapter V).

Imaginative freedom and fantasy. - (Chapter VI).

Anatole France's understanding and treatment of these themes are defined in view of the very personal and subjective nature of his Impressionistic criticism and his marked tendency to interpret particular writers through his own temperament. By analysing the emotional features of his thought in Part I, we are thus better prepared to understand his approach to the Romantic generations.

Part II (Chapters VII to XV) deals with his criticisms of individual Romantic writers, with particular emphasis on Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, de Vigny, Hugo and George Sand.

In writing this thesis, I have paid special attention to the numerous uncollected articles which Anatole France published in newspapers and periodicals. These articles may unfortunately never be republished in book-form and they reveal many new and attractive facets of his personality.

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Part I.

INTRODUCTION.

An account of the life of Anatole France as a guide to the present thesis.

Anatole France was born in Paris on the 16th April 1844. His parents were of humble peasant stock. Antoinette Gallas, the mother, was a native of Chartres and descended from a family of millers. His father, François Noel Thibault, was the son of an Angevin shoemaker. François, known by the Angevin diminutive 'France' (a name that Anatole was to adopt at the beginning of his literary career), came to Paris in 1826 for his military service and being an ardent royalist, joined the Guard of Charles X. Although he was illiterate till his manhood, he made strenuous efforts to educate himself, acquired his own book-shop and after moving from No.19 Quai Malaquais (the birth-place of Anatole France) finally established himself at No.9 Quai Voltaire as a renowned specialist on literature relating to the French Revolution.

Anatole France led a happy family life. He was devoted to his mother on whom he has written so tenderly in his autobiographical studies. At the age of 11, he entered the Collège Stanislas. His hatred of school-life in this religious establishment, of his teachers whom he described as ignorant pedants and enemies of youth and beauty, are familiar themes in his writings. His resentment was tenacious and on leaving

school at the age of 18, he had lost all religious faith.

For several years after leaving school, Anatole France was unable to decide upon a career. He read intensively, helped his father to compile catalogues and haunted the art-galleries and the Louvre. In 1865, he helped to compile the Dictionnaire Larousse and from 1867 to 1870 contributed to several obscure reviews, including Le Chasseur bibliographe and La Gazette rimée. From 1867 to 1877, he made a more important contribution to L'Amateur d'Autographes, a periodical edited by his friend, the paleographer Etienne Chararay.

Anatole France's talents as a critic and a writer developed slowly and the period 1864 to 1876 was particularly fruitful in the formation of his ideas and in his style. In 1864, Darwin's The Origin of Species was first translated into French. Largely through the influence of Darwin, Renan and Taine, France became a convinced evolutionist and shared, with all the writers of his time, the general enthusiasm for the positive sciences. He studied zoology, physiology and astronomy and wrote in all sincerity thirty years later that no theory of the universe, not a single new experiment, had found him indifferent or unmoved. On the literary side, a lasting impression was made on him as a stylist by his association with the Parnasse, which lasted from 1867 to 1876.

In 1867, France began working for the publisher Lemerre and wrote introductory essays for his reprints of famous

authors. In the same year, he joined the Parnassian gatherings which took place in the club-room above Lemerre's shop. His authority in the Parnasse became gradually more pronounced. He contributed to the second Parnasse contemporain in 1871 and published his own volume of Parnassian verse in 1873. The last work of this Parnassian period, the dramatic poem, Les Noces Corinthiennes, appeared in 1876.

During the Franco-Prussian war, France joined the National Guard and was for a short time concerned with patrol and sentry duty. The Commune and its ravages left him with a lasting aversion to mob-violence and his memories of this episode are related in his first novel Les Désirs de Jean Servien, written in 1872 and published in a revised form ten years later. The Commune profoundly modified his political views. Previously, he had been a radical and considered Napoleon III a tyrant. He now became a prudent if somewhat tepid Republican.

In 1876, Anatole France was appointed to a subordinate post as librarian in the Bibliothèque du Sénat. This appointment was to a large extent a sinecure designed to aid him in his literary efforts. In the following year he married Marie-Valerie Guérin who came from an ancient family of miniature^s artists and painters. Jocaste, his first published novel which reflects his interest in science and determinism, appeared in 1878. Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard (1881) won him the Academy Award and Le Livre de mon ami (1885) even greater renown. The gentle

and sentimental note that prevails in these two works must always be interpreted in terms of the extremely happy and serene domestic life that France was enjoying at this period. Suzanne, his only child, was born in 1881.

The year 1883 marked the beginning of his relationship with Ernest Renan whom he had long esteemed and now venerated as a father and counsellor. From this year onwards, his fame as a journalist rapidly increased. He contributed regular articles to the weekly periodical L'Univers Illustré. These articles appeared at fortnightly intervals under the heading Le Courrier de Paris and were signed 'Gérôme' till 1890. A similar type of literary and social causerie was submitted by a fellow journalist Richard O'Monroy (alias the Vicomte de Geniès), who used the same pseudonym, Gérôme. This ^{un}practical arrangement gave rise to confusion and from 1890, both journalists assumed their proper name. France's collaboration with L'Univers Illustré ceased in 1893.

Anatole France's most important work in this journalistic period was his weekly article in Le Temps, which appeared from 1886 to 1893. Until 1887, these articles appeared under the heading La Vie à Paris and at this date the title La Vie littéraire was adopted. During this very active period of journalism, approximately 350 articles were published in Le Temps and only one third of these were republished in the four volumes of La Vie littéraire. Apart from a few extracts which France selected for Le Jardin d'Epicure and Pierre

Nozière, the remaining articles of Le Temps and his entire contribution to L'Univers Illustré have never been collected for republication.¹

Before 1888, France was not as yet seriously perturbed by the social and political condition of his country. Except for a genuine concern with the condition of the poor, the general tone of his criticisms was unaggressive and revealed him to be an amused if somewhat cynical spectator of the public scene. Though anti-clerical, his sentiments were those of a nationalist and he showed a marked sympathy for the army and military virtues.

In 1888, he entered upon his liaison with Madame Armande Caillavet and became estranged from his wife who divorced him three years later. The long and inspiring relationship with Madame de Caillavet determined his universal fame as a novelist. She gave him confidence, developed his numerous but hitherto somewhat neglected social graces and he now became the centre of her brilliant salon which received the eminent public figures of his day.

His political attitude during these middle years was that of a Left Centrist with Conservative tendencies. In 1888, he

¹ Léon Carias, the great authority on Anatole France, hoped to include these articles in supplementary volumes to the Oeuvres complètes (published under his direction) and died in 1946 before completing this important task.

was one of the many who were dissatisfied with the mediocrity of the actual régime and he acclaimed General Boulanger who seemed to stand for the recovery of his country's prestige whilst in reality aspiring to dictatorship. The failure of Boulanger's coup d'état was the first of several factors that transformed Anatole France at this period from the gentle and tolerant sceptic to the disillusioned creator of Jérôme Coignard. Several other episodes, following one another in rapid succession, subscribed to his negative mood: there was the failure of his marriage and the humiliating circumstances of his resignation from the Bibliothèque du Sénat.¹ From 1889 to 1891 he became the object of celebrated literary attacks conducted by Brunetière. Thaïs, first published as a serial by La Revue des deux Mondes in 1890 was virulently condemned by the influential Jesuit critic Father Brucker and placed on the Index.

The deepening pessimism and disillusion that became pronounced in the following years mark Anatole France's growing dissatisfaction with the social and political régime of his country. Jérôme Coignard of La Rotisserie de la reine

¹ In 1888, France was angered to find that a younger member of the staff had been promoted to a position superior to his own. On protesting to the authorities, it was pointed out to him that his own contribution as a librarian could be summed up by the word "néant". At this time, the relations between France and Leconte de Lisle, his colleague in the Library, became strained and he offered his resignation in 1890.

Pédaugue and Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard, criticises injustice, bigotry and the hypocrisy of moral conventions and questions practically all the principles on which societies are founded. Evidence of Anatole France's subsequent evolution to the extreme Left clearly emerges in these last works. This did not prevent him from being elected to the French Academy in 1896, and if during this year, his revolutionary tone was of necessity less marked, he continued to express his dissatisfaction in the first two volumes of L'Histoire Contemporaine: L'Orme du Mail (1897) and Le Mannequin d'Osier (1899).

The Dreyfus case which was to divide the nation into two hostile camps and to sway political life for the next decade, caused France to support Zola in his defence of the accused officer. In 1897, he signed the 'Intellectuals' petition' and in the following year appeared in court to testify in Zola's favour when the latter was tried for contempt as a result of the notorious J'Accuse. As a journalist, France had been one of Zola's most unfriendly critics. He was beginning to appreciate his writings shortly before the 'Affaire' and this episode now caused him to acclaim Zola as a hero and to return his own decoration in protest when the novelist was suspended from the Rolls of the Legion of Honour. Lemaître, Bourget and Barrès were but a few of the 'Anti-Dreyfusards' who became estranged from Anatole France at this period but

his now open and militant adoption of the Socialist cause was further strengthened by his friendship with the great Socialist orator Jaurès. That the 'grand virage' was now complete became clear in the last two volumes of L'Histoire Contemporaine: L'Anneau d'améthyste (1899) and M. Bergeret à Paris (1901).

During this active period he became violently anti-militaristic and hostile to the Church, presided electoral meetings and workers' reunions and delivered numerous political speeches, a large number of which were published in Les Opinions Sociales (1902) and Vers les temps meilleurs (1906). In 1908, he completed La Vie de Jeanne d'Arc. This work to which he had devoted over twenty years of study was on the whole ill-received by the critics and in order to show that all interpretations of the past are equally contestable, he wrote L'Ile des Pingouins, that cynical parody of the nation's history.

The constant vigilance and possessiveness of the now ageing Madame de Caillavet who continued to worship Anatole France when he had tired of her affection prompted him to undertake a lecture tour in the Argentine in the summer of 1909. The undue prominence given to his relationship with an actress in the course of his travels caused Madame de Caillavet such deep distress that although she was reconciled with France on his return, she died in January 1910, broken in health and

spirits. At her death, France was unconsolable and the measure of his grief was only fully realised when M. Léon Carias published extracts from his diaries in 1932.

The remaining years of Anatole France's life were spent with Mlle Emma Laprevotte who was the personal maid of Madame de Caillavet and the faithful companion of the couple during their numerous travels in Europe. He married Mlle Laprevotte in 1920 with the principle object of securing her legacy. Madame de Caillavet did not live to see the completion of his two greatest novels: Les Dieux ont soif was published in 1912 and La Revolte des Anges in 1914, shortly before the outbreak of war.

When the war was declared, Anatole France left Paris for his country residence La Béchellerie in Tourraine. He was deeply horrified by the barbarity and futility of the world disaster and now became more than ever pessimistic and disillusioned with mankind. His home was the centre of literary reunions and La Béchellerie welcomed numerous friends, writers and soldiers on leave.

His last years were the saddest of his life. His beloved daughter Suzanne died suddenly in 1918. Yet although his health was failing, France remained energetic. He resumed his political activities and contributed to L'Humanité. He acclaimed the Russian Revolution and warmly supported the Communist Party which was formed in 1918 after the 'Scission

de Tours'. Remembering his early life with the greatest vividness of detail, he composed two of the most graceful studies of his childhood and adolescence: Le Petit Pierre (1918) and La Vie en Fleur (1923). Indifferent as ever to renown, he travelled to Stockholm in 1921 to receive the Nobel Prize. He died of heart failure after prolonged suffering at La Béchellerie on the 12th October 1924.

CHAPTER I

On the youthful Romanticism of Anatole France and the
influence of the Parnasse.

In dealing with the thought and literary criticisms of Anatole France, that familiar phrase "the last of the Classicists" must be ever present in our mind. The tendency of nearly all France's interpreters has been to stress the classical formation and tastes of a widely curious and independent thinker who was concerned with his own century more than with any other. "Il est le dernier écrivain classique de la prose française," wrote Léon Blum in 1895.¹ Charles Maurras who had become estranged from France as a result of the Dreyfus Case, maintained, in his last great tribute to his political adversary, that he was at heart a Classicist and a traditionalist.² Paul Valéry, the successor to France's chair at the French Academy in 1927, faced with the embarrassing duty of pronouncing the traditional 'Eloge' of a writer who had seriously misunderstood the art of Mallarmé and the Symbolists, gracefully overcame the situation by praising the limpidity and elegance of France's classical style.³ "There is in our

¹ La Revue Blanche, 15 February 1895. M. Anatole France by Léon Blum.

² C. Maurras. Anatole France politique et poète (Paris: Plon, 1924)

³ P. Valéry. Remerciements à l'Académie française. Oeuvres complètes V. pp. 9 - 45.

literature a grand highway of reason, clarity and good sense," said Professor Denis Saurat in a public lecture shortly following the last war. "To this highway French literature always returns after many deviations. Its milestones are Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, Balzac and France."

Other critics, headed by the late M. Léon Carias, have stressed Anatole France's dislike of romantic emotionalism and unreserved confession: "Laissant aux 'barbares romantiques' l'indécence de leurs sanglots, il n'a jamais cessé de demander à ses maîtres, les héritiers de la Grèce et de Rome, des leçons de mesure, de goût, de pudeur et cette force de silence qui presque jamais ne l'abandonna."¹ Jacques Roujon, who studies France's political tendencies and attempts to prove that the social reformer of the Left Wing was always at least a reactionary, a traditionalist and a Classicist, nevertheless agrees that his works reveal "quelques traces d'orgueil rousseausiste et de sensibilité romantique."² It seems that no critic was aware how strongly Anatole France was influenced by the Romantic movement except M. Ernest Seillière who in his two studies: La jeunesse d'Anatole France and Anatole France critique de son temps, develops the counter-thesis and maintains that every aspect of France's thought reveal

¹ L. Carias. Les carnets intimes d'Anatole France (Paris. Emile-Paul 1946) p. 166.

² J. Roujon. La vie et les opinions d'Anatole France (Paris: Plon. 1925) p. 91.

him to be the most typical representative of "the fifth rousseauist generation."¹

How can one conciliate the contradictions of these critics? By stating that in dealing with Anatole France who was at all times a voracious reader, an adventurer in ideas and an unashamed collector of the thoughts and expressions of his predecessors and contemporaries, it is possible to prove the influence of an extremely wide range of writers - some of them quite obscure - on France's thought and style. It has been suggested that he was an idealist, a materialist and a disciple of Condillac. It has been shown that he was a reactionary and also that he was a revolutionary Communist. Some will say that his spiritual home is ancient Greece, others that it is in the XVIIIth century of Voltaire or the epoch of Renan. The wide divergence of critics on this point is but another proof of the lack of cohesion in the thought of France and of the serious disadvantages of dilettantism. But Romanticism must appear to many to be equally incoherent and numerous are the writers who affirm that it escapes all attempts at an exact definition. For this reason, we must begin our task by stating as briefly as possible what we understand by the terms 'Romantic' and 'Romantic movement.'

¹ E. Seillière. La jeunesse d'Anatole France and Anatole France, critique de son temps. (Paris. Edit de la nouvelle Revue critique 1934).

Classique. Romantique. "De ces deux termes," says Paul Valéry, "j'ai dit et redit que ce sont des termes bons pour la conversation, excellents pour la dispute, incompatibles avec la précision de la pensée, parfaitement inutiles à son développement. Mais il n'est pas mauvais que des termes de ce genre/existent."¹ Incompatible with precise thought, because Valéry has offered us several definitions, each different yet true in their particular context. Useless as regards the development of thought because the independent, consummate artist of the type of Baudelaire can, by not heeding them, arrive at a completeness or at ^{an} indiscernible blending of the classical and romantic attitudes in which the one completes the other. But these terms can exist because however effectively Paul Deschanel has persuaded us that there were romantic Classicists, however convinced we are by M. Pierre Moreau that there were classical Romantics, we know that in the short period from 1660 to 1685 and that in the longer period covering the first half of the last century, historical, social and economical factors reacted on individual writers in order to produce a marked unity in their attitude to life and to art. So we may say that a Classical and a Romantic school existed in the history of France provided we specify that by the loosely applied and consequently unpopular terms 'school' and 'movement', we refer to that curious phenomenon of attraction

¹ F. Lefèvre. Entretiens avec Paul Valéry. (Paris: Le Livre. 1926). p. 115.

by which widely divergent thinkers may unite in a precarious and swiftly passing historical moment in order to express common aspirations in this ^{div} philosophical and aesthetic approach to life.

To hold in the conventional manner that the classicist is a sociable being, guided by Reason, tending towards impersonality and universality, expressing his thought in a language that is clear, concise and disciplined, and then to state that the Romantic is guided by emotion, withdraws from society in order to celebrate in lyrical tones his relationship with the great forces of the universe, is to define their respective attitudes by their effects and not by their cause. Underlying these attitudes there must exist a philosophical principle which determines the relationship of the artist to his environment.

The Classical view results from the belief that beyond the flow and the mobility of life, there is a permanence and an absolute, unquestioned and dogmatically accepted. If we consider the period 1660 to 1685, we see that it is characterised by a knowledge of human limitations, of unquestioned belief in theological dogma, monarchic power, social order, ethical and artistic conventions. Because the universe is clearly defined for the Classicist, he can concern himself with the study of limited states of being. By expressing a sufficiently wide range of these states, as in the case of

La Fontaine, or the many facets of one state, as in the case of Racine, he will strive towards universality. As a disciple of Antiquity, the Classicist is confident that there exists in art an absolute type of beauty. He believes that his work is perfectible and in creation he has a visible and attainable goal.

The Romantic, born in a period of great social upheavals, rejects the clearly defined limitations imposed upon him by tradition, society and authority. A state of being is valid to him only in so far as it implies and activates a process of becoming. He attempts to transcend the known universe, to liberate and to justify primitive and intuitive forces of life. In his search for the unknown, he calls upon a spiritual power which he feels extending from his innermost self into the infinite: love, compassion, nature, evil, sanctity of a racial or social mission. Because the Romantic is driven by forces of sentiment and imagination, he breaks down emotional barriers. Instead of studying individually and in separate compartments, definite states of being, he tends to fuse and to unify these states on an infinite, emotional plane through constant association of thought: love and death; passion and virtue; God, Nature, innate goodness through and from Nature. Hermione who cannot say whether she loves or hates is a romantic. Racine who clearly visualises her in one known psychological mood of love and hate is a Classicist. The Baudelairean fusion

of the senses is the natural result in a hyper-sensitive artist of the romantic tendency to merge all things into one and to unify the particular.

In human life, there is often an evolution from the romantic to the classical plane. The young are romantic when they seek to attain an ideal and to transcend their creative limitations, when sentiment and imagination give confidence in infinite possibilities. The classical plane is reached through experience, when time has caused passions to be discarded for a more detached and universal understanding of life. A.N.Whitehead has shown us that in daily experiences, there are smaller, ever-recurring romantic-classical cycles: in the acquiring of all knowledge, there is a stage of romance, a stage of precision and finally a stage of generalisation.¹ But in a country like France where form and lucidity play so important a role in aesthetic creation, particular emphasis has been placed on this evolution in matters of artistic discipline. Proust tells us that all classical works are elaborated romantically. Valéry explains this obscure paradox when he states that a classicist is a romantic who has finally learnt his 'métier'. "Voilà", he concludes, "pourquoi le romantisme a fini par le Parnasse."²

¹ A.N.Whitehead. The aims of Education. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1947).

² P. Valéry. Littérature. (Paris: Gallimard, 1930). pp. 105-106.

The media of the arts often show themselves to be more favourable to one or to the other of these attitudes. Sculpture and architecture, being concerned with the tangible, the static and the limited, are favourable to the classical artist. Gautier would have the Parnassian hew his verse "in the resistant marble." Lyrical poetry and music, because they are ephemeral, flowing and intangible are the familiar media of the romantic.

Just as the Classical movement of 1660-1685, resulted from a moment of order, calm and supremacy, following a period of disorder and disorganisation, a swiftly passing moment of balance which contained, as life itself, the germs of death, so XIXth century Romanticism was born of defeat, insecurity and questioning. The father of the 'enfant de siècle' had witnessed the progress of the XVIIIth century confident in the supremacy of reason and the perfectibility of man to the triumphant dawn of a Revolution which had ended in hysteria and massacre. His impoverished country which had once again found law, order and security with Bonaparte, knew with the Emperor a period of unlimited conquests, of hopes and ambitions, only to find itself, in 1816, ruined and depopulated as before but now humiliated and accepting an unloved and reactionary monarch. The epoch of the Restoration and of the July government was marked by a development of industry and by the rise and triumph of a new aristocracy and prosperous bourgeoisie.

But for the young, for the aspiring and the idealistic, it was a period of mediocrity and indifference. The artistic decade of 1830-1840 is characterised by the knowledge that in the past, all things have been tried and found wanting, that the old has died and that a better future is latent but yet undiscovered.¹ It is a period of confused desires, a passing moment of emotional extremes in optimism as much as in despair. This height of sentimental exaltation swiftly exhausted itself. It is customary and conventional to point out that from 1840 onwards, when Hugo, Sand and Lamartine were turning away from intimate self-revelation to wider social and humanitarian problems, with the development of organised knowledge and with the application of determinism to science and to criticism, there was an evolution towards greater realism and universality. The fissure becomes even more apparent with the 1848 Revolution and the exile of Victor Hugo, and by 1852, Théophile Gautier had published his Emaux et Camées, proclaiming the aesthetic reaction against Romantic subjectivity and the Parnassian cult of Art for Art's sake, already elaborated by Flaubert in his correspondence as early as 1842. With this aesthetic reaction which coincides with

¹ "Il est certain qu'il y a dans l'homme deux puissances occultes qui combattent jusqu'à la mort: l'une, clairvoyante et froide, s'attache à la réalité, la calcule, la pèse et juge le passé; l'autre a soif de l'avenir et s'élançe vers l'inconnu." A. de Musset. La confession d'un enfant du siècle. Chapter II.

Baudelaire's recoil from Nature and cult of the artificial, and also with the appearance of Flaubert's realistic novels, we can say that the Romantic movement, conscious of itself, assertive and militant, had come to an end. For this reason, we accept the years immediately preceding and following 1850 as a necessary limit in this study of Anatole France's literary criticism¹ and we are all the more tempted to do so as France himself appears to accept this purely arbitrary and conventional limit. In his study of the Romantic painter Jacobus Dubroquens in Pierre Nozière, France tells us that "Dubroquens touchait par son âge aux ^{derniers} romantiques et aux républicains de sentiment."² At the same time, we must remember that those emotional forces discovered and liberated by the later XVIII century and the first half of the XIXth century were assimilated by and became the property of human thought and creativeness and continue to influence us to this very day. Baudelaire who deliberately "cultivated his hysteria with joy and terror", Leconte de Lisle, Heredia, Loti, abandoning the study of grim, contemporary reality in order to seek inspiration in the past and the exotic orient, the Symbolists who convey the inexpressible, fleeting 'état d'âme'

¹ In the case of Victor Hugo and George Sand who led long and active lives and were the contemporaries of France, we are naturally obliged to go beyond this date.

² Pierre Nozière, p. 119.

through the media of poetry and music, Renan and Bourget, so sensitively aware of the spiritual disintegration of their time, are the direct inheritors of the Romantic movement - even as Anatole France himself. But before studying France as a mature critic, we must first see how greatly he was influenced by the Romantic spirit in his childhood and adolescence.

Anatole France was born in Paris in 1844, that is to say one year after the failure of Hugo's Les Burgraves and the first premonition of the Romantic decline. This city of his earliest years was the ancient Paris of crooked streets and quaint gardens, a city as yet unaffected by the vast schemes of Baron Haussmann. To the end of his life, France remembered this old world clearly and with emotion. He never ceased to regret its passing. His early childhood was a period of rhetorical idealism and of humanitarian impulses fostered by George Sand, Proudhon and Lamartine, but it was equally a period of realism and sharp irony: the age of Daumier and the Charivari. In his autobiographical novels,¹ France has left us vivid accounts of the historical characters who crossed the path of his childhood. In his daily walks with his nurse

¹ Le livre de mon ami (1885); Pierre Nozière (1889); Le Petit Pierre (1918); La Vie en fleur (1923). To these must be added a semi-autobiographical novel, Les desirs de Jean Servien (1882) and a posthumous article Fragment d'autobiographie in La Revue de France, November-December 1924.

on the banks of the Seine, he would meet the solitary, aged Chateaubriand, Béranger, walking jauntily with a rose in his button-hole, Jules Sandeau and Barbey d'Aurévilly. In his intimate family circle, France was made daily aware that the old world was breaking up under the impact of political changes and with the growth of science and determinism. His godfather, Jules Charavay, depicted in the autobiographies as Monsieur Danquin, was a rational and realistic bourgeois, who had little patience with romantic vagueness and idealism. But his own father, who had served in the Guard of Charles X, was a true 'fils du siècle'. France has left us many lively portraits of him: he was an idealist, verbose, vague, and impractical. He indulged in prolonged fits of melancholy and in the study of metaphysics. His gods were Chateaubriand and Lamartine and he wore the famous 'coup de vent' hair style of the former and the high stock of the latter. "Mon esprit," writes France, "se modela sur celui de mon père comme cette coupe moulée sur le sein d'une amante; il en reproduisit en creux les plus suaves rondeurs. Mon père se faisait de l'âme humaine et de sa destinée une idée sublime; il la croyait faite pour les cieux; cette foi le rendait optimiste. Mais dans le commerce ordinaire de la vie, il se montrait grave et parfois sombre. Comme Lamartine, il riait rarement, n'avait nul sens du comique, ne pouvait souffrir la caricature et ne goûtait ni Rabelais, ni La Fontaine. Enveloppé d'une sorte de

mélancolie poétique, il était vraiment un fils du siècle; il en avait l'esprit et l'attitude." ¹ France would have us believe that because Thibault père's romantic attitude conflicted at a very early age with his own tastes, he deliberately cultivated the rational and classical approach in opposition to his father, for although France has always spoken of him with affection and respect, he has equally stressed the tension and reserve in their relationship: "En m'ajustant sur lui, je devins pessimiste et joyeux, comme il était optimiste et mélancolique. En toutes choses, d'instinct, je m'opposais à lui. Il se plaisait avec les romantiques dans le vague et l'indéterminé. Je me mis à aimer la raison ornée et la belle ordonnance de l'art classique." ²

The evolution to a classical plane was in fact a far later occurrence and France has shown us abundantly that during the first twenty five years of his life, he was penetrated with the romantic spirit of his father's generation.

In his autobiographical novels, he has left us some colourful accounts of Romantic painters and writers, all survivors of the militant 1830's, who made on him a profound impression. There was Monsieur Ménage, the starving painter who lived in a squalid studio attic above the Thibault apartment and who, obliged to copy masterpieces in the Louvre to earn a living, would mutter with a sardonic smile that Raphael

¹ Le Petit Pierre, pp. 6 and 7.

² Le Petit Pierre, p.7

was a "toad" and Ingres "an old mandarin."¹ There was a familiar visitor, a certain poet M. Marc Ribert, "romantique chevelu, ~~font~~ de velours habillé et qui ronsardisait." Ribert would enter into endless discussions with Danquin, the rational godfather. For M. Danquin would affirm that Romanticism was a physical disorder like sleep-walking or epilepsy. But the young France was transported with enthusiasm when Marc Ribert would defend his cause: "C'est, disait Marc Ribert, l'oeuvre de révolte et de douleur; c'est le deuil amer mêlé à la fiévreuse recherche de l'infini; c'est le désespoir caché sous l'ironie la plus mordante." - Que sais - je encore? j'en frissonnais d'épouvante et d'admiration."²

Clearly, in these formative years, Anatole France was a highly impressionable child. Around him, he felt the presence of another world, a ghost-world peopled by demons and monsters and he was given to indulging in imaginative visions and grotesque fantasies. The autobiographical novels are filled with such recollections as these:

On Pierre, looking through a hole in the dining-room wall: "Je conçus l'idée que, derrière ce canevas grossier, recouvert de papier à rames, des êtres inconnus flottaient dans l'ombre, différents des hommes, des oiseaux, des poissons et des insectes, indistincts, subtiles, animés de pensées

¹ La Vie en Fleur, pp. 224-225.

² Ibid pp. 119-120

malveillantes." Or again at night: "Avant de m'endormir, je voyais de mon lit une troupe de petits hommes à grosses têtes, bossus, bancales, étrangement difformes, coiffés de feutres à plumes, le nez chaussé d'énormes lunettes rondes, qui tenaient divers instruments tels que broches, mandolines, casseroles, tambours de basque, scies, trompettes, béquilles, dont ils tiraient des sons étranges, en dansant des danses grotesques." "La nuit dans ma couchette, j'y voyais des figures étranges ... des légions de diables cornus y dansaient des rondes; puis lentement une femme de marbre noir passait en pleurant."¹ France later complained that he had lost the power of imagination but grotesque visions of this kind reappear constantly in Thais, Balthasar, l'Etui de nacre and Le Puits de Sainte Claire.

When France became a pupil at the Catholic Collège Stanislas in 1855, his school years were characterised by dreaminess, negligence and a keen response to the poetry of the past. At school, he fostered a sentiment of being apart from others. He heartily disliked his teachers and always maintained in later years that they were calculated to stifle in the young all artistic talent and feeling for beauty. This resentment was tenacious and abiding. In his old age, he remembered with bitterness, a certain 'cuisire' who with ascetic zeal tore from his text book a coloured illustration which he particularly

¹ Le Petit Pierre, pp. 16, 17, 58, 68, 73, 78, 113, 118.
Pierre Nozière, p. 115.

cherished. Thanks to the Collège Stanislas however, France became an excellent classical scholar, or as he says more modestly "un bon petit humaniste." His love of Antiquity was encouraged by his friendship with Louis de Ronchaud who frequented his father's bookshop¹ and by the elderly hellenist M. Dubois-Dubé who was connected with his family. The latter revealed to the young boy the beauty of Virgil and Horace and taught him that nothing worth reading had ever been written since the XVIIIth century.² This was an opinion that France frequently re-echoed in his years of maturity although neither in his writings nor his literary criticisms has he shown himself consistent on this point. We cannot fail to observe how greatly France's conception of Antiquity, both in his childhood and later years, was influenced by the nostalgic and idealised interpretation of his century. In class, visions of the Ancient world would appear to him with startling beauty. They were vivid, lingering images and naturally they were poeticised through his young and sensitive imagination. A few words of Livy pronounced in the dreary class-room would reveal to him all the splendour of the past: "Je voyais passer en silence, à la clarté de la lune, dans la campagne nue, sur une voie bordée de tombeaux, des visages livides, souillés de sang et de poussière, des casques bossués, des cuirasses

¹ La Vie littéraire I, p.217. ff. Louis de Ronchaud, souvenirs.

² La Vie en fleur. p. 206.

ternies et faussées, des glaives rompus."¹ Numerous too are his visions of ancient queens, in the evocation of which we feel already his sensuous cult of feminine beauty. When at meal times a pupil read aloud a passage from Rollin in which Cleopatra is depicted sailing to meet Anthony in a boat of purple and gold, "une image délicieuse emplît mes yeux. Le sang me battit aux tempes, ces grands coups qui annoncent la présence de la gloire et de la beauté. Je tombai dans un extase profond."²

In his adolescence, he began to haunt the Louvre and was reduced by the beauty of Greek sculpture to a state of wonder and despair: "Abîmé sur une banquette devant l'Arès Ludovisi, j'éprouvais une ardeur de vivre et de mourir, un mal délicieux une tristesse infinie, une ivresse d'horreur et de beauté; je sentais, en même temps un désir insensé de tout voir, de tout savoir, de tout connaître, de tout devenir, et en même temps l'envie de ne plus penser, l'ivresse de ne plus sentir, le charme de ne plus être."³

On leaving school, France was still under the spell of Romanticism. From 1860 to 1865, he was infatuated with a

¹ Le livre de mon ami, p. 151.

² From Anatole France's Preface to J. Cantel's La Reine Cleopâtre (1924), consulted in the Oeuvres complètes, Vol. XXV Pages d'histoire et de littérature, p. 135. The memory of this incident appears in Les désirs de Jean Servien, pp. 172-174.

³ La Vie en fleur. pp. 285-286.

young actress, Elise Devoyod, considered by Gautier to be a successor to Rachel. Although he did not meet her, France found consolation in idealising his love for her and in 1865 completed a manuscript of thirty eight poems. These unpublished lyrics are short and undistinguished. They express despair, longing and the fatality of passion, and in them clearly emerges the influence of Byron, of Gautier and particularly of Hugo. During this period, he began a romantic melodrama Sir Punch, whose hero, so reminiscent of Don César de Bazan, must awaken familiar echoes:

"Je suis le rire énorme, éternel, triomphant ...
Je me nomme révolte et j'ai le tâche austère
D'être un gant que Satan jette aux bons de la terre."¹

He wisely put away the manuscript after writing three scenes of this play but the influence of Hugo is still extremely marked in two poems of this period: Deny, tyran de Syracuse and Les légions de Varus, published in an obscure review, Le Chasseur bibliographe in 1867.

For ten years the episode of Elise Devoyod was not forgotten and France elaborated it in the semi-autobiographical Les désirs de Jean Servien, written in 1872, shortly after the Commune, but revised and published ten years later. Jean Servien was likened by Maurice Barrès to Flaubert's L'Éducation Sentimentale. Professor E.P. Dargan would trace the

¹ See Georges Girard. La jeunesse d'Anatole France, 1844-1876 (Paris: Gallimard, 1925). Chapters VII and VIII contain interesting extracts from the manuscripts of the early poems and Sir Punch. They now form part of the Noel Charavay Collection.

resemblance with Bourget's Le Disciple.¹ The connection is evident for all three novels deal with the perils of unrestrained imagination on young people emotionally dissatisfied and (under the influence of the epoch) with those fortuitous events that determine their fate. Jean Servien, the son of a poor book-binder is brought up amidst privations and despises his condition. He is reduced to the thankless role of a 'pion' in a religious establishment (clearly the Collège Stanislas) and continues to escape from unwelcome reality by filling his head with romantic literature and dreams of past splendour. "La littérature romantique lui avait inspiré beaucoup d'estime pour les courtisanes à condition qu'elles fussent accoudées mélancoliquement au balcon de leur palais de marbre."² Under the influence of an Italian adventurer, the marquis Tudesco, who teaches him that "opinions do not deserve the sacrifice of a single one of our desires," Jean develops an obsessional love for an actress Gabrielle, by whom he is shunned and humiliated. The final disillusion occurs when Jean who would have pardoned Gabrielle "des vices élégants, des monstruosités exquisés, des crimes romanesques",³ discovers that she is the

¹ M. Barres. La jeune France, tome V. May 1883: Anatole France. E.P. Dargan, Anatole France, 1844-1896 (New York, Oxford University Press, 1937) p. 235.

² Les désirs de Jean Servien, p. 116.

³ Ibid. p. 214.

mistress of the vulgar profiteer Bargemont. The shock results in a serious illness, after which Gabrielle becomes "a pale memory" and finally Jean is killed in the Commune during a scene of mob-violence.

Léon Carias considers this work the most personal of France's novels. E.P. Dargan states that it is "definitely confessional"¹. Although the events of the story are largely fictional, its sentiments are personal and many incidents are autobiographical: the idealised love for Gabrielle, if not its development, the memories of early dreams and dissatisfactions, the bleakness of life in a 'pensionnat', and the unforgettable experiences of the Commune which left Anatole France with a lasting aversion to passionate revolutionaries and mob-hysteria.

On reviewing La Vie en fleur, Edmund Gosse was struck by the "yeasty condition" which permeates this work,² and it is a remarkable fact that in the last novel that France published in his life-time, he should have remembered so distinctly the emotions of his adolescence. Some external influence was needed at this crucial moment to direct and to check the aimless, confused aspirations that are visible in the early, unpublished poems, in Les désirs de Jean Servien

¹ L. Carias. Anatole France (Paris: Rieder. 1931) p. 43.
E.P.Dargan. Anatole France. 1844-1896. op.cit. p.236.

² E. Gosse. Sunday Times. 6th August 1922.

and in the authentic, personal confessions of La Vie en fleur.

In 1867, France began working for the publisher Lemerre and wrote introductory essays for his reprints of famous authors.¹ The historical club-room above Lemerre's shop was the noisy meeting place of the first Parnassian group and France was soon admitted as an enthusiastic member. His Alfred de Vigny published in 1868² was quite possibly written with the intention of naming a spiritual ancestor for the Parnassians, although France does not explicitly formulate this intention in his work. Subsequently two of his poems La part de Magdeleine and La danse des morts were included in Le Parnasse contemporain of 1871. In 1873, he published in a separate edition his own contribution to the Parnasse: Les Poèmes dorés and the Idylles et Légendes.³ At this stage, France frequented Leconte de Lisle's salon and venerated the master. His authority became gradually more pronounced and in 1875, he appeared on the selection committee of the third Parnasse contemporain. His last and greatest poetic contribution was Les Noces Corinthiennes (1876) a drama based on Goethe's The Bride of Corinth.

¹ Many of these essays have been republished in Le Genie latin (1913).

² Alfred de Vigny (Paris: Bachelin-Deflorenne, 1868).

³ The complete edition of France's Parnassian poems was published by Lemerre in 1896 under the title of Poésies. In the present study, we have chosen the definite edition as our standard of reference.

In his Parnassian poems, France is strongly influenced by Leconte de Lisle in his already marked tendency to depict the conflict between Antiquity and Christianity. La Prise de voile¹ represents his first attempt to portray life as an Illusion, a succession of fleeting and ephemeral phenomena, and this eminently unstable view of the universe appears to be inspired by Leconte de Lisle's doctrine of the Maya. But in the same group of poems are to be found persistent echoes of Chénier, Hugo, de Vigny and Gautier. His sources are as usual numerous and diverse. His life-long interest in Darwin and Evolutionism begins to manifest itself at this stage of his development. The numerous poems in which France celebrates the fatal laws of existence and procreation, struggle for survival and death, all intimate at this early date his later contention that Love and Hunger are the two great poles of the universe.

From Anatole France's Parnassian training derives his responsiveness to pure form, clear, simple expression, and his higher, disinterested love of art. Alfred de Vigny, published in 1868, must solicit our attention for it shows that on the threshold of Parnassus, France had already decided that the Greek conception of measure, harmony and serenity was always to be preferred to romantic expansiveness and exuberance:

"Ce n'est pas une des moindres puissances du génie

¹ Poésies, op.cit. p.249.

d'Alfred de Vigny, d'avoir mis jusque sur le front de la passion une inaltérable sérénité. Une telle vie et une telle oeuvre nous déconcertent tout d'abord et peuvent même nous laisser froids; nous sommes habitués, enfants de ce siècle, à voir dans le sanctuaire des coeurs la flamme briser la lampe, les sentiments excessifs rompre, en éclatant, l'harmonie des lignes et des sons; nous avons vu la Muse de Byron se pâmer, se tordre, belle encore et hurler, non sans charme, ses ivresses et ses douleurs. La poésie moderne, si souple et si vraie, n'en est pas moins excessive et violente. Sa force éclate dans l'effort, et non, comme voulaient les Grecs, dans la sérénité et dans le repos même."¹

How greatly the Parnasse contributed to France's higher understanding of art may be observed in an article of this period published in L'Amateur d'Autographes. Commenting on the suicide of two obscure Romantic poets, Escousse and Lebras, a tragedy which resulted from the failure of their drama Pierre III in 1831, France esteems that they were too young and feeble to realise that the poet must create in an impersonal, selfless and disinterested manner: "Ils moururent comme une grisette parcequ'ils avaient compris l'art comme une grisette comprend la passion."² The Parnassian influence enabled him to discipline his style. Fernand Calmettes

¹ Alfred de Vigny. op.cit. pp. 2-3.

² L'Amateur d'Autographes. 16 April 1870. p. 121.

recalls in Leconte de Lisle et ses amis how in those early days, France encouraged Paul Bourget to seek 'le mot juste' after reading a few lines by Bourget in which the word "beau" had been used vaguely and indiscriminately:

"Ce n'est pas par l'emploi systématique de l'épithète générale qu'on élargit le rythme, qu'on donne au vers de l'étendue, c'est par la rigoureuse conformité de cette épithète avec la pensée dont elle participe."¹

Anatole France's Parnassian poems are very far from being devoid of sentiment or even of sentimentality² but his one theoretical contribution to the Parnasse shows that he would have liked to stretch the Parnassian conception of impersonality and pure form to its utmost limits. Fernand Calmettes mentions a paper read by France to his fellow poets and to Leconte de Lisle, in which he formulated the following theory: "Puisque toutes les fictions que peut rêver l'esprit humain ont été conçues dès les âges les plus anciens, puisque le premier homme doué de puissance intellectuelle a pu contenir dans son cerveau tout le fond de pensées sur lequel de siècles en siècles a vécu l'humanité, puisque rien n'est nouveau sous le soleil intellectuel, si l'art ne veut pas s'immobiliser dans la redite de vieux symboles, s'il veut être original et neuf, il faut

¹ F. Calmettes. Leconte de Lisle et ses amis. (Paris: Librairies Imprimeries réunies, 1902). p. 170.

² Poésies. op.cit. La dernière image. p. 99; L'Auteur à un ami. p. 259.

qu'il renonce au fond pour s'attacher exclusivement à la forme." ¹ This appears to be France's earliest attempt to depreciate the value of original sources on the very debatable grounds that there is nothing new to discover in human conduct, that all literary themes are communal property and that the true artist reveals himself in the manner that he selects and synthetises. We are told by Calmettes that France's theory was very favourably received by Leconte de Lisle and his disciples, but at the same time, we know that his Parnassian verse is anything but impersonal in content and original in form. Very characteristically, he continued in later writings and criticisms to formulate aesthetic opinions that he was by temperament incapable of putting into practice.

When the Parnassian group had disbanded and France became a celebrated journalist of Le Temps, he swiftly demolished all the Parnassians had taught him concerning the impersonality and the objectivity of the work of art. Leconte de Lisle with whom he finally quarrelled in 1890 was from 1887 onwards but a figure at whom to poke mischievous fun.² But through the Parnasse, France learnt the importance of measure and harmonious expression. In his search for clear and concise expression, in his pure and limpid prose, France remained to the end of his life a Parnassian in matters of form but he was very less

¹ F. Calmettes. Leconte de Lisle et ses amis. op.cit. p.214.

² La Vie littéraire. I.p 95. M. Leconte de Lisle à l'Académie française; Les Lettres. 14 February 1909.

successful in maintaining the Parnassian ideal from the point of view of sentiment and personal feeling.

CHAPTER II

On the nature of Anatole France's hostility to French Romanticism in his productive years. His use of the term 'romantic'.

No study of Anatole France as a critic of Romanticism can be made without a primary reference to the very conflicting manners in which he has been interpreted by two notable anti-romantic critics of our time: Charles Maurras and Ernest Seillière.

In his youth, Charles Maurras was a fervent admirer and disciple of France. As a result of France's staunch adherence to the Dreyfus cause and of his subsequent 'grand virage' to the Left Wing and Socialism, Maurras became estranged from him but he never ceased to venerate the writer whom he termed his 'Master'. He maintained that France was the greatest traditionalist of his country, the last and the purest of the Classicists. His Anatole France, politique et poète,¹ published on the occasion of France's eightieth birthday in 1924 was written with the sole purpose of illustrating this view. Inevitably, we find in this work the characteristic wilful blending of aesthetic and political convictions and ultimately Maurras is concerned mainly with proving that France is fundamentally a political reactionary. A notable chapter begins with the proud declaration: "Il ne sera pas

¹ C. Maurras. Anatole France, politique et poète. (Paris: Plon: 1924).

dit que l'Action française dont la doctrine doit beaucoup à M. Anatole France, ne sera point associée à la célébration du quatre-vingtième anniversaire de sa naissance."¹ Needless to say, France did not acknowledge his offspring and when in July 1922, reporters of the daily press sought to discover whether he would support Maurras' candidature to the French Academy, they made much of his blunt and provocative refusal: "Il n'a pas une personnalité littéraire telle qu'elle puisse forcer mon vote; aucune comparaison avec Fontenelle, Voltaire ou Hugo." For France believed that life was too variable and elusive to be founded on any rational concept of law and conduct. Marcel Le Goff has noted this opinion once expressed by the Master on his disciple Maurras:

"C'est un esprit systématique, un doctrinaire. Il croit que la vie, le monde et plus particulièrement la France peuvent se construire, se faire ou se refaire suivant un système déduit selon les règles les plus strictes de la logique et de la raison. Quelle erreur! La vie déborde les systèmes, elle ne s'adapte à aucun. Plus le système est intellectuellement et rationnellement déduit, moins il a de prise sur la vie."²

Another noted anti-romantic critic of this century, M. Ernest Seillière has adopted a view that is diametrically

¹ C. Maurras. op. cit. Chapter III. p. 31.

² M. Le Goff. Anatole France à la Bechellerie. Propos et souvenirs. 1914-1918. (Revised edition. Paris. Delteil 1947) p. 302.

opposed to the judgment of Charles Maurras. All who are familiar with the literary studies of M. Seillière, know the insistence with which he maintains that Romanticism is still the "religion of our time" because it has been the common tendency of writers since the days of Rousseau to adopt his "mystical naturism" and to reject Reason and past experience for the knowledge of a supernatural "ally" who sanctions and aids the human effort towards expansion and survival and is ready to justify all emotional, aesthetic and social aspirations.¹ Mystical naturism, according to M. Seillière, divides itself in post-revolutionary France into passionate or erotic mysticism, followed by social and aesthetic mysticism, and in Germany into a religion that is aesthetic and racial. But Reason, he affirms, is the slowly elaborated synthesis of human experience throughout the ages, tested and maintained by the élite, the leaders. He calls for a return to order and to rational control. M. Seillière has illustrated the danger of the chimeric and emotional element in his studies of Anatole France and more recent writers.² In his

¹ E. Seillière. Sur la psychologie du romantisme français (Paris Edit: de la nouvelle Revue critique 1933). A valuable account of Ernest Seillière's philosophy may be consulted in French studies. July 1952: Ernest Seillière, a French critic of the Romantic movement, by W.M. Landers.

² E. Seillière. Emile Zola (Paris: Grasset, 1923); Marcel Proust (Edit. de la Nouvelle Revue française 1931); D.H. Lawrence et les récentes idéologies allemandes (Boivin, 1936) La jeunesse d'Anatole France and Anatole France, critique de son temps (Edit de la Nouvelle Revue critique. 1934).

two studies on Anatole France he has strikingly chosen this writer as the most typical representative of "the fifth rousseauist generation." Anatole France, he declares, is the direct emotional and literary descendant of Rousseau. To justify this thesis, M. Seillière examines France's published works, pointing out the influence of mystical naturism in France's cult of paganism, Beauty, eroticism, of the down-trodden and the oppressed, with a strong insistence on the "immoral" teachings of France and on what he terms rather ponderously his "romantic anti-intellectualism."

The very unsecure foundations of M. Seillière's general theories have already been sufficiently discussed and demolished by distinguished critics¹ and it must already be apparent that the term "mystique" applied even in its most extended and artificial sense to a non-believer and to such a deliberate and conscious writer as France, cannot on any account be accepted. But from the examples provided by Charles Maurras and Ernest Seillière, we perceive that two noted reactionaries who believe firmly that the genius of French literature can only thrive under rational control, have by moulding France to their rigid systems, interpreted him in the most contradictory manner, and France continues to belie their

¹ J. Maritain. Trois réformateurs (Paris: Plon 1925). pp. 159-161; H. Bergson. Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion (Paris: Alcan. 1932). pp. 335-336 etc.

judgment as he must elude all definitions. Yet even though these two critics are guided by extra-literary convictions, they could not have arrived at their conclusions if France had not given them ample motive and afforded them numerous illustrations for their respective theories in his own thought and writings.

Anatole France is a writer who loves the life and the art of Antiquity, of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries with such intensity that from his devotion to these epochs, he is able to formulate an aesthetic ideal that is wholly classical. At the same time, he possesses an active and contemporary mind. He is a modern in the fullest sense of the word. At times, this would-be Classicist expresses the spiritual conflicts of his century in terms so eloquent and despairing that we may discern in his writings clear echoes of Lamartine, Hugo and de Vigny. No writer of his generation has so willingly exalted instinctive and emotional behaviour to the detriment of reason and the intellect than France. As a Classicist, he underates originality and his own imaginative powers because he holds that true creativeness lies in the harmonious blending of known sources, and yet the dream-element, the love of fantasy and the grotesque are constantly betrayed in his writings. Satan, the supreme champion of freedom and revolt is so frequent an intruder in his tales and novels that Maximilian Rudwin has named France "our great contemporary

diabolist." ¹ These are but a few of the incongruous and contradictory features of his thought. If France had applied to literary criticism, the scientific and objective method of Brunetière, these very incongruities could be overlooked, but we know that France was the most deliberately subjective of critics. Very often, when seeking to interpret the personality of a writer, he conveys nothing but his own disillusion and pessimism. Anatole France's entire personality is reflected in his literary criticisms and we cannot divorce these from his life. Therefore, before studying his criticisms of individual Romantic writers, we must seek to discover in the present chapter how greatly the love of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries affected his condemnation of Romanticism. We must then place him in his own century and study those emotional features of his thought that determine his affinities with the French Romantics and influence his sympathetic and constructive approach to these writers. ²

How greatly has France's devotion to the XVIIth century affected his approach to Romanticism? In his mature years, he was completely under the spell of Racine, and as he grew older, the cult of Racine became a possession. Towards the end of his life, he wrote the beautiful invocation to the poet

¹ Maximilian Rudwin. The Devil in legend and literature. (London: Open Court 1931) p. 86.

² Chapters III to VI of this study.

which contains a whole-hearted condemnation of the romantic divagations of his own youth: "Ce n'est que peu à peu, en avançant dans la vie que j'ai appris à vous connaître et à vous aimer. Corneille n'est près de vous qu'un habile déclamateur, et je ne sais si Molière lui-même est aussi vrai que vous, ô maître souverain, en qui réside toute vérité et toute beauté! Dans ma jeunesse, gâté par les leçons de ces barbares romantiques, je n'ai pas compris tout de suite que vous étiez le plus profond comme le plus pur des tragiques, mes regards manquaient de force pour contempler votre splendeur." ¹ This love of Racine which extends in a less marked degree to Molière, to La Fontaine and to Madame de Lafayette, does not constitute an exclusive cult of the 'grand siècle.' France had no predilection for Corneille, he found Boileau uninspiring, he admired the eloquence but not the thought of Bossuet, ² and although he occasionally echoed the Pensées, he nourished a personal hostility to Pascal's sombre asceticism. ³ The truth is that the XVIIth century did not offer him a wholly acceptable way of life. He would refer to the cruelty of this epoch, and to the abuses and oppressions of the reign of Louis XIV. ⁴ In a youthful article, we find him attacking

¹ Le Petit Pierre, p.330. ² La Révolte des Anges. p.189.

³ La Vie littéraire IV. pp 209-222.

⁴ N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France (Paris: Charpentier. 1925) pp.115-116; Dernières conversations avec Anatole France on les Mélancolies de l'intelligence. (Paris: Charpentier-Fasquelle 1927) p.76.

the "grotesque and hateful" person of Louis XIV and condemning the XVIIth century as "ferocious and unclean".¹ Later, he came to look back on it with affectionate regard, to realise that it was a period of refinement and moderation, a time when the French language was at its best and purest. Therefore, although he believed the XVIIth century to be too tyrannical and too greatly ruled by Christian dogma to offer him an ideal conception of existence, he knew it to be an epoch of artistic perfection and he believed that it could afford his own time a valuable lesson in restraint, measure and courtesy: "En réalité ils (les Classique) eurent comme nous leurs haines et leurs amours, leurs joies, leurs colères: ils menèrent de longues querelles. Je ne songe qu'à ce qui se passa dans les lettres. La lutte de Boileau contre Chapelain, vers 1667, et la dispute des anciens et des modernes, vingt ans plus tard, furent aussi vives, aussi acharnées que les combats des classiques et des romantiques en 1830 et plus récemment les polémiques de l'école naturaliste. Au dix-septième siècle, la colère elle-même était sage et la passion mesurée. Hélas, nous avons perdu le grand air, la politesse et la raison sereine de nos pères. Aujourd'hui, le plus petit écolier connaît mieux que Nicolas les vicissitudes de la vieille planète, les longs travaux des hommes et les figures diverses des peuples. Nous possédons une

¹ L'Amateur d'Autographes. 1 February 1869. p. 43.

philosophie terrible de la vie et Nicolas nous semble un vieil enfant honnête et têtue. Nous sommes infiniment plus instruits et plus intelligents que les beaux esprits du grand siècle. Mais ils étaient raisonnables et nous sommes insensés; ils étaient sains et nous sommes malades. Faut-il donc périr quand on a acquis tant de richesses?"¹

With the example of the 'grand siècle', Anatole France could offer the Romantic generations lessons in moderation and formal perfection but to present an ideal conception of existence, he turned to the century their own fathers had known and in the XVIIIth century he found an art of conducting human affairs that corresponded most satisfyingly with his own temperament. Too much has been written on the manner in which Anatole France was impregnated with the thought of the XVIIIth century rationalists and sceptics for us to discuss at length his profound understanding of the 'philosophes'.² Above all he extolled the rationalist philosophers for their humanitarian ideals of justice and freedom and their wide tolerance, but he loved the XVIIIth century in all its aspects and to the most intimate and refined details of its daily life. No modern has been so true to the spirit of the XVIIIth century or has interpreted so faithfully its historical and social atmosphere as

¹ Le Temps. 4 November 1888. A review of Nicolas Boileau by F. Brunetière and Boileau by E. Deschanel.

² H.E. Whittle. The influence of Voltaire on A. France. Thesis for Ph.D. London, 1939.

France in Les Opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard and La Rotisserie de la reine Pédauque. He once told Nicolas Ségur that when the strain of modern life became too great, he retired to that century as to his "country seat," for it afforded him dignity, and ease without vulgarity.¹ He loved its dilige-
 tantism and its spirit of enquiry as much as its sensuality and light frivolity. How wisely, how sensibly and yet how gracefully the society of this time conducted their affairs. They established a new era of universal rationalism and criticism and yet they welcomed refinement and the voluptuous indulgence of the senses. The sensual cult of 'life for life's sake' which is so important a feature of Anatole France's thought could find its full gratification in this indulgent epoch. To the women of this time, he never ceased to pay homage. They were cultured and yet they bore their learning with ease and grace. We cannot wonder then if France condemned Rousseau the Utopist for he believed that with the fall of the guillotine a brilliant world had come to an end. Surveying the writers of his own century, he realised that one thing was seriously lacking and that was humour: "Parmi ceux-là les uns ont la douceur, les autres la force. Aucun la gaieté. La littérature ne rit plus depuis un siècle."²

France has always stressed the fact that the healthy,

¹ N. Ségur. Anatole France anecdotique. (Paris: Michel 1929) pp. 28-29.

² La Vie littéraire. I. p.54.

philosophical attitude of the previous centuries had degenerated in his time into a morbid, unpleasant illness. He knew the causes of the XIXth century malady and he did not consider himself exempt from it but he could not understand the romantic tendency to claim suffering as a pass-word to immortality: "Parlant encore de la sensibilité fouguese, extrême du dix-septième siècle," writes Nicolas Ségur, "France raconta pour moi qui l'ignorait l'anecdote du souper d'Autueil tel que le fils de Racine l'a raconté et où Chapellet et Boileau étant chez Molière et discutant avec lui sur les maux qu'implique l'existence, furent tellement grisés par la mélancolie de leurs paroles qu'ils descendirent pour aller se noyer philosophiquement dans les eaux de la Seine. Ils s'en approchaient déjà lorsque Molière les retint, les invitant à réfléchir encore.

Oui, continua France, c'étaient des êtres vraiment inspirés, emportés, délicatement mais réellement sensibles, obéissant à l'harmonie et non à la vulgarité ni à la violence, comme nous autres les fils spirituels de Rousseau."¹

France could not condone the tendency of XIXth century criticism to interpret the eternal griefs of the great creations of Racine and Molière in terms of romantic aspirations and melancholy. To such figures as Phèdre or Alceste, he had

¹ N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. op. cit. p.116

a realistic and even a naturalistic approach.¹ For him, Phèdre was not so much the immortal, languorous figure as "une grande princesse étonnée et offensée qu'on osât résister à ses désirs."² On the subject of Molière, he deprecated the XIXth century tendency to stress the suffering behind the laughter and to interpret the misfortunes of Alceste in terms of the great comedian's intimate griefs. An article written in 1869, when France was in full Parnassian bloom, already emphasises the point that he was never tired of elaborating in later years: "Regnier était de cette race gauloise dont la poésie n'est point lyrique mais dont la langue solide et la conception nette sont parfaitement conformes à ce génie français que l'invasion du germanisme depuis a troublé en même temps qu'agrandi. Regnier et Molière sont de la même race robuste et joyeuse. Je ne sais si l'on en viendra à trouver Régnier mélancolique et lacrymatoire mais je n'ai jamais pu comprendre, pour ma part, par quel effort toute une génération, celle de 1830, a pu trouver des sanglots et des larmes sous le rire franc de Molière."³ Alceste was

¹ La Vie littéraire IV p.14: "Racine qui fut ^{le} plus audacieux, le plus terrible et le plus vrai des naturalistes..."

² Le Lys Rouge. (The journal of the Société Anatole France) October 1938: Souvenirs inédits de Georges Renard.

³ L'Amateur d'Autographes. 16 February 1869, p.60.

naturally the first to suffer through misrepresentation. Claude Aveline and Paul Gsell have noted France's insistence on this point: "Il est si rare de n'être pas trahi par ses interprètes. Voyez l'aventure qui arrive à Molière. Son misanthrope est un jeune gigolo dont les fureurs et les jérémiades nous semblent comiques. Or, on en fait un homme grave et sage, revenu de tout."¹ "Ce sont les romantiques qui lui ont prêté leur spleen. Ils en ont fait un beau ténébreux, un Manfred, un Lara, un Obermann. Ils l'ont dénaturé... Alceste est un blanc-bec et la drôlerie, c'est que ce fréluquet qui devrait être tout à l'insouciance de sa jeunesse, se mêle de débiter à un chacun des sentences morales."² In a lively article, written in 1885, France develops this idea with that unusual blending of historical erudition and contemporary thought which is so typical of his journalistic period. The occasion on which he comments is the banquet of the Molière Society: "Nos amis les Moliéristes, présides par M. Arsène Houssaye et Edouard Thierry, viennent de fêter le grand poète dans un nouveau banquet. C'est fort bien fait à eux et je m'associe à leur culte tant qu'ils ne s'attendriront pas sur les mésaventures domestiques de Molière et qu'ils ne considéreront pas ce grand comique comme un précurseur de la

¹ Le Lys Rouge (the journal of the Société Anatole France): A. France et le cinéma by Claude Aveline. April 1939.

² P. Gsell. Les matinées de la Villa Said. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1921) pp. 190-193.

Révolution française. Mais ils ne me feront jamais plaindre Molière d'avoir été ce que l'a fait sa femme. 'Trop jeune le prit', comme dit la chanson. D'ailleurs Molière était philosophe comme disent ses amis et jovial, comme ne le disent point ses amis depuis que la jovialité a passé de mode. Il semble avoir pris fort gaiement ses mésaventures domestiques. Quant à celles de M. de Montespan, on voit par l'Amphitryon, qu'il les prit mieux encore, et s'en moqua en vieux Gaulois comme en bon courtisan. Je crains, voyez-vous, qu'à force d'admiration nos bons Moliéristes n'en viennent à attrister Molière. N'est-ce pas l'acteur Beauvallet qui lui disait, il y a trente ans, dans un beau compliment:

"Tu riais au théâtre et pleurais dans ton coeur!"

"Où avait-il vu cela, Beauvallet? Où trouve-t-on que Molière était mélancolique? Nulle part. Ce sont là des inventions du romantisme. Il y a un moliérisme qui est le mien et qui consiste à admirer un peu moins Molière et à le comprendre un peu plus."¹

Nothing more clearly exemplifies France's adherence to the classical ideal than his personal conception and interpretation of the terms 'genius', 'talent', 'originality', 'imagination' and 'creativity'. France recoiled from ostentation and emphasis. He considered that a writer should be modest, self-effaced, thoughtful and extremely conscious of

¹ L'Univers Illustré, 24 January 1885.

the creative process. In his preface to the poems of Sainte-Beuve, he unhesitatingly prefers the latter's intimate and mediocre poetry to romantic truculence and sonority: "Depuis la Révolution, le Français est devenu terriblement emphatique. Ce sont les mots sonores et non les sentiments profonds qui le touchent.... Dans tous les genres il nous faut des Marseillaises."¹ He was extremely wary of the misused and relative term 'genius'. He spent his life amongst books and yet he never considered that writing was a great vocation or a 'divine mission'. He demanded that the writer should be painstaking and always humble. In spite of the many criticisms that have been levelled against France since his death, none have contested and many have emphasized his extreme modesty in the face of adulation.² In an interesting article of Le Temps, France reviews a work by Charles Richet in which the latter, in accordance with the scientific spirit of the time, had attempted to furnish a physiological explanation of genius and had pronounced it akin to madness. France considers the changing meanings of the terms genius and talent, and rejects the modern conception of the former as being both senseless and harmful to the great work of art:

¹ Le Génie latin. Sainte-Beuve poete. p.341.

² See Le Lys Rouge. 1 October 1933. La modestie d'Anatole France, by Michel Corday: "Il en éprouvait toujours une sorte de gêne qu'il dissimulait par une plaisanterie ou quelque autre diversion." N.Ségur. Dernières conversations: "Il avait habituellement horreur de parler de son art, de ses livres."

"Autrefois on appelait génie une disposition naturelle aux choses.

"Le génie de la Princesse Palatine," dit Brouet, "se trouva également propre aux divertissements et aux affaires." Le génie c'est le naturel. On n'en attendait point d'effets merveilleux, on n'y attachait pas de mystérieuses vertus. Dans le sens le plus favorable, c'était une aptitude spéciale aux lettres, aux arts, aux sciences. C'était un beau naturel. Nous avons changé cela. Le mysticisme romantique et l'orgueil littéraire ont fait du génie une sorte de Saint-Esprit dont le souffle, inspirant les élus, leur communique l'infailibilité, et assure à leurs écrits une supériorité analogue à celle que les chrétiens accordent aux livres canoniques. C'est là un des effets du sentiment religieux qui a envahi la littérature depuis Chateaubriand, Lamartine et Victor Hugo. Désormais, le génie est comme la grâce: il suffit à faire des élus et l'on n'est sauvé que par lui." Then, after a development in which France defines the work of a 'talented' poet "des vers composés avec intelligence et réflexion par un esprit en possession de soi-même," he concludes: "Mais si M. Charles Richet a bien choisi son exemple, si la poésie romantique n'est comme j'en ai peur qu'un formidable et vain assemblage de mots, je n'admirerais qu'avec un mélange d'inquiétude et de malaise les prodiges de ce chaos où la pensée n'a pas lui. Et si c'est là le génie, je préférerais

le talent au génie, on du moins je me plairai à la contemplation du génie que quand le talent l'aura instruit et poli. Serait-ce parcequ'il est inconscient qu'il faut mettre le génie au-dessus du talent? Mais à ce compte, les mouvements reflexes qui accompagnent les fonctions les plus vulgaires de la vie seraient réputés plus admirables que les attitudes savantes d'une danseuse et que les gestes longuement médités d'une tragédienne."¹

In his valuable philological study Four Words, Logan Pearsall Smith has shown us that the loosely applied terms 'genius' 'originality' and 'creativeness' are eminently modern contributions to aesthetic vocabulary.² France tends to use these

¹ Le Temps. 6 January 1889.

² Logan Pearsall Smith. Four Words: Romantic, Originality, Creativeness, Genius. (London. Clarendon Press. 1924). The XVIIIth century, affirms the author, ignored these words in literary criticism because of their solemn religious association and preferred the term 'invention', or the conscious observation and imitation of nature. English writers of the XVIIIth century, Dryden, Addison, Young perceiving in their own literature imaginative and affective elements that could not be ascribed to conscious imitation, adopted the terms 'original' and 'creative' which, at first used sporadically, became current in the second half of their century. The modern conception of 'genius', the creator endowed with supernatural power was popularised by Young in his Conjectures on original composition (1759). The translations of these critics strongly influenced the metaphysical aesthetics of Kant and the Sturm und Drang period and thence the new terms became watchwords in the romantic poetical vocabulary.

terms in an extremely deliberate and reactionary manner and in doing so is clearly influenced by the classical centuries. He is opposed to excessive individuality in literature. In his earliest literary study, Alfred de Vigny (1868), he already shows a marked tendency to define and thereby to limit the unknown potentialities of originality and creativeness.

Referring to de Vigny's youthful poems and his imitation of André Chénier, he affirms: "Le génie lui-même commence par imiter; son originalité s'affirme par degrés. Au lieu de réunir avec effort les membres épars, son légitime butin, et d'en former, comme il faisait d'abord, un tout où les parties primitives trahissent leur origine et leur destination étrangère, le génie de ces mêmes membres pris ou il lui plaît, fait un être vivant, harmonieux et doué d'une existence propre. C'est là toute l'originalité du génie."¹

Therefore, artistic creativeness is merely a superior form of imitation, a masterly and harmonious blending of known sources. This view could only be strengthened by France's adherence to the Sensationalist philosophy of Condillac. In L'Essai sur les connaissances Humaines (1746), Condillac denied any real creative power to genius. Its activity for him consisted in the ability to combine in new relations the data already provided by sensory experience. That France was influenced by Condillac's Sensationalism at

¹ Alfred de Vigny (1868) op. cit. pp. 23-24.

an early age is evident in his curious treatise on poetry read to Leconte de Lisle's salon. Constantly and repeatedly in later writings he affirms man's impossibility to discover the unknown world that exists outside sensory experience. In his Dialogue sur les contes de fées, his mouthpiece Octave, attempting to rationalise the origin of all fairy tales and legends, holds the view that the imagination is not a creative but a synthetic faculty, assembling material already provided by the five senses.¹

From his dislike of emphasis and extreme originality, from his belief that the creative powers must be deliberate and controlled, France is able to formulate a literary 'profession de foi' that is wholly classical. In his open letter to Charles Morice, the Symbolist poet who sought his opinion on the trends of contemporary literature, he declares that the writer must be clear, natural and simple in the expression of his thoughts. He must shun excessive individuality and write for a wide public: "Ne nous faisons ni trop rares ni trop singuliers. Soyons naturels, soyons vrais. Effaçons-nous, afin qu'on voie en nous pas un homme mais tout l'homme. Ne nous torturons pas: les belles choses naissent facilement. Oublions-nous: nous n'avons d'ennemi que nous-mêmes."²

¹ Le livre de mon ami, p. 276. "L'homme est absolument incapable d'imaginer ce qu'il n'a ni vu, ni entendu, ni senti, ni goûté. Je ne me mets pas à la mode et m'en tient à mon vieux Condillac

² La Vie littéraire, II, p. 200.

On the subject of language and style, France became convinced towards the end of his life that Paul-Louis Courier and Béranger were the only authors to have written pure and correct French in his own century. In his study on Stendhal, he commends Paul-Louis Courier for having composed an artificial language from the archaisms of Amyot and La Fontaine and makes the uncompromising statement: "Tout auteur du commencement du XIXe siècle, Chateaubriand aussi bien que Marchangy, tout auteur dis-je, écrivait mal à l'exception du seul Paul-Louis Courier..."¹ "Pour la syntaxe," he told his secretary Brousson, "le chansonnier Béranger est bien supérieur à Victor Hugo. Sa langue est beaucoup plus pure, nette, française."² This extreme view cannot fail to astonish when we consider that France was deeply influenced by the literary styles of his century, particularly in lyrical and descriptive passages. But although practice does not show him to have despised romantic lyricism, he makes some attempt both in his study on Stendhal, and in his Conversations with Nicolas Ségur, to explain why the language of the XIXth century had degenerated beyond measure. The French language of the XVIth century, nourished by the fertile sources of Latin and Greek, produced the rich and varied styles of Amyot, Rabelais

¹ Stendhal (Paris: Les amis d'Edouard. 1920) p. 34.

² J.J.Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles (Paris: Crès. 1924.) p. 176.

and Montaigne. In sheer beauty there was nothing to compare with these styles but the XVIth century language was still dependent on its sources and possessed no unique personality. The XVIIth century pruned and impoverished the language but at the expense of richness and variety, its writers discovered the distinct personality of French: clarity, harmony and suppleness. Towards all great writers of the XVIIIth century, France reveals the same admiration and he concedes that Rousseau wrote as well as Montesquieu and Voltaire. (On this point, he was always very consistent). The language first began to degenerate under the influence of the Revolutionary orators but amongst these there were a few notable exceptions and Camille Desmoulins, according to France, was the author of the last well-written pamphlet in the French language.¹ Whereas the writers of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries revealed their individuality in the selection and the clear order of their ideas, XIXth century authors sought originality in words, expressions and distorted syntax: "Il (le XIXe siècle) a introduit des mots, des sonorités, mais sans avoir la force de les rendre organiques. **Je** ne vois pas en quoi Chateaubriand, Flaubert, - je ne parle même pas de Hugo - peuvent prétendre à la variété sans effort d'un Montaigne ou d'un Rabelais. Ils n'ont pas réellement enrichi la langue tandis qu'ils lui ont fait perdre de ses qualités

¹ Stendhal. op. cit. pp. 35-39.

musicales."¹

We have dwelt at length on these eminently classical and reactionary features of Anatole France's thought because they appear to inspire his ironical shafts, the favourite 'boutades' aimed at the Romantic movement. "Il a dit un jour à un ami qui pourrait en témoigner: le romantisme c'est la liquéfaction de l'esprit français," writes Jacques Roujon.² "La guerre et le romantisme, fléaux effroyables," echoes the satyr Nectaire in La Révolte des Anges.³

Although the term romantic, as an epithet or a noun is used by France in an extremely wide and loose manner, it almost invariably has a playful or derisory connotation. It serves to designate some form of excess, a morbid or grotesque imagination, ridiculous conduct or lack of self-control. "Nos grand's mères étaient romantiques," he writes in La Vie Littéraire. "Leur imagination aspirait aux passions tragiques."⁴ On the childhood of Chateaubriand and Lucile, he observes:

¹ N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. op. cit. p. 118. This belief has been shared by others: Lemaître's last letter to France contained the sentence: "Gardez-vous de croire que depuis le XVIIe siècle on ait jamais écrit en Français. (M. Le Goff. A.F. à la Bechellerie. op. cit. p. 18.) Paul Valéry notes: "un appauvrissement fâcheux de la syntaxe qui se réduit peu à peu à un très petit nombre de formes jusqu'à donner chez certains écrivains du XIXe siècle et non des moindres, l'impression d'une parfaite monotonie." (F. Lefèvre. Entretiens avec Paul Valéry. op. cit. p. 118.)

² J. Roujon. La Vie et les opinions d'Anatole France. op. cit. p. 230. France was intimately connected with the author's father (the writer Henri Laujol) and his circle.

³ La Révolte des Anges. p. 251. ⁴ La Vie littéraire. IV. p. 10.

"Ils s'échappaient, couraient sur la plage; les piliers d'un vieux gibet leur servaient à jouer aux quatres coins. Ce trait comme tous ceux que je reproduis ici, appartient à Chateaubriand et révèle une imagination terriblement romantique."¹

When Madame Bergeret was scorned by her husband and left to the mercies of a half-witted servant girl Marie, "elle devenait romantique par excès d'infortune et se représentait dans l'ombre de la nuit cette Marie lui versant un poison préparé par M. Bergeret."²

The use of the epithet is perhaps the most striking in France's portrait of Flaubert: "Romantique, il le fut dans l'âme. Au collège, il couchait un poignard sous l'oreiller. Jeune homme, il arrêtait son tilbury devant la maison de campagne de Casimir Delavigne et montait sur la banquette pour crier à la grille 'des injures de bas-voyou.' Dans une lettre à un ami de la première heure, il saluait en Néron 'L'homme culminant du monde ancien....' C'est assurément au romantisme qu'il doit ses plus magnifiques absurdités."³

And of course, it is tempting to use the term in connection with Zola, thus interpreting in mocking tones one of Zola's own admissions: "Il voit gros, quelquefois même il voit grand. Il pousse au type et vise au symbole. En voulant copier, le maladroit invente et crée!.... Il devine et c'est dans la divination qu'il se plaît. Il a des visions, des hallucinations de solitaire. Il anime la matière inerte et donne une pensée

¹ Le Génie Latin. p. 306. ² Le Mannequin d'osier. pp.347-348

³ La Vie littéraire. III. p. 304.

aux choses. C'est à Medan que se cache le dernier des romantiques." ¹

Such ironical shafts have given rise to the belief that France was a fore-runner of Pierre Lasserre and that he was wholly biased against the Romantic movement. Jacques Roujon sets out to prove that France was at heart a reactionary in literary and political conviction: "un réactionnaire a la conviction que la France ne date pas de 1789, il garde un goût prononcé pour les littératures grecques et latines et se méfie du romantisme." ² Even such eminent authorities on France as E.P.Dargan and Leon Carias have stressed France's hostility to Romanticism. "To the end of his life," writes E.P.Dargan, "France scarcely ceases to inveigh against the many faults of the school which he characteristically signalizes as unstable equilibrium, excess, lack of taste, ungoverned feeling and too much imagination - 'la folle du logis.'" ³ According to Leon Carias, de Vigny was "the only Romantic whom France truly admired." ⁴ But when we turn to France's criticisms of individual Romantic writers, we see that he was very far from being biased or one-sided. Lamartine, de Vigny, de Musset and George Sand are four writers whom France

¹ La Vie littéraire I, pp 75-76.

² J. Roujon. La Vie et les opinions d'Anatole France. op.cit. p.211.

³ E.P.Dargan. Anatole France 1844-1896. op. cit. p.201.

⁴ L. Carias. Les Carnets intimes d'Anatole France. op.cit. p.121.

so constantly exalts that in many articles he appears to have surpassed 'la mesure' and to have sinned in the direction of indiscriminating and whole-hearted enthusiasm. His studies of Constant, Stendhal and Mérimée are entirely sympathetic and constructive. Rousseau, Chateaubriand and Hugo, the robust exponents of the first three Romantic generations, are the only authors whom France approaches in a negative and prejudiced manner. But although France shows very little sympathy for Chateaubriand in particular, in his studies of Rousseau and Hugo may still be found much appreciative criticism.

It cannot come as a surprise to any student of France that he should condemn Romanticism in dogmatic pronouncements and at the same time extol so many of its notable literary interpreters. From his deep devotion to Antiquity, to the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, France formulates an aesthetic ideal that is wholly classical. He tends to define, to delimit and to control the creative process. He asks that the writer should be thoughtful, self-effaced and universally understood. But whatever positive theory France elaborates on literary criticism and on life itself rests on very insecure and unstable foundations. As a disciple of Renan, his thought is penetrated with the contemporary sense of relativity. His very theory of Impressionistic criticism makes explicit the view that all literary tastes are relative, that the critic

cannot commit himself to any definite judgment and may only convey that particular impression of beauty conveyed by the work of art in a passing moment. There is nothing more unstable than his conception of life as an Illusion, a succession of fleeting and ephemeral dreams. After making a clear distinction between genius and talent and stating a marked preference for deliberate creativeness, France shows himself to be quite incapable of maintaining his preference: "Leconte de Lisle vent tout devoir au talent, Lamartine ne demandait rien qu'an génie ... pourtant je les admire l'un et l'autre bien sincèremment." ¹ Or again: "Ceux qui font des chefs-d'oeuvres ne savent pas ce qu'ils font; leur état de bienfaiteur est plein d'innocence." ² He attempts to maintain the ancient dualism between classical measure and romantic excess, yet the important Prefaces to the second and third volumes of La Vie littéraire dwell almost exclusively on the theme that a systematic and doctrinal approach to literary criticism is abhorrent to his temperament: he wishes to retain only the first, spontaneous impression of beauty created by all literary works, "le doux étonnement." At all times, France appears to be aware of his contradictory attitude and rejoices in the charges of inconsistency levelled against him by his critics, "tant il est vrai que l'âme

¹ La Vie littéraire, I. p.97.

² Ibid. Preface to Vol.II. p.XI.

humaine est un abîme de contradictions."¹

This very instability and sense of relativity characterise his approach to Romanticism. His understanding of its individual exponents is largely benevolent and constructive because his real desire is to enjoy all forms of beauty, and very characteristically, to reconcile opposites. The literary disputes of the previous decades, he knew, were dead and forgotten and it was the privilege of his time to look back upon all phases of the past with the same understanding and affection: "Il y a une oeuvre, entres autres, dont je sais infiniment de gré à mes contemporains. C'est d'avoir déployé cette intelligence heureuse qui pardonne et reconcilie. Ils ont terminé les querelles littéraires que le romantisme avait furieusement allumées. Grâce à nos maîtres Saint-Beuve et Taine, grâce à nous aussi, ils est permis aujourd'hui d'admirer toutes les formes du beau."² Elsewhere in La Vie littéraire, he speaks of himself and of his contemporaries as "nous qui n'avons vu que le triomphe du romantisme et la pacification un peu 'morne' de l'empire des lettres," and he did, at all times, derive much amusement and pleasure from the famous disputes of the 1830's.

In the course of his journalistic career, France met and conceived a deep affection for two elderly 'Jeunes Frances', Auguste Vacquerie and Charles Asselineau, who were completing

¹ La Vie littéraire III. p. 361.

² Ibid. II. p.205.

their active and irreproachable life in study and meditation. To the aged writer Auguste Vacquerie who in the militant 30's uttered the inspired words:

Shakespeare est un chêne
Racine est un pieu,

France willingly concedes that an enthusiastic cause is worthy of a good fight. "Pour ma part, moi qui garde à Jean Racine une admiration fidèle et tendre... j'ai envie de féliciter M. Auguste Vacquerie de l'avoir appelé un pieu; j'ai envie de dire au vieux critique de la vieille Place Royale: "Vous avez bien fait. Vous vous battiez et comme tous ceux qui se battent, vous étiez persuadé de la bonté de votre cause. Et puis en combattant Racine, vous aviez plus d'esprit, de sens poétique et de génie que ceux qui le défendaient en ce temps là."¹

This same mischievous delight in uniting contraries is stressed in France's lively portrait of Charles Asselineau who was found smoking a pipe of peace in his study full of satanic memories and meditating on Boileau:

"J'ai connu le bon Asselineau au déclin de son aimable vie. C'était un paisible bourgeois de Paris qui fumait sa pipe dans un cabinet tout tapissé de sabbats et de danses macabres. Car, fidèle aux amours de sa jeunesse, il s'entourait des reliques de l'art des Célestin Nanteuil et des Gustave

¹ La Vie littéraire, III. p. 361

Boulangier. Sa bibliothèque contenait les éditions originales de Gaspard de la Nuit, de Pétrus Borel, de Victor Hugo, de Théophile Gautier avec des frontispices à donner le frisson. Les murs entre lesquels ce doux Parisien coulait des heures tranquilles criaient: "Mort et damnation!" ... Charles Asselineau souriait doucement aux figures sataniques qui l'entouraient. J'ai/mais le commerce de cet homme plein de grâce et de simplicité. Je le voyais souvent le dimanche, il y a de cela quinze ans, dans son musée romantique et bourgeois. Il causait beaucoup avec moi et ne causait que de Boileau. Oui, ce vieux Jeune France, cet ancien bousingot, ce romantique chevelu, se sentait sur ses vieux jours, une profonde amitié pour Nicolas. Il n'en démêlait pas bien la cause mais c'était une tendresse qui le tenait au coeur.

Nicolas, voyez-vous, nous disait-il, c'est un vrai Parisien comme moi. Et puis c'était un poète qui aimait les vers: les poètes de cette espèce ne se rencontrent pas aisément, et, j'ai éprouvé dans ma longue vie qu'il n'y a tels pour détester les vers que ceux qui en font."¹

But some attempt must be made to explain France's sympathetic and constructive approach to Romanticism as something deeper than mere contradictoriness and the dilettante's sport of conciliating opposites. In the following chapters, we will consider his understanding and personal treatment of

¹ Le Temps. 4 November 1888.

certain romantic motives: self-revelation and expansiveness, the 'mal du siècle', the supremacy of emotion and feeling, imaginative freedom and fantasy. Only by discovering his debt to his own century can we understand his approach as a critic to individual Romantic writers.

CHAPTER III

Anatole France and the 'culte du moi'.

In studying Anatole France's literary criticisms, we cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that he considered the Romantic tendency to cultivate and exalt the ego at once inartistic and distasteful. He once went so far as to affirm to Nicolas Ségur that the political and social changes effected by the French Revolution were insignificant in comparison with that direful revolution brought about in the literary tradition by Rousseau:

"Après l'ébranlement révolutionnaire le cadre social resta en somme le même, tandis que le cadre littéraire était brisé définitivement. Rousseau étale ses tares et ses infirmités et nous parle de lui-même. Cette indélicatesse roturière qui effarerait Racine et devant laquelle Corneille se voilerait la face, devint la mode littéraire, et fut proposée en exemple à l'Europe entière qui l'adopta. Tous nous nous confessons plus ou moins ^{en} habit d'arménien."¹

Here we have France expressing a private opinion in a very definite manner, but a well-known passage in Le Petit Pierre stresses with equal firmness his personal dislike of introspection, and he claims that throughout his life, he has always attempted to escape from himself: "Incrédule à l'oracle

¹ N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. op. cit. pp. 114-115.

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de Delphes, loin de chercher à me connaître moi-même, je me suis toujours efforcé de m'ignorer. Je tiens la connaissance de soi comme une source de soucis et de tourments. Je me suis fréquenté le moins possible ... Ignore toi toi-même, c'est le premier précepte de la sagesse."¹

The most striking contradiction in the work of France is that although he professes this dislike of the 'culte du moi', he is in fact the most subjective, the most personal and the most self-centred of writers. Moreover, just as in the study of history he believed that the most significant data could be gleaned from Memoirs, in his literary studies he was always drawn to and fascinated by personal confessions. In his criticisms, he always attempts to understand the weaknesses as much as the greatness of writers through their personality and through the intimate revelations they have voluntarily left us. "C'est l'homme, et l'homme seulement que je cherche dans l'artiste."² La Vie littéraire includes a significant essay in which France considers the subtle change that comes over a writer when he proceeds from fiction to personal reminiscences: Marmontel bores us heartily with his Bélisaire but becomes warm and alive when he relates the adventures of his youth. The Confessions of Saint Augustine, pursued France, were much more influential than his

¹ Le Petit Pierre. p. 316.

² Le Jardin d'Epicure. p. 84.

theological writings in making his sentiments understood to the world. Rousseau remains great to this day not for revealing to his time a new sentiment of love and pity, not for having written La Nouvelle Héloïse or his political and didactic writings, but because he shamelessly disclosed his entire personality and all his weaknesses. "Si Jean-Jacques a encore aujourd'hui des lecteurs ... c'est pour avoir peint sa pitoyable existence, c'est pour avoir raconté ce qui lui advint en ce triste monde, depuis le temps où il n'était qu'un jeune vagabond, vicieux, voleur, ingrat et pourtant sensible à la beauté des choses, rempli de l'amour sacré de la nature, jusqu'au jour où son âme inquiète sombra dans la folie noire. On n'ouvre plus guère l'Emile et la Nouvelle Héloïse. On lira toujours les Confessions."¹

Le Jardin l'Epicure reveals France seeking even more intently for the complete, absolutely sincere confession which he feels has yet to be written: "On peut, on doit tout dire, quand on sait tout dire. Il y aurait tant d'intérêt à entendre une confession absolument sincère! Et depuis qu'il y a des hommes, rien de pareil n'a encore été entendu. Aucun n'a tout dit, pas même cet ardent Augustin, plus occupé de confondre les manichéens que de mettre son âme à nu, non pas même ce pauvre, grand Rousseau que son orgueil portait à se calomnier lui-même."²

¹ La Vie littéraire. IV. p 90.

² Le Jardin d'Epicure. p 85

Quite apart from this fascination that all types of confessions exercised upon him, France's claims to objectivity become unacceptable when we consider his methods as a critic: the personality of the writers he studied was always appreciated in connection with his own individual tastes. He was interested only in what affected and moved him. At a time when writers were striving to achieve scientific objectivity, France and Jules Lemaître made a virtue of this personal, intimate technique. Both critics were opposed to the objective and scientific method of Brunetière. The latter, a disciple of Auguste Comte, Darwin and Taine, had attempted to constitute a science of literary criticism and to apply to literary studies a formal classification founded on the theories of evolution. Such a criticism attempted to be a science of the widest scope, inseparable from the study of history, sociology and morals. Above all it claimed to be purely impersonal. "Mes goûts personnels ne sont pour rien dans mes jugements," wrote Brunetière, "et je louerai par-dessus les nues les écrivains qu'au fond je n'aime guère, comme au contraire j'en critiquerai vivement dont je fais moi-même mes délices."

Anatole France and Jules Lemaître were by temperament directly opposed to Brunetière's dogmatic and moralising approach. Lovers of fantasy, penetrated with a sense of relativity in all literary judgments, they held the view that

it is impossible to reconstruct the state of a writer at the moment of literary creation and that readers themselves must interpret the work in an infinite number of ways according to their epoch, their age, and their individual responsiveness. They insisted that the only sincere contribution the critic could make was to impart to the reader that particular 'impression' awakened in him by the object of his criticism. This method, with its many compensations and even more blatant defects was admirably suited to the temperament of France. It harmonised perfectly with his belief that the true nature of the exterior world is unseizable except through the medium of the senses. It harmonised with his dilettantism, that is to say his tendency to enjoy all aspects of thought without committing himself too strongly to any, to hover from one thought to another as fancy dictated, or as reason, impartiality or doubt commanded.

We may well ask if France's method was truly a critical method for he would occasionally find an almost perverse pleasure in not reviewing the work announced in the title of his article or else in dealing with it in a small paragraph after a rambling and disconnected 'causerie' on subjects ranging from art and history to vivisection and merry-go-rounds, and above all on purely personal reminiscences or assertions of taste and setiment. "That subjectivity is evidence that he is conscious at all times of himself and his

reactions, that he never becomes absorbed in his subject because he stands outside and apart from it. It is evidence of a fundamental and inescapable egoism," writes Haakon Chevalier.¹ Certainly France's literary articles reflect the cultivation of an ego that is unique in the history of criticism. He tells us in the Preface to the fourth volume of La Vie littéraire that he has afforded much to the cultivation of personal feeling and nothing to systematic study (esprit de système): "Tout y est senti. J'y ai été sincère jusqu'à la candeur."² He was incapable of showing by systematic exposition why a work of art was great or beautiful: "Je crois que nous ne saurons jamais pourquoi une chose est belle. Et je m'en console. J'aime mieux sentir que comprendre."³ Amongst the many pleasures that our would-be Classicist seeks to derive from the contemplation of a master-piece are included: "de longues revêries ... le souvenir de ce qui fut cher ... le retour ému sur soi-même."⁴ But we would run the risk of interpreting France rather as he feared the moderns interpreted Alceste if we were to prove this criticism to be one of pure

¹ H.M.Chevalier. The Ironic temper: Anatole France and his time. (New York: Oxford University Press. 1932). p 28.

² La Vie littéraire IV. Preface. p. 11

³ La Vie littéraire. II. p 191.

⁴ Ibid. Preface. p. xii.

feeling. Although the part played by personal memories is great, the attention paid to historical documentation, the knowledge displayed of even the most obscure literary figures is equally important. On the whole, his critical method (or lack of method) is a type of intellectual romanticism. It is characterised by divagations, indecision, a nostalgia for the past, a knowledge of the flow and mobility of life and the passing of all things. Annette Antoniu has noted in France's critical studies something floating and elusive which perpetually embarrasses those who wish to grasp his personality: "Il veut tout sentir, tout comprendre, harmoniser des idées faites pour s'exclure réciproquement; il voit toujours les deux faces des choses et trouve dans sa pensée autant de motifs d'admiration que de mépris."¹

In the same way that France rejects the meaning and value of objectivity as a critic, so does he condemn the impersonal approach of the Naturalists and of the Parnassians who had so deeply influenced his youth. He admired de Maupassant immensely as a writer but he was irritated when he could not discover de Maupassant's intimate feelings through his writings: "Je voudrais savoir se que croit et sent en dedans de lui cet homme impitoyable, robuste et bon. Aime-t-il les imbéciles pour leur bêtise? Aime-t-il le mal pour sa laideur? Est-il gai? Est-il triste?"² The much vaunted impassivity of

¹ A. Antoniu. Anatole France, critique littéraire. (Paris: Boivin 1929) pp.69-70.

² La Vie littéraire. I. p 56.

Leconte de Lisle was a theme to which France would return with endless mockery once he had escaped from the tyranny of the master. We have only to recall his ~~ironical~~ review of de Lisle's historical characters and its triumphant conclusion: "Ce poète finalement ne peint que lui-même, ne montre que sa propre pensée, et seul présent dans son oeuvre ne révèle sous toutes ses formes qu'une chose: l'âme de Leconte de Lisle."¹ More tenderly and poetically he presents the same objection to Verlaine who in his Parnassian period had echoed the familiar thought of Gautier in the line: "Est-elle en marbre ou non, la Vénus de Milo?" - "Sans doute, elle est en marbre. Mais, pauvre enfant malade, sécoué par des frissons douloureux, tu n'en es pas moins condamné à chanter comme la feuille en tremblant et tu ne connaîtras jamais de la vie et du monde que les troubles de ta chair et de ton sang."²

We must ask ourselves now if France succeeded in being more impersonal and objective in his novels. Brousson has noted the following remark made by France which tends to show that he consciously attempted to write his novels as a classicist: "On me reproche l'érudition de mes personnages. On me dit "à quelque siècle qu'ils appartiennent et quelle que soit leur condition, Thaïs ou Crainquebille, ils parlent tous la même langue, celle de Renan, celle de Voltaire, la

¹ La Vie littéraire. I. p 103.

² La Vie littéraire. III.p. 311.

vôtre." Je reponds: "c'est la tradition classique ... je voudrais avoir permission d'écrire des romans dont les personnages seraient de pures abstractions. Comme dans les exemples des juristes, ils s'appelleraient Primus, Secundus, Tertia." ¹

We know that France did not succeed in this aim. The composition of his novels and the development of their plot have been greatly criticised on the grounds that France did not live up to the classical standards that he set himself. If we regard his novels from the classical point of view we see that this is not only due to the fact that they lack unity. Certainly, France was tempted at all times to depart from the main plot and to linger with his characters as they dissert at length on problems ranging from the philosophical and social to the very trivial and unimportant. The most severe reproach that could be addressed to them by the Classicist is that they lack the element of subordination, that 'sacrifice' on which Flaubert was so insistent. And the reason for this is clearly that in many novels the personality of France obtrudes upon and prevents the harmonious development of a character to a point where it appears as something not necessarily greater but other than himself. All his characters, Nicias, Coignard, M. Bergeret, Brotteaux de Llettes express the various facets of his thought. None except perhaps Thais

¹ J.J. Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op.cit. pp. 175-176.

and Evariste Gamelin of Les Dieux ont soif reach beyond the point of France's own development. "L'Unité réelle de ses ouvrages est purement subjective," writes Gustave Michaut. "Elle est constituée par ses pensées à lui, sa personnalité découverte ou mal dissimulée."¹

Thus we may say that whatever classical ideal of impersonality France values, he succeeded in destroying^u both in his own writings and by the manner in which he encourages others to reveal themselves intimately. Often in reading his work we are reminded of Rousseau's observation: "Le lecteur n'a pas grand besoin de savoir tout cela, mais j'ai besoin moi de le lui dire."² But France's understanding and appreciation of the Romantic 'culte du moi' must always be measured in terms of his own capacity to reveal intimate emotion. To state that France cannot surrender himself spontaneously to deep emotion is, we feel, a sure way of misinterpreting him. We stress this point because in several authoritative studies that have appeared on France in the past years, it is suggested that he lacks immediacy of feeling and sensation. Mr. Ian Alexander holds that France is eminently the 'lettré' who decants and subtilises pure feeling through his intellect and values it as an idea.¹ On the contrary, there

¹ G. Michaut. Anatole France, étude psychologique. (Paris: Fontemoing 1913) p. 147.

² Les Confessions. Livre X.

³ I. Alexander. Horizon. January 1945. The scepticism of Anatole France. H.M. Chevalier (The Ironic temper op. cit). points out that France remains the spectator who "stands on the margin of life" and looks on.

are many spontaneously lyrical passages in his work and his intimate lyricism is always engendered by a nostalgia for the past, a knowledge of life's unreality and instability, or a profound sadness and pessimism. Such passages are numerous in La Vie littéraire, le Jardin d'Epicure, La Vie en fleur etc. They are, we shall see, even more abundant in his uncollected articles. But in the expression of deep feeling France remains a sociable being who values direct contact with his readers. "J'ai l'espoir que si je parle de moi, ceux qui m'écouteront ne penseront qu'à eux-mêmes."¹

At all times he recoils from disclosing the most intimate and personal aspects of his private life. In his novels, he shows a marked tendency to attenuate his romanticism by conveying deep emotion indirectly through the many idealistic and naive characters whom he has created: Thaïs who in her search for the unknown revolts against the sceptical, dandified Nicias, Fra Giovanni who is fortified by love and child-like simplicity in his encounter with logical Satan, Choulette the poet who believes that all moral beauty is the result of that "incomprehensible wisdom which comes from God and resembles madness." Because France is obliged to portray himself with candour in his autobiographies, he insists that he is studying 'another' self, one from which he has evolved: "Je suis une autre personne que l'enfant dont je parle. Nous n'avons plus en commun, lui et moi, un atôme de substance ni de

¹ La Vie littéraire. I. p 108.

pensée." ¹

France has left us only one account of deep, private grief: the diaries known as Les Carnets intimes, kept from 1910 to 1913 after the death of Madame Arman de Caillavet. We may judge by those extracts that M. Carias has found suitable for publication how strong but restrained was the expression of France's despair in real misfortune. In his sympathetic commentary, M. Carias observes how France refrains from giving way to vague, effusive emotion and remains modest and realistic: "Avec la curiosité presque impersonnelle du savant, il étudie ce cas nouveau pour lui, celui d'un être au désespoir, brusquement vidé des raisons de vivre. Il a horreur de la sentimentalité vague. Il ne songe pas à se croire meilleur qu'il n'est; il se refuse à admirer sa tristesse comme le fruit d'une âme exceptionnelle, pur de tout sentiment vil, de tout retour sur soi." ²

All these factors influence France's understanding of Romantic egoism and subjectivity. He always remains appreciative of personal confessions provided they be human, candid

¹ Le Petit Pierre. p 317. France's attempts to dissociate himself from the past are of necessity very unsuccessful. Cf. "J'ai toujours été doux mais d'une douceur farouche ... (La Vie en fleur. p 50). "Je me sens agité de tous les frissons de mon enfance." (Ibid. p 140).

² L. Carias. Les Carnets intimes d'Anatole France. op.cit. p. 119.

and sincere. He has little sympathy for authors such as Chateaubriand and Hugo, who suggest that they are exceptional beings. He believes that Rousseau, Constant, Lamartine, de Vigny and de Musset are guided by sincerity and truth but discovers few traces of these qualities in Chateaubriand. He seeks the personal element in so far as it has a universal meaning and this explains his attachment to all intimate, lyrical poets except Hugo whose personality he finds too exuberant and whose originality appears too excessive. To a large extent, France remains guided by his classical feeling for naturalness, truth and measure but inevitably, he shows no great consistency on this point as will become clear when we review the astonishing articles he has left us on George Sand.

CHAPTER IV.

The development of the 'mal du siècle': the melancholy of
the intelligence.

We have seen so far that the criticisms Anatole France addresses to the Romantics deal principally with the aesthetic and with the 'culte du moi'. We must now look into the subject of the more radical beliefs of the XIXth century concerning man's position in the universe, his aspirations, his relationship to the forces of nature, of love and of evil with which he feels himself so intimately connected.

There can be little doubt that France responded with historical acumen to the early stages of the 'mal du siècle'. The pessimism and bewilderment of the individual who, thrown more than ever on his own resources after the Revolution, turned away from reality in order to meditate on the metaphysical problems of death and eternity, are perfectly grasped in this little known "portrait of a young man" which is remarkable for the very obvious influence of Hugo on France's rhetorical style and choice of images:

"Regardez ce jeune homme habillé à la mode de l'an 1800. Le costume n'y fait rien; pourtant je ne suis pas fâché qu'il porte un habit vert, des culottes jaunes et des bottes. Je tiens même aux bottes, les bottes ont quelque chose d'heroique et par là de poétique. Il ne me déplaît pas non plus qu'il s'enveloppe d'un manteau sombre. Le vent agite les boucles

de ses cheveux sous les larges bords de son chapeau. Son nom importe peu, c'est un homme obscur, une feuille de l'humaine forêt. C'est vous, c'est moi, il y a quatre-vingt huit ans. Comme je fais aujourd'hui dans un plus simple costume, il rêve sous de vieux arbres. Il songe aux châteaux détruits, aux allées effacées des parcs déserts, aux églises de village retirées au culte et rendues à la poésie. Il songe aux tombeaux brisés de Saint Denis et au cimetière de la Madeleine où reposent sous un linceuil de chaux toutes les victimes de la Terreur que l'échafaud a reconciliées. Il songe à la mélancolie des ruines et à la majesté terrible des Révolutions. Il sent profondément le contraste de la paix de la nature et l'agitation des hommes. Il croit entendre Dieu dans le murmure des forêts comme dans le tumulte des foules. Il médite sur l'ordre nouveau qui vient de naître; il déteste également la légèreté railleuse de l'ancien régime qu'il a vu condamné et retranché et le dogmatisme étroit des révolutionnaires emportés à leur tour dans la tempête du sang. Un sentiment religieux très vague, une sorte de catholicisme fait de sentiments et d'images naît dans son âme. Eh bien, cet homme dans sa rêverie a déjà connu la poésie moderne. Il a devancé de vingt ans les premières Méditations de Lamartine. Or cet homme était tout le monde, il était la jeunesse, il était l'avenir. Toutes les aspirations, tous les pressentiments qui prirent une

forme en 1820 aux applaudissements du monde s'amassaient, au lendemain de la Révolution, dans les âmes renouvelées. Le lyrisme romantique était dans l'air. Il avait des frissons et pas de voix. Nous ne savons pas, nous autres hommes ordinaires, nommer les choses très neuves que nous sentons."¹

Another Hugolian passage in the same vein, published in L'Univers Illustré, deals more particularly with the Napoleonic dose of the 'mal de siècle' and attests the same historical interest in the development of the 1830 generation. "Antony," writes France, "est né sous les échafauds de la Terreur; il a grandi au grondement des canons de Bonaparte; il a vu l'impossible, il a vu l'empereur. Ses nerfs ont été agités par ces formidables secousses qui ont bouleversé le monde. Comme Chateaubriand, comme Lamartine, il a des sens nouveaux. Il voit, il touche ce que nous ne pouvons ni apercevoir, ni atteindre. Quand le monde ne tremble plus, il est mal à l'aise. Dans un pays tranquille, il est dépaysé. Il ne peut vivre que dans l'énorme et l'extraordinaire. Il ne comprend plus rien à la nature quand elle est paisible; à la vie quand elle est régulière; il ne les avait pas prévues comme cela. Il est fait aux orages; la paix le trouble, la paix extérieure, car il a lui, Napoleon dans l'âme. Or cet homme que vingt ans de guerre et de révolutions grandes comme le monde

¹ Le Temps. 16 September 1888. A review of Lemerre's Anthologie des poètes du XIXe siècle.

ont fait poète sans le savoir, devient amoureux. Il aime, et vous ne voulez pas qu'il mette dans son amour tout le tumulte, toutes les fanfares guerrières, toutes les charges de la cavalerie, toute la poésie napoléonienne et romantique, tout cet idéal enfin qui est aussi nécessaire à sa vie que l'air et le jour! Il aime avec le siècle qu'il a dans l'âme. Le bonhomme de Titan qui l'a conçu peut se flatter d'avoir fait ce jour là l'enfant du siècle."¹

These extracts represent France's only attempts to describe in a general manner the emotional and the spiritual problems of the earlier generations. Although, as we shall see in his studies of Constant and de Vigny, France has a great sympathy for the melancholic and contemplative aspect of Romantic literature, provided it be interpreted by thoughtful and intellectual writers, he prefers at all times to stress the happy, light-hearted activities of the 1830's, the youth and the merriment of the militant Romantics. He has recaptured something of the warmth and vitality of Gautier's l'Histoire du Romantisme in his articles on Auguste Vacquerie and Charles Asselineau.² In an extract from his column in L'Univers Illustré, he compares the young people of his time to the generation of Sand and deprecates the terrible seriousness of contemporary students whom he refers to as "la jeunesse des Ecoles." "Elle est jeune et c'est

¹ L'Univers Illustré. 23 January 1886.

² See Chapter II. pp. 53-55.

déjà un grand mérite. Le seul reproche que j'oserais lui faire est de ne l'être pas assez. De mon temps, la jeunesse était plus jeune. Nous décrochions encore les écriteaux entre minuit et deux heures du matin. Et voulez-vous que je vous dise: je me méfierai toujours un peu d'un ministre, d'un financier ou d'un homme de lettres qui n'a pas à vingt ans décroché des écriteaux ou introduit des chapeaux haut-de-forme dans l'intérieur des réverbères: il y a aura toujours un côté de l'humanité qui demeurera fermé à celui qui n'a pas fait ces choses, d'ailleurs absurdes. Vous rappelez-vous ce chapitre de L'Histoire de ma vie, où George Sand raconte la joie qu'elle éprouvait avec Latouche et quelques jeunes gens à faire des folies sur le pavé désert de Paris, au clair de la lune. Une nuit, la bande imagina de louer un fiacre qui marchait au pas les portières ouvertes. Nos amis le traversaient à la file en chantant l'office des morts. Et ces fous-là ont touché depuis à toutes les belles et grandes choses de l'humanité. Je crains plus que la peste les jeunes gens raisonnables. Celui qui ne descend jamais au-dessous de ce qui est sensé ne s'élève jamais au-dessus de la médiocre raison."¹

In his general descriptions of society from 1830 to 1850, France tends to stress its superficial aspects. Thus we have the portrait of Marc Ribert who had frequented the

¹ L'Univers Illustré. 8 March 1888.

Jeune France, the lorettes and the theatres of the boulevards, had built a Gothic castle and dissipated his inheritance in extravagant absurdities. We have numerous sketches in passing fashions, in hair-style and in dress: the famous 'coup-de-vent' popularised by Chateaubriand, and the high stock of Lamartine, considered in his own childhood to be symbols of high-mindedness and of lofty ideals.¹ France has made it clear that the generation he remembered from his childhood is symbolised by his father and as he looks back upon it, his irreverence must appear to us very natural. But even the famous 'coup-de-vent' becomes a nostalgic symbol of something past and something better. In an interesting post-humous article, it serves to define a period of faith and idealism to which France knows that he and his contemporaries can never return:

"Rappelez-vous les portraits de l'époque; sur tous on voit le coup-de-vent. Ce coup-de-vent, signe d'une génération, avait touché la tête de Chateaubriand et passé sur bien des fronts avant d'effleurer les tempes de mon père. C'était le coup-de-vent de '93, de Marengo, d'Austerlitz, le souffle de la terreur et de la gloire ... Je vois ces Français nos pères, nés dans l'orage et vivant sur les hauteurs d'où nous sommes descendus. Tout dans leur attitude un peu emphatique,

¹ La Vie en fleur, pp. 114-121; Le Petit Pierre, p. 7; La Vie littéraire, IV. pp. 10-11.

dans leur expression noble et tendu, dans leur vague regard et dans leur ample parole atteste les souffles invisibles dont ils ont frissonné. Ils portaient haut la tête. Leur cou serré dans une large cravate était d'une longueur qui nous étonne. Quelle différence avec les cous d'aujourd'hui. Nous n'avons point une seule vertèbre de moins; mais nous portons le cou dans les épaules, nous sommes ramassés pour la lutte."¹

In this posthumous article, France remains perfectly aware of his remoteness from his father's generation. The latter half of the XIXth century witnessed in an alarmingly short space of time the destruction of all the beliefs that had given man the knowledge of occupying a central position in a secure, well-planned universe, the knowledge that in all forms of thought and activity, there existed certain hierarchic and dogmatic principles of absolute authority.

"Anatole France," writes Paul Bourget, "a eu ses vingt ans sous le Second Empire, à un moment où l'étonnant progrès des sciences positives propageait cette superstition sur laquelle il faut toujours revenir, ce Scientisme qui consiste à faire rentrer les faits psychiques, dans la biologie, et la biologie elle-même dans la physico-chimie, si bien que la nature entière n'est plus qu'une implacable succession de

¹ La Revue de France. November-December 1924. Fragment d'autobiographie. pp. 8-9.

phénomènes éternellement et inutilement déroulés, sans commencement ni terme, sans principe et sans but, Quel sens peut bien avoir, dans un univers pareil, les efforts de l'homme et d'abord sa civilisation?"¹

But in his youth, France beheld the moment when the forces of life had suddenly assumed a hopeful and dazzling quality. His entire generation, he tells us, learnt to read in the books of Darwin, Spencer and Taine.² In his important article La Morale et la science, he evokes the discussions in the Jardin des Plantes with Paul Bourget and Etienne Charavay during which the entire mechanism of the universe was explained in one morning in the light of Evolutionism.³ In the Museum of biology, they would come upon a marble Venus, placed in the centre of the last room, "a symbol of those gentle, invincible forces by which all species multiply." Evolutionism was then a romantic adventure, considerably enhanced by the idealism of the previous generations. For though, as France confessed later, Charavay was humbled by the certainty of his descent from monkeys, he himself was proud to think that by ascending the spiral, men would ultimately surpass their present status.⁴ France always

¹ P. Bourget. Quelques témoignages. (Paris: Plon 1928) p.161.

² La Vie littéraire III. p. 306.

³ Ibid. pp. 55-56.

⁴ N. Ségur. La Revue de France. 15 September 1929.

remained an evolutionist long after the bankruptcy of science was proclaimed around 1890, but in the last thirty years of the century it became more and more apparent to him and to his contemporaries that the universe does not transform matter with any view to perfecting humanity and that man is but a by-product, a casual accident, in a universe too immense and detached to have laid out any programme of perfection for him.

And now the men of the latter half of the century, had like Renan, Bourget and France himself, the perspicacity and the courage to face a moral predicament: how could they restore the spiritual values expressed by the ancient beliefs in harmony, order and virtue and yet remain faithful to the pursuits of the exact sciences? "Faire le bien pour que Dieu s'il existe, soit content de nous, paraîtra a plusieurs une formule un peu vide," wrote Renan in 1871. "Nous vivons de l'ombre d'une ombre, de quoi vivra-t-on après nous?" And in the 1890 Preface to L'Avenir de la Science: "Je le dis franchement, je ne me figure pas comment ou rebâtira, sans les anciens rêves, les assises d'une vie noble et heureuse." ¹

Renan, we know, did not despair in finding a solution to this problem and he was confident that through science and evolution, man would ultimately ascend to a superior form of

¹ E. Renan. Dialogues philosophiques (1871). Preface XVII; L'Avenir de la Science. Preface de 1890. p XVIII.

being and to a knowledge of the Eternal. Anatole France was wholly lacking in this fundamental idealism because from his years of maturity till his death he remained faithful to the Sensationalist philosophy of Condillac. Le Jardin d'Epicure elaborates at length the idea of man's incapacity to arrive at a true knowledge of the nature of the universe. The scientist's eye armed with the microscope is after all only a human eye. He will see more distinctly but he cannot penetrate the substance or ever discover the primary cause of phenomena.¹

Renan's optimism soon appeared to France a form of "scientific romanticism" and in spite of his deep admiration for Renan, influenced, we believe, more by the latter's generosity and eloquence than by his thought, he definitely breaks away from him in his fundamental scepticism and in his adherence to philosophical Sensationalism: "Ce que j'aime le moins dans Renan, mais que le caractérise quand-même, c'est sa foi absolue en la science. Il est le plus grand représentant du romantisme scientifique qui donna tant d'espérances a quelques-uns de sa génération ... Hélas! La science ne peut rien changer puis qu'elle ne peut éclairer que le monde que nous possédons en nous-mêmes, le seul qui nous soit accessible. Quand à l'univers inconnu qui nous entoure, ses énigmes restent et resteront éternellement

¹ Le Jardin d'Epicure, pp. 59,60,65.

mystérieuses." ¹

With such a belief, France can question the validity of all accepted moral and social standards. He can say, in connection with the martyr Serenus, a character in Jules Lemaître's novel, that "there is some impertinence in getting oneself burnt to death for an opinion." ² Limited by his sceptical view of the universe, he claims till the end of his life that the study of philosophy and metaphysics is a mere game of the intellect, seeking to reveal by invention that which sense of data and immediacy of experience can alone convey in their imperfect manner. ³

This attitude has exasperated as many as it has consoled. André Gide and Maurice Barrès are but two of the thoughtful writers who have reproached France for his amiable scepticism, his habit of confusing truth with its appearance and for the monotonous repetition of his axioms:

"Je songe au mot de Goethe," wrote Gide in 1906. "Le tremblement (das Schaudern) est le meilleur de l'homme. Hélas! Précisément ... et j'ai beau m'y prêter ... je ne sens point le tremblement de France; je lis France sans

¹ N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. op.cit. p 126.

² La Vie littéraire. III. p 31.

³ Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp 61, 62, 72, 102, 195-223; M.Corday. Dernières pages inédites d'Anatole France. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy. 1925). p 42.

tremblement. Il est disert, fin, élégant. C'est le triomphe de l'euphémisme. Mais il reste sans inquiétude. On l'épuise du premier coup."¹

Maurice Barrès, in 1908, expressed much the same thought: "Je ne reproche pas à France d'avoir vu que nos dieux éternels (plus encore que nos déesses éphémères) sont des groupes de sensations, des illusions. Mais je lui reproche de tirer de cette vue, de cette belle découverte, une vanité à jamais apaisée. Qu'il est pédant, qu'il est appliqué dans sa frivolité! ... Ne sent-il pas la profonde tristesse de cette vue? Pourquoi ne l'exprime-t-il pas?"²

But France was in fact deeply conscious of the moral anguish referred to by André Gide and has very sensitively expressed the sadness which Barrès affirms he has frivolously overlooked. This extract from the diary of Maurice Barrès was written at a time when the two writers had become estranged as a result of the Affaire Dreyfus. In 1883, when they were still close friends, a younger Barrès had written a penetrating essay on France and had pointed out that the melancholy which pervades his thought was indeed a deep and genuine sentiment, the inevitable outcome of the century's disappointed hopes and aspirations, the last phase of the 'maladie du siècle'. The demonstrative despair of René and

¹ A. Gide. Journal. 9 avril 1906. (Gallimard. American Edit) Vol I. p 248.

² M. Barrès. Mes Cahiers. (Paris: Plon. 1929). tome VII. p. 305.

of his literary descendants of the 1830's, wrote Barrès, was characteristic of the century's youth. As the century matured, the dreamers became men of action: Lamartine blushed on reading his Méditations, Hugo and George Sand concentrated their thought on social and humanitarian problems. But when the century halted breathless in the middle of its course and reviewed its strenuous efforts, it was overcome by a sense of futility and despondency. "Penché sur l'abîme mystérieux que le positivisme lui défendait d'explorer, il fut pris de vertige et se laissa couler au scepticisme. La science avait donc ployé sous tant de promesses! Tous ces rêves fiévreusement caressés gisaient là, les reins cassés par le saut de '48, ou les crosses de '52."¹ France, affirmed Barrès, was the most typical exponent of the new generation who in its disillusion sought refuge in dilettantism and adopted the aesthetic attitude. "Le dilettantisme est une discipline de l'esprit, un état voulu; il voile les passions, sans les supprimer."² Writing in 1883, Barrès had referred mainly to Les désirs de Jean Servien and Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard, but this same deep and very conscious melancholy is traceable in many of France's later writings.

¹ M. Barrès, in La Jeune France. tome V. May 1883: Anatole France. p 602-605.

² Ibid. p 608.

When France reviews Maurice Spronck's Les artistes littéraires (1889), he notes that certain writers of the latter half of the century, Baudelaire, Flaubert, the de Goncourt brothers, reveal common characteristics of which the most salient is a profound affection of the mental balance. They include epileptics, paralytics, victims of aphasia. They spread over nature the bitterness and sadness of their malady. "Ainsi donc," he concludes, "le mal qui éclate aujourd'hui couvait depuis plus de trente ans. La névrose, la folie, qui envahit³² la jeune littérature étaient en germe dans les oeuvres encore belles, et qui semblaient pures, dont nous avons nourri notre jeunesse." ¹

The 'mal du siècle', at first vague, lyrical and effusive, had developed into something more clearly defined and morbid, and France who was responsive to the moods of his time, was well aware that its steady progress coincided with the disintegration of the old values and beliefs. The Romantic poets had not the advantage of that abundant and more conclusive documentation of the later generations. They could only sense this disintegration and expressed in naive abstract terms by the contrasts of good and evil, thought and life, the heart and the mind, those conflicts between the needs of sentiment and the dictates of reality that are still so marked in our century. But with the application of

¹ La Vie littéraire. III. p 189.

determinism to all aspects of thought, with the development of the exact sciences and industry, the writers of Anatole France's time felt more acutely than ever that man was fast losing his freedom and becoming a cog in a mechanical planet. Leconte de Lisle retiring to his remote world of the past, France assuming a smiling mask of 'Irony and Pity', experience as deeply as the generation of 1830 the need to escape from reality. Their despair, implicit and not lavishly displayed, is all the more radical.

By looking outwards onto a world now humbled by knowledge, France defines with clarity and with poetic despair that human sadness which he knows to be as old as the world but which the XIXth century, with its growing awareness of the complexity of the universe has magnified. "Ne nous flattons pas d'avoir entièrement inventé aucun de nos misères. Il y a longtemps que le prêtre murmure en montant à l'autel: "Pourquoi êtes-vous triste, ô mon âme, et pourquoi me troublez-vous?" Une femme voilée est en chemin depuis la naissance du monde: elle se nomme la Mélancolie. Pourtant, il faut être juste. Nous avons ajouté, certes, quelque chose au deuil de l'âme, et apporté notre part au trésor universel du mal moral."¹

The true outcome of the 'mal du siècle' is developed by France in the beautiful passage of La Vie littéraire which

¹ La Vie littéraire. III. pp 6-7. Pourquoi sommes-nous tristes?

dwells significantly on the Tree of Knowledge, depicted in a Dutch engraving that he would admire as a child in his family Bible: "Nous avons mangé les fruits de l'arbre de la science et il nous est resté dans la bouche un goût de cendre ... Noyés dans l'océan du temps et de l'espace, nous avons vu que nous n'étions rien et cela nous a désolés. Dans notre orgueil, nous n'avons rien voulu dire, mais nous avons pâli. Le plus grand mal (et sans doute le vieux jardinier à la barbe blanche de ma veille bible l'avait prévu) c'est qu'avec la bonne ignorance, la foi s'en est allée. Nous n'avons plus d'espérances et nous ne croyons plus à ce qui consolait nos pères. Car il était doux de croire même à l'enfer ... Avec la foi et l'espérance nous avons perdu la charité; les trois vertus qui, comme trois nefes ayant à leur proue l'image d'une vierge céleste, portaient les pauvres âmes sur l'océan du monde ont sombré dans la même tempête. Qui nous apportera une foi, une espérance, une charité nouvelles?"¹

This melancholy, which Saint-Beuve has wisely shown us to be far older than the XIXth century and which he reveals in Lucretius, in Saint Chrysostomos, in the 'acedia' of the medieval minstrels, in the despairing attitude of Durer's 'Melancholia' letting fall to her feet the instruments of

¹ Ibid. pp 7-8.

science, is undoubtedly a melancholy of the intelligence.¹ It is the supreme melancholy of Anatole France's time. As he looks back upon his century, France visualises the Romantic epoch as a historical moment which still possessed dignity and hope. "Je vois ces Français nos pères, vivant sur les hauteurs d'où nous sommes descendus." His nostalgic regret for the passing of idealism is very clearly expressed in the numerous articles where he extols Lamartine and George Sand. His deep regard for Alfred de Vigny (who, with Racine and Chénier, was his favourite modern poet) is largely due to the fact that de Vigny, in his thoughtfulness and philosophical resignation, precociously foresees the later generation's sense of futility and despondency.

Le Jardin d'Epicure contains a moving passage that has been strangely overlooked by those who reproach France for his vanity and frivolity: "Le mystère de la destinée nous enveloppe tout entiers dans ses puissants arcanes, et il faut vraiment ne penser à rien pour ne pas ressentir cruellement la tragique absurdité de vivre. C'est là, c'est dans l'absolue ignorance de notre raison d'être, qu'est la racine de notre tristesse et de notre dégoût ... Dans un monde où toute illumination de la foi est éteinte, le mal et la douleur perdent jusqu'à leur signification et n'apparaissent plus que comme des plaisanteries odieuses et

¹ Sainte-Beuve. Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire.
Vol. I. p 346.

des farces sinistres."¹

But this despair also has its compensations, and France, like de Vigny, has derived much pleasure from the idea that he who defies the mystery of the universe must pay the full penalty in the bitterness of his discoveries. We cannot fail to observe how persistently he has romanticised this thought and how emotionally he has expressed it throughout his life: "Les hommes qui firent les oeuvres les moins vaines sont ceux qui voient le mieux la vanité de toutes choses. Il faut payer par la tristesse, par la désolation, l'orgueil d'avoir pensé."² Of Jules Sandeau, he writes: "Il y a dans l'étude des sciences un fond d'orgueil et d'audace amère que cette âme paisible et douce ne connut jamais."³ The thinker, echoes Jérôme Coignard, loses in the commerce of books and the sciences all innocence and peace of heart. "Il lui en reste à jamais une fière amertume et une tristesse superbe."⁴

¹ Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp 51-52.

² Le Génie latin. Jean Racine. p 186.

³ La Vie littéraire. I. p 23.

⁴ Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p 135.

CHAPTER V

The triumph of sentiment over reason. The cult of illusions.

The importance of "infinite, indeterminate desire."

In the first pages of this study, we have noted that one critic of our time, M. Ernest Seillière, has found it possible to turn the tables against Anatole France and to interpret him as the direct spiritual descendant of Rousseau. In his studies on Anatole France, M. Seillière quotes, as typical illustrations of his theory, France's Parnassian cult of beauty and paganism, his exaltation of passionate and instinctive behaviour and the manner in which he emphatically asserts over reason the superior claims of the emotions. We must not believe, affirms the author, that France was as detached from his former romantic self as claims in Le Petit Pierre. "Tout le livre est écrit au contraire pour se chercher et se trouver à tout prix dans l'enfant de jadis."¹ Jean Servien in his frustrated social ambitions and his will to power is the spiritual offspring of Saint-Preux, Werther, René, Amaury and Frederic Moreau.² Because France expresses in La Vie en fleur some deeply poetical sentiments on nature and death, he must be considered "un continuateur qualifié de la lignée des lévites de la déesse nature."³ This 'mystical

¹ E. Seillière. La Jeunesse d'Anatole France. op. cit. p 59.

² Ibid. p 37.

³ Ibid. p 68.

naturism' is equally apparent in France's cult of Satan whom he rehabilitates as a symbol of revolt thus continuing the Satanic tradition of his century and in particular of Lamartine, de Vigny and Hugo.¹ Inevitably, when France openly adopts Socialism after 1898, his attitude becomes even more irrational and can be likened precisely to Rousseau's utopic belief in the innate virtue of the people: "J'ai déjà indiqué souvent que France nous montre comment on peut être foncièrement naturiste tout en professant une psychologie pessimiste extrême parce que le pessimisme en ce cas ne porte inconsciemment que sur les classes dirigeantes et sélectionnées. Si notre penseur sape et va continuer de saper la morale ainsi que les codes, c'est qu'il persiste à construire en dépit de lui-même une vague utopie sur la bonté naturelle du peuple."²

Provided we ignore the political bias of these studies, we see that the arguments raised by M. Seillière from the purely literary point of view, are interesting and controversial. Although greatly exaggerated, they are not without foundation. For it must forcibly strike any reader of France that his tendency to support the superior claims of instinctive and emotional behaviour is so pronounced in his work that if we adopt the extreme view taken by M. Seillière, France

¹ Ibid. p 239.

² E. Seillière. Anatole France critique de son temps. p 42.

can be interpreted as a Romantic who is hostile to the barriers imposed by reason and by intelligence. It seems that M. Seillière has accepted France's quite deliberate romantic lapses at their face value without taking into account that France adhered faithfully to reason and to the exact sciences in the manner of the XVIIIth century philosophers and the XIXth century determinists, but that his loyalty was forcibly weakened by many factors: his scepticism, his pessimism, his cult of his illusions and his knowledge of the eternal flux, the importance that he attaches to the dream world and to infinite, indeterminate longing.

In spite of his deep scepticism, France could not subscribe to Brunetière's dogmatic pronouncement, delivered in 1890, that "science had become bankrupt." In this same year, remembering the enthusiasm of his youth, he found that his loyalty to rationalism and to scientific determinism was fundamentally unchanged: "Nous étions persuadés qu'avec de bonnes méthodes expérimentales et des observations bien faites, nous arriverions assez vite à créer le rationalisme universel. Et nous n'étions pas éloignés de croire que du XVIIIe siècle datait une ère nouvelle. Je le crois encore."¹ In the previous year, he had defined his attitude on the publication of Paul Bourget's Le Disciple.

The importance of this novel for France and his

¹ La Vie littéraire. IV. p 43.

contemporaries lay mainly in the philosophical discussions that it provoked, for it set the question: Are determinism and scientific fatalism dangerous and immoral in their consequences? Can a scientist who denies all metaphysical significance of good and evil be held responsible for the moral aberrations of his pupil? It was a problem that roused Brunetière to state in La Revue des deux mondes that every time a new doctrine questions the principles on which society is founded, that doctrine must be false and science must at all times be subordinated to morality and to past experience. It appeared to France that this solution over-simplified the problem. In his answer to Brunetière,¹ he has shown how relative and unstable are customs and notions of morality in all epochs and amongst the many and diverse civilisations, and he insists that thought, whatever it may seek to reveal, has invulnerable and imprescriptible rights to pursue objective knowledge: "La plus grande vertu de l'homme est peut-être la curiosité. Nous voulons savoir. Il est vrai que nous ne saurons jamais rien. Mais nous aurons du moins opposé au mystère universel qui nous enveloppe une pensée obstinée et des regards audacieux; toutes les raisons des raisonneurs ne nous guériront point, par bonheur, de cette grande inquiétude qui nous agite devant l'inconnu." ²

¹ La Vie littéraire. III. pp 54-78. La Morale et la Science.

² La Vie littéraire. III. pp 77-78.

When we say that France rejected the rationalist approach in the name of sentiment, we must bear in mind that this attitude often resulted from his belief that reason had as yet not done enough for humanity. A kind of 'dépit amoureux' was thus involved and he would reproach intelligence for its imperfections because he desired it to reign supreme in the world. "Je m'aperçois, Polyphile," says one of his characters Ariste, "que vous faites à l'intelligence une querelle d'amoureux. Vous l'accablez de reproches parcequ'elle n'est pas la reine du monde." ¹

Undoubtedly, France was ready to defend the freedom of thought whenever this freedom was imperilled, but perhaps the greatest manifestation of his pessimism lies in his belief that intelligence would never attain that exalted position of "queen of the universe." In all his writings, the idea that human conduct is motivated by passions, by greed and by instinctive needs is elaborated at length. "Vous croyez à la science," says the angel Zita in La Révolte des Anges. "Vous vous imaginez que les hommes et les anges sont capables de comprendre, tandisqu'ils ne sont faits que pour sentir. Sachez bien qu'on n'obtient rien d'eux en s'adressant à leur

¹ Pierre Nozière. p 165. In this Greek dialogue, inspired by Renan, Polyphile represents the belief in human conduct based on passions and instincts and Ariste, the primary claims of the intelligence.

intelligence. Il faut parler à leurs intérêts et à leurs passions."¹ And ultimately the only distinction that France draws between the previous generations and his own contemporaries is that in the past it was still possible to idealise human impulses. The Romantics could poeticise their impulses and say that they were determined by passion, but the unpleasant truth, revealed by science and supported by the literature of his time, is that this term is but a euphemism and that by passion we mean simply the satisfaction of basic instincts. "Il y a dans la pensée contemporain une étrange âcreté. Notre littéraire ne croit plus à la bonté des choses. Ecoutons un rêveur comme Loti, un intellectuel comme Bourget, un sensualiste comme Maupassant, et nous entendrons sur des tons différents, les mêmes paroles de désenchantement ... L'art du XVIIe siècle croyait à la vertu, du moins avant Racine qui fut le plus audacieux, le plus terrible et le plus vrai des naturalistes, et peut-être à certains égards le moins moral. L'art du XVIIIe siècle croyait à la raison. L'art du XIXe siècle croyait à la passion avec Chateaubriand, George Sand et les romantiques. Maintenant avec les naturalistes, il ne croit plus qu'à l'instinct."²

It must not be supposed that France derived any pleasure from this knowledge. On the contrary, in his famous article

¹ La Révolte des Anges. p 142.

² La Vie littéraire. IV. p 14.

on George Sand, he adopts the cause of the idealists and bitterly reproaches Zola for the destructive approach of the Naturalists: "Tout l'effort immense des civilisations aboutit à l'embellissement de la vie. Le naturalisme est bien inhumain: car il veut défaire ce travail de l'humanité entière. Il arrache les parures, il déchire les voiles: il humilie la chair qui triomphait en se spiritualisant, il nous ramène à la barbarie primitive, à la bestialité des cavernes et des cités lacustres."¹ But the idea of the supremacy of instincts over intelligence is one to which France clings faithfully and it is greatly strengthened by his Sensationalism. His posthumous publications stress his adherence to this doctrine: "L'homme n'est pas fait pour découvrir son origine et ses fins. Il est fait pour sentir le joie et la douleur, non pour savoir et connaître."² The life of France is characterised by several vigorous and very sincere attempts to support reason, to believe in humanity and its efforts. His defence of free enquiry on the occasion of "la querelle du Disciple" is followed by his warm support of Dreyfus. This in turn is followed by his long adherence to the Socialist cause and his belief in the potentialities of a re-organised society. Beneath all these

¹ La Vie littéraire. I. p 345.

² M. Corday. Dernières pages inédites d'Anatole France. op. cit. p 41.

attempts lies an undercurrent of scepticism and nihilism. The last chapter of L'île des Pingouins stresses the idea that even if the mechanised world, corrupted by material greed were to be destroyed by a few 'benevolent anarchists', primitive life would again evolve to this same height of materialism, and so on, in infinite cycles. ¹

With his tendency to see life as a lugubrious fantasy, Anatole France does not appear to have had a firm grip on reality. "Il y a trois choses, le bien, la beauté, le vrai," said Renan, commenting on the inscription 'Veritatem dilexi' that he had chosen for his tomb. "La plus grande des trois, c'est la vérité. Et pourquoi? Parcequ'elle est vraie la vérité est ce qui est." This is the eminently realistic and practical view of the determinist and also of the great French Classicists. It is not the distinguishing feature of Anatole France who was so sensitively aware of the eternal flux and the passing of all things, in other words the illusory quality and futility of existence, not its positive value: "Le douloureux écoulement des choses." ² This sentiment, he tells us in Le livre de mon ami, he had known from his childhood when rummaging in the book-stalls of the

¹ As an evolutionist, France believed that the physical universe would ultimately become uninhabitable and that mankind would disappear completely from the planet (See Le Jardin d'Epicure. p 19. La Vie littéraire. IV. pp 44, 45 etc.

² Pierre Nozière. p 17.

quay-side, he would discover mysterious forms of past existence. It inspires the lyrical apostrophe to the old booksellers of the Seine: "Oui, mes amis, à pratiquer les bouquins rongés de vers, les féraillies rouillées et les boiseries vermoulues que vous vendiez pour vivre, j'ai pris, tout enfant, un profond sentiment de l'écoulement des choses et du néant de tout. J'ai deviné que les êtres n'étaient que des images changeantes dans l'universel illusion et j'ai été dès lors enclin à la tristesse, à la douceur et à la pitié."¹

We do not believe that France, with his well known contempt for philosophical systems ever wished to interpret this sentiment other than as a poetical and purely personal one. Yet the revealing Dernières conversations recorded by Nicolas Ségur show that he felt a deep affinity with Heraclitus, an affinity that he has never stressed in his writings: "Héraclite me paraît le premier homme qui ait regardé la vie et qui ait compris son horreur. Le pessimisme, je veux dire la vraie, la seule attitude de qui consent à employer son intelligence à la méditation du monde, naît avec Héraclite. C'est là une grande date ... Il n'y a qu'une seule attitude possible: l'effroi d'Héraclite. Ceux qui au contraire souvient comme je le fais moi-même, ce n'est que de peur d'en avoir trop peur.

¹ Le livre de mon ami. pp 159-160.

Oui, c'est une aventure grandiose que celle de l'Ephésien. Il découvre avant tout autre la vérité tragique de la vie, c'est à dire que rien n'existe, que rien ne demeure, que tout s'écoule, et que cette merveille vaniteuse de l'homme et son intelligence n'est pas même l'ombre d'un ombre."¹

From this unstable view of the universe springs France's tendency to recreate a world within, to dwell in the region of fantasy and dreams. One form of Romanticism inherited by the XIXth century from Rousseau, is, in the words of Irving Babbitt, "the indulgence of infinite, indeterminate desire."² In all his writings, France stresses the importance of undefined desire, the necessity of illusion, the value of infinite longing. "Je puis dire que mon existence ne fut qu'un long désir. J'aime désirer; du désir, j'aime les joies et les souffrances. Désirer avec force c'est presque posséder."³ In La Vie en fleur we read of an early infatuation with the sculptress Marie Bagration and of a love that thrives on illusion and unconsummated desire. "On n'aime vraiment que ce qu'on ne connaît pas."⁴ This instinctive and happy longing for the unknown, says France of Leconte

¹ N. Ségur. Dernières conversations avec Anatole France. op. cit. pp 112-113.

² I. Babbitt. Rousseau and Romanticism. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1919) p 79.

³ Le Petit Pierre. pp 325-326

⁴ La Vie en fleur. pp 305-306.

de Lisle, conveys the poet to distant lands and to far-away centuries in the search of mystery: "Car il n'y a de poésie que dans ce que nous ne connaissons pas. Il n'y a de poésie que dans le désir de l'impossible et dans le regret de l'irréparable."¹ And that is why the elderly, sensible professor, M. Bergeret, walks at night-fall under the elm trees of the Mall with the restless 'vague à l'âme' of René:

"Il allait, l'âme vague, diverse, éparse, vieille comme la terre, jeune comme les fleurs des pommiers, vide de pensée et pleine d'images confuses, désolée et désirante, douce, innocente, lascive, triste, traînant sa fatigue et poursuivant des Illusions et des Esperances dont il ignorait le nom, la forme, le visage."²

Even so had Chateaubriand and Lucile in former days strolled along the Mall at Combourg. "Notre principal désennui," writes Chateaubriand, "consistait à nous promener côte à côte dans le grand Mail, au printemps sur un tapis de primevères, en automne sur un lit de feuilles séchées, en hiver sur une nappe de neige que bordait la trace des oiseaux des écureuils et des hermines. Jeunes comme les primevères, tristes comme la feuille séchée, purs comme la neige nouvelle

¹ La Vie littéraire. I. p 104.

² Le Mannequin d'osier. p 221.

il y avait harmonie entre nos récréations et nous." ¹

Only if we bear in mind France's deep pessimism, the feeling of unreality which results from his awareness of the eternal flux, his tendency to dramatise the burden of intelligence as much as to poeticise indeterminate desire, can we understand why on so many occasions he rejects reason as a capricious and a cruel guide ² and asserts now the superior claims of instincts, now the more lofty preoccupations of the true believer. France was always attracted by those souls who possess a naive, spontaneous and unquestioning faith. He envied men whose activities led them to follow a clearly defined line of action and who were delivered from doubt because they did not have to reason out their calling. "L'homme qui peut raisonner ses actions découvre bientôt qu'il en est peu d'innocentes. Il faut être prêtre ou soldat pour ne pas connaître les angoisses du doute." ³ None can fail to note the attention he has paid to those creatures who possess immediacy of sensation and implicit faith through inner revelation. These characters are numerous in his work and they all express the dualism in his own nature. Thus,

¹ Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe. Première partie. Livre II.

² Pierre Nozière, p 145. "La raison, la superbe raison est capricieuse et cruelle. La sainte ingénuité de l'instinct ne tràmpe jamais."

³ Le livre de mon ami. p 67.

in her search for the unknown is opposed to Nicias, Fra Giovanni the gentle Franciscan is opposed to logical Satan. The tumbler of Notre Dame is not reproached by his fellow monks for performing before the altar of the Virgin, for "the pure in heart are blessed." Choulette, the eccentric poet of Le Lys Rouge, whose character is based on Verlaine and Nicolardot, is but one of France's many studies of the XIXth century Catholic in whom spontaneity of faith is closely allied to sin. Jérôme Coignard, the sceptical abbé of the old régime believes at least in his faith, so does M. d'Astarac, the Rosicrucian who creates salamanders in his laboratory.¹ In nearly all the works of France the believer is opposed to the sceptical ironist and it is significant that the latter is not permitted to obscure the former by rational exposition. Jerome Coignard who so faithfully echoes the rational thought of France in his criticism of established laws and customs, makes a sudden and complete volte-face in the last page of his Opinions and confesses that in all previous judgments he has ignored the dictates of the heart, and so his thought must remain forever sterile:

"Le coeur est seul capable de féconder ses rêves. Il verse la vie dans tout ce qu'il aime. La raison n'a point

¹ Thais; Le Puits de Sainte Claire; L'Etui de nacre; Le Lys rouge; La rotisserie de la reine Pedauque.

tant de vertu ... Il faut pour servir les hommes, rejeter toute raison comme un bagage embarrassant, et s'élever sur les ailes de l'enthousiasme. Si l'on raisonne, on ne s'envolera jamais." ¹

In his literary studies, we see that France is never truly at his ease with writers or with historical characters who do not convey directly some spiritual disquiet or at least some revelation of intimate feeling. In considering the sensual and aesthetic dilèttantism of Baron Vivant Denon, we find him surprisingly disturbed by the calm and self-sufficiency of Napoleon's Director of Fine Arts: "Il lui manqua sans doute, je ne sais quoi d'obstiné, d'extrême, cet amour de l'impossible, ce zèle de coeur, cet enthousiasme qui fait les héros et les génies. Il lui manqua l'au-delà. Il lui manqua d'avoir jamais dit "Quand-même!" Enfin il manqua à cet homme heureux l'inquiétude et la souffrance." ²

In the same way, France is always opposed to the dry, matter of fact approach to life. He takes a delight in defending madness and eccentricity. Who can tell if those who feel differently from us are not in their folly nearer to wisdom and to truth? "Et le démon de Socrate? Et les voix de Jeanne d'Arc? Et l'amulette de Pascal? C'est une question

¹ Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p 235.

² La Vie littéraire. III p 179.

de savoir s'il ne faut pas se défier du bon sens plus encore que de la folie. Sans la folie, il n'y aurait plus au monde no sainteté, ni heroïsme, ni génie. L'humanité deviendra bien triste et plate le jour où l'on parviendra a guérir tous les fous." ¹

It has often been said of France that he is an Epicurean, but we must reflect that the great teaching of Epicurus was that the soul must be delivered from fear, from anguish and from suffering. The knowledge of suffering in the thought of France must prevent us from applying too readily this much misused epithet. In many notable passages, France reveals a marked strain of manicheism. Suffering is to him a reality, it has a positive and a moral value. Sully Prudhomme in his philosophical poem Le Bonheur once attempted to imagine a perfect civilisation and a mechanised universe in which man would be exempt from joy, grief or curiosity. An allusion is made to this promised land in Le Jardin d'Epicure where France extols suffering as complimentary to happiness:

"Au sortir de cette nouvelle terre d'Utopie, quand de retour sur la terre, on voit autour de soi des hommes lutter, aimer, souffrir, comme on se prend à les aimer et comme on est content de souffrir avec eux. Comme on sent bien que la seulement est la véritable joie! Elle est dans la souffrance

¹ Le Temps. 28 November 1886. Cf. Le livre de mon ami. p 194; La Vie littéraire. I. p 177. Les fous dans la littérature.

comme le baume est dans l'arbre généreux. Ils ont tué la passion et du même coup ils ont tout tué, joie et douleur, souffrance et volupté, bien, mal, beauté, tout enfin et surtout la vertu." ¹

By his deliberate cult of illusions, France sought to recreate within himself a world of beauty from which the stark realities of the present were banished. For his mind, curious and perspicacious was responsive to all ideas founded on exact knowledge but his emotions clung fondly to the "infinite world of dreams." ² By his knowledge that the intelligence is the enemy and that the artistic sensibility must cultivate an illusory world, France can feel and understand the Romantic spirit both in retrospect and as a personal experience. But at the same time, ^{he has the} his capacity to enjoy both currents of his century, the romantic and the idealistic ^{with the frequent result} as much as the positive and the rational, ^{frequently results} that in his case there is no conflict. Thought and feeling become mutually independent and the result is often passive enjoyment. This power to 'make the best of both worlds', which is his privilege as a dilettante and the despair of his critics is nevertheless the clue to his elusive character. It explains his lack of cohesion and his many contradictions.

¹ Le livre de mon ami. p 56. Einstein who met France in Berlin in 1921 was asked by a reporter if he found the latter's scepticism displeasing and replied "his intelligence is sceptical, but his heart is not." (Le Lys Rouge. 1 April 1933. Souvenirs inédits by Claude Aveline.

"At the root of these oppositions," writes Haakon Chevalier, "lies the fact of the mutual independence of mind and emotion. The man is sophisticated but his sophistication is in great part naiveté surmounted. He is disillusioned but he loves illusions. He is a penetrating but somewhat wayward critic in the quest of truth and facts, yet he clings to fancy and to fiction. His scepticism is so constant as to be a reflex, yet he wants, he needs to believe." ¹

¹ H.M. Chevalier. The Ironic temper. op.cit. p 170.

CHAPTER VIThe romantic imagination: the treatment of grotesque and supernatural themes, the cult of Satan.

If the Romantic attitude to life, as it has so often been observed, escapes all accurate definition, this is due to the fact that it has been adopted by successive generations of extreme individualists each evolving within their own lifetime and that the Romantic movement evolves too, passing from Nature worship to neo-Catholicism, from the medieval to the exotic, from serene idealism to the satanic and thence to a greater realism, to universal charity and to humanitarian Socialism. Because the Romantic generations form part of a society that has been uprooted and has questioned all the dogmatic principles of authority on which it originally rested, their thought is characterised by something other than ideas and is interpreted by confused aspirations, a nostalgia for the unknown, a need to escape into the future or into the mysterious past. Therefore Romanticism can be described by none of its Protean forms and we may arrive at a definition by grasping the underlying, basic principle that engenders its many shapes. We have attempted to define the Romantic attitude as an emotional disbalance resulting from the individual's awareness that nothing in the world is fixed or stable and that he, as part of the natural and

invisible universe is equally evolving towards an unknown goal. One of the most clearly observable outcomes of this awareness of 'becoming' rather than 'being' is a moral and spiritual anguish resulting from the knowledge that a hopeless gap separates man from the unknown, the flesh from the spirit, the real from the ideal, and a bitter frustration and revolt, discernible in such diverse writers as de Vigny, Hugo or George Sand, at the knowledge that this gap cannot be bridged. But because all individuals feel themselves related to the greater, invisible universe by such obscure forces as love, compassion or evil, the Romantic's tendency is to break down emotional barriers and, by a powerful effort of the imagination, to project himself into the unknown. Thus an unimpeded imagination is the motive power of Romantic literature and, according to many, its undoing.

As a critic, Anatole France believed, or would have us believe that an unrestrained imagination is the writer's undoing. "Ne nous faisons ni trop rares, ni trop singuliers,"¹ is his warning to his time, and again, in his fascinating Apology for plagiarism, we may note the influence of both Classicism and Parnassus on the unrepentant imitator: "Une idée ne vaut que par la forme ... Donner une forme nouvelle à une vieille idée, c'est tout l'art et la seule création possible."² It seems that in maturity, France had travelled

¹ La Vie littéraire. II. p 200 ² La Vie littéraire. IV. p 163.

a long way from the weird, fantastic visions of childhood depicted in his autobiographies. In later years, it seemed to him that because of its perpetual enchantment, his childhood was the only happy period of his life and on several occasions he affirmed that with the passing of those early days, he lost the power of his strange and fertile imagination. "J'ai en depuis le malheur de perdre ce don précieux." ¹ This admission coincides in an interesting manner with the words once noted down by his secretary Brousson: "On me reproche l'érudition de mes personnages ... On me reproche aussi mon manque d'imagination. L'imagination est la mère des extravagances, la folle du logis." ²

When we read France's autobiographical novels, it becomes evident that from a very early age he indulged in the grotesque and the fantastic as much as in the supernatural and the miraculous. ³ We do not believe that he ever lost the power of his vivid imagination. But in his thought, we may observe two conflicting tendencies. The spiritual descendant of the XVIIIth century 'philosophes' seeks occasionally to rationalise the origin of supernatural belief but at the same time, this sceptic and atheist wants to

¹ Le Livre de mon ami. p 103.

² J.J.Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op.cit. p 175.

³ Cf. Le livre de mon ami. II. ch.1. L'Ermitage du Jardin des plantes.

believe and willingly recreates the soul of the candid and naïve saints and the ancient world that accepted the miraculous in its simplicity and faith.

At first it would appear that his adherence to the Sensationalist philosophy of Condillac must prove an inhibiting factor to the flights of his imagination but unlike this empiricist, France has fortunately not missed out the active and spiritual side of human experience. His adherence to Sensationalism merely serves as a goad and an instigator in his search of the unknown world. This fact becomes evident in a passage of Le Petit Pierre where he speaks of the "heavy chains" of his existence in the course of which he never renounced the hope of discovering a new, mysterious universe. The passage is terminated by one of those familiar lyrical apostrophes, addressed this time to the dog who accompanied him in his walks and who was the dumb witness in his quest: "Tu m'as vu, Mitzi, épier à tous les carrefours, à tous les angles du chemin, à tous les détours des sentiers dans les bois, l'apparition terrible, sans forme, et pareille au néant, et qui m'eût soulagé un moment de l'ennui de vivre. Et toi, mon ami, mon frère, ne cherchais-tu pas aussi quelque-chose que tu ne trouvais jamais? Je n'ai pas pénétré tous les secrets de ton âme; mais j'y ai découvert trop de ressemblances avec la mienne pour ne pas croire qu'elle était inquiète et tourmentée." But the

unknown eludes^{us}, it exists in the exterior world that we shall never know. "Et puisque nous ne pouvons sortir de nous-mêmes, nous ne l'atteindrons jamais."¹

This conclusion is the very justification and motive power of Anatole France's imagination. What cannot be seized in the exterior world must be recreated in the inner mind. "I am imaginary and therefore I exist. Everything is only a dream and since nobody dreams about you, Sylvestre Bonnard, you have no existence at all," says the haughty little fairy to the disconcerted scholar.² "Such statements," Professor E.P.Dargan has observed, "convey more than 'Peter Pan sentimentality.'"³ They are the very foundation of France's doctrine of Illusion which maintains that one appearance of reality would be as devoid of meaning as the next unless we voluntarily transform it by an individual effort of the imagination. Throughout his life, France maintains that the monotony and ugliness of reality would be intolerable if we could not recreate something other and better in our mind. It is in this sense that in his article George Sand et l'idealisme dans l'art, he writes of the Naturalists: "On oppose la réalité à l'idéal, comme si l'idéal n'était pas la seule réalité, qu'il nous soit permis de saisir."⁴ This idea

¹ Le Petit Pierre. pp 117-119.

² Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard. p 359

³ E.P.Dargan. Anatole France 1844-1896. op. cit. p 85.

⁴ La Vie littéraire. I. p 344.

is emphasised in Le Jardin d'Epicure: "L'existence serait intolérable si l'on ne rêvait jamais. Ce que la vie a de meilleur c'est l'idée qu'elle nous donne de je ne sais quoi qui n'est point en elle. Le réel nous sert à fabriquer tant bien que mal un peu d'idéal."¹ In his Preface to Faust we are introduced to a Breton cook who assured a company with whom France once dined that she had seen the devil at Quimper. A rationalist who was present laughed at her credulity but a wiser guest (and who can doubt that this was France himself) retorted: "Ma bonne femme, à supposer que le diable n'existât pas avant que vous l'eussiez vu, il existe maintenant: vous l'avez créé. Gardez-vous en."² Thus we see that far from being devoid of imagination, France possesses an extremely rich and versatile imagination, ranging as it does so easily from the Platonic to the Satanic, and being more often than not eager to dwell with unusual satisfaction in the realm of the Devil and the Black-Bogey.

To assemble all the dreams and fantasies that passed through the restless stream of Anatole France's consciousness would prove an unending task. But we can indicate those particular "images de l'éternelle illusion" over which he most persistently chose to linger.

From his earliest days, he delighted in exotic visions of the past. Very characteristically, these visions were

¹ Le Jardin d'Epicure. p 112.

² A. France. Preface de Faust. Nouvelle traduction de Camille Bénédict (Paris: Lemerre 1891). Vol. I. p.VIII.

often associated with sensuous evocations of feminine beauty. Although the sensuous impulse relates him to Baudelaire, whom he greatly admired, the lyrical invocations to the past are often inspired by Chateaubriand for whom he felt no deep sympathy but who nevertheless contributed greatly to the richness and the rhythms of his prose. The influence of the latter may be clearly observed in this extract from an article of Le Temps which relates a memory of France's school-days:

"En ce temps là je mêlais l'amour à la mort dans la poésie de mes rêves. Pendant l'étude du soir que surveillait un pion crasseux, je voyais l'ombre de Cynthie, ses voiles à demi consumés, pâle et les cheveux dénoués, telle enfin qu'elle était sur le lit funèbre. Le feu avait terni le béryl qu'elle portait au doigt. J'étais Properce. Elle me rappelait les veilles de Suburre et les muets serments ... Ne riez pas. Telle est la magie de ces poètes latins: les fioles assyriennes qu'ils ont versées sur le bucher funèbre ont a jamais parfumé^{et}/embelli la mort.

Mais le dimanche, à la chapelle, ce n'est plus Cynthie qui m'apparaissait à travers les nuages de l'encens, au chant des cantiques, c'est Cécile endormie dans un cercueil de cyprès, toute embaumée de myrrhe et d'aromates. Cécile vêtue encore de vêtements tissus d'or dont elle s'était parée pour le sacrifice, et croisant ses deux mains sur la palme

du martyre."¹

Another uncollected article, which is the most personal that France ever wrote, Vacances sentimentales, relates his visit to the Black Forest and Alsace in the company of his wife and his small daughter Suzanne. On entering the Abbey of Sainte Odile, he observes on the steps of the sanctuary, crumbling fragments of the Abbey's ancient sculptures. One of these, a weeping angel in the rococo style, inspires a lyrical apostrophe that most aptly describes his love of the mysterious past:

"Parle, j'entrerai dans tes peines, mon ange. Je les partagerai, aussi vrai que je partage la dure mélancolie de tes vieux compagnons. Car entends-tu, j'aime à la fois le sensualisme gracieux de ton temps si joli et l'ascétisme sombre des grands siècles chrétiens. Toutes les ruines, graves ou légères, me jettent dans une pieuse rêverie, toutes les formes du passé ont une âme que cherche mon âme. De quelque façon austère ou voluptueuse qu'ils aient fait le rêve de la vie, les morts m'inspirent tous un sentiment d'affectueuse curiosité."²

It is a remarkable fact that this exponent of doubt and denial was haunted by the mysterious. In his review of contemporary literature, he showed particular interest in

¹ Le Temps. 18 April 1886.

² Revue politique et littéraire. 14 October 1882. Vacances sentimentales, p 489.

such interpreters of the ghost-world as Gilbert Augustin Thierry, Paul Hervieu, Guy de Maupassant, Leon Hennique, Eugène Melchior de Vogüé, Villiers de l'Isle Adam. Amongst past writers he was attracted to such divers narrators of the weird and magical as Apuleus, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Nodier, Gerard de Nerval. He delighted in the experiences of visionaries, sorcerers, in the rituals of the Black Mass, in the phenomenon of hypnotism, auto-suggestion and psychic premonition.¹ Spiritualism as a science and a religion proved too large a pill for him to swallow but the amusing manner in which he followed the adventures of Sir William Crookes with the delectable spirit Katie King is yet another example of the fascination he experienced as a literary artist for the unknown: "La vérité est que le monde inconnu, c'est, non pas aux magiciens et aux spirites, mais aux romanciers et aux poètes qu'il faut en demander le chemin."²

Guy Michaut in his Anatole France, étude psychologique, regards this courting of nature's mysteries as a mere dilettante's sport: "Ils amusent sa pensée mais il n'y croit pas."³ And yet this quest for the unknown is a very definite

¹ L'Echo de Paris. 11 January 1893. (Le maréchal de Salon et Louis XIII; Jeanne d'Arc and the numerous preliminary studies for this work; Le Temps 13 March 1892 (un visionnaire en 1816); L'Univers Illustré 16 May 1891 (La messe noire au XVIIe siècle), 4 February 1893 (L'envoûtement et la sorcellerie) etc.

² La Vie littéraire. I. p 124.

³ Guy Michaut. Anatole France, étude psychologique. op.cit. p 44.

survival of the romantic need to fill the gap that separates flesh from spirit. France's escapist trend is true to his time and characteristic of his generation which experiences more than ever the need to believe in an age when, as he says himself "all illuminations of faith are extinguished."¹ Therefore in deciding such matters, we can do no better than to take him at his own word:

"Notre littérature contemporaine oscille entre le naturalisme brutal et le mysticisme exalté. Nous avons perdu la foi et nous voulons croire encore. L'insensibilité de la nature nous désole. La morne majesté des lois physiques nous accable. Nous cherchons le mystère."²

This admission accounts for the constant intrusion of the mysterious in his writings. Amongst his gruesome tales, a clear differentiation must be made between those that rest on a rational foundation, supported by the scientific investigations of his time and those that are inspired solely by a love of horror and mystery. To the former group belong Jocaste and L'Oeuf rouge which deal with the power of auto-suggestion on unbalanced individuals. This theme is developed in the novel L'Histoire Comique.³ But to the second belong a

¹ Le Jardin d'Epicure, p 52. ² La Vie littéraire. III.p 265.

³ Michael Corday relates that France favoured the adaptation of Jocaste and L'Histoire Comique for the screen. "Il disait que le cinéma devrait surtout interpréter le fantastique." (Anatole France d'après ses confidences et ses souvenirs. Paris: Delpeuch. 1928. p 126).

more imposing collection of unmitigated 'horror' tales: 'L'Ombre' in Le Livre de mon ami (related as a personal experience), 'M. Pigeonneau' and 'La fille de Lilith' in Balthasar, 'La Messe des Ombres' and 'Leslie Wood' in L'Etui de nacre, 'Lucifer' and 'Le Mystère du sang' in Le Puits de Sainte Claire, 'Adrienne Buquet', 'La Pierre gravée' and 'Jean Marteau' in Crainquebille, Putois, Riquet.¹

But these tales of phantoms, nightmares, ghostly premonitions and reincarnations, numerous as they are, do not represent the most typical feature of Anatole France's fantastic imagination, for even more characteristic is the manner in which he divides both his attention and his sympathy between the miraculous lives of the saints and their opponent the Prince of Darkness.² His Parnassian poem La Danse des Morts ends with the line: "Heureux ceux-là qui croyaient à l'Enfer." "Il était doux ^{de} croire même a l'Enfer," he echoes later in La Vie littéraire. To hold this view implies a recreation though not necessarily a rehabilitation of Satan. But the figure of the Adversary looms so large in his writings that however greatly he was seduced by Francis

¹ Le livre de mon ami, p 181; Balthasar. pp 43, 72; L'Etui de nacre. pp 106, 121; Le Puits de Sainte Claire. pp 13, 71, 245; Crainquebille, Putois, Riquet. pp 171, 189, 249.

² Amongst the forty one stories published in L'Etui de nacre, Le Puits de Sainte Claire and Les contes de Jacques Tournebrouche, no less than twenty four of these deal with the miraculous.

of Assisi, Satan may well appear to be his patron ~~saint~~. France is profoundly influenced by the Romantic satanism of his century and he incorporates all its most striking features.

Satan as a poetic figure became known to the French writers of the XIXth century through the two conflicting versions of Milton and Byron. Chateaubriand who first introduced Milton to his country, was strongly influenced by the English poet in Les Martyrs, but his Catholicism forbade him to exalt Satan even in his physical attributes and in his heroic pride. Consequently the Devil in Les Martyrs appears a dreary, unconvincing figure and always a tool in the hands of the Almighty. Maximilian Rudwin, the distinguished authority on Satanism in literature, has noted that René's more convincing diabolism is disseminated in his earthly figures.¹ But Chateaubriand's interpretation is Miltonian insofar as he agrees that in the interests of orthodoxy, Satan must remain the Spirit of Evil. The Devil, as he is interpreted by Byron in Cain (1821) had the added advantage for the French Romantics of being the conception not only of a great contemptor of the gods but also of an extremely wily and gifted dialectician. Byron makes no attempt whatsoever to belittle his Satan, and it is significant that

¹ M. Rudwin. The Open Court. (Chicago University publication). May 1922: Supernaturalism and Satanism in Chateaubriand.

having stated his case for the Devil in the most complete and convincing manner, this poet should have had an abiding influence on the logical French mind and notably on his two great admirers, de Vigny and Flaubert. For Cain is the first human rebel from divine authority. He seeks to develop all the faculties of the mind and the body in opposition to the mystifying, cruel God who has created him:

Knowledge is good
And life is good and how can both be evil? ¹

Satan then appears to him as the champion and supporter of mankind and seeks not to tempt him but to confirm his view that the life-force must expand and develop by revolting against God, the tyrannical oppressor of humanity.

From Byron springs the reversal of poetic judgment with regard to the Devil. He is now the victim, a symbol of the outcast, banished from God's grace and also of suffering humanity throughout the world. De Vigny is the first to approach the subject of the Devil's purification in Eloa. In Lamartine's La Chute d'un Ange, the fall from grace is symbolised by the tragic adventures of the Angel Cédar. Hugo, in La fin de Satan, assumes God's attributes and depicts Satan as a repentant, thirsting to be restored to divine favour, and he decrees that Satan's forgiveness will be effected in a blissful future when all Evil will be banished from the world. Hugo and Lamartine may at times support the

¹ Byron. Cain. Act 1. scene 1.

Byronic attitude of revolt, the first in Ibo, the second in Le Blasphème, but ~~by~~ the very nature of their Catholic faith, they resign themselves to the mysterious rulings of the Almighty and thus continue the orthodox Christian tradition as handed down to them by Milton and Chateaubriand. But together with the Conformist Lamartine and Hugo, there appears a group of writers who are not so easily comforted by verbal consolations. To this group belong de Vigny, who has not conveyed the full depth of his revolt in Eloa, Flaubert of La tentation de Sainte Antoine whose Satan is the demon of Science, expanding and developing with the enquiring mind, Baudelaire whose Satan is "Dieu trahi par le sort," Louise Ackermann who, in her poem Les Malheureux, depicts the dead at the last judgment rejecting God's mercy since He is the author of Evil. These writers, whilst developing their Satanism on very individual lines, may truly be said to continue the Byronic tradition is their belief that Satan's attitude is reasonable and justifiable.

If Anatole France incorporates all the features of XIXth century Satanism, this is largely due to the fact that he is a pagan with a Catholic upbringing. Maximilian Rudwin traces the origin of France's Satanism to his pious childhood: "Anatole France, profoundly pagan though he was, professed a strong belief in Beelzebub and the Black-Bogey. This scoffer at all things sacred was scared by Satan. There is

a lurking suspicion that the atheist Thibault could not divest himself of the belief in the Devil which he had imbibed with his mother's milk.¹ France does continue the orthodox tradition as handed down to him by Chateaubriand, Lamartine and Hugo, in his belief, nourished from childhood, that evil is a necessary concomitant of virtue: all evil, all suffering, all the negative attributes of man are in reality a blessing in disguise. They rouse man out of his lethargy, prompt him onwards and upwards. To suffering, France maintains, we owe love, pity, heroism and all the virtues. We recall his dismay on visiting 'Guignol' with his daughter Suzanne, because the puppet Gringalet had killed the Devil: "Le Diable ~~est~~ mort, adieu le péché! Gringalet n'a pas assez considéré que le mal est nécessaire au bien, comme l'ombre à la lumière, que la vertu est toute dans l'effort et que si l'on n'a plus de Diable à combattre, les Saints seront aussi désoeuvrés que les pecheurs."² This manicheistic view of the universe is one that France frequently expresses in other, less light-hearted circumstances.³ But from 1891 onwards, coinciding with his growing attitude of revolt, France is not content to remain philosophical and

¹ M. Rudwin. The Devil in legend and literature. op.cit.p 112.

² Le Livre de mon ami. pp 222-223.

³ La Vie littéraire. I. pp 334-335; Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp 48-50, pp 68-71.

resigned. He must needs incarnate his Satan and in doing so, he joins the ranks of the uncompromising rebels, Byron, de Vigny, Louise Ackermann, three poets whom he deeply admired.¹

We do not hold with M. Rudwin that France was scared of the Devil. On the contrary, in all his relationships with proud Satan, he tends to glorify and to exalt him. In his physical attributes, his splendour is unsurpassed: "Un ange aussi beau que Saint Michel mais noir ... Il était noir et beau, semblable à un jeune Egyptien."² In his depiction of Satan's moral attributes, France owes everything to his century. With Byron, he maintains that Satan is the force of independent thought and the champion of humanity, with Barbey d'Aurevilly and Baudelaire, that he is the demon of love, sensuality and beauty, with Flaubert, that he is the temptation of rationalism and science. But to all these traditional features, France has added his profound paganism and his love of Antiquity. His Satan is the personal and complete expression of his revolt from asceticism and Christian dogmatism.

In Thaïs, incarnated Satan emerges for the first time in the interpretation of the doctrine of the Fall given by

¹ Le Temps. 8 April 1888: "Ce divin Byron que l'Angleterre méprise aujourd'hui ..."; La Vie littéraire I. p 178: "Je crois que Byron est un des plus grands poètes du siècle." La Presse. May 1924: Hommage a Byron et passim. On Louise Ackermann and Alfred de Vigny, see our chapter, Alfred de Vigny.

² Le Puits de Sainte Claire. pp 76, 157.

the Greek philosopher Zénothemis: Adam and Eve, first created by the mysterious hands of God, were abandoned to the mercy of the ferocious demiurge Iaveh of Hebraic legend. Iaveh terrified them by his capricious threats and his thunderbolts, but in reality, he was as ignorant as they. "Il ne possédait ni le compas ni la lyre ... il ignorait également la science qui commande et l'art qui persuade." Satan, the kindly demon, took pity on these two children in their helplessness and terror. As a luminous serpent, he led them to the tree of knowledge, but the jealous Iaveh came upon them as they were about to pluck the life-giving fruit. In his frenzy, he produced such a tempest in Paradise that the terrified Eve let the fruit fall from her hands. Iaveh remained triumphant. To Adam and Eve fell the human lot: ignorance and suffering.¹ Thus, the first Satan whom France depicts contains in embryonic form all the attributes of the heroic leader of La Révolte des Anges.

But since he seeks to activate all human faculties, Satan is the friend of the flesh and champions the development of natural instincts and passions. Hence in his subsequent incarnations, in the later chapters of Thaïs and in Le Puits de Sainte Claire, he readily appears in the guise of a faun or satyr, and in La Révolte des Anges, he reigns supreme in the Ancient world as Dionysios. Satan of Thaïs and Le Puits

¹ Thaïs. pp 143-149.

de Sainte Claire is a pagan demon who holds with Cain that "knowledge is good" but would add that "life is better". Of all those who destroy beauty and mortify the flesh, he remains the implacable enemy. He terrifies them by extravagant apparitions. Finally, he exterminates them. With what weird and evil spirits is Paphnuce not haunted in his solitude for choosing to ignore the true nature of his love for Thaïs? Three more ascetic victims are included in Le Puits de Sainte Claire. The medieval monk Fra Mino who brings to his aid all the precepts of his arid scholasticism and causes the tomb of the holy Satyr to be exorcised is visited at night by the nymphs of Antiquity who tear his heart from his body.¹ A no less terrible revenge is wrought by Satan on Spinello, the Florentine painter who chooses to portray the Evil One and his satellites in hideous detail as the seven deadly sins. Lucifer appears before him in order to prove his resplendent beauty:

"Spinello, penses-tu vraiment que je sois paresseux? Me crois-tu lâche, Spinello? Estimes-tu que dans ma révolte, j'ai manqué de courage? Non, il était donc juste de me peindre sous les traits d'un audacieux avec un fier visage."² But Spinello does not live to benefit from this supernatural art-course, for he is killed by the shock of Lucifer's apparition.

¹ Le Puits de Sainte Claire: Saint Satyre. p 48.

² Ibid: Lucifer. p 79.

The fourth victim, Fra Giovanni the Franciscan is treated in a more human manner, for Giovanni is a naive and gentle soul, he is motivated only by his love of God and mankind. He believes that truth is simple and that all human reform may be accomplished by the word of Christ. Therefore Satan appears to him in the guise of the 'Subtle Doctor', he instructs him in the complexities of the universe and persuades him that there is no absolute truth. In the hands of the Prince of Dialecticians, Giovanni undergoes the last and greatest temptation of Flaubert's Saint Antoine, the temptation of rational thought. But a new twist is given to Flaubert's drama: no consoling figure of Christ appears to Giovanni with the rising sun, for all his dormant faculties of thought and doubt have been awakened. On the eve of Giovanni's martyrdom, Satan frees him from his prison and completes his damnation by tempting him in the flesh. Henceforth Giovanni recognises Satan as the 'Prince of Men' and adores his tempter for revealing to him the true nature of the human condition.¹ Needless to say, the Florentine legends of Le Puits de Sainte Claire are related to the author by a Franciscan priest, Adone Doni, who believes in Satan's final redemption and in the fundamental virtue of the "meditative archangel."²

¹ Ibid: L'humaine tragédie. p 244.

² Ibid. Prologue. p 4.

La Révolte des Anges incorporates all the elements of Anatole France's Satanism: the fantastic, the pagan and the sensual, the plea for human progress, for beauty and the arts, for science and knowledge. The chapters of this work in which the Angel Nectaire relates the first revolt of his leader and his subsequent evolution on earth, the final chapter in which Satan dreams of his second rebellion and the definite conquest of Iaveh, form a prose-poem and an epic.¹ La Révolte des Anges is the only epic-drama of Satan's rebellion in French literature. M. Denis Saurat holds the view that it can be compared only to Hugo's La Fin de Satan, but he points out that there is no element of conflict in Hugo's poem and that from the dramatic point of view, it remains a failure. From the beginning of Hugo's poem Satan is already conquered, not only physically but spiritually. His hatred and envy are merely a deep repression of his love and he aspires to God's forgiveness. M. Saurat observes equally that France has not broken with the Miltonian tradition in La Révolte des Anges, for in Paradise Lost, Milton's Satan had already accused God of

¹ A. Becker. Le Mercure de France. May 16, 1914: La prose rythmée dans La Révolte des Anges.

stupidity:

Who overcomes by Force
Hath overcome but half his foe.

This is the position adopted by Satan in La Révolte des Anges. He feels even grateful to the ignorant and vain demiurge, for how else but by opposing him, could he have become intelligent and human?¹

France owes much to Milton's conception in the pride and splendour of his Satan. To him, he owes the acknowledged line: "Mieux vaut la liberté dans les enfers que l'esclavage dans les cieux."² But in spite of these reminiscences, France to our mind does not continue the orthodox current of Satanism. He holds little in common with either Milton, Chateaubriand or Hugo. He belongs more particularly to the group of uncompromising rebels who have chosen Satan as the great champion of humanity and God as the implacable enemy of human progress and happiness. For Satan, as France depicts him, is the most beautiful of the Seraphims and he possesses man's most heroic attributes: "Il brillait d'intelligence et d'audace. Son vaste coeur se gonflait de toutes les vertus qui naissent de l'orgueil: la franchise, le courage, la constance dans l'épreuve, l'espoir obstiné."³

¹ D. Saurat. De Milton à Anatole France. from the journal Marsyas (Murevigne. Aigues-Vive) March 1933. This article is partly reproduced in M. Saurat's: Modern French literature (London: Dent 1946) pp 50-52.

² La Révolte des Anges p 198.

³ Ibid. p 190.

Many of Satan's thoughts in La Révolte des Anges had already been expressed by Byron in Cain:

One good gift has the fatal apple given -
Your 'reason' - let it not be overstay'd
By tyrannous threats to force you into faith
'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling.

Even the astonishing paradox that terminates La Révolte des Anges, depicting Satan forsaking his potential victory and the enjoyment of God's absolute power in order to return to his incomplete, human condition, is implied in the words of Cain's seducer:

He as conqueror will call the conquered
'Evil', but what will be the 'good' he gives?
Were I the victor, his works would be deem'd
The only evil ones.

Amongst French poets, Alfred de Vigny who disdained the cruel, silent God for refusing to explain the enigma of universal evil, was the most gifted to continue the philosophical revolt of human and unrepentant Satan. But it is very typical of de Vigny that his abortive efforts: the first sketches of his poems and the projects for unwritten poems, are often more bold and violent than his completed and published works. Georges Bonnefoy has shown us that

¹ Byron. Cain. Act. II. Scene 2.

in the first, unpublished version of Eloa, Satan was not responsible for his evil nature: this evil was the consequence of God's wilful creation.¹ Similarly, the depth of de Vigny's revolt against the 'caprice divin' cannot be measured by the stoic dignity of Le Mont des Oliviers but can be gauged more accurately by the projects for unwritten poems contained in Le Journal d'un Poète. As a public figure, de Vigny never once forgot his moral responsibility towards suffering humanity. Consequently, he too dreamed of Satan's definite redemption in his projects for Satan sauvé. But neither would he commit himself to this morally satisfying conclusion. He left the task of redeeming Satan to Hugo, for as a philosopher, such sentimental happy endings would have appeared to him to be mere verbal solutions: evil would always remain, constant and eternal.² Before La Révolte des Anges, no French writer

¹ G. Bonnefoy. La pensée religieuse et morale d'Alfred de Vigny. (Paris: Hachette 1946). pp 37-40.

² G. Bonnefoy. op. cit. p 41. "Il s'en tenait au dernier vers d'Eloa, affirmant dans une théorie ou dans l'autre, la pérennité du mal et son immobilité."

had accomplished the bold epic of Satan's rebellion. We shall attempt to show in a subsequent chapter how France was inspired by and completed de Vigny's abortive projects.

In the first part of this study, we have observed how Anatole France incorporates in his thought and in his writings many of the salient features of Romantic literature. At times, we are inclined to suspect that this most elusive of writers, once having been dubbed "the last of the Classicists", felt obliged to assume this title which does not in any sense fit him, as a personal tribute to the Greek, Latin and French masterpieces which proved the great passions of his life. For in his egotism, in his melancholy and pessimism, in his exaltation of emotional and instinctive conduct, France reveals himself to be profoundly influenced by his century. Neither can he rid himself of the Romantic virus in the most characteristic, yet deeply irrational feature of his thought: the knowledge that nothing in the world is stable, that life is a succession of dreams and illusions, perpetually flowing and always unseizable. Many of his writings rest on a basis of profound reverie and in their very decided escapist trend, France remains an inheritor of the Romantic tradition.

M. Gustave Michaut who has provided the most detailed psychological analysis of France's imagination, insists that the sustained creative urge is not his: his imagination

is contemplative, his characters are intellectually conceived as to serve as mouth-pieces to voice the oft-repeated Francian ideas.¹ The majority of critics hold with M. Michaut that France's imagination is a synthetic rather than an creative faculty, but all agree that he fuses heterogenous and borrowed elements in a crucible of his own.² Many are the writers who have delighted in tracing his sources but to indulge in this type of exercise in the present study merely to point out 'plagiarisms' would be a futile sport. For it is not always easy to tell if France borrows in a deliberate and conscious manner and, if he does, he has sufficiently justified himself on this score in his Apology for Plagiarism. Our object in pointing out clear and direct echoes of the Romantic writers is to show that France was well acquainted with their thought and modes of expression and valued these sufficiently to incorporate them in his own writings but always by transposing them in his own, very personal manner.

¹ G. Michaut. Anatole France, étude psychologique. op. cit. pp 94-119.

² L. Barthou. La Revue de France. 15 June 1926: Sur Anatole France. p 165. "Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait dans notre littérature un esprit à la fois moins inventif et plus personnel qu'Anatole France."

PART II

CHAPTER VIIPrecursors of Romanticism: Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In his attempts to recreate the past, Anatole France has made it abundantly clear that there were but two great epochs in the history of mankind when it was good to be alive. He has evoked as a poet that pre-Socratic Greece where mind and body alike could be developed harmoniously and in accordance with nature's dictates. But this land, in his case, is principally a Parnassian vision, considerably enhanced by the aura of mystery and nostalgia cast over it by the XIXth century neo-hellenists. In modern times, the atheistic and rational XVIIIth century is his real spiritual home. For the refined society of the salons, whilst developing the spirit of scientific enquiry, cultivated to the full the belief that Paradise must be built on earth as a wise precaution, by means of the voluptuous indulgence of the senses. So that when we now turn to Rousseau who, with an over-tormented sensibility and an unbalanced mind, practically shattered that lovable and equitable tradition for nearly a century, we can well understand the words of France

secretary Brousson who, accompanying his aged master in their daily walks, once remarked pointing to the Panthéon: "C'est là, mon cher maître, que vous dormirez votre dernier sommeil, aux côtés de votre grand ami Voltaire et de vos grands ennemis, Jean-Jacques et Hugo."¹

Undoubtedly, France has attacked Rousseau as a rationalist and as a disciple of Voltaire. Moreover, the numerous allusions to Rousseau's doctrine which can be traced in all his writings and even in the opinions expressed in private circles in old age, prove that he had meditated lengthily on his philosophy and always attempted to discuss its implications as a realist and as a historian. France never managed to surmount his invincible hostility to Jean-Jacques the doctrinaire. But at the same time, he was attracted irresistibly by the sensibility of the poet and the deluded vagrant. The literary influence of Rousseau remains clearly in notable passages of his work. So that when we shall have dissected, analysed and systematically destroyed the whole of Rousseau's doctrine, solely by means of France's expressed views, we cannot hope to reach an antithesis, so true is the observation of Montaigne that each man in his complexity bears within him the entire imprint of humanity.

¹ J.J.Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op. cit. p 296.

One of the greatest marks of France's attachment to the rationalist philosophy of the XVIIIth century lies in the fact that two of his best known characters of that period: Brôtteaux de Llettes of Les Dieux ont soif, and the urbane, sensual abbé Jérôme Coignard, have found delight in expressing their hostility to Rousseau. Brotteaux, the refined 'ci-devant' has the advantage of witnessing the full, destructive consequences of Rousseau's credulity at the height of the Revolutionary Terror: "Il parlait de Jean-Jacques comme d'un plat coquin. Par contre, il mettait Voltaire au rang des hommes illustres, sans toutefois l'égaliser à l'aimable Helvétius, à Diderot, au baron d'Holbach."¹ Jérôme Coignard who is older than Rousseau by one generation, does not live to witness the full effects of his teaching. "Quand il mourut, Jean-Jacques n'avait pas encore remué le monde par l'éloquence de la sensibilité la plus vraie unie à la logique la plus fausse."² But the ambiguous figure of the Abbé does, as we know, direct his attention to affairs of far greater actuality in his wilful discursiveness and Rousseau, like many others, receives the full impact of his mockery.

¹ Les Dieux ont soif. p 276.

² Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p 26.

To Rousseau's affirmation that man is naturally virtuous and corrupted by the evils of society, Coignard answers realistically, "car il était persuadé que l'homme est naturellement un très méchant animal et que les sociétés ne sont abominables que parce qu'il met son génie à les former."¹ And Coignard's attitude does not represent a passing phase of cynicism for the theme of man's naturally evil disposition is developed in all the later writings of France with ever-increasing pessimism. "Le fonds humain ne change pas et ce fonds est âpre, égoïste, jaloux, sensuel, féroce."² "Qu'il puisse être en quelque monde inconnu des êtres plus méchants encore que les hommes, c'est possible, bien que presque inconcevable."³

When we seek to discover with France the principles on which societies are established, we find that all social groups are characterised by fear, dissimulation and greed because these vices are innate in mankind.⁴ Virtue is non-existent in its natural state. It is but a convenient expedient devised by mankind to make social intercourse tolerable. "La vertu," affirms Evariste Gamelin, the

¹Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p.26.

²La Vie littéraire IV. p.48.

³La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque. p.110.

⁴Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.168; Le Mannequin d'osier. pp 223-224.

fanatical disciple of Rousseau, "est naturelle à l'homme Dieu en a déposé le germe dans le coeur des mortels". But Brotteaux de Llettes in the name of France replies that man is great only in so far as he asserts his superiority over the destructive forces of nature: "Jean-Jacques qui montra quelques talents, surtout en musique, était un jean-fesse qui prétendait tirer sa morale de la nature et qui la tirait en réalité des principes de Calvin. La nature nous enseigne à nous entre-dévorer et elle nous donne l'exemple de tous les crimes et de tous les vices que l'état social corrige et dissimule. On doit aimer la vertu, mais il est bon de savoir que c'est un simple expédient imaginé par les hommes pour vivre commodément ensemble. Ce que nous appelons la morale n'est qu'une entreprise désespérée de nos semblables contre l'ordre universel, qui est la lutte, le carnage et l'aveugle jeu des forces contraires."¹ France's profound contempt for the religion of nature is expressed with even greater force in a page of L'Ile des Pingouins, so clearly inspired by Voltaire, where in describing the Golden Age of the first penguins, he ironically parodies the Discours sur l'inégalité:

¹Les Dieux ont soif. pp.86-87.

"Les pingouins accablaient de travail leurs malheureuses compagnes qui ressemblaient à des bêtes de somme. Ils ignoraient le trouble du coeur et le désordre des passions. Leurs moeurs étaient innocentes. L'inceste très fréquent, y revêtait une simplicité rustique, et si l'ivresse portait un jeune homme à violer son aïeule, le lendemain, il n'y songeait plus."¹

The antithesis, already expressed by France, that Rousseau unites the truest sensibility with the most questionable logic sums up his consistent attitude to the ~~former~~ ^{letter} and we shall see that in this respect his criticism is more impartial and has far greater value for those who recognise Rousseau's genius than the amusing but wholly biased lectures of Jules Lemaître.² But we must ask ourselves if it is really faulty logic that France condemns in Rousseau. It is rather the very dubious quality of his axioms. If we accept with Rousseau that God permeates and sanctifies nature, and consequently the human personality and conscience, with His divinity, it is logical to suppose that human conscience is infallible through divine revelation and that by rejecting nature and by constituting artificial social groups we are rejecting God and virtue. France must

¹L'île des pingouins. p.58

²J. Lemaître. J.J.Rousseau Conférences (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1929)

have had some intimation of the fact that Rousseau seduces by the terrible force of his logic for he once, as we shall see, contradicted himself on this point and referred to Rousseau as "un logicien passionné."¹ It is not really faulty logic that France attacks in Rousseau but dogmatism, and, for here is the most paradoxical objection that France can offer, a dangerous disregard of the fundamental and far more acceptable Christian dogma of original sin. What could be more tempting to France than to condemn Rousseau in the language of the Catholic church? His objection is clearly expressed in his reference to a young anarchist, a disciple of Jean-Jacques, who believes that when naturally virtuous men are delivered from the artificial constraint of society, they will return to the Golden Age. "Sa pureté," says France, "le laisse à sa logique et le rend terrible. Il raisonne mieux qu'un ministre, mais il part d'un principe absurde. Il ne croit pas au péché originel, et pourtant, c'est là un dogme d'une vérité si solide et incontestable qu'on a pu bâtir dessus tout se qu'on a voulu."² Jérôme Coignard who attacks Rousseau is a Catholic and adopts his religion's realistic approach to the failings of human nature but through the too great indulgence that he is willing to

¹l'Univers Illustré. 9 February 1889. See present chapter.
p. 155.

²Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p. 30.

accord to the fatal and incorrigible nature of sin, he combats the austerity and asceticism of Rousseau's philosophy, in the name of his creator France, as a sensualist: "C'est qu'il (Coignard) s'était formé du mal une idée simple et sensible. Il la rapportait uniquement aux organes de l'homme et à ses sentiments naturels, sans la compliquer de tous les préjugés qui prennent dans les codes une consistance artificielle."¹ So finally France reproaches Rousseau for his rigidity, his lack of indulgence and humour. For Rousseau, we know, jokes seldom and in a pompous, self-conscious manner. Unlike Bergson, he holds laughter to be unnatural. "L'homme vraiment heureux ne parle guère et ne rit guère."² Undoubtedly, France considers that this austerity constitutes Rousseau's greatest failing: "Rien ne ressemble moins à la philosophie de Rousseau que celle de M. l'abbé Coignard. Cette dernière est empreinte d'une bienveillante ironie. Elle est indulgente et facile. Fondée sur l'infirmité humaine, elle est solide par sa base. A l'autre manque le doute heureux et le sourire léger. Comme elle s'assied sur le fondement imaginaire de la bonté originelle de nos semblables, elle se trouve dans une posture gênante, dont elle ne sent pas elle-même tout

¹Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p.26

²L'Emile. Livre IV.

le comique. C'est la doctrine des hommes qui n'ont jamais ri."¹

Since Anatole France's criticisms are so largely personal and subjective, we see that his antipathy for Rousseau results from a conflict of temperaments and a diversity of tastes that must always outweigh their cultural affinities. For Rousseau too, though self-taught, has the literary background of a Classicist, reared as he is on Plato, Plutarch, Montaigne and the writers of the 'grand siècle'. But France is too insistently aware of the past to reject it deliberately for the wisdom of inner-revelation. He is the well-balanced, hyper-civilised product of an epoch that he loves for its very complexity. Then, in spite of a meditative nature and a love of solitude, he is a sociable being, witness the significant passage in Le livre de mon ami where he relates how he dreamt as a child of becoming a hermit and a recluse: "Quant au rêve d'être un solitaire, je l'ai refait toutes les fois que j'ai cru sentir que la vie était foncièrement mauvaise; c'est à dire que je l'ai refait chaque jour. Mais chaque jour, la nature me tira pas l'oreille et me ramena aux amusements dans lesquels s'écoulaient les humbles existences."² Rousseau has a deep

¹Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p.27.

²Le Livre de mon ami. p.67.

mistrust of culture. In the Discours sur les sciences et les arts, he combats the "eternal plague of letters", praises Socrates for condemning the effects of Greek art, rejects sculpture and painting, "images of all the follies of the heart and the mind." Whereas if it is at all possible to apply to France the epithet 'mystical' that is lavished upon him by M. Seillière, we may be sure that it is applicable only to his love of art and beauty.¹ Thought itself is attacked by Rousseau, carried away by his belief in the natural state; "J'ose presque assurer que l'état de réflexion est un état contre nature et que l'homme qui médite est un animal dépravé."² But France attacks intelligence principally in the poetic manner of de Vigny, for revealing to the thinker too great a source of despair. Rousseau has a deep dislike of the witty, mundane sceptical lady of his century, having been too often mortified, as he reveals in the Confessions, by a playful tongue. To her, he opposes Julie and the blushing Sophie, that unnatural product of nature. France is so strongly attracted by the witty, feminine sceptic that he incarnates her in the purely

¹"Il faut nous abandonner à la beauté, y trouver une règle de vie, une recette de bonheur... Si l'on peut découvrir un but à la création, soyez sûrs que ce ne peut être qu'un but esthétique. (N. Ségur. Dernières conversations. op.cit.p.88)

²Le Nouvelle Héloïse. III^e partie.

fictitious portrait of his grandmother, 'grand' maman Nozière; and again in his tale Madame de Luzy¹. All these factors must be borne in mind if we are to realise how totally different are the temperaments of these two writers.

We must ask ourselves if France's criticisms of Rousseau are nothing more than an attempt to combat the dogmatism of inner-revelation by the equally contestable and dogmatic axioms of a cynical pessimist. Up till the present we see that even the solution that France proposes to counter-act Rousseau's pedantry is personal, for he prescribes not so much a generous forgiveness of human failings as "une bienveillante ironie" which is a very different thing. Fortunately, France has had the integrity to pursue his investigations of Rousseau's doctrine with the logical approach of a historian.

It is certain that one of the most dire consequences of Rousseau's optimism, particularly in the social and political field, lie in the implications of this terribly ambiguous phrase: "Il est au fond des âmes un principe inné de justice et de vertu sur lequel, malgré nos propres maximes, nous jugeons nos actions et celles d'autrui comme bonnes ou mauvaises, et c'est à ce principe que je donne le

¹Le Livre de mon ami. pp. 77-101; L'Etui de nacre. pp.263-276.

nom de conscience."¹ In studying Rousseau, France sought to discover the practical implications of this belief. In order to be perfectly fair to Rousseau, he has tested the theory by relating it to virtuous men, in fact men so high-minded that he almost runs the risk of contradicting himself by depicting them as innately virtuous: such men as Robespierre, or Evariste Gamelin of Les Dieux ont soif. Throughout his life, we find France meditating on the paradox of a sincere belief in virtue leading directly to bestiality.

In 1893, France writes: "Robespierre vénérât la mémoire de Rousseau. Il eût tenu M. Jérôme Coignard pour un méchant homme. Je n'en ferais pas la remarque si Robespierre était un monstre, mais c'était au contraire un homme d'une haute intelligence et de moeurs intègres. Par malheur, il était optimiste et croyait à la vertu. Avec les meilleures intentions, les hommes de ce tempérament font tout le mal possible."²

To Maurice Barrès, France observes in 1887: "Robespierre! c'est celui que je déteste le plus. Il a voulu gouverner selon la morale. Tous ceux qui ont eu cette prétention ont fait le plus grand mal. La morale

¹L'Emile. La profession de foi on vicaire savoyard.

²Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. p.28.

est une règle artificielle. C'est compliquer la politique d'une difficulté étrangère que de la jouer selon une règle qui n'est pas la sienne."¹

This idea with which France was obsessed, led, late in his life to that most forceful condemnation of Rousseau's utopism: Les Dieux ont soif, published in 1912.

France had been from his earliest years, a student of the history of the Revolution. His father, the bookseller Noel France Thibault, specialised in the literature of that period and France became well acquainted with all aspects of the Revolution as he browsed over his father's books and catalogued them. His earliest published articles notably Les prisons sous la Révolution and Les prisons sous la Terreur, reveal a strong preoccupation with the human aspect of the Revolution and the psychology of its victims and instigators.² As France matured as a writer, so do we find the character of Evariste Gamelin developing. He is partly conceived in the character of the anarchist described in Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard, and emerges more clearly in Le Lys rouge as a fanatic created by the novelist Paul Vence.³ Finally in

¹M. Barrès. Mes Cahiers. op.cit. Tome I. p.230.

²Le Bibliophile Français July 1870; L'Amateur d'Autographes.
October 1873.

³Le Lys rouge. pp.62-63.

Les Dieux ont soif, the ideal disciple of Rousseau is completely formed.

Evariste Gamelin is a complex character. A painter of the school of David, chaste, cold and righteous in his conduct, devoted to his mother, he nevertheless possesses "a sad, violent soul" and is the jealous lover of Elodie. Evariste's heart is genuinely virtuous. France insists on this point, particularly in the episode where, after standing for hours in a bread-queue, Evariste gives his bread to a starving woman, unhesitatingly and with self-effacement. For he is "un bon, un pur," not only in the sense understood by his revolutionary colleagues. During a long period of hunger and poverty, one thought obsesses him: how to render the people happy and establish an era of harmony and peace on earth. When he goes into the country and sees the harvesters at work, "Evariste, pris d'un amour soudain de la nature sentait ses yeux se gonfler de larmes; des rêves de concorde et d'amour emplissaient son coeur."¹ So that finally, when he is nominated a member of the Tribunal, his sceptical companion, Brotteaux de Llettes, utters the prophetic words: "Il est vertueux. Il sera terrible." Then we witness the terrible unleashing of the forces of virtue motivated by conscience. The Tribunal is at work,

¹Les Dieux ont soif. p.144.

now acquitting with effusions of pity and tenderness, now condemning prisoners during the Terror without evidence or trial. And in the misty, feverish atmosphere of the courtroom, Evariste's duty becomes clear. He has been endowed by the Supreme Being with an infallible conscience. Where no evidence is forth-coming, his own intuition cannot fail him:

"Il fallait suivre les impulsions de la nature, cette bonne mère qui ne trompe jamais; il fallait juger avec le coeur, et Gamelin faisait des invocations aux mânes de Jean-Jacques:

Homme vertueux, inspire-moi avec l'amour des hommes, l'ardeur de les régénérer."¹

When the inevitable anti-climax follows the Terror and the people, after assassinating Robespierre, are satiated with blood and 'sublimity', Evariste Gamelin still remains uplifted by his revolutionary mysticism. He dies as a martyr, convinced that he has sinned by being over-indulgent and proclaiming that his labours for humanity have been unappreciated. He dies as a romantic hero because he has cherished utopic dreams.

Throughout this study, the influence of Rousseau on the beliefs, the manners and the language of its characters runs

¹Les Dieux ont soif. p.177.

like a fine thread. In the church transformed into the headquarters of the General Assembly, the bust of Rousseau stares down from a saint's niche. When the citizen Blaise takes a party for a country ramble, the ladies search for wild flowers "because Jean-Jacques had made botany a fashionable study". When Elodie is obliged to tell Evariste of her former lover, her confession is cynically modelled on Julie's avowal to Wolmar.¹ Above all, France emphasises the terrible falsity that pervades the atmosphere of this period: the public gardens where the citizens "drink, dance and make love in artificial cottages, in the shades of false cloisters, artificially ruined amongst imitation tomb-stones, for they were all to the last man lovers of nature and disciples of Jean-Jacques and they too possessed sensitive hearts steeped in philosophy".²

Whether France is justified in attacking Rousseau for a state of affairs that he had not remotely foreseen when writing the Social Contract, and would have been the first to condemn, is a debatable point. In reality, Les Dieux ont soif attacks the harmful confusion of La profession de foi du vicaire savoyard and the Social Contract as this

¹Les Dieux ont soif. p.64.

²Ibid. pp. 51-52.

confusion prevailed in the mind of Robespierre and Saint-Just. The political Rousseau is extremely wary of individual conscience in matters of government.¹ His greatness lies in the fact that he conceived government as a collective, unanimous and moral effort. Unfortunately, France has not left us a serious and direct criticism of the Social Contract. We learn only in Le Vie littéraire that "Rousseau's ideas on nature and society were the most false and the most baneful that man ever entertained."² We can however through France's interest in social reform seek to discover what he condemned in the political Rousseau.

In the studies on the political thought of Anatole France written in the past years, it has become more and more apparent to his interpreters that his adoption of Socialism in 1898 was not, as is generally supposed a "grand revirement", in other words that he did not suddenly abandon his shroud of passive scepticism for an enthusiastic belief in the potentialities of re-organised society inspired by the injustices of the Affaire Dreyfus. Charles Braibant and Claude Aveline stress the fact that Anatole France was evolving towards Socialism from 1889 onwards.³ This fact

¹Du Contrat Social. Livre.I. ch. VII.

²La Vie littéraire, IV. p.90.

³C. Braibant. Le secret d'Anatole France. Du Boulangisme au Panama. (Paris. Denoël et Steel. 1935); C. Aveline. Trente ans de vie sociale: Vers les temps meilleurs. (Paris. Emile-Paul. 1949).

becomes obvious when we read the attacks on existing society contained in Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard (1893), Le Lys rouge (1894) and Le puits de Sainte Claire (1895). M. Braibant points out that France's attitude of revolt coincides with a growing hostility towards the existing government dating from the failure of the Boulangiste cause in 1889.¹ In his new edition of Vers les temps meilleurs which contains a detailed account of France's political activities in the present century, M. Aveline affirms that the latter's adherence to Socialism was constant and sincere.² Nevertheless from Jérôme Coignard to Les Dieux ont soif, from 1893 to 1912, France does not cease to condemn Rousseau's Utopism. His hostility must be explained in terms of his own deep mistrust of human nature and his knowledge of slow and gradual progress.

An important aspect of Anatole France's participation in social reform is his emotional plea for justice and it has not so far been observed that France greatly resembles Hugo of Les Misérables in his tendency to portray obscure and wretched victims of society: Fra Giovanni, the tramp Pied d'alouette, the illiterate and naive Crainquebille, who

¹C. Braibant. op. cit. p.110

²C. Aveline. op. cit. Introduction and commentaries to the political speeches.

bow their head in dumb resignation before the mystical jargon of the law.¹ When Fra Giovanni of L'humaine Tragédie preaches the gospels to the magistrates of Viterbo, pointing out the iniquities of society and the misery of the poor, he is condemned to death as a seditious maniac and for greater irony, his learned prosecutor urges that he is justly condemned in the very words of the Social Contract:

"Giovanni, il te convient de souscrire à ta sentence qui te condamne, car prononcée au nom de la ville, elle est prononcée par toi-même, en tant que partie de la ville. Et tu y as une part honorable comme citoyen, et je te prouverai que tu dois être content d'être étranglé par justice.

En effet, le contentement du tout comprend et renferme le contentement des parties, et, puisque tu es une partie, infirme à la vérité et misérable, de la noble ville de Viterbe, ta condamnation qui contente la communauté doit te contenter toi-même."²

The Dreyfus episode strengthened Anatole France's conviction that the administration of the law is arbitrary and inhuman. In Crainquebille, written solely to expound this view, he once again derides Rousseau's optimistic belief

¹ Le Puits de Sainte Claire: L'humaine tragédie; Le Mannequin d'osier, pp.63-71; Crainquebille, Putois, Riquet.

² Le Puits de Sainte Claire: pp. 231-232.

that the law is the unanimous expression of the will and the interests of the individual. Jean Lermite (alias France) observing that the innocent Crainquebille has been sentenced by the magistrate Bourriche who relies on the false testimony of a policeman, ironically adopts the dogmatic tones of Rousseau as he comments on the laws infallibility:

"La société repose sur la force et la force doit être respectée comme le fondement auguste des sociétés. La justice est l'administration de la force. Le président Bourriche sait que l'agent 64 est une parcelle du Prince. Le Prince réside dans chacun de ses officiers. Ruiner l'autorité de l'agent 64, c'est affaiblir l'Etat."¹

Throughout his political career, France retained the conviction that human nature is weak and unstable. It seems that Rousseau's confidence in human virtue were foremost in his mind when he declared to a group of Communist printers in 1901: "Vous avez voulu mettre d'accord vos actes et vos pensées; vous avez voulu que parmi vous le fruit du travail fut équitablement réparti. C'est une entreprise belle et difficile. Prenez garde, camarades, vous vous êtes mis hors de l'ordre commun: vous vous êtes condamnés à la

¹Crainquebille, Putois, Riguet. pp.36-37. Cf. Du Contrat Social. Livre III. Ch.I: "J'appelle donc gouvernement ou suprême administration l'exercice légitime de la puissance exécutive; et prince ou magistrat, l'homme ou le corps chargé de cette administration."

vertu à perpétuité."¹ He believed that the moral enlightenment of the individual should precede the collective reform of society. Satan of La Révolte des Anges ceases to rebel when he discovers that the false god of tyranny and ignorance must be destroyed "in us and us alone".² La Révolte des Anges appeared in March 1914 and in May of the same year, France emphasised this point in a speech delivered to his party where he discussed the reform of the balloting system in the coming elections: "Toutefois, sur ce point, je ne vous cache pas que la réforme de l'électeur serait préférable à la réforme du mode électoral."³ The political France is cautious. He calls not for revolution but for progress. Like Voltaire, he believes that progress can be achieved by education, by science, and by casting aside the ancient tyranny of tradition and religion.⁴ He can only conceive a social reform that is slow and gradual.⁵ M. Bergeret who champions Dreyfus and thus expresses the most emotional side of France's plea for social justice, is

¹C. Aveline. Trente ans de vie sociale. Vers les temps meilleurs. op. cit. pp. 68-69.

²La Révolte des Anges. p.411.

³C. Aveline. op. cit. Preface p.lii.

⁴Vers les temps meilleurs; Les opinions sociales.

⁵Les opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard.p.192; Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp. 87, 101 et passim; N. Ségur. Dernières conversations. op.cit. p.67.

resigned to the fact that he will not witness in his lifetime the new State of which he dreams: "Je ne verrai pas la cité nouvelle. Tous les changements dans l'ordre social comme dans l'ordre naturel sont lents et presque imperceptibles."¹

It must be observed that France's criticisms of Rousseau are so largely negative and hostile because he is concerned with the results of his philosophy and its implications in terms of well-being and humanitarianism. But we must not be misled by the scepticism of Coignard and Brotteaux de Llettes. In all the phases of his life, France was responsive to Rousseau's sensitive understanding of nature, to the candour and the pathos of the Confessions and to their author's undeniable literary genius.

It is difficult to imagine France indulging in ecstatic belief through a poetical and mystical union with Nature. Yet E. Seillière tells us significantly that La vie en fleur contains "un aveu de rousseauisme largement romantique" and even "les accents de Montmorency et de Combourg."² He refers to the memories that France has left us of his adolescence and of his emotion on visiting Granville in Normandy for the first time.

¹M. Bergeret à Paris. p.258.

²E. Seillière. Le jeunesse d'Anatole France. op.cit. p.68.

"Alors", writes France, "mon coeur gros de tristesse et d'inquiétude éclata. Je sanglotai et désirai mourir, non par lassitude et ennui d'être, mais parce que la vie m'apparaissait trop belle et trop charmante pour que je ne sentisse pas aussi du goût pour la mort, sa soeur et son amie, toujours enlacée à elle, et parce que je chérissais la nature jusqu'à vouloir m'anéantir dans son sein. Elle ne m'avait jamais été si douce. L'air coulait tiède et parfumé dans ma poitrine, les souffles du soir me donnaient des caresses nouvelles et des frissons inconnus."¹

The tone is perhaps too optimistic to be compared effectively to that of Chateaubriand at Combourg, but France's ecstatic state does indeed compare strikingly with an extract from one of Rousseau's celebrated letters to M. de Malesherbes: "Je ne sentais, avec une sorte de volupté, accablé du poids de cet univers; je me livrais avec ravissement à la confusion de ces grandes idées, j'aimais à me perdre en imagination dans l'espace; mon coeur resserré dans les bornes des êtres, s'y trouvait trop à l'étroit, j'étouffai dans l'univers, j'aurais voulu m'élancer dans l'infini."²

¹La Vie en fleur. p.154.

²Lettres à M. de Malesherbes. Montmorency. 12 juin. 1762.

Elsewhere in La Vie en fleur, we find the aged France evoking with the same clarity this fervent and romantic conception of nature that he had known in his schooldays. "La profondeur des bois m'inspirait dès ma plus tendre enfance un plaisir mélancolique.

... J'ai toujours été doux mais d'une douceur farouche et dès l'enfance, avide de solitude. La pensée d'une allée dans un bois, d'un ruisseau dans un pré, me jetait sur mon banc dans des transports de désirs, d'amour et de regrets qui allaient jusqu'au désespoir.

... Je demandais à la nature de goûter sur son sein la volupté qu'elle mêle à la mort. Je lui demandais de me livrer sa beauté désespérante. Comme on change peu! En écrivant ces lignes, je me sens agité de tous les frissons¹ de mon enfance."

In these lucid memories, France evokes a very early state. By the time he had become associated with the Parnasse and had published his Poèmes Dorés, that mysterious apprehension of infinity and timelessness through the natural forces of the universe had become largely bereft of its magic through his studies of Darwin and Spencer.

¹ La Vie en fleur. pp. 50, 149, 151. Cf. Le Livre de mon ami. p. 174: "La mer, que je voyais pour la première fois, et les bois dont le calme était si doux, me causèrent d'abord une sorte de ravissement..."

Evolutionism taught him that we are but a casual by-product of that immense and insensible Nature that urges us to procreate but also to kill. And as such we are motivated by the two laws that Nature imposes upon us: the dictates of love and the dictates of hunger and destruction.¹ So finally, France asks in La Vie littéraire that the poet should not, like the de Goncourt brothers, those "grandsons of Jean Jacques, proclaim that nature is our enemy, nor must he, like Baudelaire, seek a pure form of art from which natural beauty shall be completely absent. We must not give Nature an emotional interpretation, either as Rousseau, the de Goncourts, or Baudelaire. She must be accepted for what she is, cruel in her effects but amoral and constantly evolving: "Dans notre intérêt et pour notre repos, pardonnons à cette nature le mal qu'elle nous fait par mégarde et par indifférence."²

At the same time, we cannot fail to observe the ease with which France recaptures his early, emotional state in La Vie en fleur, the manner in which he is so obviously influenced by Rousseau's eloquence in describing his former condition, and the significance of the words: "Je me sens agité de tous les frissons de mon enfance."

¹La Vie littéraire. I. pp. 63, 347,; II. p.66. et passim.

²Ibid. III. p. 187.

That France was always responsive to Rousseau's sensibility and to his poetic influence on the XIXth century is evident in an article of L'Univers Illustré, written in 1889, where he comments on a topical event: the inauguration of Rousseau's first statue in Paris. With feigned indignation, he asks his readers if it is really just that a city which possesses four statues of Voltaire should be so slow in rendering homage to Rousseau:

"Tant que Paris a gardé un peu de tenue, il n'a pas osé couler en bronze le méchant polisson qui fut laquais, vola un ruban, vécut de madame de Warens, conta dans un langage enchanteur ses mauvaises habitudes prolongées jusqu'à l'âge mûr, mis ses enfants au tour, et finalement devint fou. C'était un malheureux, mais ce malheureux est un des maîtres de sa langue, un des plus éloquents écrivains de la France; ce malheureux est un logicien passionné, un amant délicieux de la nature. Il a vécu, il a senti, il a pensé. Il a fait vivre, sentir, penser toute une génération, qui fut, à son exemple, sensible, naturelle, éloquente, insensée. Il n'avait pas sa statue, tandis que M. Ricard, qui fut ministre, avait la sienne! Non certes, je n'envierai pas à ce pauvre infirme qui fut un grand homme les honneurs tardifs qu'on lui décerne."¹

¹L'Univers Illustré. 9. February 1889. Rousseau's statue was unveiled in the same week.

We have previously had occasion to note that France was not consistent when it came to deciding whether sincere confessions à la Rousseau were harmful to literature. He has reproached Rousseau for immodest plebeian vulgarity and for encouraging the Romantic generations to cultivate their vanities.¹ In reality, France, who was so exclusively a man of letters, was deeply impressed by Rousseau's effortless power to seduce by his eloquence. "Il admirait particulièrement le style de Rousseau," asserts France's friend and disciple Michel Corday. "Il disait à propos des Confessions: d'abord c'est le sens commun, puis cela devient beau, plus beau, encore plus beau, étonnamment beau. Chaque phrase est subordonnée à l'ensemble."²

France makes it clear in La Vie littéraire that the Confessions were his favourite work of Rousseau. He considered that whereas the Nouvelle Héloïse and L'Emile were no longer readable because of their unconvincing message, the Confessions were timeless because of Rousseau's magic power to transform the very revelation of his vices into a candid and moving human document: "La vérité ne lui coûte

¹See Chapter III. p.57.

²M. Corday. Dernières pages inédites d'Anatole France. op. cit. p.70.

point à dire: il sait que, pour ignoble et vile qu'elle est, il la rendra touchante et belle: il a de des secrets pour cela, les secrets du génie qui comme le feu purifie tout."¹

With equal sympathy, France perfectly grasped Rousseau's need to convey the purely emotional impression left by a past experience when his imperfect memory could no longer supply precise dates and facts. Maurice Barrès relates a conversation between Bourget and France in which the former inferred as a psychologist that this particular trait in Rousseau was abnormal. France considered this to be a most natural way of writing a biography. "On n'a pas assez remarqué," he replied, "ce que dit Rousseau dans ses Confessions. J'inventerai peut-être certaines circonstances que je ne me rappelle pas pour y loger des sentiments vrais."² In his own autobiographies, France delights in this method, and on one occasion in La Vie en fleur, he excuses his faulty memory by quoting Rousseau as a laudable example: "J'ai pu combiner des circonstances pour remplacer celles qui m'échappaient. Mais ces combinaisons n'eurent jamais pour raison que l'envie de montrer la vérité d'un

¹La vie littéraire I. p.87.

²M. Barrès. Mes Cahiers. op.cit. tome I. p.224.

caractère; enfin, je crois que l'on n'a jamais menti d'une façon plus véridique. Jean-Jacques dans un endroit de ses Confessions, a fait une déclaration assez semblable à celle-ci, autant qu'il me semble."¹

We have seen in the present chapter, how clearly Rousseau has influenced France in La Vie en fleur when the latter describes his love of nature. In other notable passages, France appears to be equally inspired by Rousseau.

It is interesting to note that Rousseau serves as a direct model for France when he attempts to express an undetermined state of restlessness, desire or yearning. In the Confessions, Rousseau recalls; "J'atteignis ainsi ma seizième année, mécontent de tout et de moi, sans goût de mon état, sans plaisirs de mon âge, dévoré de désirs dont j'ignorais l'objet, pleurant sans sujet de larmes, soupirant sans savoir de quoi."² There are obvious reminiscences of these words in Le livre de mon ami, when France describes himself in his adolescence as "plein du désir inconnu que je devinais partout et que je ne trouvais nulle part. Seul, tout le jour, je pleurais sans cause, il m'arrivait quelquefois de sentir mon coeur se gonfler si fort que je croyais mourir."³

¹La Vie en fleur. p.345.

²Les Confessions. Livre I.

³Le Livre de mon ami. p.175.

In less emotional passages, Rousseau continues to influence his thought. The idea expressed in Le Jardin d'Epicure that it is impossible to write an accurate historical account of past events since their determining factors must always elude the historian, is taken directly from L'Emile. "On s'imagine," writes Rousseau, "que l'histoire est à leur portée (à la portée des enfants), parcequ'elle n'est qu'un recueil de faits. Mais qu'entend-on par ce mot de faits? Croit-on que les rapports qui déterminent les faits historiques soient si faciles à saisir?... De plus, il s'en faut bien que les faits décrits dans l'histoire ne soient la peinture exacte des mêmes faits tels qu'ils sont arrivés: ils changent de forme dans la tête de l'historien, ils se moulent sur ses intérêts, ils prennent la teinte de ses préjugés."¹

And France: "Y est-il une histoire impartiale? Et qu'est-ce que l'histoire? La représentation écrite des événements passés. Mais qu'est-ce qu'un événement? Est-ce un fait quelconque? Non pas! C'est un fait notable. Or, comment l'historien juge-t-il qu'un fait est notable ou non? Il en juge arbitrairement, selon son goût et son caractère, à son idée, en artiste enfin."²

¹L'Emile. Livre II, Livre IV.

²Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.107.

From Rousseau comes the idea expressed in L'Ile des Pingouins, that land appropriated by force by the first inhabitants, results in the fencing-off of fields and the origin of property. When Saint Maél beholds the massacres of the Penguins, his companion explains: "Ils créent le droit, ils fondent la propriété; ils établissent les principes de la civilisation, les bases des sociétés et les assises de l'Etat.

- Comment cela? demanda le vieillard Maél.

- En bornant leurs champs. C'est l'origine de toute police."¹

In even less obvious contexts, the influence of Rousseau is traceable. Maurice Gaffiot points out that in his political speeches, France is fond of reproaching this rhetorical expression from the Social Contract: "La liberté véritable, celle-là qui ne reconnaît point de liberté contre elle-même."² And in the same way that France in his autobiographies justifies his faulty memory in the words of Rousseau, so does he find inspiration in the latter when seeking to excuse a not very commendable action of his

¹L'Ile des Pingouins. p.62. The same thought is expressed by the stone quarrier in L'humaine tragédie. (Le Puits de Sainte Claire pp. 179-180.)

²M. Gaffiot. Les théories d'Anatole France sur l'organisation sociale de son temps. (Paris. Marcel Rivière.1928). p.51; See Vers les temps meilleurs. op.cit. pp 85,94.

past life: "J'ai acquis en ce temps là, la certitude que sans être excellent, je vau~~x~~ mieux que la plupart des hommes."¹

It is customary for Anatole France's interpreters to state briefly that he appreciates all writers of the XVIIIth century except Rousseau to whom he remains emphatically hostile. We have seen that this assumption is far from being wholly correct. France condemns the dogmatic Rousseau who decides to meddle with the affairs of humanity and to prescribe optimistic but false and misleading solutions. His reaction to "le pauvre, grand Rousseau"² who lays his soul bare to humanity, the poet of nature, the tormented individual who interprets his intimate feelings in magic words, is very different. And it is perhaps not the least proof of Anatole France's complexity that he should have condemned the thinking Rousseau whose arguments, as it was once observed, are welded together by "an iron chain of logic",³ whereas he remains responsive to the most sensitive aspect of Rousseau's nature and appears, in several notable passages that we have quoted, to be quite unaware of the latter's influence on his own emotional thought and expression.

¹ Le Petit Pierre. p.152; La Vie en fleur, p.104. Cf. Lettres à M. de Malesherbes. Montmorency. 4 juin. 1762. "Je mourrai... très persuadé que de tous les hommes que j'ai connus, aucun ne fut meilleur que moi."

² La Vie littéraire I. p.87; Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.85.

³ C.E.Vaughan. Du Contrat social. (Manchester University Press. 1926) Introduction p.xxxii.

CHAPTER VIII

Precursors of Romanticism (continued). The literature of the Consulate and the First Empire. Lucile and François René de Chateaubriand.

Anatole France's habit, at once distracting and compensating, of asserting his right as a dilettante to wander off the beaten track, reveals an understanding that is both poetical and historical of the decades that link the XVIIIth to the XIXth century. As all good scholars, he has set himself the timeless question: is Chénier a precursor of Romanticism?

We know from France's own admission that Chénier practically equalled Racine in his estimation.¹ Consequently, when he was called upon to review Lemerre's Anthologie des poètes du XIX^e siècle in 1888, we can understand his dismay on observing that André Lemoyne, who compiled the new anthology, had included Chénier on the grounds that he was "the true renovator of French poetry."

In the article Anthologie (published in La Vie littéraire) where France reviews the new publication,² he

¹M. Le Goff. Anatole France à la Béchellerie op.cit. p. 113.

²La Vie littéraire II. pp. 228-236. The complete review of the Lemerre Anthology appeared in 5 articles published in Le Temps on the 26th August, 2nd, 16th, 23rd September, and 7th October 1888. Only 2 of these articles, the first dealing with Chénier, and the fourth dealing with de Vigny and Hugo, have been republished in La Vie littéraire II.

supplies the model essay concerning Chénier's undeniable position as a faithful exponent of XVIIIth century thought. Yet he firmly denies that Chénier was an innovator or even influenced the Romantic generations. Chénier apprehended neither René's melancholy nor the curiosity and the metaphysical aspirations that drew Madame de Staël to Germany. Neither was he an innovator in his versification: examples of his poetic rythms are to be found in Delille, Bertin and Parny. Becq de Fouquières was quite wrong in maintaining that Chénier had influenced the Romantic poets and the Parnassians. Chénier was the least romantic of poets. Lamartine understood instinctively that Chénier was a true exponent of XVIIIth century thought and showed his dislike for him in the Cours familier de littérature. De Vigny had written his Poèmes Antiques before the de Latouche edition of Chénier's poems appeared in 1819. Leconte de Lisle owed nothing to Chénier and found his inspiration in original Greek sources.

Throughout this essay, Chénier is envisaged as the last and the purest expression of a dying culture: "Il est la fin d'un monde, Voilà précisément pourquoi il est exquis, pourquoi il est achevé... Il ferme un cycle. Il n'a rien semé, il a tout moissonné."¹ It seems that France is misled

¹La Vie littéraire II. p.228.

by his unbounded devotion to the XVIIIth century and there is undoubtedly a note of partiality and prejudice in his observations. The prejudice has been well noted by M. Ernest Seillière who observes: "Dans Chénier, France ne voit en aucune façon un précurseur d'XIX^e siècle... Ce n'est pas mon sentiment: il le fut à la fois par la nuance de son hélienisme romanesque et par la couleur de ses opinions politiques."¹ France tends to ignore the prominence given to Chénier by de Vigny, Hugo and Sainte-Beuve. The question of Chénier's influence on de Vigny's early poems has never been effectively settled.² Chénier, like Janus, looks backwards and forwards. When a cycle is closed a new cycle is already born within it, and thus Chénier leads us to a period that France views with greater partiality because it affects him no longer as a lover of the XVIIIth century but as a dilettante seeking social and historical atmosphere.

In an uncollected article published in Le Temps on the 2nd September 1888, France continues his review of the Lemerre Anthology and dwells on the literature of the Consulate and the first Empire. His article contains a

¹E. Seillière. La jeunesse d'Anatole France. op.cit. p.158.

²In his revised edition of the 1868 Alfred de Vigny (Paris: Aveline. 1923) p.49, France readily accepts Sainte-Beuve's view that de Vigny had antedated his early poems in order to appear uninfluenced by Chénier.

well developed and laudatory passage on Marie - Joseph Chénier, "the most eloquent of the poets of the Consulate" whose virile tones symbolises the late Directoire style "with its Roman majesty to which the Egyptian campaign lent a kind of oriental magnificence." But in this period, France remains principally attracted by the gentle melancholy and discreet grace of Chênedollé, Millevoye, Arnault and Legouvé. With his characteristic tendency to digress, France gives undue prominence in his article to Gabriel Legouvé's La Mérite des Femmes. Although this poem is not included in the Lemerre Anthology, France blithely ignores this fact in order to tell us that it was his grandmother's favourite book. Consequently, it has a sentimental value and the interests of Lemerre must be momentarily disregarded while France expounds upon it. Aesthetically, La Mérite des Femmes leaves him unmoved. Yet the dried flowers found in his grandmother's copy after her death are a proof of its emotional significance for her generation: "C'était pour elle la source vive et l'haleine embaumée. Il serait absurde de lui donner tort. La gracieuse créature savait ce qu'elle lisait. Elle était jeune et le livre était frais..."¹ If this sentimental winsomeness is not to

¹Le Temps. 2 September 1888. This extract has been republished in Pierre Nozière pp. 143-145.

everybody's taste, it nevertheless remains an interesting example of France's theory of relative aesthetic values and of a historical sensitiveness which permits him to reconstruct a past mood undeterred by his own, more exacting literary standards. Throughout this article, France insists that the "ephemeral" poetry of the late XVIIIth and the early XIXth century must not be read in a supercilious manner. All literature that has moved particular generations to tears (whether it be the poetry of Zaire or the sentimental lines of Legouvé) must be replaced in its historical context and understood in relation to the spirit of its time:

"N'enfermons pas la poésie dans d'étroites formules et disons nous bien que tel vers aujourd'hui stérile et décoloré, a contenu jadis un idéal charmant et des visions délicieuses. La poésie éphémère ne fut pas moins la poésie. Ne chicanons pas ceux qui trouvèrent la beauté dans des vers qui nous semblent aujourd'hui mal faits. Nous ne comprenons plus ce qu'on admirait hier. On ne comprendra plus demain ce que nous admirons aujourd'hui. Les formes d'art et les sentiments esthétiques changent d'une génération à l'autre. Pourquoi seules la rime et la césure seraient-elles fixes dans l'écoulement universel des choses?"

In the active years of the Consulate and the First Empire, the true vehicles and interpreters of poetry, he maintains, were the women. Principally through the women

of this period, France senses that floating, indecisive state, the spiritual ardour and the mental disquiet that culminates in the 'mal du siècle':

"Les femmes du commencement du siècle élevées avec une simplicité forte sous l'ancien régime et qui virent l'échafaud sans pâlir, exhalaient la poésie et la respiraient. Les vrais poètes d'alors c'étaient elles, C'étaient Delphine de Sabran, Pauline de Beaumont, Lucile de Chateaubriand. N'est-ce pas une soeur de Lucile, la belle madame de Farcy qui, tombée malade et pieuse disait: "Que répondrai - je à Dieu quand il me demandera compte de ma vie? Je ne sais que des vers!" And with a literary flourish that we suspect a more restrained France to have regretted in later years, he concludes: "Créatures héroïques et charmantes, sans qui l'on ne saurait pas jusqu'où peuvent aller les délicatesses de l'âme; les vers de Parny étaient sur leurs lèvres mais on pressentait déjà dans leur regard la poésie de Lamartine!"¹

At an early age, France was fascinated by the mysterious character of Lucile de Chateaubriand. His celebrated essay on Lucile which appears in its condensed form in Le Génie Latin was first published in 1879 as an introduction to Etienne

¹Le Temps. 2 September 1888.

Charavay's edition of her writings. France was drawn particularly to the strange, solitary upbringing of the young Chateaubriands and the effect of a loveless childhood, heavy with brooding melancholy on Lucile's overwrought imagination. He has traced her story with delicacy and with a poetical sensitiveness that is most apparent when he describes her unhappy, aimless love affair with Chênédollé or her final state of exalted mysticism and gentle madness: "Elle tombait dans cet abattement des enfants à qui rien ne réussit parce qu'ils n'eurent pas le sourire de leur mère ... Ses nerfs s'ébranlèrent, elle eut des hallucinations. Une douce et bizarre folie soufflait en elle par bouffées."¹

So great was the impression produced in France by the unseizable character of Lucile, that he recreated her, in Le Livre de mon ami, in the purely fictional and romantic episode of Amélie.² Here, Amélie appears as an overwrought young woman gifted with psychic vision, who stays in the same house as Grand'maman Nozière during the Terror. On the night of the ninth Thermidor, Amélie peers into a looking glass and perceives the gory and mutilated body of Robespierre.

¹Le Génie latin. Lucile pp. 306, 308.

²Le Livre de mon ami pp. 95-99.

France describes Amélie in the very words that he had used previously to describe Lucile. These words in turn are directly inspired by Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe. "Amélie," he writes, "était grande et belle. Son visage pâle, décoré d'une chevelure noire avait une incomparable beauté d'expression. Ses yeux chargés de lueur ou de flammes cherchaient autour d'elle quelque chose d'inconnu..."¹

France's sentimental attachment to Lucile persisted in later years. In 1892 he retraced the life of her husband, Jacques-Louis de Caud, in an article of L'Univers Illustré, and based his account on unpublished documents discovered in the archives of Rennes. "La mémoire de Lucile," he wrote, "est assez aimable pour qu'on ne craigne pas de la rappeler, et la moindre contribution à l'histoire de cette charmante femme a son prix."²

The relationship between France and Chateaubriand is equally personal but infinitely less delicate. Chateaubriand died in 1848 when France was but four years old, yet he maintains that he could remember the figure of the solitary,

¹Le Livre de mon ami, p.95. Cf. Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe I. III. 6: "Lucile était grande et d'une beauté remarquable, mais sérieuse. Son visage pâle était accompagné de longs cheveux noirs...etc."

²L'Univers Illustré. 17 September 1892.

aged 'vicomte' whom he would encounter as a child in his daily walks. There is no reason to doubt this affirmation when we consider the vividness of his description and the extraordinary clarity of his childhood memories:

"Dans une des rues qui descendent à ces quais de la seine où naissait l'enfant qui ne sait encore aujourd'hui, après tant d'années, s'il a bien ou mal fait de venir au monde...un homme au vaste crâne, rude et nu comme un bloc de granit breton, et dont les yeux, profondément enfoncés dans des orbites en ogive, naguère jetaient des flammes et maintenant gardaient à peine une faible lumière, un vieillard, morose, infirme, superbe, Chateaubriand, après avoir rempli son siècle de sa gloire, s'éteignait plein d'ennui."¹

But if Chateaubriand was then a mere shadow of his former self, he was encountered daily in the home, in the shape of his most ardent disciple Thibault-père. Thus the influence of Chateaubriand made itself felt in the 'first circle', the family circle, which Sainte-Beuve rightly considers to be so important in the formation of a writer. "C'était pour lui le plus grand génie de la France ancienne et moderne," France told his secretary Brousson when speaking

¹Le Petit Pierre. p.11.

of his father's infatuation with Chateaubriand. "Il savait par coeur les plus belles pages du vicomte. Il me les récitait d'une voix déplorable. Il recourait au vicomte comme à un oracle. Que ne l'avait-on écouté quand il avait dit... car il avait tout prophétisé."¹

At the slightest domestic mishap, Thibault père would hold forth in the pompous and grandiloquent manner of his idol, and mother would listen, patient and resigned. We must add to this picture numerous tattered and always incomplete editions of Chateaubriand that cluttered up the family home, a much treasured picture depicting tomb-stones and hearts, made from Chateaubriand's curls and presented to the infatuated father by his hair-dresser, a scene that shook the house-hold when a servant girl was found beating a rug with the very stick used by the vicomte in climbing Mount Sinai, monotonous evenings during which the young France was obliged to read to his father long passages from the favourite author. "Ajoutez à cela que mes premiers prix au Collège, ce furent encore ce sacré Génie du Christianisme. Etonnez-vous maintenant que j'en sois si dégoûté. Au reste,

¹J.J. Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op.cit. p.109.

je me suis bien vengé du vicomte."¹

We know that the revenge which France hints at was his growing dislike of Christian asceticism and the priesthood, a dislike which originated at the Collège Stanislas where in his academic exercises, the young scholar could not escape from Chateaubriand any more than at home. But old habits die hard and the revenge was not immediate. Preserved in an album, Le Livre d'or of the Collège Stanislas, are compositions written by some famous pupils of the establishment, including France and Rostand. These essays were competitive and were encouraged by the College's traditional 'Académie d'émulation'. France's essays were written from 1859 to 1861 and they include an unusual composition: "Méditations sur les ruines de Palmyre", in which the style of Chateaubriand and Volney are easily discernible:

"Le soleil ne traçait plus qu'un bandeau de feu à l'horizon, et la lune s'était levée sur les ruines de Palmyre.

¹ J.J. Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op.cit.p.305. The previous incidents are related on pp.99, 100, 109-111.

Because of the well-known motives of resentment that determined Brousson's cynical portrait of his employer, his statements are regarded with great mistrust by the more serious interpreters of France. In the present study, we have made use of his memories sparingly and with circumspection, by seeking confirmation in the works of other, more reliable witnesses, or directly in the writings of France. The extraordinary emphasis and frequency with which Brousson dwells on France, Thibault and Chateaubriand, the fact that France confirms his father's infatuation in his Fragment d'Autobiographie (op. cit) tends to prove that the particular memories we have quoted are authentic if exaggerated.

Cet astre de la nature endormie ajoutait encore à la morne solitude de ces lieux où tout repose d'un sommeil éternel. On entendait au milieu du silence, les glapissements des chacals, et les cris des oiseaux de nuit, ces voix lugubres des déserts et des ruines.

Un voyageur apparaissait seul; le dégoût du monde l'avait entraîné loin de sa patrie, loin des hommes et il était venu demander au désert les impressions dont son âme était altérée. ... "Salut", dit-il, "opulente Palmyre, royale Babylone, superbe Persépolis; et vous Tyr et Sidon, reines du commerce, salut! Dépouillées comme vous êtes de vos prêtres et de vos temples, de vos soldats et de vos ramparts, de vos marchands et de vos trésors, que vous avez d'attrait pour moi!

Ruines de tant de nations puissantes, que je vous sens de vertus! Vous consolez le malheureux par la vue de la plus terrible catastrophe; vous reprimez l'élan d'une joie immodérée par une image de deuil et de mort. Vous apprenez au riche ce que valent les richesses, à l'esclave combien et court son esclavage..."¹

Four years later, on leaving school, France published

¹The text of Méditations sur les ruines de Palmyre (1861) is reproduced by H. Parigot in his article 'La vie et l'école.' Le Temps 28 October. 1924.

one of his earliest tales Ezilda, duchesse de Normandie, written in 1865.¹ The story, immature yet vivid, is again inspired by Chateaubriand. Ezilda, the beautiful Duchess of Normandy, follows her husband to Palestine during the Crusades. When he is wounded by a poisoned arrow, she sucks the venom from his arm as he lies asleep and dies in the grand, heroic manner. "Un piètre mélange de Chateaubriand et du vicomte d'Arlincourt", comments Jacques Suffel,² referring to this early tale, but the influence of Chateaubriand was to extend far beyond these youthful, academic exercises.

France was not a stranger to the "vague à l'âme" of René and Obermann. Chateaubriand comes to his aid in a curious manner when he describes the restlessness of his own youth in Le Livre de mon ami:

"Le vague des eaux et des feuillages étaient en harmonie avec le vague de mon âme. Je courais à cheval dans la forêt; je me roulais à demi-nu sur la grève, plein du désir de quelque chose d'inconnu que je devinais partout et que je ne trouvais nulle part."³

¹Ezilda was published in 1865 in an obscure magazine edited by a class-mate. It was rediscovered in 1938 and published by Léon Carias in Le Lys rouge. January 1938.

²J. Suffel. Anatole France (Paris. Edit du Myrte 1946) p.37.

³Le Livre de mon ami. pp.174-175.

Cf. "Il me manquait quelque chose pour remplir l'abîme de mon existence: je descendais dans la vallée, je m'élevais sur la montagne, appelant de toute la force de mes désirs l'idéal objet d'une flamme future..." (René)

Nor is this restlessness a specifically youthful condition for the elderly and more restrained M. Bergeret who strolls under the elm trees of the Mall experiences the same indeterminate longing and to describe his vague desires, France discovers a notable precedent in Les Mémoires d'Outre-tombe.¹ Only we must recall that in Le Livre de mon ami, France makes it clear that such poetic emotions must not be developed into an affected pose: "Alors le désespoir était hors d'usage," he writes of his youth. "Pour s'en être trop servis, nos pères l'avaient usé. Je ne fis rien de terrible ni de grand. Je ne m'en allai point cacher sous les arceaux ruinés d'un vieux cloître, je n'appelai point les aquilons. Je fus seulement très malheureux et je passai mon baccalauréat."²

If France can find emotional affinities with René in his restlessness and desires, it is equally true that he can find intellectual affinities in the more sincere Chateaubriand who is obscured by the poseur René.

Fundamentally, Chateaubriand and France are of the same pessimistic and sceptical nature. A study of the Essai sur

¹See Chapter V pp. 98-99 of the present thesis.

²Le Livre de mon ami. p.177.

les Révolutions and Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe reveals a melancholy far more intellectual than the one conveyed by René and Eudore. "Froid et sec en matière usuelle, je n'ai rien de l'enthousiaste et du sentimental: ma perception distincte et rapide, traverse vite les faits et les hommes et les dépouille de toute importance."¹ For Chateaubriand was the offspring of a century over-optimistic in its belief that all had been discovered in the light of reason. The Revolution and the Napoleonic wars were the heavy penalty that this optimism entailed. When Chateaubriand looks back on his life in the concluding chapters of his Mémoires, he finds that his political scepticism and social pessimism have not greatly changed since the early days of the Essai. As regards more intimate experience, the melancholy of René, of Eudore, just as the melancholy of Senancour's Obermann is largely due to a precocious, analytical knowledge of human desires, so that all spontaneous pleasures are already reasoned out and wearily discarded before they are lived. There is nothing less consoling than the manner in which Father Aubry tries to comfort Atala, by assuring her that in leaving this world, she is taking the wisest course, since love is inconstant, marriages must inevitably degenerate

¹Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe. I. xi. 1.

into disillusion and hatred, and man is in any case already forgotten by his fellows the day after his burial. If all this is intended to exalt life hereafter, such a rapid analysis of human experience reveals more than a hint of nihilism in the author of the speech.

We have had many occasions to observe the deep pessimism that characterises the thought of France. Just as Chateaubriand and Senancour prematurely exhausted all joy in living by precocious anticipation and analysis, Nicolas Ségur has shown us how France in his old age passed from disillusion to an almost total state of nihilism. "La clairvoyance empoisonnait chez lui d'avance toute joie."¹ There are sombre echoes of Senancour in France's admission of resignation and despair: "Les siècles s'étonnent de ce que les siècles ont admiré. Les grands noms deviennent des noms vides... Le secret de la vie, c'est pas la volupté, c'est la douleur... ~~Je~~ trouve que la vie est une chose affreuse... la chose la plus misérable, la plus instable, la plus passagère de tout ce que nous apercevons... la nature nous plie à la souffrance, nous

¹N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. p.14.

soumet à l'ennui et nous contraint affreusement de vivre."¹

When we attempt to seize the fundamental nature of France and Chateaubriand, we can discover unexpected affinities. But because France's attitude to Chateaubriand was decidedly hostile and derisory in his years of maturity and as a literary critic, inevitably his antipathy is provoked by 'le vicomte's' outward behaviour and more particularly by his insincerity.

In spite of a clear understanding of modern ennui, France's criticism of Chateaubriand appears at a superficial glance to follow the familiar lines of Sainte-Beuve: Chateaubriand was a poseur of great vanity, insincere even in his devotion to religion and to politics. Because he was vain and insincere, he was shallow and callous in his affections. Sainte-Beuve had been unsparing to the former idol and it seems that there was nothing left for France to reveal. What remains clearly the mark of France are the

¹N. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. pp. 170, 82, 180, 184, 181. These admissions have been placed in this order in order to compare with a celebrated passage from Senancour's Rêveries: "Je n'ai rien vu qui déjà ne fut indifférent à mon cœur, ni dans les possessions des biens de la vie, ni dans la recherche des illusions difficiles; j'ai trouvé que tout était vain, même la gloire et la volupté, et j'ai senti que ma vie m'était inutile. Voyant qu'elle ne contenait nul bien pour compenser ses douleurs, je l'ai seulement tolérée comme un fardeau nécessaire." See our chapter on Stendhal. p. 380.

rapid, humorous sketches that delineate Chateaubriand's moods and poses. Even more typical and essential is his personal understanding of Chateaubriand's religious and aesthetic sensuality. Finally we must consider France's ambiguous appreciation of Chateaubriand's 'métier' and artistry, the flowing, exotic manner which he is, on occasions, very pleased to condemn, but nevertheless incorporates freely into his own writings (as we have had some occasion to see already), and most notably in Thaïs, Le puits de Sainte Claire and Sur la pierre blanche.

The Chateaubriand pose is delineated by France in rapid, cruel sketches and René's introspective attitude is seized in all its vanity: "René s'était si longtemps miré dans l'étang du vieux manoir! Il n'est tel que Narcisse pour dépeindre Narcisse."¹ Rousseau was at least a sincere recluse but Chateaubriand's love of solitude was no more genuine during his first visit to Versailles than in the wilds of North America. "Il fit de la sauvagerie une attitude; ce fut la première coquetterie de cet homme qui devait les avoir toutes... La solitude n'était pas son fait. Pourquoi'il se plût au désert, il aurait fallu que la foule vint l'y

¹Le Génie latin. Chateaubriand. p.303.

admirer, comme les fidèles abondaient jadis dans les grottes de la Thébaïde."¹

Since France has a strong predilection for the women of the early XIXth century and in particular, those who were most intimately connected with Chateaubriand: Lucile, Delphine de Custine, Pauline de Beaumont, it is amusing to note how gallantly he defends them as he condemns the 'vicomte' for the callousness of his affections. The relationship with Lucile appears to him to be perverse in its literary interpretation if not in actual fact. René did everything that he could to make us believe that his "lovable sister" adored him in an incestuous manner but we may be sure that this particular episode of his life was conceived in his imagination, because of his "cruel and tender egoism".² In a sympathetic article on Delphine de Custine, France has left us an elegiac account of unrequited love. By idealising the figure of Delphine de Custine whom more recent biographers have shown to be neither as constant nor as deeply affected as France would have us believe, he once again underlines the cruel vanity and egoism of René: "La belle victime vit Chateaubriand dans tout l'éclat de sa jeune gloire et déjà dévoré d'ennuis. Elle l'aima.

¹ Le Génie latin. Chateaubriand. pp.296, 300.

² Ibid. pp.303-304, p.309.

Il se laissa aimer."¹

An article of L'Univers Illustré ironically describes Chateaubriand as he liked to picture himself: possessed by a fatal demoniac force and leading his victim to a dire, fatal issue: "Elle (Madame de Custine) s'était avisée d'aimer René, ce René si troublant, si fuyant, si inconstant et qui traversait la vie des femmes comme un vent qui ravage et qui désole... Et d'ailleurs, Chateaubriand fut toujours et pour toutes un grand ingrat. Seulement, après les avoir désolées, il consacrait à ses maîtresses de belles oraisons funèbres. Il se drapait comme dans un suaire, dans l'éclat et la sonorité de ses belles phrases."²

Pursuing these lines, France arrives at conclusions which may appear unjust when we consider Chateaubriand's more lofty preoccupations, although they have some foundation, being directly inspired by Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe: "Du fond de la magnifique solitude de son génie, il ne vit jamais rien en ce monde que lui-même et son cortège de femmes."³

¹La Vie littéraire II. p.167.

²L'Univers Illustré. 30 June. 1888. The funeral oration referred to is Chateaubriand's celebrated passage on the death of Madame de Custine: "J'ai vu celle qui affronta l'échafaud du plus grand courage, je l'ai vue plus blanche qu'une Parque..." (Les Mémoires d'Outre-tombe. II. ii.1.)

³La Vie littéraire II. p.88. Cf. Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe II. i. 7.: "Pauline de Beaumont ouvre la marche funèbre de ces femmes qui ont passé devant moi."

Chateaubriand's insincerity in matters of religious faith are analysed in a more personal and piquant manner by France, the confirmed disbeliever and disciple of Renan.

When France returns, as he so often does, to that border-line which separates religious from aesthetic mysticism, he is never tired of telling us that by revealing to the artist, primarily a sensualist, pleasantly terrifying vistas of sin and damnation, religion is an important factor in contributing to his fall from grace. So greatly is France seduced by the idea, that at times he seems almost ready to pardon Christianity since it can afford him the attractive and oft-repeated theme: "la volupté de se perdre." France is always on the side of the sensual Catholic. He creates him in his own novels, as Jean Servien, as Choulette (inspired by the character of Verlaine), or as Jérôme Coignard. He seeks him in the literature of his own country and is very naturally attracted to Barbey d'Aurévilly, Baudelaire and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. These writers are justly considered by France to have been inspired in their audacious and perverted form of Catholicism by Chateaubriand, the father of the XIXth century neo-Catholics. In his celebrated article on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, France writes:

"Il était de cette famille de néo-catholiques littéraires dont Chateaubriand est le père commun et qui produit Barbey d'Aurévilly, Baudelaire, et plus récemment M. Joseph Péladan. Ceux-là ont goûté par-dessus tout dans

la religion les charmes du péché, la grandeur du sacrilège, et leur sensualisme a caressé les dogmes qui ajoutaient aux voluptés la suprême volupté de se perdre. Ces fils superbes de l'Eglise veulent pour ornements à leurs fautes la foudre du ciel et les larmes des anges. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam fut comme eux un grand dilettante du mysticisme."¹

Therefore Chateaubriand is the great fore-runner of the XIXth century 'dilettantes in mysticism'. Here France must once again find a personal affinity with Chateaubriand and he readily acknowledges and develops the comparison. Jean-Jacques Brousseau and Paul Gsell, who had been secretaries to France, have given us proof of this in their identical versions of an amusing incident. When the Cardinal, Monseigneur de Cabrières, a candidate for the Academy, paid a formal visit to France in order to solicit his support, he strove to revive a flagging conversation by placing Chateaubriand on the same level as Saint Augustine, Pascal and Bossuet. At this point, relates Brousseau, France could no longer contain himself and burst forth: "Evidemment, monseigneur, Chateaubriand est un grand exemple, mais de quoi? De piété? De sensualité? Je suis un peu ébahi, je l'avoue, de voir l'honneur de nos prélats placer

¹La Vie littéraire. III. p.121.

l'avantageux René dans son Apologétique avec les Pères. Chateaubriand vous a-t-il rendu de si bons offices avec son Génie du Christianisme et ses romans à prétentions édifiantes? Convenez-en, c'est un grand sensuel... Il est allé à Dieu comme aux Tuileries parce que Dieu était bien meublé."¹

The end of this embarrassing interview has been well noted by Paul Gsell: "Il aimait la majesté des cathédrales et le faste des pompes rituelles. Mais moi aussi, monseigneur, je les aime... Chateaubriand vénérât les auteurs sacrés. Mais moi aussi je m'en repais, monseigneur", was France's malicious conclusion.²

Because of his own sensual appreciation of Christianity, France can in no way reproach the XIXth century neo-Catholics for their joy in blaspheming. Blasphemy is in any case a proof of sincerity, he observes in La Vie littéraire, for one must be a true believer in order to blaspheme.³ But Chateaubriand always appears to him to be the great bluffer, neither sufficiently pious to be content with abstract

¹J.J. Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op.cit. pp.227-229.

²P. Gsell. Les matinées de la Villa Saïd. op. cit. p.25.

³La Vie littéraire. II. p.258.

theology, as the men of the XVIIIth century,¹ nor candid and sincere in his fundamental relationship to the Church, as Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurévilly. In his sympathetic obituary article on the latter, France clearly visualises how Saint Peter would plead the demoniac Barbey's cause in Heaven: "Voici M. Barbey d'Aurévilly... Il a dit parfois de vilaines choses, il est vrai; mais comme il ne les croyait par et qu'il ne les faisait croire à personne, ce ne fut jamais que de la littérature et la faute est pardonnable. Chateaubriand qui, lui aussi était de notre parti, se moqua de nous dans sa vie beaucoup plus sérieusement."²

Anatole France senses in Chateaubriand a man who would have been a great poet of paganism had he not, as de Pontmartin once observed, sought to gather at the same time "the roses of Sion and the myrtles of Cythera."³ For Chateaubriand demonstrates in vain that Antiquity will

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.122. "Aux époques de foi on me s'échauffait guère sur les vertus mystiques des religieuses... N'oublions pas que la poésie des cloîtres date de Chateaubriand et de Montalembert."

²La Vie littéraire. III. p.45.

³France's instinctive dislike of Chateaubriand's insincerity can be gauged by the interest that he shows in A. de Pontmartin's Souvenirs d'un vieux critique (L'Univers Illustré. 23 March 1889). De Pontmartin who had known Chateaubriand personally writes: "Lorsqu'on voit Chateaubriand cultiver à la fois les roses de Sion et les myrtes de Cythère et enjoliver d'une foule de romans profanes son rôle d'apologiste chrétien, on est tenté de dire que le christianisme du génie ressemblait bien peu au génie du christianisme." These and more scathing comments are enthusiastically acclaimed by France and reproduced in his article.

not bear any comparison with Christianity: his sensuous understanding of ancient form, notably in the chapter of Le Génie du Christianisme where he compares Virgil to Racine, his poetical evocation of the Ancient world in Les Martyrs, reveal a deliberately repressed love of paganism that may have developed on the same lines as Chénier's had it been given wings. The passage in Le Génie latin where France describes Chateaubriand's awakening to the poetry of Virgil compares strikingly with his own first encounter with Dido in Le livre de mon ami: "Quand il s'étendait sur l'herbe ou dans un barque, un livre à la main, l'étang et la lande se peuplaient de voluptueuses images; il y voyait les héroïnes des poèmes et des romans qu'il lisait; il y voyait surtout la Délia de Tibulle, la Pécheresse du sermon de Massillon et cette figure d'imortelle ardeur qui, de son bois de myrtes virgiliens, enchante à travers les âges l'élite des adolescents."¹

When the Cardinal Monseigneur de Cabrières pleaded for Chateaubriand, in the course of the amusing interview we have described, he stressed the fact that Chateaubriand had at least proved his devotion to the Church in Les Martyrs. France's reply was very much to the point:

¹Le Génie latin. Chateaubriand. p.295. Cf. Le Livre de mon ami. La forêt de myrtes. pp.176-177.

"Dans Les Martyrs, il a emmagasiné toute l'Antiquité classique."¹

Sainte-Beuve has severely likened Chateaubriand's fitful piety to the conduct of Italian courtesans who veil their holy statues when exercising their profession.² In comparison, France's understanding of the Catholic René is more human. It is tolerant and playful. A whole-heartedly pagan René would have met with his fullest approval. A René who insincerely upholds the dogma of the Church is to be despised. But fortunately, Christianity did not succeed in obscuring Chateaubriand's fundamental paganism and this is his one redeeming feature as France indicates with satisfaction in a sly reference to Chateaubriand's conversion:

"Nous voyons que la grâce frappe ainsi ses coups: elle agit soudainement et tombe comme la foudre. Mais elle ne détruit pas le vieil homme en M. de Chateaubriand; elle fut bénigne; elle lui laissa ses belles imaginations profanes, ses désespoirs impies et brillants, toutes les ombres de myrte qui peuplaient sa pensée."³

¹J.J. Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op.cit. p.227.

²Sainte-Beuve. Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire. Vol.I.

³Le Génie latin. Chateaubriand. p.301.

This is another way of saying that the real M. de Chateaubriand is not the creator of austere Father Aubry who persuades Atala to die with pious resignation but the poet whose heroine utters the passionate cry of rebellion: "J'aurais désiré que cette divinité se fût anéantie pourvu que serrée dans tes bras, j'eusse roulé d'abîme en abîme avec les débris de Dieu et du monde" - Even as Paphnuce who discovers too late the bitterness of self-imposed mortification: "N'avoir pas la joie d'emporter en enfer la mémoire de l'heure inoubliable et de crier à Dieu: Brûle ma chair, dessèche tout le sang de mes veines, fais éclater mes os, tu ne m'ôteras pas le souvenir qui me parfume et me rafraîchit par les siècles des siècles."¹

Anatole France's appreciation of Chateaubriand as a literary artist is ambiguous and results largely from the fact that, in spite of his strictly defined Classical standards, he remains strongly influenced by René's sensuous, flowing style.

For reasons sufficiently developed in the case of Rousseau, France is particularly attracted by the confessions of Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe: "Il s'était peint dans tous ses livres... Pourtant nous préférons le livre où il s'est peint je ne dis pas sans apprêt, mais sans déguisement,

¹Thaïs. pp.282-283.

avec un orgueil que l'ironie tempère, une sorte de bonhomie hautaine et un ennui profond qui s'amuse pourtant du jeu brillant des mots."¹ At the same time, France cannot hide his admiration for Chateaubriand as the original explorer of strange, exotic beauty. The XVIIIth century writers had sought innocence in nature, but when Chateaubriand escaped to the forests of the Mississippi, he discovered the magic poison which the youth of the century drank with delight.²

The importance of this event is too great to be superficially accepted. Now France discovers in the writings of Judith Gautier "une de ces phrases comme on en trouve dans Chateaubriand et Flaubert, qui feraient croire que la prose française, maniée par un grand artiste est plus belle que les plus beaux vers."³ Now he praises Eugène Melchior de Vogüé for seeking his inspiration in his travels "comme Chateaubriand qu'il rappelle par la fierté et la splendeur du style."⁴ Nor is this passage on the Abbé Morellet, Chateaubriand's fiercest critic, unsympathetic to the latter. For we learn that Morellet,

¹La Vie littéraire. I. p.88.

²Ibid. p.357.

³Ibid. IV. p.137.

⁴Le Temps. 25 November 1888.

believing that it was physically impossible for Chactas to take Atala on his lap and warm her cold feet at one and the same time, experimented with his old house-keeper. "N'ayant pas pu y parvenir, il déclara que M. de Chateaubriand prêtait à ses personnages des attitudes qu'on ne saurait avoir. A cela près, le bon abbé Morellet avait raison. On ne trouve pas dans Atala la philosophie des Incas, et le père Aubry, dont la barbe aspirait vers la tombe, n'est pas aussi tolérant que le vicaire savoyard. Il avait raison, mais puissions nous n'avoir jamais raison comme lui. Puissions-nous comprendre toujours les beautés neuves et semblable au vieillard Siméon, saluer en mourant l'idéal de l'avenir."¹

On the other hand, it will always be remembered that when the Satyr Nectaire, of La Révolte des Anges, who sided with humanity from the early days of Satan's revolt, discovered that the early XIXth century had destroyed his great achievements, he retired in disgust to his country seat and left the 'enfants du siècle' to their doom. "Le pis est que les enfants du siècle, tombés dans le dérèglement le plus affligeant, conçurent un Christianisme pittoresque et littéraire, qui témoigne d'une débilité d'esprit vraiment incroyable et finalement tombèrent dans le romantisme."² Brousson has depicted France improvising

¹Le Temps. 12 May 1889.

²La Révolte des Anges. pp. 250-251.

mocking parodies of Chateaubriand's style in the course of their journey to the Argentine.¹ All writers of the early XIXth Century wrote badly, asserts France with some asperity, in one of his last articles. All writers, Chateaubriand and Marchangy alike. Paul-Louis Courier was the only possible exception to this rule.²

Where lies the answer to these contradictions? Perhaps in Anatole France's own style which, in descriptive passages, is that of a less exuberent Chateaubriand, disciplined by Flaubert and the Parnasse, stripped here of a superfluous dependent clause, there of an unnecessary adjective, but nevertheless handed on directly by "le vieil homme en M. de Chateaubriand." The description of the banks of the Nile in Thais, closely resembles the famous evocation of the banks of the Mississippi in Atala. In the sensuous use of adjectives, in the disturbing vision of strange, exotic nature, we have a landscape warm in colour, heady with vegetation and fauna, much as Chateaubriand would have seen it:

"Le fleuve roulait à perte de vue ses larges eaux vertes où des voiles glissaient comme des ailes d'oiseaux,

¹J.J. Brousson. Itinéraire de Paris à Buénos-Aires. (Paris:Crès. 1927) pp. 188-190.

²See Chapter II. p. 46.

où, çà et là, au bord, se mirait une maison blanche, et sur lesquelles flottaient au loin des vapeurs légères, tandis que des îles lourdes de palmes, de fleurs et de fruits, laissaient s'échapper de leurs ombres des nuées bruyantes de canards, d'oies, de flamants et de sarcelles. A gauche, la grasse vallée étendait jusqu'au désert ses champs et ses vergers..."¹

Except for the use of an obsolete expression (l'astre du jour), it would be difficult to say whether the following description of Athens taken from Les Martyrs was not an evocation from Sur la Pierre blanche. For a reader seeing the subsequent passage for the first time, it would be equally difficult to tell whether the description of Corinth in Sur la Pierre blanche had not been taken from Les Martyrs. The similarity of style, the process of guiding the reader's eye slowly round the large panorama, of halting regularly at given points of brilliant colour and light, is in both instances too striking to be ignored:

"Athènes s'offrait à lui dans toutes ses pompes: le mont Hymette s'élevait à l'orient, comme revêtu d'une robe d'or; le Pentélique se courbait vers le septentrion, pour aller joindre le Permetta; le mont Icare s'abaissait

¹Thaïs. pp. 36-37.

au couchant, et laissait voir la cime sacrée du Cithéron; au midi, la mer, le Pirée, les rivages d'Egine, les côtes d'Epidaure, et, dans le lointain, la citadelle de Corinthe, terminaient le cercle entier de la patrie, des arts, des héros et des dieux.

Athènes avec tous ses chefs-d'oeuvres, reposait au centre de ce bassin superbe: ses marbres polis et non pas usés par le temps, se peignaient des feux du soleil à son coucher; l'astre du jour, prêt à se plonger dans la mer, frappait de ses derniers rayons les colonnes du temple de Minerve: il faisait étinceler les boucliers des Perses, suspendus au fronton du portique et semblait animer sur la frise les admirables sculptures de Phidias."¹

And this is how France visualises ancient Corinth in Sur la Pierre blanche:

"Dans le ciel rose le soleil se levait humide et candide. Les ondulations douces des collines de l'Isthme cachaient le rivage saronique, le stade, le sanctuaire des jeux, le port oriental de Kenkhrées. Mais on voyait, entre les flancs fauves des monts Géraniens et le rose Hélicon à la double cime, dormir la mer bleue des Alcyons. Au loin, vers le septentrion, brillèrent les trois sommets

¹Les Martyrs. Livre XV.

neigeux du Parnasse. A leurs pieds s'étendait Corinthe sur un vaste plateau de sable pâle, incliné doucement vers les bords écumeux du golfe. Les dalles du forum, les colonnes de la basilique, les gradins du cirque, les blancs degrés des propylées étincelaient, et les faits dorés des temples jetaient des éclairs."¹

To end a comparison that may be carried on lengthily, we quote a passage from the opening lines of Le Puits de Sainte Claire, where the influence of Chateaubriand is so striking that all comment would be superfluous:

"Les cloches de la ville sonnaient la mort tranquille du jour; et la pourpre du soir tombait avec une majesté mélancolique sur la chaîne basse des collines. Quand déjà les noirs escadrons de corneilles avait gagné les remparts, seul dans le ciel opal, un épervier tournait, au-dessus d'une yeuse isolée.

J'allais au devant du silence, de la solitude et des douces épouvantes qui grandissaient devant moi. Insensiblement la marée de la nuit recouvrait la campagne. Le regard infini des étoiles clignait au ciel. Et, dans l'ombre, les mouches de feu faisaient palpiter sur les buissons leur lumière amoureuse."²

¹Sur le Pierre blanche. pp.33-34.

²Le Puits de Sainte Claire. pp. 1-2.

We can understand in passages of this kind, where we find the origin of that style which slowly and insidiously captivates the senses, the vitality and the influence of Chateaubriand in his century and how truly grateful France must have been to Christianity for failing to suppress the ageless demon in René. But however great the literary influence may have been, the importance of France's criticism of Chateaubriand is that he sees him as a living and human character, and in this he proves once again that he is more interested in the man than in the writer. There is a sadness livened by a kind of gaminerie in an article of L'Univers Illustré where France reviews the Mémoires of one "M. Pâques, doyen des coiffeurs de France" who had the honour of being Chateaubriand's barber. Combining his own recollections, with the memories of M. Pâques and Hortense Allart, France gives us a delightful picture of Chateaubriand in his last years. M. Pâques recalls Chateaubriand in the realistic manner of a barber who visits his client in the early morning. Chateaubriand would be found crouching over his fire, a pathetic, solitary figure in a threadbare coat stained with drinking chocolate. France remembers too that the aged René had a sadly neglected appearance but he cannot agree that Chateaubriand's last years were quite so desolate:

"Autour de lui flottaient les ombres de Pauline de Beaumont, de Mme de Custine, et de Mme de Mouchy. Très

jeune, il m'a été donné de voir un des plus grands séducteurs du Directoire et du premier Empire. Il ressemblait sous sa barbe blanche à un bandit, et il était tout barbouillé de jaune d'oeuf ... Donc ce René tant aimé était à soixante-dix ans un vieillard frileux et négligé. Mais le bon M. Pâques n'a pas tout dit sans doute parcequ'il n'a pas tout vu. Le vieux M. de Chateaubriand ne restait pas tout le jour au coin de son feu dans sa rédingote tachée de chocolat. Il s'en allait une rose à la boutonnière, dans les cabarets à la mode, et chantait, en cabinet particulier, avec des beautés faciles, les chansons de Béranger. C'est Prudence qui le dit dans ses Enchantements¹, et elle le savait!

...Longue vie à M. Pâques! Quand il écrira de nouveaux souvenirs, puissé-je être là pour en ouïr la lecture de mes propres oreilles! Le barbier de Chateaubriand, qui garde comme une relique le blaireau dont il savonna la joue du maître est un homme digne de toute sympathie et fort intéressant à connaître. La dernière femme de chambre de Madame Récamier est morte la semaine dernière à Neuilly. Ainsi s'effacent les derniers témoins de ces illustres contemporains de nos grands-pères."²

¹Hortense Allart. Les Enchantements de Prudence. (1877).

²L'Univers Illustré. 21 September 1889.

CHAPTER IX

Benjamin Constant.

Anatole France's understanding of Benjamin Constant serves as an interesting appendix to his criticism of Chateaubriand. Constant is a writer of the XIXth century for whom France felt a very warm and personal sympathy. His articles and essays on Constant were written from 1877 to 1889.¹ They reflect the personality of France in his years of maturity, and in the most intimate and revealing manner.

For a long time, France writes in La Vie littéraire, he kept in his study a sketch of Constant executed by the artist Gabriel Guérin of Strasbourg. He was fascinated by the long, pale features, by the sadness and the irony of Constant's expression: "Elle avait je ne sais quoi d'exquis et de misérable, je ne sais quoi d'infiniment distingué et d'infiniment pénible, sans doute parce que l'esprit et la vie de Benjamin Constant s'y reflétaient."²

In all his articles on Constant, France remains

¹ Benjamin Constant et le roman d'Adolphe in L'Amateur d'Autographes. September 1877; 2 articles in Le Temps: 27 February 1887 (reprinted in La Vie littéraire vol. I) and 14 July 1889 (uncollected). The Preface to Adolphe (for the Lemerre edition of that novel. 1889) republished in Le Génie Latin.

² La Vie littéraire I. p.71. France refers to Gabriel Guérin in this context as "un de mes parents". Guérin was in reality his wife's ancestor.

impressed by the sadness and the complexity of his nature. He sees with great clarity the conflicts occasioned in him by the rational and sceptical thought of the 'philosophes' at warfare with the passionate current of the XIXth century. On many occasions, France stresses the importance of Constant's intellectual formation: his precocious studies in European Universities, the influence of his father who encouraged a superficial attitude towards passing liaisons, the friendship with the sceptical and atheistic Madame de Charrières.¹ This man already penetrated with incredulity at an age when young men still retain their faith is "thrown into the burning, tempestuous atmosphere of the XIXth century". Constant's unhappiness is due to the fact that he retains his scepticism and his lucidity. All spontaneous feeling and ardour is killed at its root by his intellectual perspicacity.²

In his review of the first publication of Constant's Journal in 1887,³ France emphasises this conflict and glorifies the painful complexity of Constant's nature which he can so well understand through his own experience of life: Constant was repelled by the vanity of human conduct and

¹L'Amateur d'Autographes. September-December 1877; La Vie littéraire I. p.60; Le Génie latin. p.340.

²Le Génie latin. pp.339-340.

³La Vie littéraire I. pp.59-72.

longed for solitude, but he could not forsake the society to which he belonged and which prepared fresh torments for him. He hungered for fulfilment and for glory in politics, in religion, in love. His heart was ardent, he desired all things but nothing could content him. His indecisiveness, his tendency to doubt, his knowledge of human instability, filled him with anguish and he harboured against life a deep resentment for having disappointed and deceived him.¹

Because of the lucidity with which Constant analyses his emotions in the Journal, he appears to France as a man sincerely and movingly unreconciled with his existence:

"On peut juger sévèrement cet homme, mais il y a une grandeur qu'on ne lui refusera pas: il fut très malheureux et cela n'est point d'une âme médiocre... Il traîna soixante ans sur cette terre de douleur, l'âme la plus lasse et la plus inquiète qu'une civilisation exquise ait jamais façonnée pour le désenchantement et l'ennui."²

¹ La Vie littéraire I. p.68. Cf. P. Gsell. Les matinées de la Villa Saïd. op. cit. p.85, where France discusses his scepticism. "En somme les sceptiques sont les plus idéalistes des mortels. Seulement ce sont des idéalistes déçus."

² La Vie littéraire I. p.66. Cf. "on me croit heureux. Je ne l'ai jamais été une heure, un jour." (J.J. Brousson. A.F. en pantoufles. op.cit. p.61). "C'est justement l'intelligence qui empêche d'être heureux. Je ne me suis pas senti heureux, une seule heure, un seul instant, du moins après l'enfance." (N. Ségur. Conversations avec A.F. op. cit. p.56).

We can see, by the very genuine and tender note of France's concern, that his personal understanding of Constant has many compensations. For France is always at his most eloquent when he celebrates the ennui of the conscious thinker and the intellectual melancholy that he can so well understand. But the danger of approaching Constant in this emotional and subjective manner is that France has inevitably overstressed the former's disdain and scepticism when considering him as a public figure. He does not appear to have properly understood the political tension which resulted in Constant's indecisive conduct on Napoleon's return from Elba. The creator of Jérôme Coignard sees in Constant's political actions the inevitable cynicism of all public figures who had passed from the Revolution to the Restoration: "Celui qui devait rediger l'acte additionnel, collaborer au *Mercur* de 1816 et, aux heures critiques défendre la liberté à la tribune de la Chambre, celui-là n'était pas né avec un généreux amour des hommes. Il n'était lié à eux par aucune sympathie. Quand il put les connaître, il les méprisa."¹ Constant exemplifies for France his well-known paradox, expressed in Le Jardin d'Epicure, that a man of action must always be impeded and paralysed by his thoughtful, speculative mind.² He maintains that Constant was incapable of making

¹La Vie littéraire I. p.61.

²Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp.93-94.

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¹ La Vie littéraire I. p.61.

² Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp.93-94.

a decision. "Jamais homme ne fut plus indécis. Les idées naissaient trop nombreuses et trop agiles dans son cerveau. Elles s'y formaient, non comme une armée en solides bataillons carrés, mais en troupe légère, comme les abeilles des poètes et des philosophes attiques..."¹

By exaggerating Constant's cynicism and doubt, France arrives at very debatable conclusions: The women who were prominent in his life, Mme. de Staël, Mme. Récamier, influenced his opinions, his actions, his speeches. Constant had no illusions on the freedom that he pretended to believe in. "Cet homme...professa la liberté sans y croire."² We cannot help observing how France has allowed his own scepticism to obscure the fundamental unity of Constant's political life and the ardour of his Liberal convictions. One of Constant's recent biographers, M. Alfred Fabre-Luce, has very naturally taken exception to France's interpretation. "Benjamin, en pleine force, avait d'ardentes convictions intellectuelles, sur lesquelles il ne transigeait pas... Mais ne chicanons pas: Benjamin s'est ingénié à égarer ses biographes. Et puis, l'auteur du Jardin d'Epicure inventait volontiers des sceptiques, pour leur offrir son affection."³

¹La Vie littéraire I. p.63.

²Ibid. p.72.

³A. Fabre-Luce. Benjamin Constant. (Paris. Arthème Fayard. 1939) pp. 312-313.

In the last 13 years of the XIXth century, with the publication of Constant's Journal, a new and more intriguing Adolphe was revealed. Whereas formerly Adolphe was thought of as a callous individual in his relationship to Ellénore, the critics now began to interpret his conduct in a more sympathetic and personal manner. "L'analyse des analyses de Constant fut le morceau de concours des écrivains délicats," writes A. Fabre-Luce. "Anatole France, Paul Bourget, Maurice Barrès s'y essayèrent. On lit encore avec plaisir ces exercices."¹

Anatole France's personal interpretation of Adolphe is inspired by his well-known contempt for the dramatic poses of René and by his equally deep regard for the XVIIIth century's attitude to love.

France delights in Adolphe's sincerity and directness, for Adolphe, unlike René, is incapable of deceiving himself. He judges his own conduct in the most lucid and unsparing manner. He does not consider that his sufferings are those of an exceptional being and he is the first to condemn his own cruelty and weakness. The poor 'vicomte' still remains the object of France's irony in this summing-up of Adolphe's behaviour:

¹A. Fabre-Luce. Benjamin Constant. (Paris. Arthème Fayard. 1939) p.312.

"Du moins fut-il toujours sa propre victime et n'eut-il jamais ni la cruauté froide du libertin ni l'inconscience plus cruelle encore de l'amant que son rêve a quitté."¹

France is the first critic of his generation to have revealed a note of compassion and tenderness for Adolphe when contrasting him to Ellénore. For nearly one hundred years, he asserts, it was customary to stress the cruelty of Adolphe, but in reality he was the most pathetic of victims and must solicit "our immense pity". Ellénore, on the other hand is the symbol of tyrannical and resentful womanhood. What has happened, in the deplorable adventure of these two, to the charming frivolity and amiable scepticism of XVIIIth century lovers? Valmont of Les Liaisons dangereuses had only to say to the mistress he no longer loved: "On se lasse de tout, mon ange," and she would resign herself to the inevitable, or, if she were inconsolable, she would retire discreetly and gently die of grief like the Présidente de Tourvel. These lovers had refinement and good taste. They did not fill their century with their cries and their lamentations. "Mais le coup de pistolet de Werther fit école, et l'amour devint une chose tragique dont il convenait de mourir bruyamment."² In his column

¹Le Génie latin. p.338.

²Ibid. p.335.

of Le Temps, France develops this idea in an amusing fashion and imagines a conversation between himself and an old lady of the ancient régime who totally succeeds in destroying his conventional opinion that Ellénore is a martyr. The old lady in the unperturbed manner of a Grand'maman Nozière, points out that no woman of her time could approve of Ellénore's behaviour: "Elle meurt! - Pour le faire enrager. Cette mort est de très mauvais goût. Quant à Adolphe, il se conduisit en galant homme. Croyez-moi, je m'y connais. Et croyez-moi encore si je vous dis que, sans être des héroïnes, les femmes ont pour la plupart plus de courage et plus de tact que cette Ellénore."¹

This unorthodox interpretation of Adolphe may be regarded simply as a further assertion of France's admiration for the XVIIIth century mode of life, but we are obliged to point out that his best essays on Adolphe were written in 1889, that is to say one year after his first estrangement from Marie-Valerie France which resulted in bitter quarrels and in divorce.² The misogynic note has a personal ring, but even if we consider that France intends solely to amuse his readers, the condemnation of Ellénore is not the least contradiction in a writer who has so faithfully portrayed

¹Le Temps. 14 July 1889.

²See J. Suffel. Anatole France. op.cit. pp.187-191.

the frenzies of the monk Paphuuce and the jealous, possessive love of Deschartes.¹

Considering Benjamin Constant as a writer and a novelist, France admires him for having found in Adolphe a harmonious compromise between the lyrical confession and

¹France visualises Ellénore as a symbolical figure and makes but half-hearted attempts to identify her. In the early article of L'Amateur d'Autographes (September-December 1877), he takes her to represent Anna Lindsay, but on several occasions he identifies her with Madame de Staël (Le Temps. 14 July 1889, Le Génie latin. p.334; Le Temps. 7 September 1890).

He has left us but one article on Madame de Staël (Le Temps 7 September 1890. Uncollected). In this essay, he tells us very little about Madame de Staël's importance as a literary figure and nothing whatsoever on the significance of her intellectual contributions to Romanticism. He seeks merely to interpret her personality and her moral qualities. According to France, Madame de Staël's greatest virtue was her generous love and sympathy for humanity. "Jamais créature ne se plongea d'une telle ardeur dans les passions, dans les sentiments, dans les idées du siècle... Elle avait l'âme grande et haute". He appears to have forgotten entirely his former condemnation of Ellénore. Madame de Staël was "une grande amoureuse." She felt and behaved like all the women who had lived through the Terror, Pauline de Beaumont, Delphine de Custine etc., and the importance that she gave to love in her private life is considered by France to be one of her most attractive traits. In depicting herself as Delphine and Corinne, she remained sincere for she gave her heroines heartless and cold admirers. The sympathetic note is retained throughout France's essay and particularly in his significant comment on Madame de Staël's novels: "C'est la nature même, la nature habillée à la mode de 1802. Attendez seulement une centaine d'années et vous verrez ce qu'on dira de la nature habillée par nos romanciers de 1890. Mme de Staël manquait ni de nature certes, ni de naturel. Ses romans représentent au vrai l'état de son âme et l'esprit de la société."

that severe, impartial analysis of human conduct which is the true mark of the classical novel. In Le Temps, he refers to Adolphe as "ce vieux chef-d'oeuvre d'analyse, un récit d'une évidente vérité."¹ He is attracted by the simplicity of Constant's style. "Rien n'y trahit la recherche; la subtilité de la pensée n'y trouble jamais la simplicité du style."² In an article of L'Univers Illustré, France selects with all the pleasure of a dilettante a few maxims from Constant's Journal that are a striking reminder of his own way of thinking³ and we suspect that France admires Constant as a stylist because he is one of the great masters of the aphorism. The deceptively easy art of the aphorism which is so conspicuous in Le Jardin d'Epicure is inspired by Constant as much as by the maxims of La Rochefoucauld. France perfectly recaptures Constant's note of concision when he says of Madame de Staël: "Elle se plaint qu'on l'a trompée, comme si un homme pouvait aimer sans se tromper d'abord soi-même."⁴

Anatole France's very sympathetic understanding of

¹Le Temps. 14 July 1889.

²Le Génie Latin. p.342.

³L'Univers Illustré. 5 March. 1887.

⁴La Vie littéraire. I. p.64.

Constant results from their personal affinities. Whenever he discovers in later writers of his century the same sceptical, yet conscious and sincere attitude to life, he envelops them in his affection and interprets them through his temperament.

CHAPTER X

Alphonse de Lamartine.

The vivid portrait of the aged Chateaubriand, inspired by one of Anatole France's earliest memories, is only rivalled by this unforgettable sketch from life of the solitary and impoverished Lamartine, published in Le Temps in 1886.

"Le Lamartine que j'ai vu de mes yeux est celui des derniers jours, alors que, raidi dans sa grande taille, desséché, sans dent, sans joues et presque sans regards, la tête petite, fière et morne, il ressemblait à un vieil aigle déplumé. Il était en ce temps-là à jamais dévasté et désolé. Il avait souffert plus que la mort, et visiblement rien ne pouvait plus reverdir en cette nature épuisée, sur laquelle le destin avait jeté le sel à poignées. Mais ce vieillard, cette ruine humaine est encore, la pensée aidant, la plus grande image qu'il m'ait été donné de contempler!"¹

One cannot mistake the sincerity of these moving words and yet the admiration that France has accorded to Lamartine both as a man and as a poet cannot be generally realised by the readers of La Vie littéraire, for the most

¹Le Temps. 11. July 1886.

eloquent of our critic's articles on Lamartine appeared in Le Temps from 1886 to 1888 and have never been republished.

There is little reason to suppose that in praising this poet, France was complying with conventional tastes. At all times, he was an independent and outspoken critic. We must remember moreover that from 1850 to 1880, coinciding with the Parnassian reaction, the general enthusiasm for Lamartine had decidedly cooled. The studies of Brunetière, Lemaître, Doumic and finally Séché, the Apothéose de Lamartine, celebrated in the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne in 1910, were all shortly to contribute in restoring his popularity but France's first articles were published at a time when the enthusiasm of the literary public was as yet unawakened and we must consider them as his most genuine tribute to the great poet and orator.

On the 4th July 1886, France announces in his columns of Le Temps that Lamartine's statue is to be unveiled in Paris. Is this, he asks, a sign of his returning popularity? He admits sadly that Lamartine has become in the past years an indistinct shadow: the women who wept on reading Jocelyn are now aged. Poets are the voice of lovers, but lovers are young and seek a contemporary voice so now they are engrossed in... Sully Prudhomme. In the future, Lamartine will be read only by the 'lettrés'. That is the fate of

immortal writers. Everybody knows their name, but nobody reads them, he concludes on the familiar ironical note.¹

In his article of the following week, France gives his readers a colourful account of the statue's inauguration at Passy. In the square Victor Hugo, the sunshine plays on the leaves and our journalist, making his way in the heat and the crowd realises that for the good people of Passy, quite unconcerned with the significance of the ceremony, this is just another "jour de fête". A young woman blushing admits that she has come to see M. Arsène Houssaye for "he writes so well!" The procession headed by the Minister of Education, members of Parliament, the mayor and the Corporation, makes its way to the foot of the statue which is solemnly unveiled. The public's reaction is one of disappointment for Lamartine is represented by the sculptor Marquet de Vasselot, seated and pensive and not in the erect, gesticulating pose of an orator. The cause of France's own dissatisfaction with this typically fin-de-siècle statue is very different. By representing Lamartine in this manner, he upbraids the sculptor, you convey the impression that the country squire of Saint-Point was a self-satisfied bourgeois, a prosperous industrialist. If this were true, the public of today would respect him

¹Le Temps. 4 July 1886.

all the more yet the real nature of Lamartine was very different:

"La vérité est que Lamartine fut le plus grand poète de son temps, l'orateur le plus généreux, le citoyen le plus pur, l'homme le plus brave. La vérité est qu'il ne sut jamais qu'aimer et que donner. La vérité est que seul au monde, il occupa le pouvoir sans qu'il en coûtât rien à la générosité de son coeur et à la sublime candeur de son âme."

On this occasion, France is equally dissatisfied with the speech delivered by the Minister of Education. For how, asks M. Goblet, could a man such as Lamartine, so exclusively a poet and an idealist, expect to make a successful politician? The activities of the poet and the statesman, retorts France with some asperity in his article, are not difficult to conciliate. Far from proving a failure, Lamartine reassured his contemporaries by his eloquence and his heroic courage. No doubt, he proved inferior to the magnitude of his task, but who, under the same circumstances, would have acted in a better or wiser manner? Our national history proves that Henri IV, Richelieu, Napoleon, were but a few of the great leaders who displayed in their writings the poetical qualities of enthusiasm and imagination; the literary activities of Chateaubriand and Constant were not impaired by their political life. And France concludes with the

unexpected words: "Les grands pasteurs des peuples sont des enthousiastes et des voyants. J'ajouterai qu'il est bon qu'ils soient un peu chimériques. M. Goblet doit préférer au fond de son coeur les chimères aux vulgarités. Ce n'est pas avec le bon sens, c'est avec la poésie qu'on gouverne les hommes."¹

These are generous but truly astounding words coming from the future creator of Coignard and Bergeret. We must remember that in 1886, France was deeply patriotic and still a moderate in his political opinions. Many misfortunes and disappointments were to befall him from 1889 to 1891: the Affaire Boulanger, his dismissal from the Senate and finally his divorce and these factors all contributed to the deepening pessimism of his thought from 1891 onwards.

In reviewing Lemerre's Anthologie des poètes du XIX^e siècle, in a series of articles which appeared in Le Temps from September to October 1888, France returns to the subject of Lamartine with the same enthusiasm and now replaces him in his historical context. The cause of his sympathy for Lamartine as a poet becomes more apparent. Lamartine did not seek to be excessively original. He faithfully interpreted the spiritual aspirations of his time: "Ce jeune homme n'avait ni sentiments, ni idées, ni vues qui

¹Le Temps. II. July 1886.

lui fussent propres. Il chantait comme un grand arbre quand y souffle le vent. Tout ce qui se passait dans les airs devenait harmonie en le traversant. Ses Méditations exprimaient la mélancolie qui suit les grandes crises sociales, le besoin de paix, d'amour et d'adoration qu'éprouve un peuple après des violences terribles et d'épouvantables catastrophes, le sentiment de la liberté humaine au milieu de toutes les fatalités, enfin une religion, un christianisme plus nouveau que tout le reste, pur élevé, vague, sorte de déisme à images!"¹

This new religious sentiment is one that France is able to appreciate better than the gaudily attired but chilly neo-Catholicism of Chateaubriand. Both Chateaubriand and Lamartine lacked true Christian humility which confines its worship to dogmatic and ritual forms, he admits, but Lamartine was more genuine than his illustrious predecessor, his piety was more tender: "Lamartine se montra devant le Dieu de sa mère et de sa vieille Bible moins cassant, et moins fier, moins artiste et moins gentilhomme que ne l'avait été l'illustre Breton au pied des autels relevés. Plus touché, il fut plus touchant."²

Lamartine was a natural poet. This is perhaps the greatest praise that France can bestow upon him. No modern poet was able to combine natural accents with a keener understanding of nature. Others like Hugo were undoubtedly

¹ Le Temps. 16 September 1888.

² Ibid.

more gifted in their powers of observation and description, but Lamartine was penetrated with his love of all living things. He had the truest and most intuitive understanding of nature: "Personne ne l'a autant aimée, ni mieux sentie que lui. Il n'en fut jamais séparé ni distinct. Son vers et sa prose, plus belle encore peut-être que ses vers, sortent tout humides, tout ruisselants de cet océan de sympathie dans lequel il nageait parmi toutes les choses vivantes. Il fut à son heure non seulement poète, mais la poésie même."¹

Anatole France's admiration for Lamartine dates from his youth and the poet's influence is discernible in Les Poèmes dorés. Leconte de Lisle's scathing comments on "la barque d'Elvire", in the Preface to Les Poèmes Antiques, did not prevent France from writing in his poem Le désir, lines that Lamartine would have acknowledged:

Mais la vague beauté des regards, d'où vient-elle
 Pour nous mettre en passant tant d'espérance au front?
 Et pourquoi rêvons-nous de lumière immortelle²
 Devant deux yeux qui s'éteindront?

There are distinct reminiscences of L'Infini dans les cieux in the lyricism of Venus, étoile du soir:

L'esprit cherche l'esprit dans l'étoile prochaine
 Et jetant dans l'espace une mystique chaîne
 Eux en nous, nous en eux, nous nous glorifions.
 Tant il est naturel de sortir de soi - même,
 Tant nous portons au coeur le besoin qu'on nous aime,³
 Tant notre âme de feu jette loin ses rayons.

¹ Le Temps. 16 September 1888.

² A. France. Poésies. op. cit. p.35.

³ Ibid. n.55.

Lamartine was not the only poet to influence Anatole France's verse. Gautier, Leconte de Lisle and Hugo have left heavier imprints. But whereas France reacted against Hugo at an early date, he continued to admire Lamartine long after his association with the Parnasse had ceased. He was attracted by the qualities of lucidity, simplicity and naturalness in Lamartine's verse, its eminently classical qualities. In 1886, commenting in Le Temps on the manifesto issued by Jean Moréas in favour of the Symbolist movement, France, who as we know was fond of taxing the Symbolists with obscurity and affectation, takes Moréas severely to task and proposes Lamartine as the supreme example of poetic simplicity and greatness: "Si j'avais votre âge et votre talent, monsieur, je mettrais de côté tous vos "impollués vocables", toutes vos "rimes illuescentes" et toutes vos "fluidités absconces", et je m'efforcerais d'écrire aussi bien et mieux que personne dans la langue de tout le monde. Le royaume de la poésie est comme le royaume de Dieu. On n'y peut entrer qu'avec un coeur simple. Le sentiment y conduit et non pas les systèmes. Voyez Lamartine. Il est le plus grand de nos poètes, comme il en est le plus simple."¹

When Leconte de Lisle was elected to the French Academy

¹Le Temps. 20 September 1886.

in 1887, France published on this occasion an article so full of sly innuendos that he could not have shown in a more definite manner how greatly he had become estranged from the dogmatism of the Parnassian creed. After announcing that Leconte de Lisle would probably make a slighting reference to the Middle Ages in his first speech to the Academy, France humbly begged the new member to recognise the beauty and the vitality of medieval poetry. If Leconte de Lisle would make this concession, France innocently concluded, then he would make an equally great concession in return and admit that modern poetry was superior to the minstrel lays. "...Je préfère la poésie moderne, celle de Lamartine, par exemple, et aussi celle de M. Leconte de Lisle." There were many ways of offending Leconte de Lisle but none was more calculated to widen the breach between the Mentor of Parnassus and his former disciple than to praise him and Lamartine in the same breath. "Il est vrai", pursued our critic, still intent on provoking, "que rien ne ressemble moins aux vers de Lamartine que les vers de Leconte de Lisle. Dans ceux-ci on admire un art incomparable. Des autres, on dit justement qu'on ne sait pas comment c'est fait. Leconte de Lisle veut tout devoir au talent. Lamartine ne demandait rien qu'au génie... Pourtant je les admire l'un et l'autre bien sincèrement."¹

¹La Vie littéraire I. p.99.

We have previously mentioned an article where France, reviewing Charles Richet's scientific treatise on the state of genius, makes a clear distinction between the Romantic conception of spontaneous creativeness, genius in its worst sense, and the conscious, deliberate and intellectual effort to achieve beauty which he defines as talent and openly prefers.¹ But it has perhaps become obvious that France was not consistent in maintaining this preference. In the above-mentioned juxtaposition of Lamartine and Leconte de Lisle, both methods of creation are equally admissible. Parnassian verse and Symbolism both demanded conscious, intellectual creativeness, yet France rejected the former for stifling the expression of personal sentiment, the latter for obscurity and affectation,² and both for basing their methods on positive literary theories: "En art comme en amour l'instinct suffit et la science n'y porte qu'une lumière opportune. Bien que la beauté relève de la géométrie, c'est par le sentiment seul qu'il est possible d'en saisir les formes délicates."³

In the last years of Anatole France's life, Virgil, Lucretius and Racine became the objects of an absolute worship. Yet the critic of Le Temps was not so exacting.

¹ See Chapter II. pp. 41-43.

² See La Vie littéraire. pp. 193-194.

³ Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp. 58-59. (Reproduced from Le Temps. 23 January 1887).

He was out of his depth when it came to understanding the new poetic trends of his day and he gave first place to poets such as Sully Prudhomme, François Coppée and Frédéric Plessis whom posterity has relegated to more obscure ranks. His constant preoccupation with old folk-songs during his period of fame as a literary critic is an indication that he primarily sought in poetry lucidity and a naive, spontaneous lyricism. And it is no doubt for this reason that in Le Temps, France expresses himself on the art and function of poetry in much the same manner as Lamartine:

"Un beau vers est comme un archet promené sur nos fibres sonores. Ce ne sont pas ses pensées, ce sont les nôtres que le poète fait chanter en nous. Quand il nous parle d'une femme qu'il aime, ce sont nos amours et nos douleurs qu'il éveille délicieusement dans notre âme."¹

"Ils mettent la lumière en même temps que la parole sur nos joies confuses et sur nos obscures douleurs; ils nous disent ce que nous sentons vaguement; ils sont la voix de nos âmes."²

These accents are familiar and appear to be directly inspired by the Prefaces to Les Méditations and Les Harmonies. And here is a reminiscence of Lamartine's Le poète mourant.

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.73.

²La Vie littéraire. I. p.156.

("Je chantais, mes amis, comme l'homme respire, comme l'oiseau gémit, comme le vent soupire..."): "Il ne comprit pas," writes France of Flaubert and his attempts to 'dehumanise' the artist, "que la poésie doit naître de la vie, naturellement, comme l'arbre, la fleur et le fruit sortent de la terre, et de la pleine terre, au regard du ciel."¹

Lamartine who was the subject of so many favourable comments in Le Temps, had become in the 1880's, to use France's own words "an indistinct shadow", and in his review of the Lemerre Anthology, the critic was not at a loss to explain how this great name had become obscured with the passing of time. Lamartine was in no sense an artist, he was "sublimely ignorant" of poetical craftsmanship, his verse and the ideal that he brought to mankind had both become aged with the passing of time.² The next thirty years were to bring the indistinct shadow of Lamartine to the fore-ground by producing a long series of historical and literary studies on the poet and the enigmatic Julie Charles. France was one of the first to encourage the Lamartinian revival and to contribute towards it.

A realistic study on the youth of Lamartine, published by Félix Reyssié in January 1892, caused France to write in

¹La Vie littéraire. III. p.305.

²Le Temps. 16 September 1888.

Le Temps an interesting dialogue between Pierre, a romantic idealist and Paul, an archaeologist who supports the realistic approach to literary studies. Both characters represent the play of France's elastic intellect over the many facets of a given problem. Pierre-France, the friend of mystery and illusion bitterly reproaches Felix Reyssié for having clothed Elvire and Graziella in human form: let the critic relegate unpublished documents and all his newly discovered love-letters to the gloomy vaults of the archives. He, the idealist, chooses to retain his fresh and youthful vision of the vague, indeterminate but immortal Elvire. Science, he complains, can be compared to the burning oil that falls from Psyche's lamp and disperses for ever all mystery and beauty. But Paul-France, the determinist, supports the rights of the human mind to investigate all positive facts. As we stand in no danger of ever discovering the complete truth about a past episode, our researches will always leave us with sufficient unsatisfied curiosity to experience that astonishment produced by genius and by beauty. Let us discover all we can concerning Julie Charles: "Qu'on me montre son portait,, ses lettres, son éventail, les bijoux qu'elle portait et qui tiédissaient sur son cou... tous ces témoins familiers qui nous disent plus mélancoliquement que le poète: Elle a passé! Comment ne sentez-vous pas la tristesse profonde et douce de respirer

dans les vieilles lettres les âmes disparues et d'évoquer parmi les ruines du passé des formes jadis aimées, qui ne sont plus, qui ne seront jamais plus!"¹

We see that even Paul-France the determinist could not rid himself of the romantic virus and his curiosity on the subject of Julie Charles was about to be partly satisfied. In August 1892, France was asked by Noel Charavay to publish a collection of letters written by Julie Charles and her husband. The letters which principally serve to throw some light on the domestic and social life of this couple were published by France in four articles of Le Temps.² France was the first critic to relate, with careful documentation, the life of Julie from her childhood to her tragic death in 1817. Equally important is his detailed biography of the aged Jacques Charles who was one of the most eminent physicists of his day. In the sympathetic portrait that France has left us of the witty, Voltairean scientist, Charles is praised for his fatherly devotion to Julie and depicted as a courageous and great-hearted character. "Vieillard aimable et doux, resté jeune par la gaieté

¹Le Temps. 24 January 1892: Elvire (dialogue).

²Le Temps. 4, 11, 21, 25 September 1892. Subsequently republished in L'Elvire de Lamartine (Paris: Champion 1892), now a very rare edition, and in Oeuvres complètes Vol. XXIV. pp. 267-333.

ingénue de l'âme, et la simplicité du coeur."¹ Lamartine in his relationship with Julie is portrayed realistically as an egoistic lover who primarily sought in the latter a "lyrical motive." After assuring his readers that it would serve no good purpose to enquire whether this liaison was of a Platonic nature, France characteristically proceeds to state that it was not and that le Lac is "the most voluptuous of all funeral chants".² The constant association of love and death, which is so marked a feature of France's own thought, appears to him to constitute the principal attraction of Les Méditations but the colourless, romanticised autobiography Raphaël is damned with faint praise and pointed out as an unreliable source: the poet obscures his personality in Raphaël but it is only to admire himself the more. A note of "lascivious chastity" predominates in this work conceived by the poet in his middle years when he had already contracted the habit of eloquence.³

The next and last study on Lamartine, Anatole France's introduction to Le Lac, published in his edition of Les Poèmes du Souvenir,⁴ strikes a more intimate note.

¹Oeuvres complètes. Vol. XXIV. p.271.

²Ibid. p.299.

³Ibid. p.298.

⁴Les Poèmes du Souvenir: Le Lac, La tristesse d'Olympio, Le Souvenir. (Paris: Pelletan. 1910).

Madame Arman de Caillavet had died suddenly in January 1910, leaving France inconsolable. The extracts published by Léon Carias from the diaries kept by France during the next three years reveal him to have been so grief-stricken that they make all commentary appear superfluous and indiscreet. The Introductions to Le Lac, La Tristesse d'Olympio and Le Souvenir which constitute with these three poems the graceful edition of Les Poèmes du Souvenir, show beyond a doubt that the eternal theme of regret at the passing of love and the knowledge of death's irrevocability were now experienced in a personal manner. Some of the most despairing passages from the Carnets intimes were written as France was completing his Introduction to Le Lac.

The theme of regret, of remorse, of the impossibility of forgetting, echoes constantly in the pages of France's diary and he is haunted by the memory of the dead woman, of their quarrels, their mutual faults and their past happiness. On the 31st March 1910, France writes as he travels in Italy: "En chemin de fer, de Naples à Rome, chose incroyable et monstrueuse, dans l'ennui de sa perte, je lui reproche certains petits travers, quelques imperceptibles disgrâces."¹ And towards the end of

¹L. Carias. Les Carnets intimes d'Anatole France. op. cit. p. 123.

September: "Oui, maintenant qu'elle est morte, tu n'as plus ni bonheur, ni raison de vivre. Mais sois vrai: en mourant, elle n'a emporté que les débris, les restes défigurés de ton bonheur. Il était déjà saccagé pas le temps. Vous n'étiez tous deux capables que d'être des amoureux. Vous ne saviez ni l'un, ni l'autre vieillir. Vous aviez tout gâté, tout détruit, elle par son âpre volonté, toi par ta pitoyable légèreté. Je ne dis pas qu'elle m'ait aimé plus que je ne l'ai aimée. J'étais porté aux extrêmes, et je me suis jeté souvent pour elle dans un excès de passion désespérée. Mais elle m'aima plus fortement, plus vertueusement et dans un plus bel équilibre."¹

One may idealise the past and soften the contours of painful memories or else, like France, face a situation such as this in an uncompromising and realistic manner. In this state of grief, he wrote the Introduction to Le Lac. There are many ways of relating the story of Elvire and many are Lamartine's biographers who have found in the very vagueness of this episode and the incompleteness of documentary evidence the justification for an individual and romanticised interpretation. France, inspired by his recent memories chooses the realistic approach but he cannot help conveying

¹Ibid. p.125.

all his personal emotion. His essay contains a lyrical, elegiac note and at the same time a cruel analysis of Lamartine's love for Julie. Lamartine is portrayed as a selfish and convention-bound man of genius: "Comme la plupart des hommes, comme tous les hommes, Lamartine mettait de la fatuité et de l'égoïsme dans son amour. Il n'était certes ni plus cruel, ni plus insensible qu'un autre. Mais le génie grandit tout, l'orgueil comme la simplicité."¹ Julie is represented as the pursuer. Feeling that her death is imminent, she humbly offers to substitute her unreciprocated love for a maternal affection. There are quarrels, reconciliations and mutual reproaches: "Pourquoi ces folies? Pourquoi ces méchancetés? Pourquoi? Parce que l'amour soulève dans toutes les âmes, même les plus tendres, un désir de querelles, un besoin d'être dur, violent, cruel. Et aussi parce que les amants ne se connaissent jamais l'un l'autre. et que dans l'ignorance affreuse de ce qu'ils désirent ardemment savoir, ils doutent, croient, s'inquiètent, conçoivent d'absurdes et d'indignes soupçons."²

But perhaps the most faithful echo of the private grief revealed in the Carnets intimes is to be found in the lyrical conclusion to Les Poèmes du Souvenir, which like the

¹Les Poèmes du Souvenir. op.cit. p.17.

²Ibid. p.20.

first words written by France on Lamartine still remains his personal tribute to the poet. For we believe, writes France, that death is the ultimate loss, but the germs of death are contained in the eternal flow of life. We place our hopes in the future, but the future itself is the past that we project before us. All things are constantly dying:

"Douceur du souvenir, charme du passé, bonté cruelle de la mort! Par elle tout s'achève et s'harmonise, et ce que nous avons aimé dans la discontinuité et la dispersion. qu'est la vie, nous l'aimons plus chèrement dans l'unité, la pureté, la simplicité d'une mémoire fidèle. Nous aimons alors avec une plénitude jusque. là inconnue, à quelles conditions, hélas! Faut-il donc avoir perdu tout ce qu'on possédait pour en savoir tout le prix?

... Ils sont bienfaisants, les poètes qui charmèrent cette humaine misère, leur misère et la nôtre, par les images les plus riches et les sons les plus doux."¹

¹Ibid. p.39.

CHAPTER XI

Alfred de Vigny.

Anatole France was 24 years old when he published in 1868, his first work, a biography and critical study of Alfred de Vigny. Fifty-four years later, he revised the early manuscript and the second Alfred de Vigny was published in 1923, one year before his death, as his last work. He ended his career as he had begun it, by a tribute to the least orthodox of the Romantic poets and we may say with M. Claude Aveline, the editor of the 1923 version, that this last work "completes an immense cycle."

Anatole France always held a very poor opinion on the merits of his first book. The copies that belonged to his friends bear the following disconcerting dedications:

"A Jacques Lion, ce très mauvais petit livre dont j'ai honte."

"A mon ami, Jean Bunand, ce petit livre qui ~~genferme~~ en peu de pages toutes les fautes possibles."¹

When confronted with the wealth of new facts that have been brought to light in the past sixty years concerning

¹C. Aveline. Le Manuscrit autographe. May-June 1928: Sur l'Alfred de Vigny d'Anatole France.

the life and the thought of Alfred de Vigny we may have no great difficulty in understanding Anatole France's diffidence on the subject of his first book. But this would not be a fair way of judging the 1868 edition. We must assess it primarily in view of the author's age and the progress achieved in de Vigny studies at this very early date.

Alfred de Vigny appeared in May 1868 and the fact that Louis Ratisbonne had published Le Journal d'un Poète in the previous year, proves that France had taken but a few months to write his book which is strongly influenced by the poet's diary. He was then a practically unknown young journalist with very little money and with a consequent readiness to undertake hack-writing. He compiled catalogues, contributed to encyclopaedias and on one occasion worked on Lemerre's Dictionnaire de Cuisine with the distinguished collaboration of Dumas père and Leconte de Lisle. His regular post of reader to the publisher Lemerre and his subsequent association with the Parnasse date from the end of 1867. Alfred de Vigny, published in May 1868 was a small edition comprising 150 pages with a portrait of the poet by Staal. The book, which is now extremely rare, was edited by Bachelin-Deflorenne, a book-seller of the Quai Voltaire and friend of France-Thibault père.

Etienne Charavay, in the July edition of L'Amateur

d'Autographes, hailed the publication as follows:

"Voici cinq ans qu'est mort le comte Alfred de Vigny. Cependant le grand poète attendait encore son biographe: il vient heureusement de le trouver dans un jeune écrivain, M. Anatole France, d'autant plus propre à apprécier le talent de Vigny qu'il est poète lui-même."¹ Lest we should think that Charavay was carried away by friendship and enthusiasm, an examination of previous studies on the poet shows that the 1868 de Vigny was indeed the first biography and the most complete 'vue d'ensemble' to have appeared until this date.²

For any writer to compose a convincing biography of de Vigny during the poet's life-time would of course have been a difficult task. Of the two emotional episodes that he experienced, namely his military career and his relationship with Marie Dorval, only the first could be mentioned and its facts learnt from one source: Servitude et grandeur militaires. His literary success in Paris dating from Cinq Mars (1826) to Chatterton (1835) could be described fairly accurately but here the biographer was

¹L'Amateur d'Autographes. July 1868. p.202. Charavay was the editor of this review.

²"La première vue d'ensemble sur l'oeuvre surtout poétique d'un grand précurseur," writes M. Baldensperger in the Bibliography to de Vigny's Oeuvres complètes. (Paris: Pléiade 1948). p.45.

obliged to stop, faced by an uneventful life rendered even more obscure by the poet's solitude and deep reserve.

De Vigny died in September 1863. Proceeding in chronological order we observe that the principle studies that appeared on de Vigny before this year are mainly critical and contain very slight biographical data. Sainte-Beuve's article in Portraits Contemporains (1835) was followed by Gustave Planche's essay in Portraits littéraires (1836). During the next twenty years nothing was added to these early studies. In 1856, Eugène de Mirécourt included de Vigny in his popular series Les Contemporains but concentrated mainly on his success as the author of *Chatterton*. But then two important critical studies interspersed with anecdotes and personal memories immediately followed the poet's death in 1863. Lamartine's Cours familier de littérature of October 1863, Saint-Beuve's essay in Les Nouveaux Lundis 1864,¹ the first tender and poetical, the second deep, probing yet malicious, must solicit our attention as being two notable sources of the work that France was to undertake a few years later. His third and

¹A. de Lamartine. Cours familier. xciv. e entretien. tome 16. October-November 1863; Sainte-Beuve. Nouveaux Lundis tome VI. 1868 (The article was first published in La Revue des deux Mondes in April 1864).

most important source is the intimate knowledge gained from Le Journal d'un poète, published by Louis Ratisbonne, de Vigny's disciple and testamentary executor, in 1867. If France was de Vigny's first biographer, as Charavay rightly claimed, this is largely due to the fact that he held over his illustrious predecessors the inestimable advantage of being acquainted with the poet's diary. Yet another source of literary inspiration is the fact that in 1868, France was beginning to exercise his poetic talents, to frequent the Parnassian gatherings and as a good Parnassian, to acclaim de Vigny reverently as the inspiration of the new poetic movement.

Anatole France had encountered de Vigny only once, two years before the poet's death. The encounter took place in the circulating library of M. Nottet, one of his father's friends and business associates. M. Nottet had commissioned the penurious young France to compile a catalogue for his library¹ and the latter's description of de Vigny, memorable for its vividness and precision, first appeared in Le Temps on the 22 November 1891. This same passage, slightly more polished in style, has been reproduced in Le Jardin d'Epicure:

"A dix-sept ans je vis un jour Alfred de Vigny dans un cabinet de lecture de la rue de l'Arcade. Je n'oublierai

¹An account of this incident is given in Les Nouvelles littéraires 18 October 1924: Quand M. France faisait des catalogues.

M. Nottet was an ancestor of the publishers Emile-Paul frères who have kept this catalogue in their archives.

jamais qu'il portait une épaisse cravate de satin noir attachée au cou par un camée et sur laquelle se rabattait un col aux bords arrondis. Il tenait à la main une mince canne de jonc à pomme d'or. J'étais bien jeune et pourtant il ne me parut pas vieux. Son visage était paisible et doux. Ses cheveux décolorés mais soyeux encore et légers, tombaient en boucles sur ses joues rondes. Il se tenait très droit, marchait à petits pas et parlait à voix basse." France then describes himself as fingering with emotion the book of memoirs that the poet had just returned to the library. In the book he found a forgotten strip of paper on which de Vigny had traced in his angular writing the single word Bellerophon. "Héros fabuleux on navire historique, que signifiait ce nom? Vigny songeait-il en l'écrivant à Napoléon trouvant les bornes des grandeurs de la chair, ou bien se disait-il: "Le cavalier mélancolique porté par Pégase n'a point, quoi qu'en aient dit les Grecs, tué le monstre terrible et charmant, que la sueur au front, la gorge brûlante et les pieds en sang, nous poursuivons éperdument, la chimère?"¹

Reverence to de Vigny and reverence to art are indeed the two points on which the Parnassians were unanimous.

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp.103-104.

Some idea of de Vigny's posthumous authority in that circle may be gathered by the misadventure that befell François Coppée, who at the first performance of his play Le Passant was slighted by a critic for occupying a modest post in the War Ministry. Immediately, Etienne Charavay in the name of the Parnassians, rebuked the tactless critic in L'Amateur D'Autographes and incidentally seized the occasion to publicise France's latest work:

"La carrière des lettres est rude à suivre, et tous ces Parnassiens que vous semblez mépriser d'un façon si hautaine, et qui cependant font revivre la poésie en France, tous ces jeunes gens, dis-je, pratiquent un précepte d'un de leurs maîtres, Alfred de Vigny, dont l'un d'eux a retracé la vie, à savoir de consacrer le jour aux travaux qui donnent les moyens de subvenir aux besoins de la famille, et la nuit à ces occupations littéraires qui élèvent l'âme et cultivent l'intelligence."¹

Admiration and a note of dignity inspired by the poet's authority in the Parnasse and by his nobility² are constantly revealed in France's early study of de Vigny. The 1868

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp.103-104.

²J.J. Brousson. (A.F. en pantoufles. p.134) records that the aged France once admitted that in writing his Alfred de Vigny, he had principally been dazzled by the poet's aristocratic personality. Claude Aveline, no great admirer of Brousson's veracity, nevertheless stresses the fact that France resented his social inferiority and he relates France's love of French culture to his desire to find some spiritual connection with the nobility. (Trente ans de vie sociale. op.cit. Introduction

Preface is obviously inspired by France's first encounter with the Parnassian Muse and we may note moreover that the critical method of Taine has an equally strong influence on the young writer.

"Nous avons essayé de raconter la simple histoire d'un grand poète qui fut un galant homme, parcequ'il nous a semblé instructif de rechercher dans quelles conditions de belles oeuvres se sont produites, sur quel sol sont écloses les fleurs austères de la pensée.

La poésie ne nous semble pas un jeu où l'on puisse réussir seulement par l'habileté des combinaisons et l'adresse de la main. La vraie poésie, pensons-nous, ne se rencontre pas sans le respect de soi-même et la hauteur des préoccupations."¹

When we read the studies on Alfred de Vigny that had appeared before Anatole France's publication, we are struck by the fact that (with the exception of Sainte-Beuve whose approach to de Vigny was tinged with malignity) all previous commentators had tended to etherealise the man and to interpret him through the idealism and the quiet despair of his poetry. Needless to say they had dwelt at great length

¹A. de Vigny (1868) Preface.

on certain poetic impressions that they interpreted in terms of magnanimous personal virtues: chastity, candour, disinterestedness. Their writings reveal a typically romantic tendency to express the elevated sentiments that de Vigny inspired, by lyrical effusions, poetic images, vague and restful colours. "Je l'aimais de l'amitié qu'on a pour un beau ciel. Il y a de l'ether bleu-vague et sans fond dans son talent," wrote Lamartine in 1856.¹ Antoine de Porry who published a very tenuous study on de Vigny in 1864, echoed the chant: "Son coloris, constamment suave, pur, diaphane, peut se comparer à ses nuages bleus, roses, dorés dont l'horizon se pare etc...."² The culmination of this affectionate and poetic cult as opposed to Sainte-Beuve's realistic and analytical manner is best illustrated by Lamartine's long obituary article of October 1863 (published in the Cours familier) and of course Louis Ratisbonne's Preface to Le Journal d'un poète. When we now turn to Anatole France's study we see that for the time it is unique in retaining the lyrical and reverent note, and yet in imparting that convincing impression of reality that is essential to a good biography. To envisage de Vigny as a

¹A. de Lamartine. Cours familier. xe entretien. 1856. p.291.

²A. de Porry. Alfred de Vigny. Eth de morale et littéraire. (Marseille: Arnaud. 1864) p.27.

human character, to bring him down to earth from his ethereal blue heaven is a task that Sainte-Beuve had previously attempted by psychological analysis but which France now completed in 1868 with biographical detail and with a gentle tact that is lacking in the essay of his illustrious predecessor whose dislike of de Vigny is well known.

We have already noted France's severe criticism of his early work and the Preface to the 1923 edition still retains a note of modesty and diffidence:

"Si j'avais pu détruire ce livre, je l'aurais fait. Mais le moyen? Réflexion faite, il ne valait pas un traitement sisévère. Il est d'un écolier qui ne savait ni penser ni écrire, mais qui n'avait point de méchanceté. Ce jeune homme ~~est~~ tort de porter un jugement sur un grand poète quand les goûts et les connaissances lui manquaient, mais il le fit avec respect. Il fut pédant et embrouillé et donna, néanmoins par endroits, des marques d'un certain sens littéraire."¹

It would have been impossible for France to rewrite Alfred de Vigny in view of his failing strength in 1922. In the new edition, he has corrected some major historical

¹Alfred de Vigny (Paris: Aveline. 1923) Preface. p.13.

errors due partly to carelessness, partly to his credulity as a young writer. A more valuable lesson that can be gained by comparing the two texts is however not so much in the attention paid to historical detail as in the manner that France has chastened and simplified his style, suppressed grandiloquent and affected passages and substituted vague, romantic expression for the precise and appropriate noun or epithet.¹

In view of the rarity of the 1868 edition, a comparison of the two texts cannot fail to be instructive. As regards the correction of historical data, the young France of 1868, dealing with the Poèmes antiques, disagrees with Sainte-Beuve's theory that de Vigny had antedated La Dryade and Symétha in order to escape the suggestion that he had been influenced by Chénier who became known to the general public in the de Latouche edition of 1819. De Vigny, France asserts, could have been acquainted with the fragments of Chénier's verse that had already been published by Millevoye and Chateaubriand, and therefore he implies charitably, there

¹M. Claude Aveline has published in facsimile the main extracts from the corrected manuscript in Le Manuscrit autographe. January-February 1928. (Bibl. Nat. Manuscrits). Each paragraph offers an example of France's painstaking exactitude in the search of correct and harmonious expression.

was no need for him to practice this deception. The argument then closes with the sophisticated "d'ailleurs ce débat prolongé devient puéril."¹ The childish debate has been pursued by other, more recent commentators, and in the 1923 edition, France writes succinctly: "Aujourd'hui, je doute beaucoup que ces deux poèmes soient de 1815"², having become somewhat less trustful with the passing years.

Yet another important correction in the 1923 version relates to the curious legend that centred around de Vigny's reception at the Academy in January 1846. It is known that de Vigny was deeply offended by the speech of reception delivered by the President Molé. In consequence, he refused at first to attend Academic meetings and postponed this duty until the former's termination of office in the summer of the same year. Molé was a supporter of the old Classical tradition and had little sympathy for the contemporary Romantic movement. An authentic report of his speech may still be consulted in Le Journal des Débates of the 30th January 1846. Inevitably it contains flattering allusions to the poet but its wording appears quite deliberately hurtful. Molé criticises and corrects practically every

¹Alfred de Vigny. (1868) p.22.

²Alfred de Vigny. (1923) p.49.

point that de Vigny had made in his own oration and suggests that the new member has failed to pay full tribute to his predecessor (M. Etienne), who was not merely a poet but chose to lead an active, political life. He enquires why de Vigny should be so concerned with the question of truth in art since he gives a totally incorrect historical account of Richelieu in Cinq Mars and of the Emperor in Servitude et Grandeur militaires. The final shaft is aimed at Chatterton who, according to Molé, belongs to an effeminate generation.¹

Curiously enough, de Vigny and his contemporaries had remained reticent about the causes of the insult. De Vigny, in Le Journal d'un poète, dwells lengthily on his wounded feelings, but merely states that Molé had altered his oration at the last moment, in order to deride him, and had clowned his effects. Sainte-Beuve in Les Nouveaux Lundis, is the first to offer some explanation of the misadventure: de Vigny, he states, had bored his audience with a lengthy speech delivered in a monotonous manner. Molé had relieved and amused the assembly by a brisk and lively reply.² Neither de Vigny, nor Sainte-Beuve, had

¹Le Journal des Débats. 30 January 1846.

²Sainte-Beuve. Les Nouveaux Lundis. tome VI. pp. 429-435.

referred to the original speech which in itself requires no further explanation. Lamartine remained even vaguer. In his Cours familier de littérature, he shows great indignation over de Vigny's humiliation and in his eloquent manner produces an imaginary reply to Molé:

"Vous n'avez jamais rien écrit que quelques pages à vingt ans, pour flatter le despotisme dont la faveur donnait des emplois et de l'or. Mais académiquement, vous êtes trop fier de votre néant pour que je puisse vous répondre par des critiques. Où les prendrais-je? Le néant n'a pas de rival, et la critique ne mord pas sur rien. Je suis réduit au silence!"¹ Unfortunately, Lamartine, writing in a negligent manner, does not make it clear that these words constitute his own extempore reply to the tactless President and to anyone glancing through this page of the Cours familier, they would appear to be an extract from Molé's original academic oration. This is precisely the error committed by France in his 1868 de Vigny. With an indignation far exceeding Lamartine's, he quotes the extract as a fragment from Molé's speech and denounces it as "le plus éclatant scandale que notre histoire littéraire puisse

¹A. de Lamartine. Cours familier. October-November 1863. XCIV e. entretien. pp. 402-403.

supporter." In the 1923 version he carefully corrects his error which he qualifies as an unpardonable negligence and now bases his account on the realistic explanation offered by Sainte-Beuve. "Le récit de M. Sainte-Beuve est plein d'invraisemblances, tandis que les notes de M. de Vigny sont simples et logiques. Entre ces deux témoignages, nous nous en sommes rapportés sans hésitation à la parole du gentilhomme qui n'a jamais menti", he had written in 1868.¹ But in the 1923 version, a less trustful France is once again obliged to return to Sainte-Beuve, the greatest authority of his time:

"J'ai rapporté ces choses-là sur la foi de Vigny. Je soupçonne fort aujourd'hui qu'elles n'existent que dans l'imagination du poète. Et tout n'est pas à accueillir dans les dires de Vigny, qui avait l'esprit haut et droit mais non pas très juste ni très clairvoyant."²

The third and last biographical episode that France has revised in the 1923 edition refers to de Vigny's

¹ Alfred de Vigny (1868) p.126.

² Alfred de Vigny (1923) pp. 174-175. France does not designate Lamartine as the original source of his error. The explanation that he offers is curiously incorrect and may be due to failing memory. He states in a foot-note that he had found the apocryphal 'speech' in a review of 1846 (title unmentioned) and only realised later that he had copied out not Molé's speech but the editor's indignant reply to Molé.

relationship with Marie Dorval. Comparing the different accounts that France has given of this liaison in the two versions of his work, we may observe how his early, idealised conception of love has evolved into a biological and cynical conception of a delicate relationship. We may say to France's credit that in 1868, he was the first of de Vigny's critics to have mentioned this widely known incident of the poet's life and that he handled his sources (de Vigny's Journal and the mémoires of Sand and Dumas père) explicitly and yet with tact. Thus the 1868 version contains a psychological account of Marie Dorval's highly strung temperament and convincingly depicts her alternating states of vulgarity, buoyancy and mystical exaltation. De Vigny's suffering and the ultimate parting are described with equal sensitiveness. Wisely, France concludes that de Vigny should have been guided by a reflection that he once wrote in his diary: "Quand on se sent pris d'amour pour une femme, avant de s'engager, on devrait se dire: Comment est-elle entourée? Quelle est sa vie?"¹

The 1923 version of this episode contains an abundance of realistic detail (with consoling thoughts culled mainly from the XVIIIth century philosophers) whether France dwells on de Vigny's incompetence as a lover or on

¹Alfred de Vigny (1868). pp. 105-113.

Marie Dorval's subsequent unnatural relationship with George Sand. Explicit reference is made to a letter sent by the poet to Marie Dorval, a document of such an intimate nature that it was finally bought by an admirer of de Vigny, K. Arthur Meyer, and destroyed. As this section of the 1923 de Vigny has occasionally been criticised for its indelicacy, we would state in France's defence the growing importance played by biological detail in biography during the fifty-four years that separate the two editions, the extreme care with which he has sought unoffending expression in his account,¹ and the fact that he philosophically omits the passage that designates Marie as a totally unsuitable partner for the high-minded poet.²

The 1923 edition is instructive in illustrating how in matters of style, France has drastically modified his earlier, romantic expression. In the later version, he has deliberately barred passages of flowery rhetoric such as the following: "Notre poète n'est pas assis sur le trépied sibyllin dont les effluves sacrées donnant un délire éloquent: il se tient muet sur sa chaise d'ivoire. Ne vous approchez pas pour écouter les battements de son coeur;

¹The facsimile extracts from the 1923 manuscript show that France's description of de Vigny's letter, contained in a brief and elegantly worded sentence, is preceded by a long page of rejected sentences, each gradually simplified and shortened.

²Alfred de Vigny (1923). pp. 151-158.

autant ~~vaut~~ vaudrait écarter des cuisses sacrées d'un Jupiter antique les plis de sa draperie de marbre."¹ Occasionally, he is at a loss to understand how or why he could ever have written such pompous or affected sentences and in the 1923 edition, he points out his bewilderment in amusing foot-notes. Commenting on the early Romantic circle formed by de Vigny and the Deschamps brothers and comparing this gathering to the boisterous 1830 cénacle, France had written in 1868: "L'hymne du prêtre précédait le bardit du guerrier". In a foot-note of the later edition, he asks: "Comment ai-je pu écrire cela? Quelle sens cette phrase avait-elle pour moi?... Je n'étais ni fou ni tout à fait imbécile. Sans doute que j'ai cru que c'était une beauté".²

Practically every chapter of the new edition contains shorter and equally revealing corrections. The following comparisons have been chosen amongst many to illustrate the attention paid to precise and simple expression and also, in some instances, the greater realism of the aged writer:

1868 edition:

"Héléna, irréparablement outragée par des soldats Turcs..." (p. 31.)

"Alfred de Vigny portait... Le deuil profond du mal universel." (p. 75).

¹ Alfred de Vigny (1868). p.2.

² Alfred de Vigny (1923). p.54.

"Il y avait entre Alfred et Madame de Vigny cette sympathie profonde que la mystérieuse nature mit entre le fils et sa mère." (p.77).

"Madame de Vigny mérite cette louange qui est à peu près toute la part de gloire qu'une femme puisse obtenir dans notre civilisation: elle n'a jamais fait parler d'elle." (p.56).

1923 edition:

"Héléna, outragée par des soldats turcs..." (p.55).

"Alfred de Vigny portait... le sentiment profond du mal universel". (p.113).

"Il y avait entre Alfred et sa mère une sympathie profonde." (p.118).

"Madame de Vigny mérite cette louange: elle n'a jamais fait parler d'elle." (p.39).¹

De Vigny was well aware that his thought was too precocious for a society that still cherished the ancient illusions and he decreed that Les Destinées should appear posthumously. Few of his contemporaries understood his message. Even Sainte-Beuve, in spite of his still unrivalled analysis of de Vigny's irony incorporated in Les Nouveaux

¹To complete this survey of the errors that occur in the 1868 edition, we would point out 2 incorrect dates that France has not attempted to rectify in the second version: he states that de Vigny was married in 1829, although the marriage took place in 1825. Unaccountably, the publication of Stello (1832), is dated 1824.

Lundis,¹ treated the poet as an isolated psychological case. Paul Bourget in his Etudes et Portraits (1889) was the first critic to interpret de Vigny's pessimism as a universal moral problem, relating it specifically to the entire spiritual disintegration of his century.² It is to this 'fin-de-siècle' generation whose sense of moral and spiritual insecurity is echoed by Bourget, by Renan, by Barrès and by France that the full meaning of de Vigny's pessimism, and also the creative and active message of Les Destinées became apparent.

Inevitably the portrait of de Vigny's character that France has traced as a young Parnassian is idealised. The realism afforded by biographical detail, by the ease and grace of the narrative, is less pronounced in the psychological analysis of de Vigny's pessimism. France tends to dwell on such qualities as stoic despair, serenity, sublime resignation. Characteristically he associates the poet's attitude with Ancient virtues and finds in it certain qualities that he already admired and was shortly to make his own:

"Le 'scepticisme profond et doux' (our italics) qui fut toujours dans l'âme du poète augmenta avec l'âge. En 1848,

¹ Sainte-Beuve. Nouveaux Lundis. tome VI. pp. 426-429.

² P. Bourget. Etudes et Portraits. (Paris: Lemerre. 1889) Vol. II. pp. 82-84.

Alfred de Vigny était en proie à un 'dés²poir calme' qui lui faisait chercher le repos et la solitude ... Il n'espérait rien qui lui plut ni de lui 'ni des autres'. M. de Vigny avait cette vertu 'qui est propre au sage dans les époques de décadence et de corruption', vertu solitaire 'qui ne prend d'appui qu'en elle-même, repousse toute sanction du monde' et n'a plus de foi qu'en sa propre divinité intérieure; elle est à elle-même son génie et sa lumière. Tels furent aussi les derniers honnêtes citoyens de Rome, et l'âme du poète ressemble 'aux plus douces et aux plus tendres' d'entre les âmes qui traversèrent, sous le manteau de stoïcien, l'immense orgie du bas-Empire."¹

There is something prophetic too in the manner that France has dwelt on de Vigny's irony, an irony more subtle and elusive than his own but which nevertheless betrays itself by a love of paradox and antithesis. On de Vigny's political scepticism occasioned by the 1830 Revolution and the advent of Louis-Philippe's bourgeois reign, France comments:

"L'ironie est la dernière phase de la désillusion. Dès lors Alfred de Vigny resta doucement ironique devant tous les grands changements d'Etat qui s'accomplirent sous ses yeux."²

¹ Alfred de Vigny (1868). pp. 92-93.

² Ibid. p.91.

Haakon Chevalier is the only critic to have noted the direct relationship that exists between France's early Parnassian study and his works of maturity. "Anatole France," he writes, "has elaborated with great subtlety and insight in different parts of his work various aspects of that attitude of resignation which was his and which he admired and made his own from that time when he wrote his significant encomium on Alfred de Vigny in 1868".¹

Léon Carias once noted that Alfred de Vigny was "the only Romantic whom France truly admired."² The purpose of this present study is to point out the wider nature of his sympathy and his direct inheritance from the Romantic generations. But undoubtedly de Vigny was the Romantic poet whom France most deeply understood and who came to influence his thought in a striking manner. In the 1868 biography there is as yet but a vague indication of preference. "La renaissance poétique de 1830 n'avait rien produit de si grand. Elle n'a rien laissé de si pur."³ Only twenty years later did France come to single out de Vigny's unique quality of non-conformism, that refusal to join in the romantic chorus of docile praise to the Eternal, and the final attitude of stoic atheism, which he could so

¹H.M. Chevalier. The Ironic Temper. op.cit. p.77.

²L. Caria. Les Carnets intimes. op.cit. p.121.

³Alfred de Vigny (1868). p.29.

well appreciate through a personal affinity: "Les lyriques de 1820 à 1830 chantent tous le cantique d'un christianisme éthéré et pittoresque. Alfred de Vigny entraît mal dans le concert: il n'avait pas le sentiment néo-chrétien. Il n'était même pas spiritualiste. A la fin de sa vie il inclinait vers une sort d'athéisme stoïque."¹

In both these writers we may observe a common trait which is in fact connected with their inheritance from the XVIIIth century, namely a basic craving for logic which results that both reject at an early age the accepted Christian dogma of providence and divine authority, and demand that the explanation of human destiny be formulated in human terms. And yet the stubborn rejection of the traditional notion of Providence has not prevented either writer from waging their poet's battle against the antropomorphic, avenging God of the Old Testament. It was once observed of de Vigny that his noble thrusts against the tyrannical God assume "un aspect tant soi peu donquichottesque."² The same could be said of the battle that France, as a non-believer, wages against Iaveh in La Révolte des Anges. There would be no way of explaining this incongruity were it not that both writers are inspired by a sense of human justice and also by a deep knowledge of

¹La Vie littéraire II. pp.256-257.

²E. Lauvrière. Alfred de Vigny (Paris: Armand Colin 1909) p.76.

the Bible dating from childhood. De Vigny has symbolised in his war against Jehovah, his burning sense of injustice when faced with the enigma of human destiny. The God of his earlier Biblical poems is the personal, avenging God of the Old Testament. But as de Vigny progresses towards the more modern concepts of scientific determinism, his primitive hatred of God becomes as it were depersonalised. The God of Le Mont des Oliviers is the God of the New Testament and the poet's protest is directed not so much against the divine principle as against destiny in its widest sense, the despairing and cruel nature of things. As de Vigny's notion of fatalism borders on the scientific, the former rebel becomes appeased and his appeasement is succeeded by stoic resignation and then silence. Anatole France, starting his career in that decade which witnessed the poet's death, retains the latter's serenity, a serenity made sweeter by his sociability and by his adoption of the aesthetic attitude. But as the passing years bring in their train a more disheartening knowledge of mankind (largely through the political and social events that characterise the turn of the century), his pessimism and disillusion become ever more pronounced, in Crainquebille (1904), L'Île des Pingouins (1908), Les Dieux ont soif (1912). Finally in La Révolte des Anges (1914), France resumes de Vigny's ancient battle against Jehovah, and paradoxically, France

who is so often accused of frivolity, strengthens the feud by protesting against the passivity and inertia which seduces man into accepting his destiny. In this respect, the development of these two writers is characterised by a curious 'reversal' of evolution. France in his later years recaptures something of the bitterness and intensity of de Vigny's Biblical poems and returns to de Vigny's original position.

It is no mere coincidence that de Vigny and France preferred to be 'spectators' rather than 'actors' in life and that both were conscious of, though not deeply perturbed by the paralysing effects of contemplation on the motives that determine action. Throughout his life, de Vigny, like Stello, remained "plus spectateur qu'acteur." "Ce qui se rêve est tout pour moi," he notes in Le Journal d'un poète. "En toi la rêverie continuelle a-tué l'action," says the Quaker to Chatterton. "Je suis né spectateur,"¹ echoes France in Le Livre de mon ami. "Malheureusement l'esprit spéculatif rend l'homme impropre à l'action",² he pursues in Le Jardin d'Epicure. A celebrated article in La Vie littéraire begins with the words: "Je ne suis qu'un rêveur

¹Le Livre de mon ami. p.114.

²Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp.93-94.

et sans doute je ne perçois les choses humaines que dans le demi-sommeil de la méditation."¹ This native inclination to revery did in fact afford a pleasure so pronounced that both writers have described it in voluptuous terms. "J'ai possédé telle Idée," writes de Vigny. "Avec telle autre j'ai passé bien des nuits."² With what self-indulgence has France dwelt throughout his writings on "les silencieuses orgies de la méditation." And with these authors, not only the joys of meditation but also its sorrows become a source of delight. "Où me conduiras-tu Passion des Idées, où me conduiras-tu?" asks de Vigny in his diary. "Il faut payer par la tristesse, par la désolation, l'orgueil d'avoir pensé," answers France.³

The resignation and pessimism of de Vigny and France are the product of their fundamental humanism which obliges them both to reject the metaphysical solution and results in a sense of defeat. De Vigny, in his search of 'l'esprit pur', passes successively from Hellenism to Buddhism and thence to Platonism (in the incomplete Daphné). Let us not suppose that France who equally depicts himself as the searcher of truth, would allow his serenity to be disturbed by such

¹La Vie littéraire. IV. p.39.

²Extract from Le journal intime inédit de 1834. quoted by Maurice Paléologue in his Alfred de Vigny. p.334.

³Le Génie latin. p.186.

ecstatic midnight trances as the poet experienced: "Toute fin est cachée à l'homme. J'ai demandé mon chemin à tous ceux qui prêtres, savants, sorciers, ou philosophes, prétendent savoir la géographie de l'Inconnu. Nul n'a pu m'indiquer exactement la bonne voie. C'est pourquoi la route que je préfère est celle dont les ormeaux s'élèvent plus touffus sous le ciel plus riant. Le sentiment du beau me conduit. Qui donc est sûr d'avoir trouvé un meilleur guide?".¹

The aesthetic attitude was in fact the most seductive and therefore one of the most popular responses to the predicament provoked by science. Inevitably, it entailed an avoidance of the main issue and de Vigny appears to have anticipated this escapist trend in his austere refusal to support the Art for Art's sake movement. Yet one cannot fail to observe how France remains penetrated with de Vigny's pessimism, in spite of the consolations afforded by beauty, and accepts de Vigny's suggestion for a 'modus vivendi' in much the same way as the poet had formulated them for posterity.

De Vigny and France have both found a certain bitter satisfaction in the idea that the contemplative attitude to which they were addicted and reason itself against which they have waged their "lover's quarrel" - (we recall that

¹La Vie littéraire II. Preface iii-iv.

this expression was used by France) - could only lead to a wider pursuit of positive knowledge which would in turn aggravate man's sense of loss and bewilderment in an ever-widening, ever more mysterious universe. "Il (de Vigny) ne renonçait en rien au bénéfice des facultés raisonnantes, expérimentales, déductives ou inductives," writes M. Baldensperger. "Il déniait à la métaphysique le droit de fournir des réponses souvent inintelligibles à des cerveaux raisonnables; par là le positivisme, dont il redoutait l'action, destructrice d'idéal à son gré, n'était point tellement différent de ses propres vues."¹ Thus de Vigny had clearly anticipated the predicament provoked by Science and had realised that whatever optimistic faith he could transmit to posterity in terms of love, pity, human dignity, might become nullified by the most optimistic of his beliefs, 'l'esprit pur', the permanent effort of aspiring and creative thought:

"Sais-tu que pour punir l'homme sa créature
 D'avoir porté la main sur l'arbre du savoir
 Dieu permit qu'avant tout, de l'amour de soi-même
 En tout temps, à tout âge, il fit son bien suprême,²
 Tourmenté de s'aimer, tourmenté de se voir."

"Nous avons mangé les fruits de l'arbre de la science et

¹F. Baldensperger. Ceuvres complètes d'Alfred de Vigny.
 op. cit. Preface. p.35.

²La Maison du berger.

il nous est resté dans la bouche un goût de cendre," echoes France in that despairing, poetic essay Pourquoi sommes - nous tristes? "Nous avons exploré la terre... Nous avons reconnu que ce n'était qu'une goutte de boue et cela nous a humiliés... Noyés dans l'océan du temps et de l'espace, nous avons vu que nous n'étions rien, ^{et} cela nous a désolés."¹

Often we may find in de Vigny and France echoes of Pascal's anguish when faced with the immensity of the universe and the insignificance of man, but the ageless plaint becomes in the XIXth century interpreted ever more acutely as a conflict between the necessary, the life-giving moral and spiritual security of the ancient faith and the equally imperative need to advance further in the quest of positive knowledge. In the thought of Renan, the predicament did eventually appear as an imminent conflict between knowledge and existence itself: "Nous vivons de l'ombre d'un ombre. De quoi vivra-t-on après nous?"²

As early as 1843 de Vigny had formulated the scientific problem which forcibly assails France and his generation in his explicit differentiation between 'belief' and 'religion'. Descartes and Spinoza, he writes in his Journal, had to seek

¹La Vie littéraire. III. pp. 6-7.

²E. Renan. L'Avenir de la Science. Preface de 1894. p.xviii.

firstly how the created world appeared to them and then the cause and the aim of creation. These philosophers were formulating a belief. But Saint Augustine, Bossuet, Fénelon who were much more human and superficial, visualising God descending on a small privileged planet constructed solely for "a certain little tribe", were seeking a religion. "La question lorsqu'on s'enfonce dans ces choses, serait de savoir si l'on doit se placer au point de vue général de l'immensité de l'univers, et s'efforcer d'en tirer une sorte de perspective prise d'une planète comme Saturne ou Jupiter, ou bien si l'on doit se placer au milieu de l'espèce humaine qui peuple la petite terre, et, de là, considérer la religion selon l'utilité qu'elle peut avoir comme point d'appui de la morale." The first position, he concludes, is necessarily the greatest, the most 'divine', being inspired solely by the sacred love that uplifts man towards the centre of creation, the second alternative is of a more pedestrian nature but must be preferred in view of the moral progress of the human species and in this sense Christianity has been found by experience to be the most beneficial religion. "Mais on sent," he adds regretfully, "combien la recherche de cet intérêt est retréci et misérable auprès de la vérité."¹

¹Le Journal d'un poète (Edit. définitive de 1921) p.164. We may observe how de Vigny's irony, less marked and conscious than France's, betrays itself equally in a love of paradox as in his use of the epithet 'divine' to qualify the detached attitude of the philosopher.

We are reminded here of the first pages of Le Jardin d'Epicure where France has expressed, more poetically than any writer of his generation, man's sense of bewilderment when faced with the immensity of the universe, his difficulty in adapting himself to his new position, no longer central but always more remote and insignificant:

"Nous avons peine à nous figurer l'état d'esprit d'un homme d'autrefois qui croyait fermement que la terre était le centre du monde et que tous les astres tournaient autour d'elle ... En ce temps là, Dieu n'avait d'autres enfants que les hommes, et toute sa création était aménagée d'une façon à la fois puérile et poétique comme une immense cathédrale ... C'en est fait des douze cioux et des planètes sous lesquelles on passait heureux et malheureux, jovial ou saturnien. La voûte solide du firmament est brisée. Notre œil et notre pensée se plongent dans les abîmes infinis du ciel."¹

Fundamentally these writers are humanists and their constant effort is to fight against their own scepticism and the sense of futility that pervades them by exalting the greatness of man's endeavour amidst all the obstacles and the enigmatic obscurity that surrounds him. This is the message of La bouteille à la mer and L'Esprit Pur, a message that is taken up by France in Le Jardin d'Epicure and later

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. pp. 1-8.

with much greater emphasis in La Révolte des Anges:

"Nous ne connaissons qu'une réalité: la pensée. C'est elle qui a crée le monde. Et si elle n'avait pas pesé Sirius, Sirius n'existerait pas."¹

"Ce qui est admirable ce n'est pas que le champ des étoiles soit si vaste, c'est que l'homme l'ait mesuré."²

A great affinity exists between de Vigny and France in their atheism which does not prevent a tolerant acceptance of all religions. Before his anti-clerical period which marks the years that immediately follow the Dreyfus episode, France dwells with insistence on the importance of religion, of Christianity in particular, as a moral and spiritual guide. Both writers emphasize the 'illusion' of religious faith, both recognise nevertheless the utility and the practical necessity of religious dogma for the survival of humanity. It was in this sense that de Vigny, in the last years of his life, conceived the project for his unwritten poem, Le Char de Brahma: "O céleste illusion de la foi! reste dans les contrées qui t'ont cultivée comme une fleur sacrée. Restes-y illusion sacrée! Car lorsque tu auras quitté la terre, que feront les hommes encore?"³

"C'est la force et la bonté des religions d'enseigner à l'homme sa raison d'être et ses fins dernières," writes

¹La Vie littéraire III. p.215.

²Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.8.

³Le Journal d'un poète. op. cit. p.239.

France in Le Jardin d'Epicure. "Quand on a repoussé les dogmes de la théologie morale, comme nous l'avons fait presque tous en cet âge de science et de liberté intellectuelle, il ne reste plus ~~aucun~~ aucun moyen de savoir pourquoi on est en ce monde et ce qu'on y est venu faire."¹

In the case of de Vigny, the uncompromising acceptance of the 'vanitas vanitatum' results in a note of pessimism and despair bordering on nihilism. "Gloire, amour, bonheur, rien de tout cela n'est complètement. Donc pour écrire des pensées sur un sujet quelconque, et dans quelque forme que ce soit, nous sommes forcés de commencer par nous mentir à nous-mêmes, en nous figurant que quelque chose existe, et en créant un fantôme pour ensuite l'adorer ou le profaner, le grandir ou le détruire."² This indeed is the position at which France arrives with his doctrine of the universal illusion, but to him even this despair must be rendered seductive and consoling, and he must impart not only a note of serenity, but sensuous delight to this very sadness and philosophical resignation:

"La tristesse philosophique s'est plus d'une fois exprimée avec une morne magnificence. Comme les croyants parvenus à un haut degré de beauté morale goûtent les joies

¹ Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.51.

² Le Journal d'un poète. op. cit. p.141.

du renoncement, le savant, persuadé que tout autour de nous n'est qu'apparence et duperie, s'enivre de cette mélancolie philosophique et s'oublie dans les délices d'un calme désespoir. Douleur profonde et belle que ceux qui l'ont goûtée n'échangeront pas contre les gaietés frivoles et les vaines espérances du vulgaire."¹

We have already observed that a curious 'reversal' of evolution characterises the intellectual development of de Vigny and of France. De Vigny achieves towards the end of his life a greater serenity and resignation coinciding with his growing faith in the virtue of human endeavour and the forsaking of his former conception of God as the personal, avenging deity. So too does his sentiment of fraternal love increase (notably in La Flute and La bouteille à la mer). The strength that he had imparted to solitary figures, the compassionate Eloi, the care-worn Moïse, the huge granite-like Samson, this strength must now be dedicated to the collective effort and the message of the drowning captain of La bouteille à la mer must be received and understood by humanity at large. But this serener acceptance of the nature of things coincides too with a definite abandonment of social and political activities and the hermit-like retreat to Maine-Giraud. "Je n'ai plus

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.105.

l'ardeur de la lutte et du péril," writes de Vigny in 1849. "Je me suis permis de rentrer dans la tristesse qui est ma nature, et peut-être le vrai sens de la vie humaine."¹

Indecision, doubt, an escape into aestheticism and contemplation characterise the first half of Anatole France's life when he could see no reason to determine himself in any course of action. His participation in the Affaire Dreyfus, his subsequent active adoption of Socialism, inevitably entail a forsaking of resigned acceptance both in terms of individual conduct and the collective effort, and a growing attitude of revolt. Crainquebille testifies to his acute awareness of social injustice, of the cruelty of docile submission to the mystical jargon of legal procedure. The former gentle manicheist of La Vie littéraire and Le Jardin d'Epicure, now fiercely anti-clerical and anti-Christian, exclaims to the students of the 'Universités populaires': "N'écoutons pas les prêtres qui disent que la souffrance est excellente. C'est la joie qui est bonne! Nos instincts, nos organes, notre nature physique et morale, tout notre être nous conseille de chercher le bonheur sur la terre."²

In this period of active revolt, France returns

¹Lettres à une Puritaine. Revue de Paris. 1897. Quoted by E. Lauvrière. Alfred de Vigny. op. cit. p.304.

²C. Aveline. Trente ans de vie sociale: Vers les temps meilleurs. op. cit. p.29.

constantly to the symbol of the antropomorphic, avenging God which characterises de Vigny's biblical poems and the intimate thoughts of his diary. "Sans le purgatoire et l'enfer, le Bon Dieu serait un pauvre Sire," affirms Brotteaux de Llettes of Les Dieux ont soif.¹ "Il a peu de suite dans les idées; il est moins puissant qu'on ne pense. Et pour tout dire, c'est moins un dieu qu'un démiurge ignorant et vain," pursues the rebellious angel Arcade in La Révolte des Anges.² Michel Corday has shown in the Dernières pages inédites that France waged his divine battle until his death. "Je voudrais écrire un dialogue sur Dieu où je développerais cette idée: Si Dieu existe, c'est le plus abominable des êtres, puisqu'il a permis cette guerre," France exclaimed in 1917.³ Amongst his papers was found a long list of definitions supplied by theologians and philosophers throughout the ages on the nature and essence of God, and this was the data that he had accumulated for a projected study when death intervened.⁴

De Vigny, who preferred the grandeur of human

¹Les Dieux ont soif. p.61.

²La Révolte des Anges. p.97.

³M. Corday. Dernières pages inédites d'Anatole France. op.cit. p.3.

⁴Ibid. p.132.

resignation, had never pursued his divine battle to its utmost limits although his diary shows that throughout his life he was preoccupied by the question of man's rebellion against the Creator: "La terre est révoltée des injustices de la création; elle dissimule par frayeur de l'éternité, mais elle s'indigne en secret contre le Dieu qui a créé le mal et la mort. Quand un contempteur des dieux paraît, comme Ajax fils d'Oïlée, le monde l'adopte et l'aime; tel est Satan, tels sont Creste et Don Juan."¹

Anatole France had already dwelt admiringly on the poet's attitude of revendication to his Creator in the 1868 Alfred de Vigny.² La Vie littéraire includes a celebrated article on the stoic pessimism of Louise Ackermann of whose poetry France writes: "On admire, on est ému, on ressent une effrayante sympathie et l'on murmure cette parole du poète Alfred de Vigny: Tous ceux qui luttèrent contre le ciel injuste ont eu l'admiration et l'amour des hommes."³

But in his poems, de Vigny had not effectively flung his challenge to the Creator. Satan in Eloa remains the prince of evil. The poet's final attitude in Le Mont des Oliviers is one of stoic disdain and dignified silence.

¹Le Journal d'un poète. op. cit. p.92.

²Alfred de Vigny (1868). pp. 82-83.

³La Vie littéraire IV. p.7.

Yet we may discover the bitterness of the human challenge which he was unwilling to formulate explicitly by examining his private notes.¹ In Le Journal d'un poète he mentions a project for an unwritten drama and sketches its outline. Bearing in mind France's early knowledge of the Journal and his admiration of de Vigny's defiant attitude, we feel that this outline constitutes one of the important sources of La Révolte des Anges:

"La question serait que l'homme est plus grand que la Divinité en ce sens qu'il peut sacrifier sa vie pour un principe, tandis que la Divinité ne le peut pas.

Pour dire cela sur un théâtre, il faudrait mettre une scène dans le paganisme où l'homme dit à un dieu cette terrible vérité."²

In the case of de Vigny, such gestures of rebellion remain as projects and outlines. Not only did the virile qualities of silent contempt and stoic dignity prevent him from developing his thought into poems. We must also take into account his feminine qualities, pity, tenderness, a love of humanity which is constantly interpreted by a concern for its moral welfare. Never once did the aristocrat lose his sense of responsibility towards an inferior humanity. Satan, the supreme rebel, was destined to repent, redeemed by the strength of Eloa's compassion.³ But in the same way that

¹ Le Journal d'un poète. op. cit. pp. 92, 102-103, 166.

² Ibid. p.257.

³ Ibid. Satan sauvé. projet de poème. p.257.

de Vigny was unwilling to commit himself by whole-hearted rebellion, so did he shun the over-optimistic, verbal solution, knowing that evil would remain, constant and eternal¹ and his Satan sauvé also remained a project.

We have noted in a previous chapter how the paradox of reversing the roles of God and Satan had seduced France as early as 1891 when he wrote Thaïs.² La Révolte des Anges is his ultimate gesture of rebellion against man's passive acceptance of the tyrannical, avenging deity. It is a synthesis of all the elements that constitute his basic humanism and appears to be the inevitable development and completion of de Vigny's implied rebellion. In La Révolte des Anges, God is depicted as a principle of tyranny and inertia, a constant impediment to the human effort.³ Satan is endowed with the human qualities of curiosity, doubt and a love of freedom. Therefore he must cast his lot with humanity, slowly evolving from primitive chaos and instruct them in the sciences and the arts. Withal, Satan has discovered

¹See Chapter VI. p. 127.

²See Chapter VI. pp. 120-121.

³"L'homme voit l'inertie de Dieu refuser de lui faire connaître le mot de l'énigme de la création et de le défendre de la colère inconnue d'en haut qu'il sent planer sur sa tête..." (Le Journal d'un poète. op. cit. p.166. La Herse. poème).

his moral superiority over Iaveh. He has discovered that suffering instigates man to conquer brute nature and at the same time reveals to him the value of love and compassion. How clearly France echoes de Vigny in Satan's phrase:

"Quand elle (la nature) nous obéira, nous serons des dieux. Mais dut-elle nous céder à jamais ses mystères, nous refuser des armes et garder le secret de la foudre, nous devons encore nous applaudir de connaître la douleur, puisqu'elle nous révèle des sentiments nouveaux, plus précieux et plus doux que tous ceux qu'on éprouve dans la béatitude éternelle, puisqu'elle nous inspire l'amour et la pitié, inconnus aux cieux."¹

But finally Satan perceives in a dream that his ultimate victory, the liberation of his fellow angels, can never be accomplished since life itself means constant human effort. God dethroned will become Satan. The victory will be to the vanquished who must now understand suffering but also aspiration and the will to progress in human terms. Satan triumphant will become God and being incapable of surpassing himself, his victory will bear no fruit and he too will succumb to inertia. Therefore Satan, awakening from his dream, forgoes his victory, preferring the fight

¹La Révolte des Anges. p.201. There are echoes of de Vigny in the cry of the angel Arcade as he seeks enlightenment in the Bibliothèque Esparvienne: "Connaissance, où me conduis-tu? Où m'entraînes-tu, pensée?" (p.65).

which is life, to the sterility of attainment, and observes to his lieutenant:

"Nectaire, tu as combattu avec moi avant la naissance du monde. Nous avons été vaincus parce que nous n'avons pas compris que la victoire est Esprit et que c'est en nous et en nous seuls qu'il faut attaquer et détruire Ialdabaoth."¹

Thus France completes de Vigny's implied rebellion, in a dramatic and poetic form, and returns in his conclusion to de Vigny's message of 'L'Esprit pur'.

Because France discovered so many personal affinities with de Vigny from the time that he published his first study in 1868, all his later article on the poet illustrate in a convincing manner how greatly he preferred the latter's gravity and depth to the optimism and the obedient acquiescence to the Almighty of such Conformists as Hugo and Lamartine. "Moins abondant, moins largement inspiré que Lamartine, il l'emportait dès le début sur le poète des Méditations par la fermeté du langage et la science des vers. Plus tard, il porta plus haut qu'aucun poète de son temps l'audace lumineuse de la pensée."² he writes

¹La Révolte des Anges. p.411.

²La Vie littéraire. II. p.255.

in La Vie littéraire. "En vérité," he pursues in Le Temps, "de Vigny est bien le seul poète méditatif de son époque."¹

De Vigny's precocious and realistic understanding of Nature has a much deeper significance to France as an evolutionist than the sentimental vision of the poet's contemporaries. In La Vie littéraire, France qualifies the celebrated verses of La Maison du berger as "l'expression d'une philosophie sombre et pathétique dont rien ne surpasse l'éloquence douloureuse."² He returns to this point with greater emphasis in an uncollected article of Le Temps: "J'ai relu, pour le fêter à ma façon la Maison du berger. C'est le plus pur, le plus triste, le plus beau des chants d'amour. Vigny sentait avec douleur l'indifférence de la nature; en cela il est plus près de nous que Lamartine et surtout que Victor Hugo. Leur vague religiosité ne nous touche plus guère." After quoting de Vigny's memorable lines, he concludes: "Voilà des paroles dont nous comprenons la majesté douloureuse et qui résonnent profondément dans nos âmes."³

¹Le Temps. 22 November. 1891.

²La Vie littéraire. II. p.257.

³Le Temps. 27 January 1889.

The uncollected articles of Le Temps equally illustrate France's sincere and personal interest in the development of de Vigny studies at a time when the poet's message to posterity was beginning to attract the wider attention of the critics and the literary public.¹ An article published in Le Temps in January 1889 welcomes the news that de Vigny's Parisian dwelling is finally to receive its commemorative plate. The article is dedicated to Louis Ratisbonne whom France praises in warm tones for the services he has rendered to the poet's memory. As usual the familiar note of *gaminerie* is never absent for long and we learn that M. Ratisbonne is seriously displeased that de Vigny's bust at the Comédie Française occupies an inferior position in a draughty vestibule where the poet's delicate ears are constantly offended by the vulgar conversation of the lackeys. It appears too that the disrespectful grooms occasionally adorn his marble brow with their caps and Louis Ratisbonne has already addressed a gentle note of complaint to the

¹In his Bibliography to the Oeuvres complètes d'Alfred de Vigny. op. cit., M. Baldensperger shows that from 1868 to 1891 when Maurice Paléologue's Alfred de Vigny appeared, no full-length study on de Vigny was published. He attributes this silence to the popularity of Hugo, the renewed interest in Lamartine and the development of realism in the early years of the Third Republic, "en de temps hostiles à toute prétention aristocratique." (pp. 245-247).

manager. Will Louis Ratisbonne succeed in relegating the bust to a higher sphere? "Pour ma part, je me résigne aisément à ce qu'il reste derrière la porte. M. Ratisbonne ne s'y résigne pas et c'est sa supériorité. Rien n'est indifférent à qui aime tout à fait. Et certes aucun poète n'est plus digne d'être aimé qu'Alfred de Vigny."¹

An article published in November 1891 hails the publication of Maurice Paléologue's Alfred de Vigny. "M. Paléologue", writes France, "a ravivé mon antique enthousiasme."² Although he reviews this work in the most flattering manner, France expresses a regret that Maurice Paléologue had not incorporated in his study certain documents discovered and published by Etienne Charavay on the friendship that was formed between de Vigny and Baudelaire in 1862, when the elder poet was dying of cancer. Charavay had in fact been the first critic to bring this interesting relationship to the attention of the public in a small volume of letters published in 1879. The correspondance which relates mainly to the de Vigny's significant understanding of Les Fleurs du Mal and Baudelaire's concern for the de Vigny's suffering is quoted

¹Le Temps. 27 January 1889.

²Le Temps. 22 November 1891.

by France in the article dedicated to Maurice Paléologue and loyally incorporated in the definite 1923 edition of Alfred de Vigny.¹

How these articles of La Vie littéraire deserve their title and successfully blend life and letters is illustrated by the interest that France displayed, in 1868, in an unsavoury court-case known as the 'Affaire Chambige'. Details of this trial are supplied by France in his column of the 11th November. Henri Chambige, a highly imaginative man, corrupted by sentimental poetry, had formed a suicide pact with his mistress in a villa at Constantine. The lady had obediently put an end to her life and Chambige, less eager to keep to the mutual agreement, was now attempting to explain this unhappy turn of events to a Parisian jury. "Je lui avais dit souvent," he stated to the jury, "qu'on admirait les amants d'Alfred de Vigny,² que ce serait une grande beauté de mourir comme cela, qu'on nous admirerait!" After quoting this deposition, France's indignation knows no bounds: "On connaît ses vers désespérés d'un poète paisible et triste jusqu'à la mort ... Rappelez-vous le chant de mort et d'amour, cette élévation si pure, si triste,

¹Alfred de Vigny. (1923).pp.194-195.

²Les Amants de Montmorency.

si désolée.

Voilà donc le souffle qui poussa un malheureux jeune homme au crime! Tout est sujet de trouble aux insensés: tout se corrompt dans les vases impurs ... Non certes, je n'accuserai pas de complicité avec Henri Chambige les Muses qu'il a trahies et compromises. Les Muses sont toujours innocentes. Les crimes et les folies des hommes ne peuvent souiller leur idéale pureté."¹

De Vigny's poetic gifts never ceased to attract France at a time when Brunetière was pointing out the slenderness of his inspiration. "Alfred de Vigny fut un initiateur," writes France in La Vie littéraire. "Il donna avant les débuts de Victor Hugo, plus jeune que lui de cinq ans, le type du vers sonore et plein qui devait prévaloir."² As early as 1868, France had noted de Vigny's superiority over Hugo in his conception of dramatic reform. We must admit however that in his early work, France is rather at a loss to support his affirmation. Inspired by a truer understanding of Shakespeare, de Vigny had attempted in La Maréchale d'Ancre to convey "a wider conception of life". The reform affected by Hernani referred mainly to

¹Le Temps. 11 November 1888.

²La Vie littéraire. II. p.256.

technicalities and not to the subject matter: "Le drame d'Hernani, on l'a trop peu remarqué, est à peu près classique par le fond."¹ The argument is specious but perfectly conveys France's partiality. Chatterton is described as "la pièce le mieux écrite de notre théâtre moderne." Kitty Bell in her "exquisite purity" is likened to Racine's Aricie. It is equally typical of France that in his first literary study, he should have pointed out both the moral concern and the XVIIIth century cynicism that animates Quitte pour la peur, a delightful playlet then totally unappreciated and excluded from the official repertoire till the end of the century.

Servitude et Grandeur militaires is a work that France constantly returns to, in autobiography and criticism, in terms of extravagant praise. We learn in La Vie en fleur, that after leaving school, he had for a time considered becoming an officer. "Je me trouvai alors un goût du métier militaire que je ne m'étais pas connu jusque-là. Je me voyais déjà lieutenant, capitaine, héroïque et doux et mélancolique comme un officier d'Alfred de Vigny..."² Le livre de mon ami contains a passage clearly inspired by Servitude et Grandeur: "Il y a sous les armes une grande

¹ Alfred de Vigny (1868) pp. 59-60.

² La Vie en fleur. p.149. and pp. 186-187.

dignité de vie. Le devoir y est clair et d'autant mieux déterminé que ce n'est pas le raisonnement qui le détermine... Il faut être prêtre ou soldat pour ne pas connaître les angoisses du doute."¹

When Abel Hermant published in 1887 his Cavalier Miserey, a realistic novel which left its readers with few illusions on the nature of garrison life, the colonel of the 12th regiment of the light infantry ordered that all copies of this work found in the barracks should be burnt and that their owners should be imprisoned. Le Cavalier Miserey did in fact constitute a dangerous attack against the French army, an institution which France warily supported at this period. His attachment to the army combined with his strong dislike of Naturalism caused him to write a most unfavourable criticism of Hermant's novel, pointing out how the author had debased a great institution and shown "only the small side of things". Not only did he strongly support the colonel's practical measure but he called his readers to witness how in former days a soldier had written an equally revealing book on the rigours of military duties and passive obedience, and yet this work had never raised a murmur of protest in spite of its

¹Le Livre de mon ami. p.67.

intellectual audacity. "Jamais il (de Vigny) ne cesse d'honorer ceux qu'il plaint. Il peut tout dire parce qu'il garde dans tout ce qu'il dit l'amour des hommes et le respect des vertus ainsi que des souffrances. Dès le début, il montre la gravité paisible de son coeur et une noblesse d'âme qui semble aujourd'hui perdue."¹

In the following years (1888-1893) we observe in France's attitude a rapid loss of faith in the government and the army which marks the turning point of his political life and his growing adhesion to Socialism. Jérôme Coignard of 1893, a firm anti-militarist, would not have signed the article that France had written six years previously on Le Cavalier Miserey,² but France's sympathy for de Vigny's idealised account of heroic submission remained in the height of the Dreyfus battle. We are told by his friend Michel Corday that he then compared Colonel Picquart to "l'un de ces soldats qu'Alfred de Vigny avait vus ou devinés, calmes héros de chaque jour, qui communiquent aux plus humbles soins la noblesse qui est en eux et pour qui l'accomplissement du devoir régulier est la poésie familière de la vie."³

We have seen so far how de Vigny influenced both the thought and the expression of France during his years of

¹La Vie littéraire. II. pp.80-81.

²Les Opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard. pp. 140-141.

³M. Corday. Dernières pages inédites d'Anatole France. op. cit. p.152.

maturity. It would be instructive to discover how the poet inspired his Parnassian disciple. Paul Bourget who in Quelques témoignages dwells mainly on his friendship with France during the Parnassian period believes that Chénier and de Vigny had the most effective influence on the latter's poetic formation.¹ Many other poets have left their trace in the Poèmes dorés and the Idylles et légendes, but de Vigny's influence is particularly noticeable in four poems: Les Cerfs, La mort d'une libellule, La mort du singe, La Perdrix, each relating the silent suffering and death of animals conquered by brutal force. That these poems are variations on de Vigny's celebrated stoic theme of La mort du loup is made all the more obvious by the manner in which they follow one another and form a sequence. Les Cerfs depicts an all-night battle between two stags, followed by the death of the vanquished animal:

L'oeil terne, il a léché sa mâchoire brisée
Et la mort vient déjà dans l'aube et la rosée ²
Apaiser par degrés son poitrail pantelant.

In La Mort d'une libellule, the frail dragon-fly, a gentle echo of the proud wolf, prefers to die far from human eyes, after having been pierced to death by a

¹P. Bourget. Quelques témoignages. op. cit. p.153.

²A. France. Poésies. op. cit. Les Cerfs. p.12.

mischievous child:

Il n'eut pas convenu que sur un liège infâme
 Sa beauté s'étalât aux yeux des écoliers:
 Elle ouvrit pour mourir ses quatres ailes de flamme¹
 Et son corps se sécha dans les joncs familiers.

We may note the serenity of these short and non-didactic poems which are truly in conformity with France's reconciled attitude towards Nature. The emphasis is placed on the animal's fatalistic acceptance of death, the inevitable law of the survival of the fittest, but the poetic image is always supplied by de Vigny:

Ils sont empreints, ces yeux qui ne regardent rien²
 De la douceur que donne aux brutes la souffrance.

Triste, s'enveloppant de silence et de paix,³
 Ayant fini d'aimer, elle meurt sans colère.

The poem La fille de Caïn in The Idylles et légendes is a transposition of de Vigny's Le Déluge with occasional echoes of Eloa. The angel Azraël abandons Heaven for the love of a mortal woman, Cain's daughter Cholibama. They too are enveloped by the swirling waters of the flood and drowned. We recall Eloa's temptation in the manner that Cholibama casts her lot with the angelic 'deserter':

Qu'importe ange ou démon, le nom dont tu te nommes
 Ton front est triste et fier, et tes yeux sont de feu⁴
 En te voyant si beau, je te préfère à Dieu.

¹Ibid. La mort d'un libellule. p.13.

²Ibid. La mort du singe. p.16.

³Ibid. La Perdrix. p.17.

⁴Ibid. La fille de Caïn. pp. 66-70.

The influence of de Vigny is perhaps most apparent in the powerful description of the flood's ravages:

Le ciel du Dieu jaloux ouvrit ses cataractes
 Sur les plaines où sont les tentes des pasteurs
 Sur les sombres forêts et les pins des hauteurs
 Sur les grandes cités aux enceintes de brique...

Something of the enigmatic beauty of de Vigny's concluding lines to Le Déluge has been recaptured by France in his final evocation of the drowning couple:

Le soleil reparut, rouge et froid dans les cieux.
 Pressant entre ses bras le corps silencieux
 ... L'Ange flottait, splendide et triste dans le vent,¹
 Las d'offrir à la foudre un front toujours fuyant.

We could not conclude this chapter on a Romantic poet to whom France was deeply indebted without pointing out how his early, idealised account of the remote, aristocratic de Vigny, developed as he grew older towards a more realistic view of a man who had his share of human vanity. In the 1891 article of Le Temps, dedicated to Maurice Paléologue's Alfred de Vigny, France already appears to have adopted

¹Ibid. La fille de Cain. pp.68-70.

Cf. Le Déluge: Des vengeances de Dieu l'immense exécuteur
 L'Océan apparut, bouillonnant et superbe,
 Entraînant les forêts comme le sable et l'
 herbe,
 De la plaine inondée enrahissant le fond...

Il soutenait Sarah par les flots poursuivie,
 Mais quand il eut perdu sa force avec sa vie
 Par le ciel et la mer le monde fut rempli
 Et l'arc-en-ciel brilla, tout étant accompli.

a more practical view of the causes that determined the poet's unsociability:

"C'était une âme grande et belle, mais sensible et coquette, lente, voluptueuse, un peu vaine, une âme de poète. M. Paléologue a mis dans une ombre discrète les innocentes vanités de ce noble coeur un peu trop épris peut-être en sa jeunesse de gentilhommerie, d'uniforme et d'académie, mais qui dans sa belle maturité, comprenant le néant de tout, devint triste sans amertume et solitaire sans égoïsme."¹

In the 1923 Alfred de Vigny, France has significantly pruned his manuscript of the expression 'le gentilhomme' which appears with monotonous insistence in the earlier version. Sainte-Beuve relates that de Vigny attended his reception at the Academy wearing the traditional uniform and a black tie which he wore, as the poet then explained to a friend, "par un reste d'habitude militaire." France has related this episode in both versions of his study but we note that in the last edition, he takes exception to this innocent detail. "C'est de Vigny qui le dit avec une affectation peut-être un peu ridicule," he writes in a footnote. "Les grands hommes ont quelquefois de ces vanités."²

¹Le Temps. 22 November 1891.

²Alfred de Vigny. (1923) p.175.

It would be invidious to imagine how France would have re-written his Alfred de Vigny had he possessed the strength to undertake this task in 1922. In view of his amendments, we can see clearly that he would have made for greater correctness and realism in biographical detail and that he would have adopted a less indulgent view of the poet's "innocent vanities". We know that the criticisms written by him on de Vigny during the long interval that separates these two editions maintain the early note of admiration, and we may safely surmise that he would have dwelt with equal insistence on those qualities to which he was so responsive: intellectual audacity and nobility of mind and heart.

CHAPTER XII

Alfred de Musset

At number 19 Quai Malaquais, the house in which Anatole France was born in 1844, Alfred de Musset had lived ten years previously with George Sand. Thither he had returned alone after the Venetian adventure to nurse his wounded feelings and had spent together with her the last days of their unhappy relationship.¹ Thus in a Paris smaller and more intimate than it is today, de Musset, like Chateaubriand and Lamartine, was by no means a remote, historical figure to our critic.

Anatole France retained throughout his life a lasting affection for Alfred de Musset. We are told by his close friend Louis Barthou that France would refer to the poet as "notre de Musset" and that he knew his poems by heart.² Even when we bear in mind the obvious exaggeration of the latter affirmation, we may say that France, like the majority of Frenchmen, loved de Musset even to his weaknesses.

In one of his earliest articles, Anatole France commends de Musset as a genuine interpreter of the ironical

¹F. Duhoureau. Alfred de Musset et Anatole France. in Comoedia. 12 January. 1932.

²L. Barthou. A.F. Sans la politique. Conferencia. 1 May 1925.

and satirical vein in French literature. Writing in L'Amateur d'Autographes in 1869, he names de Musset the direct descendant of Régnier and Molière, a poet of the "Gaulish strain". We are all the more obliged to recognise the sincerity of this praise since the article in question, devoted to the works of Mathurin Régnier, mentions de Musset in a purely incidental and voluntary manner:

"Alfred de Musset avait pour Molière et pour Régnier un amour immense et qui, à bien examiner les choses, est plutôt de sang que d'élection. C'est que Musset aussi, petit ou grand, est de la famille. Il s'éloigne notamment de Régnier beaucoup plus par la distance du temps que par la différence du tempérament. Il marque un moment tout autre de la conscience humaine, mais sa forme, son allure, révèlent un poète de race gauloise. C'est ce qui fait sa force sur l'esprit du public, c'est pourquoi il prévaudra avec nos vieux maîtres sur toutes les floraisons exotiques et artificielles des poètes de labeur."¹

Together with his articles on Lamartine and de Vigny, France's later criticisms of de Musset are generally unknown and must be consulted in various uncollected articles dating from 1884 to 1889. Writing in Le Temps in 1888, France

¹L'Amateur d'Autographes. 16 February 1869. pp.60-61.

declares de Musset to have achieved the impossible by imperceptibly blending passionate tones with wit and humour (two literary qualities which to prove effective require a certain detachment): "Ses débuts, les Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie, sont d'une charmante impertinence. Plus tard, il fut passionné et resta spirituel. Cela est unique."¹

When confronted with de Musset's dual nature, the idealist and the sensualist, who can wonder if France shows his preference for the poet who continues the tradition of XVIIIth century libertinage rather than the passionate 'enfant du siècle'. Curiously enough, this preference is implied rather than explicitly stated. In an article of L'Univers Illustré, written in 1884, France recalls Victor Laprade who had died in the previous year. He can find few words of praise for this poet whose verse appears uninspired and "mournful", whose political attitude is designated as both "cruel and naïve". But suddenly France remembers that in former years, Laprade had encouraged him as he stood on the threshold of his career and his tone becomes remorseful: "Il fut très bon pour moi et je voudrais de tout mon coeur l'admirer comme j'admire ce scélérat de Musset. Mais je ne

¹Le Temps. 7 October 1888.

puis. Je suis comme l'homme aux rubans verts, qui estimait Eliante et n'aimait que Célimène."¹

As in the case of Lamartine, France is drawn to de Musset because of his absolute naturalness, his power to communicate intense feeling directly. De Musset gives himself to his readers and they are able to relive his experiences, so poignantly and directly does he reveal them: "Les poètes, voyez-vous, ne sont aimés que quand ils se donnent. C'est là, en somme, leur plus grand secret. Musset n'en avait pas d'autres. Et Musset fut le plus aimé des poètes," writes France in an article dedicated to the poetry of François Coppée.² Here again the associative and almost unconscious manner in which France recalls de Musset's endearing traits is in itself more significant and eloquent than any more direct tribute. But such direct tributes are not lacking in his articles. Shortly after Hugo's death, Renan composed a playlet entitled 1802. Dialogue des morts which was performed by the Comédie Française in honour of the poet. With his typical desire to reconcile opposites, Renan imagined the meeting of Boileau, Racine and Voltaire in the Elysian Fields on the day of Hugo's birth. Boileau was depicted enthusiastically acclaiming Hugo as the great poet of the century.³ Commenting on this little fantasy in

¹ L'Univers Illustré. 18 October 1884.

² Le Temps. 10 February 1889.

³ E. Renan. 1802. Dialogue des Morts (Paris. Calmann-Lévy. 1886).

his columns of Le Temps, France who was one of the first to lead the reaction against Hugo, humourously deplores the fact that his master Renan should have contrived such an unfeasible reconciliation. Let Renan, he suggests, once again evoke the shades of the dead. This time, let them be confronted with Lamartine and de Musset. How much more natural and harmonious such a reconciliation would appear. And this is how France imagines the scene:

"Voltaire, qui n'a plus de rancune depuis qu'il est mort, pardonnera "le hideux sourire" et dira "votre de Musset est un pur diamant."¹ Racine approuvera d'un clin d'oeil. Nicolas prendra la parole et s'exprimera à peu près de la sorte: "Le vrai seul est aimable. Lamartine et Musset furent vrais tous deux. Leur génie les garda de l'enflure et du galimatias, qui furent les pestes de leur temps. Ils parlaient naturellement et ils parlaient au coeur. Un autre assembla plus d'images et remua plus de mots. Mais ils touchaient les âmes. Si j'avais quelques crédits chez les Français d'aujourd'hui qui me méprisent comme ils méprisent la raison, je leur dirais: Lamartine a fait pleurer vos mères; Musset fut pendant trente ans l'âme et la voix de vos amants, et vous n'en savez plus

¹Dors-tu content, Voltaire, et ton hideux sourire
 Voltige-t-il encor sur tes os décharnés. (Rolla. IV).

rien. Vous n'avez plus ni goût, ni mesure. Ce qui est naturel vous semble fade. Vous êtes des barbares."¹

There can be no doubt that these last lines of admonition are addressed to the Naturalists and to the Symbolists. We have observed that in the hey-day of his fame as a critic, France was largely unsympathetic to these two great contemporary trends in art. This fact becomes obvious in an article published two years later where he once again summons Nicolas to the attack and depicts him as an even more exacting 'magister' who would have disdained all exponents of XIXth century literature except de Musset:

"M. Renan, qui nous apporta les dernières nouvelles de Nicolas, assure qu'il est devenu romantique dans les champs Elysées et qu'il goûte fort Victor Hugo. J'en doute. Il me paraît bien que romantisme, naturalisme et symbolisme eussent paru également détestables à Nicolas, qui n'eût fait grâce qu'à de Musset pour l'amour du naturel et du vrai."²

For a critic guided by a sense of relativity, France was uncommonly fond of sweeping generalisations and superlatives. It would therefore be futile to enquire what

¹Le Temps. 23 May 1886.

²Le Temps. 4 November 1888.

has happened to Lamartine and de Vigny as he formulates this uncompromising preference in the name of Boileau. Only two years previously, he had pointed out to Jean Moréas and the Symbolists that Lamartine was "the greatest and the most simple" of all French poets. But Nicolas' exclusive choice may be understood in terms of France's very deep admiration for the beauty of de Musset's poetic expression. In the numerous literary articles he has left us there are few passages to compare in eloquence and feeling with the following tribute to de Musset's verse:

"Son vers quand il est bien venu, droit et souple sur sa tige, a l'élégance naturelle de l'acanthé. La beauté d'un tel vers semble aussi durable que celle du lis ou des roses puisqu'elle est aussi naturelle. D'abord, il n'est que charmant mais si on y régarde, on le trouve prodigieux. Il est la passion même et il parle la langue la plus pure. C'est de la flamme dans du cristal. Musset est, avec La Fontaine, le plus français de nos poètes. Nous le savons tous par coeur."¹

Even when he deplures the truculence and the declamatory tones of Romantic poetry, de Musset appears to him to be excusable in his very naturalness. Thus in his Preface to Gérard de Nerval's Petits châteaux de Bohême,

¹Le Temps. 7 October 1888.

France refers to "l'esprit romantique qui poussa aux sombres fureurs de la déclamation Musset lui-même, le clair et fin et spirituel Musset."¹ But in his concluding lines to Les Poèmes du Souvenir, he describes de Musset's manner in Le Souvenir as "emportée, négligée, charmante, avec de la déclamation, de la littérature et pourtant un naturel adorable."²

Although, as France makes clear in his criticisms of Hugo, he was on the whole extremely hostile to Romantic drama, he considered de Musset's theatre a notable exception. Writing in Le Globe on Coppée's Le Passant, he compares the author to de Musset and commends the artistic sense of both poets who had chosen an "irridescant, azure land" and an indeterminate time for their graceful fantasies. He points out that both writers had a distinguished predecessor. De Musset's "delicate and immortal" creations, Marianne and Carmosine were not the first to explore this magic country which was originally discovered by Shakespeare's Beatrice and Cymbeline.³

On the occasion of Lorenzaccio's first performance in December 1896, a celebrated performance with Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Lorenzo, France published in La Revue de Paris

¹G. de Nerval. Petits Châteaux de Bohême. Preface d'A. France. (Paris: Emile-Paul. 1912).

²Les Poèmes du Souvenir. op. cit. p.38.

³Le Globe. 25 September. 1878.

a penetrating analysis of the tragedy. In the essay Lorenzaccio et Alfred de Musset, France indicates that the poignancy of the drama does not lie in the contrast formed by Lorenzo's voluntary dissipation and the nobility of his goal. On the contrary, the 'bon vivant' streak in France's own nature will not allow him to take de Musset's portrayal of Florentine orgies quite seriously even though he realises that these episodes are inspired by the author's pathetic knowledge that debauchery must ruin genius. France reveals a deeper understanding of Lorenzaccio when he insists that its real dramatic implications lie in the young rebel's precocious awareness that his very resolution to murder the tyrant and to liberate his fellow-citizens is in itself futile and meaningless. In this essay, France very characteristically seizes upon the tragedy's philosophical significance and its disheartening, pessimistic aspect.

Together with Lorenzaccio, we must count amongst France's scholarly and well-documented studies, the introduction to Le Souvenir, where he traces in a manner humorous yet wholly sympathetic and tactful, the various phases of the Venetian adventure and its sorrowful conclusion.²

¹La Revue de Paris. 15 December 1896: Lorenzaccio et Alfred de Musset. Republished in Oeuvres Complètes. XXV. pp. 21-31.

²See Chapter XIV. George Sand.

Anatole France was but slightly influenced by de Musset as a writer, yet it is interesting to note that Paul Verlaine who has included France in his series Les hommes d'aujourd'hui, affirms that Les Poèmes dorés are very noticeably influenced by de Musset's verse.¹ Unfortunately, Verlaine did not illustrate this statement with examples and a careful reading of France's Parnassian poems does not confirm it. His borrowings from de Musset are infrequent but very deliberate and obvious. Gustave Michaut points out that an incident from de Musset's tale La Margot is reproduced in Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard.² Margot, the lady's maid, being unable to express her affection for her employer's son, fondles the old cat instead. "Le chat qui était vieux et gâté, roulé en boule dans un fauteuil, recevait fort gravement des baisers qui ne lui étaient pas adressés." Jeanne of Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard displays the same coquetry with the cat Hamilear, and Bonnard, observing this performance, remarks to himself: "Oui! Caresse ce stupide animal! Plains-le! Gémis sur lui! On sait, petite perfide, où vont vos soupirs et ce qui cause vos plaintes." An even more deliberate

¹P. Verlaine. Les hommes d'aujourd'hui. no.346. 1886.

²G. Michaut. Anatole France, étude psychologique. op. cit. p. 155.

borrowing from de Musset appears in the fairy-tale Abeille where the two drunken and quarrelsome pedants who instruct little George are modelled on Bridaine and Blazius of Oh ne badine pas avec l'amour.¹

The influence of de Musset's Comédies et Proverbes is evident in one of France's rare plays Au Petit Bonheur.² The plot is as slender as that of Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée and follows closely on the pattern of de Musset's proverb. Germaine, a worldly and disillusioned widow, is courted by Halège, a gruff country squire and by Chambry, an experienced man-about-town. After much cynical badinage and exchange of witticisms with her two suitors, in the course of which Germaine shows herself as sceptical and unwilling to be convinced as de Musset's marquise, she finally gives way to Chambry's persuasiveness uttering the sign of resignation: "au petit bonheur!". This short play was written for Madame Arman de Caillaret who organised an amateur performance for her salon and acted the role of Germaine in June 1896. It subsequently achieved a brief success when it was performed in Paris by Lucien Guitry in February 1906.

¹Balthasar: Abeille. pp.161-163.

²Au Petit Bonheur. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy. 1906).

Although these echoes of the 'enfant du siècle' are infrequent in the writings of France, none can doubt that he understood de Musset not only as a great and pure French poet but as a warm and vital personality. In his concluding lines to Les Poèmes du souvenir, commenting on the distinctive manner of Lamartine, Hugo and de Musset, the nature of France's preference is clearly indicated:

"Tous trois," he asserts, "furent vrais, et Musset le plus sensuel est aussi le plus humain."¹

¹Les Poèmes du Souvenir. op.cit. p.38.

CHAPTER XIII

Victor Hugo

There is an amusing and instructive passage in Le Temps where Anatole France rebukes Emile Faguet for having concentrated too exclusively on the 'monumental' writers of the XIXth century and having paid insufficient attention to lyrical poets such as Lamartine, de Musset and Sully-Prudhomme who in celebrating their loves and their griefs, transcend their ego and touch hidden chords in the hearts of all men. With customary slyness, but somewhat unjustly, France concludes:

"Mais M. Faguet dédaigne les petits dieux lyriques qui ne feraient point honneur à sa critique. Il ne hante que les Panthéons."¹

In the previous chapters, we have had occasion to observe how consistently appreciative France has shown himself of the more unassuming lyrical gods, whereas when he haunts the Pantheons of the first and second Romantic generations, Rousseau and Chateaubriand, he delights in

¹Le Temps. 23 January 1887. (A propos des Etudes littéraires XIXe siècle de M. Faguet).

pointing out the flaws in the masonry. His reaction to Hugo as the most topical, the most aggressively overpowering monument of the century, has inevitably been the most violent, but in this as in all aesthetic judgments, an antipathy conceived in adult life is often the outcome of a youthful attachment. Of this type of evolution, Flaubert has offered us the supreme example.

Anatole France's youthful attachment to Hugo may be measured by the enthusiastic naiveté of one of his earliest articles and by his first poems. We have mentioned in the first chapter of this study, a group of thirty-eight poems written by France in 1865 at the age of 21, in honour of Elise Dévoyod, an actress with whom he was infatuated. These poems, reproduced in part by M. George Girard in La jeunesse d'Anatole France, were never published by their author. They are flat and immature and give little intimation of the poetic talent that France was to display only five years later when the Parnasse had exerted its beneficial influence. But their interest for our present study lies in the extremely pronounced influence of Hugo on France's earliest poetic manner, in the use of rhythm, antithesis and imagery:

Mon oeil regardait dans l'ombre rougie
 Rêveur et distrait, brûler la bougie
 Dangereux fanal, abîme doré...

Oh! Disions-nous, l'amour que sur la terre on rêve
 Dans quelqu'étoile aux cieux se poursuit et s'achève.

Oh! Pardonnez, Madame, au premier cri d'une âme,
 Il faut parfois qu'un coeur dans un pur sein de femme
 Pour ne se point briser aille un peu s'épancher.

In the same group of poems, Hugo's influence is equally marked in France's treatment of historical themes. Here we find that out-dated Romantic medievalism, resuscitated by the young France of 1865 with the enthusiasm of the 1830 cénacle, in a poem dedicated to Le Château de Bouillon:

J'ai vu le grand baron, Monseigneur Godefroi,
 Guillaume de la Marck, sanglier des Ardennes,
 Puis dans les cours varlet, faucon et palefroi...

To end this vision of the past, almost inevitably, we are confronted with the mystical wall of the ages where France deciphers, amongst less illustrious names, the magic word of the century:

Mon rêve vint heurter un mur noir d'écritures
 Où brillait au milieu d'obscur signatures
 Ce nom: Victor Hugo...

And with touching loyalty, the young poet inscribes his lady's emblem "Sous ce nom si fier, ami des puissantes natures."

¹G. Girard. La jeunesse d'Anatole France. op. cit. Chapter VII. pp. 172-182.

Before studying the many unflattering references made by our critic in later life to Romantic drama in general and Hugo's drama in particular, let us now turn to the lively Sir Punch, an unpublished comedy of which only three scenes were written. Although undated, the manuscript belongs to the pre-Parnassian period and George Girard suggests that it was also composed in 1865. The action of the drama takes place in London and the principal characters are Sir Punch, a boastful drunkard, his wife Kat of equally dubious morality and the immortal Don Juan. Sir Punch defines himself with that brilliance and concision that awaken familiar echoes:

Je suis le rire énorme, éternel, triomphant,
Je suis grand moraliste et je suis bon enfant,
Je suis logicien exact; mes faits et gestes
Amendent les canons, corrigent les digestes...

This self-advertisement and an account of not very edifying past experiences are heard in admiring silence by Kat who serves her husband's dinner and plies him with wine. She then learns from Sir Punch that as Elvira wept on being deserted by Don Juan, the Devil transformed her tears into a magic necklace, now in the possession of her seducer. Kat knows that this treasure has the potency of a love-charm and persuades her husband to steal it from Don Juan. He agrees reluctantly and makes a drunken exit. At this point, Don Juan, who has been contemplating Mistress Punch

as his next victim, jumps through the window ("Je me nomme Don Juan et je suis grand d'Espagne!") and exercises his timeless art of seduction. Kat makes a great show of virtuous resistance and at the same time attempts to retain him so that her husband may accomplish his mission.¹ But alas! we shall never know the outcome of this triple rogues' game for here ends the manuscript and we must suppose that France was now turning his attention to more serious literary efforts.

Two years later, in 1867, his poetic talent had sufficiently improved to enable him to contribute two poems to La Gazette rimée, a magazine of strong Republican tendencies. Although dealing with ancient history, these poems openly attacked the policy of Napoleon III. The first, Deny, tyran de Syracuse, is a satirical dialogue in the vein of Les Châtiments, between a tyrant and his fawning subjects.² The second poem, by far the most interesting, is entitled Les légions de Varus. In its use of imagery, rhythm and that curiously naïve biblical solemnity in which Hugo excels, this appears to have been directly inspired by La légende des siècles. We are introduced to the Emperor Augustus who, with the weight of the world on his shoulders,

¹G. Girard. op. cit. Chapter VIII. pp.183-192.

²La Gazette rimée. March 1867. pp.28-30.

decides to send the pro-consul Varus to rule over the Germanic tribes. As Varus reaches the northern lands and rides with his legions through the silent forests, the German warriors burst forth from the trees and the undergrowth, slaying the Romans to the last man:

Alors la forêt mère, inviolée et sainte
 Etreignit les Romains dans son horrible enceinte,
 Les fit choir dans les trous, leur déroba les cieux;
 Chaque arbre avait des doigts et leur crevait les yeux.

Augustus, perturbed by the military disaster is troubled by nightmares. The vision of the Roman wolf appears before him with the cry: "César, rends-moi mes fils!" The dead troops file past him, and too late, the Emperor realises the greatness of his loss in terms of human lives:

Puis César entendit des murmures funèbres
 Tout remplis de son nom monter dans les ténèbres
 Formidables, et vit, par le sol entrouvert.
 Des soldats défiler, blancs sous leur bronze vert.¹

All this was uncomfortably reminiscent of Maximilian's recent and ill-fated expedition to Mexico and La Gazette rimée which had by now awakened the interest of the Imperial censorship, cancelled its further publications.

In the following year, Anatole France's youthful enthusiasm for Hugo appears scarcely abated. Writing in

¹La Gazette rimée. June 1867. pp.75-78.

L'Amateur d'Autographes in 1868, he comments on a drawing by Hugo recently reproduced in the Lemerre edition Sonnets et eaux-fortes. No doubt the drawing causes France to associate the poet with Leonardo for he describes Hugo as the complete genius who would have shone with equal brilliance in all spheres of human activity: "Où qu'il eût dirigé sa force, un génie tel que Hugo eût été puissant: mathématicien, il eût résolu des problèmes insolubles, en physique, grand poète encore, il eût découvert les lois qu'Isis voilera peut-être pour longtemps; peintre, il eût été un grand peintre."¹ Yet it is important to note that in the same year, France begins to exercise a sounder judgment and he is no longer convinced of Hugo's merits as a resuscitator of the past. In his first study on Alfred de Vigny, writing on the importance of local colour and the awakening of historical interest around 1830, he already refers to the Hugolian vision of the past as incorrect and altogether too exalted:

"Victor Hugo, de son oeil grossissant, interrogeait les gnômes et les démons de Notre Dame. Victor Hugo n'a pas toujours voulu comprendre ce que répondirent ces symboliques représentants du moyen-âge: le sang bouillonne avec trop de

¹L'Amateur d'Autographes. November-December. 1868. p.333.

fracas dans sa tête pour que ses oreilles puissent percevoir, au milieu de ce vacarme intérieur les bruits du passé."¹

The Hugolian influence however is still noticeable in the following year when France, writing in the newspaper Le Rappel on Nature in contemporary verse, begins his article with lines that we can imagine him reading in some bewilderment but a short while later:

"L'âme humaine est profondément baignée dans l'âme universelle. Il y a des larmes dans les choses."²

It is not likely that Anatole France's association with the Parnasse contributed greatly to that Hugophobia which becomes so marked in his years of maturity. The Parnassians were extremely divided in their reactions to Hugo and one of the most refreshing features of their collaboration is the strong independence of their views. He was acclaimed, at least nominally, as the patron of the first group. Xavier de Ricard, Catulle Mendès, de Banville, Hérédia (all intimate friends of France) were keen and unashamed 'Hugolâtres'. No doubt in the estimation of Leconte de Lisle, Hugo was "as stupid as the Himalayas",

¹ Alfred de Vigny (1868). op. cit. p.49.

² Le Rappel. 17 September 1869.

but the Himalayas are to say the least an imposing range of mountains and even the 'Hugophobes' could say with de Banville: "Le Père est là-bas dans l'île",¹ and retained their affection for the great old man in exile. We would attribute France's reaction against Hugo mainly to the independent maturing of his own judgment. The fact that France would not join any coterie against Hugo is confirmed by Louis Xavier de Ricard who also describes France at this period as "un lettré très fin, très informé, de mentalité très libre et très curieuse et tout à fait contemporaine."² Since the legend that the Parnassians attempted to 'debunk' Hugo is a persistent one, we would point out that such admirers of the poet as Louis Xavier de Ricard and Catulle Mendès have flatly denied it³, and that France himself, no great admirer of the poet in later years, has disproved it with equal firmness: "On nous a accusés, nous autres Parnassiens, d'avoir voulu le déboulonner. C'est faux. Nous le tenions en grand respect."⁴

The slighting reference to Hugo made as early as 1868

¹T. de Banville. La Ballade joyeuse.

²L. Xavier de Ricard. La Revue. 1 February 1902. Anatole France et le Parnasse.

³C. Mendès. La légende du Parnasse contemporain. (Brussels: Brancart. 1884)

⁴P. Gsell. Les matinées de la Villa Saïd. op. cit. p.165.

in Alfred de Vigny, shows that France on the threshold of Parnassus was already beginning to exercise a sounder judgment in respect of Hugo's deficiencies. In one of his first articles in L'Univers Illustré, written in 1883, France once again points out, as he had done 15 years previously, Hugo's lack of harmony and measure and this time relates his criticism to the theory of the grotesque. Commenting on the recent death of Manet, France rightly prophesies that the painter's reputation will increase with the years but displays little comprehension of the theory of Impressionism as he suggests that Manet evolved his style in order to justify or to systematise certain technical weaknesses that he could not remedy. In a like manner, he concludes, Hugo generalised his theory of the grotesque in order to justify his artistic immaturity:

"Ma pensée est que si Victor Hugo avait eu un sentiment très pur de la beauté régulière, s'il avait eu dans le génie autant d'ordre et de mesure qu'il a de force et d'abondance, il n'aurait jamais imaginé la théorie du grotesque qu'il veut nous faire prendre pour la clef du génie humain et qui n'est que la clef du génie de Victor Hugo."¹

Hugo's death, which occurred one year later, and his

¹L'Univers Illustré. 23 May 1883.

imposing funeral, stirred amongst the nation such genuine grief that we cannot expect France to have written anything but the most sympathetic article in honour of the poet. In the number of L'Univers Illustré dedicated to Hugo's memory which reproduces on its cover, in those happy days before Press photography, a moving sketch of the dead poet crowned in laurels, France does indeed live up to the occasion. He pays homage to Hugo as the greatest representative of his century: "Il a dit lui-même avec raison que Dieu l'avait mis au centre de tout comme un écho sonore. Et vraiment il sut exprimer tout ce que nous avons ressenti." A curious feature of this article is the rhetorical tone adopted by the critic who was a sworn enemy of declamation. Only fifteen years previously, he writes, we suffered military defeat and humiliation, but when we raised our heads, victory was once again in our midst:

"Cette victoire, un vieillard la retenait au milieu de nous: c'était la victoire de la poésie.

Aujourd'hui elle est debout sur la tombe du poète. Nous la saluons avec des cris d'orgueil et des larmes d'amour."¹

Finally, as if inspiration had deserted him, France

¹L'Univers Illustré. 30 May 1885.

displays his journalistic skill by filling his remaining columns (which represent the greater part of his article) with kindly anecdotes. The impression given by this obituary article, which must be read with circumspection in view of the occasion, is that France shirks the unwelcome task of paying tribute to the writer but waxes eloquent and becomes genuinely moved when he considers Hugo as a heroic national figure. On this point in particular, he was to remain generously consistent in all later criticisms.

The poet's death and his own increasing fame as a critic, now enabled France to express himself with greater freedom and we must compare his obituary tribute to Hugo with another article written exactly one year later on the anniversary of his death and the national ceremonies which were held at the Panthéon and the Comédie Française. Let us not be blinded, he urges, by the poet's unusual powers nor allow ourselves to measure his greatness in terms of his longevity:

"Il ne faudrait pas pourtant qu'on crût que la France n'a qu'un seul poète. Il serait temps, peut-être, d'associer aux honneurs qu'on rend à la victoire de Victor Hugo, le souvenir de ceux qui, tels que Lamartine et Musset, l'ont précédé ou suivi dans les voies de la poésie moderne. Victor Hugo a duré plus qu'eux et prolongé au delà du terme

ordinaire son excessive fécondité. Sa réputation s'en est naturellement accrue, mais ce serait mal servir sa gloire que de la rendre exclusive et jalouse."¹

The same article then proceeds to discuss Renan's 1802 and the 'natural' qualities of Lamartine and de Musset as they are appreciated by the ghost of Boileau. We have had occasion to observe in the preceding chapter how poorly France appreciates Hugo on this occasion.

Having now followed the evolution of France's taste up till the poet's death, we now find him writing with greater frequency on Hugo in Le Temps and L'Univers Illustré. To write on such a vast subject inevitably results in the fact that our critic has commented only on certain facets of Hugo's work and personality. The greatest merit of these criticisms - and how could this be otherwise when dealing with so extreme a subjectivist as France - is the light that they throw on his own reaction to the most exuberant and forceful representative of XIXth century Romanticism. At times merely humorous, at times unjust, they are by no means purely destructive and negative for if this were the case, they would rightly be considered worthless. Their constructive and positive aspect must,

¹Le Temps. 23 May 1886.

when we consider the exacting nature of France's literary taste and that onerous and artificial title of "the last Classicist" which his contemporaries decreed he should hold, serve as an example in thought and moderation to the younger generations who, guided more by fashion than by personal reflection, have decided that Hugo is either the greatest joke or the most monstrous excrescence of modern literature.

On the subject of Hugo's unrivalled power to cultivate his ego, France has inevitably been quite concise. "Je ne me souviens pas," writes Paul Bourget, "de l'avoir jamais entendu nommer Hugo sinon pour railler doucement son entente savante de la reclame."¹ Although we have frequently observed France using the term 'genius', the article on Charles Richet, mentioned in our first chapter, makes it clear that the Romantic, and in particular the Hugolian, conception of the divine spark conferred on the artist at birth, thus making him in some mystical manner one of the elect, was in itself quite meaningless to the critic who preferred the term 'talent', or natural aptitude developed by hard work. But self-infatuation is by no means the most severe charge levelled by France against Hugo.

In a meeting of the French Academy held two years after Hugo's death, the question of the poet's 'immortality'

¹P. Bourget. Quelques témoignages. op. cit. p.153.

assumed the proportions of a parliamentary debate. Leconte de Lisle, who occupied Hugo's chair, loyally declared on this occasion that Hugo's work would remain forever immortal.¹ Alexandre Dumas showed himself less indulgent. Posterity, he affirmed, would be discriminating and a great deal of the more sonorous and hollow Hugo would sink into well-deserved oblivion. Commenting on this Academic session in Le Temps,² France expresses himself as the most outspoken of the three critics: It is useless to prophesy the reaction of posterity for there is nothing more unstable than the evolving judgment of men. Each successive generation evaluates a literary reputation anew, witness the manner in which the XVIIth and the XVIIIth centuries ignored Ronsard, the fluctuating popularity of Racine, of Lamartine or of de Musset. But we may speak of Hugo in the present times and his reputation is already in the balance. Then France delivers the familiar thrust: "Il faut bien reconnaître qu'il a remué plus de mots que d'idées. C'est une souffrance que de découvrir qu'il donna pour la plus haute philosophie un amas de rêveries banales et incohérentes."

This criticism, which is so often directed against Hugo, is then developed in a manner hasty, generalised and

¹It was customary for Leconte de Lisle to pay tribute to Hugo in public speeches and to belittle him in private.

²Le Temps. 3 April 1887. The article has been republished in La Vie littéraire. I. pp.107-116: Sur le Quai Malaquais.

altogether unjust. For, he concludes, as we survey Hugo's enormous literary output, we must be dismayed and frightened to find that he has not created a single human figure amongst so many monsters:

"Les Grecs l'ont dit: l'homme est la mesure de toutes choses. Victor Hugo est démesuré parcequ'il n'est pas humain. Le secret des âmes ne lui fut jamais entièrement révélé. Il n'était pas fait pour comprendre et pour aimer. Il le sentit d'instinct. C'est pourquoi il voulut étonner; il en eut longtemps la puissance. Mais peut-on étonner toujours?"¹

At this point, it seems that France has, in a typically Hugolian manner, allowed self-expression to run on ahead merrily while thought pursues breathlessly at a distance. It is perfectly understandable that the vastness and enormity of Hugo's interior visions, the outpouring of words that filled every day of an unusually long and active life-time, should be so far removed from the Greek and the Francian conception of measure as to appear abnormal and unhuman. No doubt Hugo is the unrivalled creator of the monster, and France too has succumbed to the century and produced his own monsters, but the most living characters of Hugo: Gavroche, Cosette, the Breton fisher-folk of Les pauvres gens and so

¹La Vie littéraire. I. p.115.

many others that come to our mind, are human, true to nature and to art when judged by the most severe classical standards. And precisely because Hugo was steeped in love and compassion for all sufferers, he arrived at certain metaphysical solutions which do in fact create an impression of the commonplace, or else astound, or else lend themselves to the more thoughtful interpretations of a Denis Saurat.

A perplexing feature of French literary criticism, though fortunately not of the greatest, is its tendency to confuse the aesthetic and the political. Thus, from the moment that Anatole France adopted the Socialist cause after the Affaire Dreyfus, his critics of the Right wing developed an argument as familiar as it is illogical. How, they asked could a man so severe and classical in his literary tastes, so attached to the ancient traditions, arts and language of his country, hope to convince that he was a sincere radical? Anatole France was never guilty of this type of confusion. The best proof of this is that at a time when all his thoughts were concentrating on the cause of his party, he praised Emile Zola, in a moving speech delivered at his grave, and again complimented the Danish critic Georg Brandès at a public dinner, for "never having flattered the people in a democratic age."¹ Similarly, in

¹C. Aveline. Trente ans de vie sociale. Vers les temps meilleurs. op. cit. p.87. Hommages à Georg Brandès (10 March 1902); p.121. Les obsèques d'Emile Zola. (11 October. 1902).

one of his finest speeches, he paid homage to Hugo for the force and the splendour of his courage in the social history of the XIXth century. But he knew that art requires calm and deliberate thought, discrimination, selection. With great consistency and frequency, France has criticised Hugo for cloudy and undisciplined thought and for submitting his art to a crude and naïve "popular ideal". In spite of its rather forced lyricism, his obituary article on Hugo already suggests that the popular muse had a disastrous effect on the poet: "Un art nouveau sortit de ses mains robustes, un art énorme, étonnant, monstrueux comme le monde moderne et la démocratie pour lesquels il est fait."¹ On a visit to an exhibition of Hugo's drawings in 1888, France is struck by a sketch in which the poet had attempted to symbolise his destiny: a ship weathering the gale on a dark and seething ocean. "Il savait qu'il faut présenter aux foules des images grossières," he drily comments, "et qu'on ne risque rien de les faire colorier à l'Epinal."²

Nicholas Ségur has noted that in the last years of his life France had not altered in his view:

"La muse de Victor Hugo exprime le peuple, l'idéal populaire. Et comme l'idéal populaire est un idéal enfantin,

¹L'Univers Illustré. 30 May 1885.

²L'Univers Illustré. 19 May 1888.

la muse de Victor Hugo est vague, confuse. Ce que je reproche à son oeuvre, c'est d'être contraire à la raison, à la vérité, tout en restant poétique."¹

M. Ernest Seillière in La jeunesse d'Anatole France has rightly taken exception to the famous passage in La Vie littéraire where France declares that Hugo was incapable of creating a single human figure, but he suggests that in this context France refers implicitly to the characters of the drama.² As France states specifically "dans son oeuvre immense", the hastily worded passage does not immediately lend itself to this interpretation but there is a great deal of evidence to show that France considered the Romantic theatre in general and Hugo's dramas in particular the most unnatural and offensive creations of his century.

Although he was a great admirer of the Greek tragedies, of Shakespeare, Racine, Molière and Goethe, France has explained with some insistence that dramatic performances left him dissatisfied and uneasy. He considered acting an inferior art for gesticulation, declamation, and the overbearing personality of the actor on the stage often mar the beauty and the original meaning of the lines he

¹W. Ségur. Anatole France anecdotique. op. cit. p.163.

²E. Seillière. La jeunesse d'Anatole France. op. cit. p.162.

recites.¹ In Le Jardin d'Epicure, France stresses his dislike of dramatic performances: a stage production constitutes a passive enjoyment since its conception, its execution and the interpretation of the actors' lines are determined independently of the spectator. Contemplative and dreaming natures prefer the written text, left entirely to the imagination, for written lines read meditatively and at leisure create "prolonged vibrations and melodious echoes."² Here we have yet another example of the extreme importance that he attached to the purely personal interpretation of the work of art. In his writings we can discover but two actors of whom France thoroughly approved. The first is the marionette: for marionettes are impersonal symbols and in their abstraction, "their purity and mystery", they resemble Egyptian hieroglyphs.³ The second is the human finger and in Le Petit Pierre, he describes the lively imagination of the small boy who, being confined to his bed with measles, discovered that each finger possesses a distinct personality, and enacted upon the counterpane dramas ranging from Red-Riding Hood to Calderon. But one day little Pierre clothed his fingers with silk ribbons, painted a

¹Le Livre de mon ami. p.114; J.J. Brousson. Anatole France en pantoufles. op. cit. pp.35, 114.

²Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.34.

³La Vie littéraire. III. p.10.

face upon them and adorned them with hats. Then he constructed a stage-setting and breathlessly he improvised a drama entitled The Barons of the Holy Sepulchre which was to depict the conflicting aspirations of the Church and the Orient. But alas! The fingers refused to act whereas unadorned, they had been inspired.¹ The story has a moral for with silk ribbons and grandiose visions, Pierre-Anatole had revived the Romantic theatre.

A critic who prefers that a drama should be enacted in the mind and who finds the material accessories of the stage and the forceful personality of live actors a hindrance to his imaginative powers can find little to commend in the exuberant theatre of the 1830's. La Vie littéraire contains a slighting reference to "the roars and the sighs that resounded on the romantic stage".² The conception of the grotesque, we have heard France declaring, is but Hugo's attempt to justify by means of a generalised theory that absence of harmony and measure which is a notable feature of his dramatic art. In respect of Hugo's incompetence as a dramatist, France makes a curious observation in Le Temps. He maintains that Hugo felt more gently disposed to Boileau in the last years of his life because "he had nothing to fear from him," but his dislike for Racine became increasingly

¹Le Petit Pierre. pp.77-84.

²La Vie littéraire. III. p.194.

pronounced for he knew that Racine was a menace to his own reputation in the theatre. As if realising that such an assumption appears unduly severe, France concludes: "On dira peut-être que cette interprétation est bien noire et sent la misanthropie. Néanmoins, je la tiens pour bonne."¹ This interpretation may be fruitfully compared with a remark once passed by Goethe on Byron and Shakespeare. Goethe had maintained that Byron was jealous of Shakespeare: "As a pure individuality, Shakespeare is his superior. This was felt by Byron, and on this account he does not say much of Shakespeare, although he knows whole passages by heart. He would willingly have denied him altogether, for Shakespeare's serenity is in his way, and he feels he is no match for him. Pope, he does not deny, for he had 'no cause to fear him'. On the contrary, he mentions him and shows respect when he can, for he knows well enough that Pope is a mere foil to himself."² It is quite possible that France was unconsciously influenced by this Conversation with Eckermann in his criticism of Hugo although we know that the real cause of his "misanthropic interpretation" is his life-long passion for Racine.

¹Le Temps. 4 November 1888.

²Goethe's Literary Essays. Extracts from Conversations with Eckermann, translated by J.E. Spingarn. (Oxford University Press. 1921). p.284.

In several other articles Hugo's theatre is viewed with equal distaste. Writing in L'Univers Illustré, France points out the utter falsity of Marion de Lorme's Didier, an unintelligent creature and far worse "a protestant with no clear idea of life functions." He finds existence intolerable all because he was brought up to believe that a well-behaved young woman ought not to roam the streets at night. "Il demande à Marion ce qu'elle ne peut pas lui donner et ne lui demande pas ce qu'elle peut lui donner." The Hugolian man of destiny, he concludes, has exaggerated human pessimism to such a degree that nowadays even M. Paul Bourget's disillusioned and understandably world-weary characters cannot be taken seriously: our salons which set the literary fashion have had a surfeit of the century's melancholia and now decree that pessimism is out-dated.¹ But when France dwells on Hugo's theatre his criticisms are not always as playful or as light-hearted as the above. Writing in Le Temps on the failure of Le Roi s'amuse, painfully witnessed by Hugo in the last years of his life, he attributes the fiasco to the great, unanimous sincerity of the theatre-going public who whilst venerating the poet, could no longer take seriously a drama so totally devoid of truth and reason:

¹L'Univers Illustré. 23 January 1883.

"Eh bien, ces mêmes hommes qui tenaient pour également sublime tout ce que publiait le poète, qui célébraient L'Amé, qui vantaient Religion et Religions, ne purent point applaudir en présence du maître Le Roi s'amuse dont la célébrité pourtant était consacrée. Enthousiasme, vénération, amour, piété, rien n'y fit. Ils restèrent silencieux, mornes, pris de la grande sincérité du public au théâtre: l'oeuvre leur sembla manquer à la vérité et la raison; ils ne surent pas cacher leur sentiment et ils laissèrent malgré eux tomber la pièce. Deux mille hommes ne montent pas de concert. Par bonheur, une personne d'esprit qui approchait le maître lui dit: "C'est par respect pour vous qu'ils n'osent pas applaudir.""¹

The generally accepted view that there is no period to rival the 'grand siècle' in dramatic achievement appears to him altogether too indulgent. In an interview published by Comœdia in 1910, France holds that Racine's sense of harmony and perfection was so unique that dramatic art in general shows signs of decadence in Molière, remains practically insignificant in the XVIIIth century and finally reaches the depths of the ridiculous in the Romantic theatre which he characterises as "pretentious, vulgar and discordant."

¹Le Temps. 20 November 1887. Le Roi s'amuse was performed by the Comédie Française on the 25th November 1882.

Inevitably, Hugo's theatre is designated as the "caricature of caricatures.":

"Il semble prendre une sorte de malin plaisir à se parodier sans cesse. Il fausse les gestes, outre les sentiments, accorde les antithèses, bouleverse toutes choses, insulte au bon sens, à l'esprit, à l'humanité. Je me demande sincèrement le plaisir qu'on peut prendre à ces bouffonneries monstrueuses. Pour moi, je me garderai bien d'aller entendre Hernani ou Ruy Blas. Et quel manque de construction, quel mépris de l'harmonie dans ses oeuvres gigantesques! Avez-vous remarqué que dans Les Burgraves, la dernière scène est encore une scène d'exposition?"¹

We cannot wonder if France, with his keen sense of the ridiculous, has contributed to the Hugo legend which grew so alarmingly not only after the poet's death but from the moment that he became conscious of his messianic vocation. Michel Corday tells us that France excelled in imitating "Victor Hugo Olympique."² His articles, particularly in the popular weekly L'Univers Illustré, contain numerous anecdotes on the poet's life. One of these has had a strange history and underwent certain modifications in the

¹Comœdia. 10 July 1910.

²M. Corday, Anatole France d'après ses confidences et ses souvenirs. (Paris: Delpeuch. 1928). p.114.

hands of the sly critic. Edouard Pailleron, the dramatist, once wrote an amusing account of his first literary efforts as a schoolboy. Together with a class-mate, he had composed a verse-drama, Inès ou le Brasséro, which by its fervour and passion made even Hernani fade into insignificance. The two schoolboys then dispatched the manuscript, addressed "Victor Hugo, Océan" to the poet in exile, begging him to send them helpful advice and criticism. Hugo's reply was magnificent: "Vous êtes l'avenir, je suis le passé; vous arrivez, je pars; vous entrez dans la lumière, j'entre dans l'ombre." The fact that this message did not contain any advice of the slightest relevance could not deter the boys who together with the whole school, remained for weeks on end in a state of high excitement. Pailleron, who was the dramatic critic of Le Temps published this charming and authentic reminiscence in his column in 1886. France, who was a friend and admirer of the writer, related it in his own article in the following year, stating its original source.¹ When we now turn to Paul Gsell's Les matinées de la Villa Saïd, we find that France in later years would give his intimate circle a rather different version of this same tale:

The young Parnassians, France would relate, eager

¹ Le Temps. 20 November 1887; the story is repeated in L'Univers Illustré. 3 March 1894.

for Hugo's patronage, wrote to Guernesey asking for a Preface to the first Parnasse Contemporain. Hugo replied as follows: "Jeunes gens, je suis le passé et vous êtes l'avenir; je ne suis qu'une feuille, vous êtes la forêt; je ne suis qu'une petite lumière vacillante, vous êtes les rayons du soleil; je ne suis que le boeuf, vous êtes les rois mages..." The Parnassians, fearing that the Imperial censors had been tampering with their correspondence and were attempting to mystify them, wrote to Juliette Drouet, asking her to confirm the letter's authenticity. She wrote back promptly, declaring herself amazed that the young poets had not immediately recognised the authentic mark of Hugo's genius.¹

There is one small part of truth in this story and France has not wholly appropriated Failleron's childhood memory. Miodrag Ibrovac, in his José Maria de Heredia, states that in 1867, Hernani was performed in Paris with such great success that the Imperial censors were indeed discomfited. The Parnassians, including Heredia and Coppée remained undeterred and sent an enthusiastic note to Guernesey, assuring Hugo of their loyalty and affection. Hugo answered with the touching assurance that the young poets were "the starry crown of his poetic heaven."²

¹P. Gsell. Les matinées de la Villa Saïd. op.cit. pp.165-167.

²M. Ibrovac. José-Maria de Heredia. (Paris: Les Presses françaises 1923) pp. 113-114.

If France has confused two perfectly authentic occurrences, who can wonder if his own version, unfortunately too good to be true, is the best.

A man's taste may be measured fairly accurately by the books that surround him, and M. Jacques Suffel of the Bibliothèque Nationale recalls that France's magnificent library at La Béchellerie did not contain a single edition of Hugo. Yet it would be both unfair and incorrect to support the normally held view that France retained only a negative and destructive attitude to Hugo throughout his literary career. In the first place, the 1830 'Cénacle' which should obviously have stirred his antipathy as an aesthete, rouses only benign indulgence once the question of drama has been firmly settled. France has derived much amusement from the antics of the 'Jeunes Frances', whether he dwells on their taste for velvet doublets or their joy in the search of the macabre. In La Vie littéraire, we are asked not to be misled by the seriousness of the "frantic" school, typified by Pétrus Borel. The 'Jeunes Frances' were in reality naïve and sedentary young folk leading the most peaceful of existences, even when they sought to impress upon the bourgeois that they spent the night drinking punch in the skulls of their former mistresses. "En ce temps là, un Jeune France n'allait pas au bureau où il était expéditionnaire sans s'écrier avec un rire sarcastique:

"Je suis damné!"¹ No doubt, in their distorted evocations of the past, of the Middle Ages in particular, they displayed abysmal ignorance, but by following Madame de Staël's precept that European literatures must find inspiration in one another, they enriched their own literature, normally too rational, by the lied and the ballad and that "welcome vagueness" of German poetry. Their conception of the Middle Ages was, to say the least, bizarre but they awakened ancient memories of the fatherland, thus discovering true sources of inspiration on which national poetry must thrive: "Ils ne comprenaient pas grand'chose, étant fort peu philosophes; mais ils avaient de l'instinct: c'étaient des artistes."²

Like so many others who had been intimately associated with the Parnasse, France retained a lasting admiration for Hugo's extraordinary versatility, his gifts of observation and his mastery of poetic technique.

Nicolas Ségur relates that France was amazed at the ease with which Hugo could swallow an orange in one mouthful and yet kiss a lady's hand with infinite grace. "Tous les

¹La Vie littéraire. II. p.261. In connection with France's delight in the mannerisms of the 1830's see also Chapter II, pp 53-55, and Chapter IV. pp.74-75, of the present study; Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard. p.142.

²Ibid. p.261. We may observe in this context that France is fundamentally opposed to the attitude of Charles Maurras as regards both the national significance of Romanticism and its 'barbaric' element.

contrastées de son talent," he is reported to have said, "résident dans ce trait."¹ When in our day, we jocularly compare Hugo's virtuosity to his mastery over the unpeeled orange, we tend to forget the impact of his personality on all the writers of his time. Few of these have failed to note it, not even France who in many respects represents the extreme antithesis of Hugo's literary genius. Thus, on being reminded in the first years of this century of Leconte de Lisle's complacent "Bête comme l'Himalaya", there is something at once just and heartening in France's reaction: "Cui! sans doute, il était bête, d'accord! Mais c'était le plus vibrant des hommes et bon gré, mal gré, nous tressaillons encore de son frémissement."² To his conception of Hugo as the most vibrant and stimulating figure of his time, he remained loyal, and we have previously observed how, two years before his death, France refused to support Maurras' candidature to the Academy since as a literary personality, he could not be compared to Fontenelle, Voltaire or Hugo.

With equal justice, France has commented Hugo's powers as an observer of nature. On the morning of Hugo's eighty-third birthday, the newspaper Gil Blas published a four page

¹N. Ségur. Anatole France anecdotique. op.cit. p.164.

²P. Gsell. Les matinées de la Villa Saïd. op.cit. p.165.
 "Bête comme l'Himalaya" is incorrectly attributed in this context to Renan.

supplement in honour of the poet, containing messages from the most celebrated writers, painters and musicians of the day. In this immense 'autograph album' where scrawling hand-writings run in all directions, conveying tributes in verse and prose, France's message remains at first enigmatic:

Heureux qui comme Adam, entre les quatre fleuves,
Sut nommer par leur nom les choses qu'il sut voir. ¹

These lines however are directly reproduced from his Parnassian sonnet Au Poète, originally dedicated to Théophile Gautier.² La Vie littéraire equally commends the intensity of Hugo's vision in a short but admirable evocation of the poet's roaming childhood: "Il parcourut de ses petites jambes, au pas militaire, les routes d'Italie, d'Espagne et de la France et vit une suite infinie d'images qui devaient rester peints dans ses yeux les plus puissants du monde."³ In a lesser-known article, France develops this point on visiting, in 1889, an exhibition of Hugo's drawings displayed in the poet's former home in the rue de Sèze. Visualised twenty years previously as a Leonardo, Hugo is now less flatteringly designated as a "Schoolboy Rembrandt" in his incessant search for the effects of light

¹Gil Blas. Supplément. 27 February 1885.

²A. France. Poésies. op,cit. p.117.

³La Vie littéraire. IV. p.279.

and shadow. But the drawings, as likewise the wooden panels of the entrance hall, carved and engraved by Hugo in the primitive Japanese style, still retain the power to intrigue him and to capture his enthusiasm: "Le tonalité en est charmante, l'inexpérience ajoute à l'attrait de l'oeuvre et l'on reste ému malgré soi devant cette passion à poursuivre la nature, à l'étreindre, à la reproduire, tantôt avec la couleur, tantôt avec le crayon, après l'avoir si magnifiquement célébrée avec le langage."¹

This commendation of Hugo's language seems at first surprising until we realise that, like many critics who have condemned Hugo in equally virulent terms, France had a great respect for the poet as a craftsman. In La Vie littéraire, France describes Hugo as "le plus vaillant des ouvriers poètes". In Le Génie latin, he depicts the young Sainte-Beuve's first encounter with the 1830 Cénacle and qualifies the latter as Hugo's "atelier"³. These terms are often designated as ironical but from the Parnassian point of view they may equally be considered a compliment to Hugo's understanding of poetic technique. In this connection, there is a revealing passage in Le Temps where France compares Hugo hammering out

¹L'Univers Illustré. 19 May 1888.

²La Vie littéraire. II. p.256.

³Le Génie latin. Sainte-Beuve poète. p.348.

his verses, to the legendary blacksmiths of the Rhine who wrought strange, magic forms in their forges:

"Ce qui est toujours excellent chez Victor Hugo, c'est la facture du vers. On voit dans les légendes du Rhin les bons forgerons à la barbe d'or qui faisaient des chefs-d'oeuvres sur leur enclume. Ce qu'ils forgeaient était parfois étrange et maléfique. Ils faisaient des ouvrages merveilleux qu'on attribuait au diable. Quand je lis les vers de Victor Hugo, je songe à ces forgerons bizarres et merveilleux."¹

We may ponder on the lyrical pages dedicated to Hugo by Catulle Mendès at this period² and on the "mystical intonations" discernible in Heredia's voice whenever he discussed the poet. On writing the above passage, France had been separated from his fellow Parnassians for thirteen years and had contributed more than his share in the reaction to Hugo's prestige, yet he too has paid the Parnassian homage. Contrary to usual academic practice he has made a clear-cut distinction between form and content even in respect of Hugo's drama which he so violently abuses in the interview given to Comoedia. For in this same

¹Le Temps. 21 July 1889.

²C. Mendès. La Légende du Parnasse contemporain. op.cit. pp. 23-25.

interview, his wrath against Hugo the dramatist having fully expended, France ends on a benign note which appears quite consistent with his appreciation of Hugo's poetic mastery: "Je ne nie point la beauté de la forme qui pare l'oeuvre du grand romantique; là comme partout, Hugo demeure le plus prodigieux créateur de verbe que le monde ait connu."¹

Paul Gsell has shown us in his reminiscences that in later years, France would dwell with equal sympathy on the "delicate" (as opposed to the "orange swallowing") aspect of Hugo's nature:

"Ce qui est surtout à lui ce sont les impressions intimes qu'on n'avait jamais analysées si profondément, celles des arants, celles d'un père sur la tombe de sa fille, celles d'une mère au berceau de son enfant.

C'est là ce qui lui appartient. Et en insistant sur le prix que chacun de nous attache aux secrets de son coeur, il a modifié notre âme. Il a contribué à renouveler notre vie sentimentale. Oh! Je sais bien que beaucoup d'autres ont moissonné le même champ; mais c'est lui qui a lié les gerbes. Il fut le vigoureux botteleur."²

This passage must naturally be compared with the lines in La Vie littéraire where France maintains that Hugo was incapable of creating a human figure and compensated this defect by "astonishing". The importance placed in

¹Comoedia. 10 July 1910.

²P. Gsell. Les matineés de la Villa Saïd. op.cit. p.168.

the latter context on Hugo's powers to astonish does support M. Seillière's theory that the critic is referring implicitly to such characters as Quasimodo or Hernani who are reminiscent of the poet's own histrionic existence. The thoughtless and hasty generalisation of La Vie littéraire is unfortunately the better known of these two contradictory assessments, but we are all the more inclined to believe that France was appreciative of Hugo's delicate and intimate vein when we read in Le Livre de mon ami certain descriptions of his little daughter Suzanne that instantly recall the doting grandfather of L'Art d'être grand-père.

In the first pages of the present chapter, we have attempted to show how forcibly France was inspired by Hugo in his earliest poems. It is equally interesting to note how the Hugolian manner persists in his writings both during and after the Parnassian period. On a notable verse of Les Poèmes dorés, we are instantly reminded of an apocalyptic vision taken from the last book of Les Contemplations:

On entend l'océan heurter les promontoires,
 De lunaires clartés blêmissent le ravin
 Où l'homme perdu, seul, épars, se cherche en vain;
 Le vent du nord, sonnait dans les frondaisons noires,¹
 Sur les choses sans formes épand l'effroi divin.

¹A. France. Poésies. op.cit. Les Sapins. p.20.

More subtly, Les Cerfs, which describes two stags fighting an all night battle over their mate, echoes the duel waged between Roland and Cliver in Le mariage de Roland:

Suante, fumante, en feu, quand vint l'aube incertaine
 Tous deux sont allés boire ensemble à la fontaine
 Puis d'un choc plus terrible ils ont mêlé leurs bois.¹

Although France's measured and graceful prose is largely free from Hugolian rhetoric, a passage in Le Jardin d'Epicure which dwells in an alarmingly dramatic manner on the dangers of gambling is an amusing reminder of Hugo's ubiquitous presence in the century: "Le jeu, c'est un corps-à-corps avec le destin. C'est le combat de Jacob avec l'ange, c'est le pacte du docteur Faust avec le diable. On joue de l'argent - de l'argent, c'est à dire la possibilité immédiate, infinie."²

If we should question France's sincerity when he refers to Hugo's delicate understanding of parental love, our doubts may be dispelled when we realise how Hugo's manner has inspired some of France's most charming evocations for his daughter Suzanne, such as the description of the baby Suzanne pointing to a star on a summer's night:

¹A. France. Poésies. op. cit. Les Cerfs. p.8.

²Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.17.

"Et Suzanne parla à l'étoile!

Ce qu'elle disait n'était pas composé de mots, c'était un parler obscur et charmant, un chant étrange, quelque chose de doux et de profondément mystérieux, ce qu'il faut enfin pour exprimer l'âme d'un bébé quand un astre s'y reflète."¹

The purity of a child's gaze, his eyes which reflect the immensity of the universe, on how many tones has Hugo developed this theme, ever recurrent in his verse and in his prose? We may observe how faithfully this lyrical vein is pursued by France in his poem Ames obscures, dedicated to Suzanne:

Leurs yeux purs, leurs yeux grands ouverts
S'emplissent de rêves étranges.
Oh! qu'ils sont beaux ces petits anges ²
Perdus dans l'antique univers.

The impression conveyed by many of France's critics and Boswells is that he retained throughout his life only the negative and condemning attitude to Hugo. This view is often stated explicitly. "Il a été sans pitié pour

¹ Le Livre de mon ami. p.215.

Cf. Elle envoie à la mer qui gronde, au bois sonore
A la nuée, aux fleurs, aux nids, au firmament
A l'immense nature un doux gazouillement.
Tout un discours profond peut-être qu'elle achève
Par un sourire où flotte une âme, où tremble un rêve.
(L'art d'être grand-père. Jeanne fait son entrée).

² Le Livre de mon ami. p.205.

Victor Hugo," writes Jacques Roujon.¹ And Nicolas Ségur maintains: "Il reconnaît à Victor Hugo 'un talent magnifique' mais il n'aime pas ce talent, il n'a surtout aucune sympathie pour la mentalité du poète."² Because the cynical approach to Hugo is so marked in our time, a more complete assessment of France's appreciative understanding of Hugo can only do credit to these two great names. Hugo must always remain in France's estimation a muddled and incoherent thinker, pandering to the shallow sentimentality of the populace, an incomplete artist blissfully ignorant of harmonious proportions and psychological truth, a creator of grotesque monsters and puerile dramas. But at the same time, France has shown a just and impartial understanding of Hugo's versatile and prolific genius, of his unrivalled mastery of poetic technique and, in a more ambiguous manner, of the delicate and intimate aspect of his art. And always the poet remains, as he remained for all the men of the XIXth century, "le Père Hugo," the great figure of France's youth, whom one may recollect in anecdotes not always quite authentic, and more solemnly on official occasions. To "le Père Hugo," anti-clerical

¹J. Roujon. La vie et les opinions d'Anatole France.
op. cit. p.230.

²N. Ségur. Anatole France anecdotique. op.cit. p.163.

and republican, France paid public homage at a banquet organized in 1902 by the 'Popular Universities' of Paris for the Centenary celebrations of Hugo's birth. Yet as France reviews Hugo's political life in this eloquent speech, bowing to the firmness and the courage of his democratic principles, his stubborn resistance to the Loi Falloux in 1850, his idealistic belief in a unified and pacified Europe, even at this moment we know that Hugo the personification and finally the patriarch of a turbulent and aspiring century, not the writer and the artist, inspire the warmth of France's words:

"Victor Hugo, moins qu'un autre, peut fournir matière à une doctrine et donner les lignes d'un système politique et social. Sa pensée, à la fois éclatante et fumeuse, abondante, contradictoire, énorme et vague comme la pensée des foules, fut celle de tout son siècle, dont il était, - il l'a dit lui-même - un écho sonore. Ce que nous saluons ici avec respect, ce n'est pas seulement un homme, c'est un siècle de la France et de l'humanité, ce dix-neuvième siècle dont Victor Hugo exprima plus abondamment que tout autre les songes, les illusions, les erreurs, les divinations, les amours et les haines, les craintes et les espérances."¹

¹C. Aveline. Trente ans de vie sociale. Vers les temps meilleurs. op. cit. Le centenaire de Victor Hugo. (2 Mars 1902). pp. 83-84.

CHAPTER XIV

George Sand

One of the most faithful of Rousseau's descendants, inexhaustible and emphatic, lyrical and effusive George Sand has found in Anatole France, the critic and journalist, her most gallant and enthusiastic supporter. This is one of the few paradoxes that France had not premeditated. His articles on George Sand are numerous, the majority of them are uncollected, but in all the cult of Sand is sustained in terms so affectionate and eloquent that they disconcert by a sincerity that it is impossible to doubt.

We recall that France's regular collaboration with Le Temps extended from 1883 to 1893, and that from the 350 articles submitted during this period, approximately one third were republished in La Vie littéraire. But at a time when he was relatively unknown as a critic, he had contributed to the same journal, at very irregular intervals from 1875 to 1879. The more notable of these earlier essays dealt with contemporary novelists: the de Goncourts, Turgenev, George Sand and Zola. His article La Nature dans les romans de George Sand was published on the 18th April 1876. Taine, who began to take notice of the young

journalist at this period, was impressed both by the subject and the treatment of this essay. The letter of congratulation that he addressed to France on this occasion is one that the owner not unnaturally cherished and subsequently presented to Madame Arman de Caillavet as a New Year gift:

"Vous avez bien raison de louer la grande artiste qu'on néglige maintenant," wrote Taine, "et qui probablement est le plus grand, le plus naturel, le plus vrai génie d'artiste que nous ayons eu depuis un siècle en France. Quant au choix du sujet, il est parfait: voilà les véritables études de psychologie littéraire: cela repose au milieu de ce Sahara de sciences positives et de mirages ultra-colorés dans lesquels nous nous déssechons. Faites d'autres articles pareils; je suis sûr qu'ils sont remarqués et restent dans la mémoire des connaisseurs."¹

This same month, April 1876, witnessed the publication of France's Parnassian drama Les Noces Corinthiennes and the author distributed copies to friends and to literary authorities whose opinion he particularly valued. George

¹Taine's letter and the following letter from George Sand have been published by Jeanne Pouquet, the grand-daughter of Madame Arman de Caillavet, in her book Le salon de Madame Arman de Caillavet. (Paris: Hachette 1926) pp. 60-61.

Sand was touched to receive a copy from the young poet whom she did not know, and noting that he had also written a sympathetic article on her in Le Temps, she wrote to thank him in that simple, affectionate manner that characterises her correspondence:

"Je vous remercie du beau livre que vous m'envoyez. C'est beau et frais comme l'Antique et me fait pleurer, une fois de plus, l'oeuvre malsaine du Christianisme, cette fausse interprétation de la parole de Jésus, plus que jamais torturée et calomniée de nos jours. Vos vers frappent ce mensonge en plein coeur et ils sont beaux parcequ'ils ont une grande portée, faites-en encore. Vengez la vie de cette doctrine de mort. Merci encore pour le bel article du Temps. J'en suis encore plus reconnaissante depuis que je vous ai lu."¹

In a letter sent from Nohant a few days previously, George Sand, who had formerly contributed to Le Temps, wrote to her friend, the editor Charles-Edmond, expressed her gratitude, and spoke appreciatively of the journalist Anatole France "whom she could not remember having read in the past": "Il a beaucoup de style, une belle forme simple et dans le vrai de notre langue. Ça devient joliment rare!"²

¹Ibid. p.62. The letter is dated 26th April 1876.

²G. Sand. Correspondance. Volume VI. p. 399. 21 April 1876. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy. 1884).

Thus a mutual sympathy was established between these two great individualists. When the sixth and last volume of Sand's correspondence (in which this letter appears) was published in 1884, France reviewing the book in L'Univers Illustré under his habitual pseudonym Gérôme, saw no harm in quoting this laudatory passage to his readers after proudly announcing it as follows:

"Je rencontre dans une des dernières lettres du recueil, dans une lettre qui ne précède que de quelques semaines la mort de celle qui l'écrivit, le nom de M. Anatole France, qui bien jeune en 1876, et tout à ses débuts, avait pourtant frappé par son art d'écrire l'esprit encore vigoureux de Madame Sand.

...L'écrivain que l'auteur de Mauprat avait deviné se fit connaître quelques années après par un livre dont nous avons signalé ici le mérite et le succès: Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard, membre de l'Institut. Mais si je cite les lignes si louangeuses de Mme Sand, c'est qu'elles me servent de préface pour annoncer la très prochaine publication d'un livre de M. Anatole France, Les aventures de Pierre Nozière."¹

Who shall condemn him for this amusing subterfuge?

¹L'Univers Illustré. 1 November 1884. In this journal, France had previously boosted his work on the 10th January 1885 and had congratulated himself on "cette ironie douce et cette tendresse spirituelle qui fait le fond de sa nature."

Has he not told us in his own words, speaking of de Vigny, that "great men are occasionally guilty of little vanities"?

And yet France never met George Sand who died in June 1876. Many years later, he told his friend Nicolas Ségur that he did not regret it. "C'eût été lui faire injure que de la connaître vieille, celle qui avait ravagé tant de coeurs. C'est vers 1830 qu'elle méritait d'être vue, lorsque son beau sein, chanté par de Musset, frémissait et que ses yeux - si grands sur la belle gravure de Calamatta - brûlaient d'amour."¹

The early article of Le Temps on La Nature dans les romans George Sand was one that was bound to touch the heart of the good lady of Mohant. It relates in that simple manner that France understands so well when he talks of the young and of naïve souls, the childhood of George Sand, her love of the countryside, of animals and wild flowers. The inspiration is obviously afforded by L'Histoire de ma vie, but in his lyrical transposition, France already offers in this essay an example of his most sensuous and rythmical style:

"Elle avait l'habitude et la divination de la chose rustique. Elle savait dans quels blés poussaient les plus

¹N. Ségur. Anatole France anécdotique. op.cit. p.143.

belles gesses sauvages, dans quelles haies elle trouverait des coronilles et des saxifrages, dans quels prés des mousserons ou des morilles, sur quelles fleurs au bord de l'eau se posaient les demoiselles vertes et les petits coléoptères bleus. Tout l'enchantait dans cette vie: non seulement les saisons douces, mais l'hiver avec son soleil rouge et bas, verdissant les blés courts. Elle aimait les orages surprenant les charrois de foin, et la foudre qui rendait furieux les jeunes boeufs attelés et le vent dans les trémies pendant les longues veillées."¹

In this article, France dwells for the first time on that particular gift of Sand's that he was to emphasise on many occasions in the future: her direct and instinctive apprehension of natural beauty, the immediacy and spontaneity of her sensations. Her imagination, he maintains, is how more fresh and vigorous than ever. Those who have decreed her genius to be of a masculine kind have never understood her. She always remains most feminine in her emotions and reactions, most "normal" in her literary development.

We recall that France's hostility to Rousseau related mainly to the optimist and reckless Utopist, the misguided doctrinaire. To Jean-Jacques the sensitive poet of nature, he was always reconciled. If he had confined his reveries

¹Le Temps. 13 April 1876.

to the fields and the woods, how much more indulgent his critic would have been! George Sand shows even greater passion than Jean-Jacques in her love of nature and yet France finds her enthusiasm wholly admirable:

"En ce qui touche le don de peindre les choses naturelles, elle possède en commun avec Jean-Jacques l'attendrissement et la sincérité; mais elle a des sensations plus aiguës, des élans plus impétueux; elle s'enfonce plus avant dans la tristesse et dans la mélancolie... Chacun se rappelle ce que Jean-Jacques dit des voyages à pied. Bien qu'il fût communément le plus malheureux des hommes, il exprime à ce sujet et à mille autres un contentement modéré, tout paisible et se montre intellectuel et sensible avec mesure. Quand George Sand rappelle les promenades à cheval de sa première jeunesse, elle charme par une franchise semblable mais on devine une passion plus violente et je ne sais quelle volupté sourde."¹

France remains equally impressed by the fact that the feminine and intuitive Sand should have displayed a scientific knowledge of the organised universe and it is typical of him that at this period, when Darwinism was for many a religion of hope and promise, when the new

¹Ibid.

scientific faith appeared so fresh and compelling, he should have been attracted by her observation and her understanding of the great natural forces of the universe, or by her "strange and magnificent" meditations on the moon in Les sept cordes de la lyre.

It is worth noting that to conclude this early essay on George Sand, France raises two important questions that were in the next ten years to determine his marked hostility to Naturalism in the shape of its robust exponent Zola. The first question relates to Sand's rustic novels, which like many later critics, France judges to be her best. He is wholly reconciled with her portrayal of peasant life and with the language employed by her peasants. It is true, he admits that genuine peasants are less eloquent, in fact practically mute, but why should Sand not endow them with her gift of poetic expression: "George Sand a su créer en entier un langage qui traduit toutes les émotions, tous les appetits de ces âmes obscures." Her peasants, he maintains are part of their natural surroundings, like the plants and the trees, her landscapes too interpret the emotions of her characters by natural sympathy. In this vision, which is exclusively her own, she has discerned a beauty which the Naturalists, bent on gloom and ugliness,

lack the taste to perceive. Thus we come to the second point that France was shortly to raise with such vigour, namely that Naturalism has no place in contemporary art, is strictly speaking not an art form, and must be discouraged at all costs.

George Sand in her benign and placid old age had remained too modest to condemn Naturalism, contenting herself to demur in a charming letter to Flaubert that life after all was not quite as black as the Naturalists chose to paint it.¹ The manner in which France already throws the gauntlet in one of his earliest articles proves yet again that his support of the Romantic writers was largely (although far from entirely) due to his violent recoil against the crudities of contemporary realism. George Sand, he writes, sees nature in all its beauty because she perceives it in relation to the harmonious order of the universe. In painting and in literature he discerns a tendency to "see incorrectly": trees are depicted as hunchbacks and lepers, meadows are affected with the mange. And yet Nature is in itself neither beautiful nor ugly. Beauty is in us, affirms this subjectivist, and all depends on the manner that we choose to see. It is the

¹George Sand à Gustave Flaubert. 25 March 1872.

artist's duty to maintain a sense of proportion and to constitute a harmonious order between his senses and the objects that he contemplates.¹

What could be more flattering to George Sand than to be understood as a woman, to be commended for her masculine understanding of the scientific universe and to be praised as the most sensitive of artists? She was, as we have seen, duly grateful and in return the word of encouragement that she addressed to the young critic on this occasion, coinciding with Taine's letter, may well have determined his career. He steadily refused in all later writings to refer to her otherwise than in terms of adulation. All readers of La Vie littéraire are acquainted with his essay George Sand et l'idéalisme dans l'art. This is the only article on Sand that France ever republished in book-form and in it he has made an emphatic and, alas, over-simplified comparison between her poetic vision and Zola's crude and offensive realism. In his uncollected articles, he developed the comparison still further and preferred her as an artist to Balzac and even, on one occasion to Flaubert. A critic who makes such facile comparisons between giants of literature is playing a

¹Le Temps. 18 April. 1876.

dangerous game but France was concerned mainly in conveying his personal tastes and impressions. Others like Brunetière could judge, classify and explain literary works with detachment. Therefore let us follow this crusade for idealism in which France remained at times obstinate and misguided but always sincere.

In the article La Nature dans les romans de George Sand, no direct reference was made as yet to Zola, but in the following year, France began his favourite game of baiting this heavy figure in a long article published in Le Temps on the 27th June 1877. With irony and undisguised distaste, France passes in review all Zola's novels that had appeared up to this date, scorning him for his emphasis on brute force and the "originality" of his physiological discoveries, commenting with unkindly chosen but appropriate quotations on the bluntness of his style and the paucity of his verbal inspiration.¹

Emile Zola, in an article on George Sand written after her death and published in Les Documents littéraires (1881) states that never in his life had he the good fortune to encounter the virtuous, honest peasants that she depicts in her novels and ironically surmises that the Berry had the privilege of harbouring this exceptional race. The language

¹Le Temps. 27 June 1877.

of her peasants, he affirms, is both false and affected.¹ In Les Documents littéraires, Zola had tactlessly included an even earlier article (first published in Le Messager de l'Europe in January 1875). This article, dealing with contemporary critics, contains the following unflattering reference to France: "Les amis de M. France m'ont assuré que son ignorance de notre littérature contemporaine était telle, qu'ils devaient lui fournir des notes pour chacun de ses articles."²

France chose to ignore these two uncompromising statements but how greatly did they rankle in his mind? When George Sand's Claudie was performed at the Odéon in May 1887, he was the first to rejoice at its success. What matters it, he writes in Le Temps, if her peasants are not real country-folk such as we know them? The old Greek legend of Daphnis and Chloë was not a true story and Sand has recaptured in her drama the idyllic vision of the Golden Age. The public has enthusiastically acclaimed her idealised interpretation:

"Je ne vous ferai point d'esthétique et ne ferai point disputer les bergers de Watteau avec les bergers de

¹E. Zola. Documents littéraires (Paris: Charpentier 1881) pp. 229-230.

²E. Zola. Ibid. p.352.

Millet. Je vous dirai seulement que si George Sand a embelli ces Berrichons, c'est pour notre plaisir, et qu'elle a bien fait. Elle a peint sous le nom de Claudie, de Rose, de Reny, de Denis et de Sylvain, des êtres naïfs, capables d'exprimer des idées morales dans leur plus claire simplicité. Elle a voulu confondre par ces bouches rustiques la sagesse des pharisiens. Elle a enseigné dans une idylle le pardon et la pitié. Elle a montré par l'exemple de Claudie, comment la douleur et le sacrifice rachètent la faute que le cœur inspire. Il y a dans ce simple drame une grande vérité humaine. Je me soucie bien après cela si la couleur locale y est observée."

Art, he concludes, cannot make the truthfulness of exact observation its object. That particular truth is the object of the sciences and literature can have but one aim which is beauty. It is quite possible that Zola's peasant girl 'La Renée' is truer to life than Claudie, but 'La Renée' is unpoetical. Claudie is the creation of a poet, of "a beautiful and fine genius" who has recreated a modern Arcadia in her native province of Berry. And so the gallant critic can find a no more fitting conclusion to his article than Lemaitre's Litanies à George Sand (borrowed with acknowledgements from his friend): "O George Sand, jardin d'imagination fleurie, fleuve de charité, miroir d'amour,

lyre tendue aux souffles de la nature et de l'esprit ... grande faunesse ... O douce loi du roman contemporain."¹

Then on the 28th August of this same year 1887, France published in Le Temps his celebrated article on Zola's La Terre, which was followed on the 6th November by George Sand et l'idéalisme dans l'art. These articles, reproduced in La Vie littéraire, are the inevitable conclusion of his previous support of Sand's Claudie. The article on la Terre is but one of the many indictments that France wrote against Zola during this period.² It coincides with the protest of five former disciples of the Naturalist leader: Le Manifeste des Cinq. 'Les Cinq', alis Gustave Guiches, Paul Margueritte, Lucien Descaves, J.H. Rosny and Paul Bonnetain, deserting Zola's standards, had gathered together to denounce La Terre as scatological. "Le Maître," they proclaimed, "est descendu au fond de l'immondice". France did not choose to associate himself with this Manifesto, published by all the leading newspapers, but he is known to have supported it privately.³ His own diatribe against La Terre, published in the following week, was all the more violent and never before had he written in so harsh a vein.⁴

¹Le Temps. 15 May 1887.

²See L.Carias. Anatole France et Zola avant l'Affaire in La Grande Revue. September 1927.

³M. Kahn. Anatole France et Zola. La Grande Revue. July 1926.

⁴La Vie Littéraire. I. pp.225-238.

After illustrating the falsity of Zola's documented observation as regards the life of the peasantry and the sordidness of detail, he declared himself shocked as an artist by the novelist's total lack of taste. Such a writer, he insisted, deserves to be pitied profoundly. He is one of those wretched beings who ought never to have been born. The article is terminated by a sweeping rhetorical passage that one cannot fail to admire per se, in spite of the extreme incorrectness and injustice of its accusations:

"Il y a dans l'homme un besoin infini d'aimer qui le divinise. M. Zola ne le sait pas. Le désir et la pudeur se mêlent parfois en nuance délicieuse dans les âmes. M. Zola ne le sait pas. Il est sur la terre des formes magnifiques et de nobles pensées; il est des âmes pures et des coeurs héroïques. M. Zola ne le sait pas. Bien des faiblesses même, bien des erreurs et des fautes ont leur beauté touchante. La douleur est sacrée. La sainteté des larmes est au fond de toutes les religions. Le malheur suffirait à rendre l'homme auguste à l'homme. M. Zola ne le sait pas."¹

George Sand, quietly resting in her grave at Nohant, would no doubt have shrugged her shoulders at this 'querelle doctrinaire', yet who can fail to see that these lyrical

¹La Vie littéraire. I. p.236.

accents are unconsciously inspired by her most intimate and most oft-repeated sentiments?

Later, France came to assume a more tolerant view of Zola. Their mutual participation in the defence of Dreyfus brought them close together and he conceived a warm admiration for the stubborn, heroic figure whom he has immortalised in L'Île des Pingouins. In the magnificent speech delivered at Zola's burial in October 1902, he publicly regretted his former wrath and injustice.¹ He was then accused by a journal of the Right Wing La Libre Parole, of rallying to Zola as a political manoeuvre. This same newspaper unkindly confronted his funeral oration with the vehement article on La Terre. France then wrote to his friend Maurice Kahn, who was bent on justifying the former's attitude, and pointed out that he had begun to form a more correct estimation of Zola's gifts as early as 1891, in his article on L'Argent.² And it is true that from this date his criticisms of the novelist are sympathetic although he never became whole-heartedly reconciled to

¹C. Aveline. Trente ans de vie sociale. Vers les temps meilleurs. op. cit. Les obsèques d'Emile Zola (11 October 1902) p.121.

²France authorised Maurice Kahn to publish this letter and it appeared in his journal Pages Libres on the 25th October 1902. The article on Zola's L'Argent was published in Le Temps on the 21st March 1891.

Naturalism. Maurice Kahn who has established the nature of France's relationship to Zola in La Grande Revue of July 1924, mentions a post-scriptum that France had attached to his letter of justification.

"D'un mot tout personnel qui accompagnait cette lettre, il ressort qu'Anatole France avait été intimement blessé par La Terre; sans doute, il se souvenait qu'il était fils de paysans et, par sa mère, d'origine beauceronne: il semble qu'il ne pardonnât pas à Zola d'avoir placé en Beauce sa famille de paysans scélérats."¹

Thus it would appear that the indictment against Zola was not only the result of a wounded artistic sensibility. France had a deep, sentimental attachment to the land and this too goes a long way in explaining his warm support of the Sand interpretation. His rational self inclined to the view that men who are close to the soil are quite primitive in their instincts.² In L'Orme du Mail, M. de Terremondre, a man of "academic prejudices" objects to the immorality of La Terre, and M. Bergeret replies in the name of his creator. "Prenez garde que les paysans sont volontiers ivrognes et parricides comme l'a montré Zola."³ This is one

¹M. Kahn. Anatole France et Zola, in La Grande Revue. July 1926. p.42.

²Cf. "L'enfance est sans pitié et l'homme des champs n'en acquiert jamais" (L'Univers Illustré: 21 July 1883); "Les paysans assassinent leurs vieux parents sans aucun souvenir romanesque." (La Vie littéraire. I. p.149.)

³L'Orme du Mail. p.207 (in all editions previous to the 1923 revision of this work when France suppressed this passage).

of the many concessions that France was to make later to the novelist. A less obvious concession is his portrayal of the grotesque, animal-like La Fronche, in Les Dieux ont soif, decidedly a peasant à la Zola, but this type of character is unique in his work.

The article George Sand et l'idéalisme dans l'art, which appeared in Le Temps on the 6th November 1887, hails the publication of Emile Caro's George Sand as a fitting apotheosis of "The admirable woman, the great, naïve lover of all things whose soul was in harmony with the flowers of the fields". Here France seasons his favourite argument in favour of Idealism with a liberal sprinkle of Condillac. The Sands and the Zolas, the Naturalists and the Idealists, are like the rest of us at the mercy of their senses. They can never apprehend the true nature of things but only their illusory quality. There is no objective reality, only that image of the exterior world that is transmitted by sensations and corresponds at a given moment with the fleeting 'état d'âme'. Therefore why not seek with Sand figures of grace, beauty and love in preference to grim ugliness? Since one dream is as illusory as the next, why not seek the most beguiling? The Greeks had no illusions on the goodness of nature and mankind, yet they adored beauty and ugliness seemed to them impious. Waxing optimistic, he declares that the search for the ideal is a

natural process: "Il y a chez les hommes un incessant désir, un perpétuel besoin d'ornement la vie et les êtres. Madame Sand a dit si bien: "Par une loi naturelle l'esprit humain ne peut s'empêcher d'embellir et d'élever l'objet de sa contemplation." All the immense efforts of civilisation and the ingenuity of mankind have striven to adorn and to embellish life. Naturalism is inhuman, a perverted and decadent pleasure leading to the ruin of all that constituted the grace and charm of existence.¹

In the essay on George Sand that Zola had included in his Documents littéraires, he had affirmed that the term 'immoral' was not applicable to art. In literature, he recognised only the talented and the untalented. To emphasise the danger of the charge levelled against Naturalism, he had pointed out that the "romanesque" novels of Sand were particularly suited to disquiet the senses and pervert the intelligence for he (and more particularly she) who had indulged in Sand's ecstatic vision could never again be reconciled to the humdrum and inescapable realities of our daily life.² This reply (which must at least strike us by its good sense for does not Zola find a

¹La Vie littéraire. I. pp.341-345.

²E. Zola. Documents littéraires. op. cit. p.236.

spiritual ancestor in Molière) is not directly referred to by France in his George Sand et l'Idéalisme, but there is every indication that he bears it in mind in the same article. He expresses the wish that all Sand's novels, not only those of her serene old age but also those of her first period, Lélia and Jacques, may once again find favour. For if we judge her revendication of the passions to be audacious, we cannot deny the force and the inevitability of these same passions. He insists that all great literature of the past, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and Racine, has exalted their strength and their fatalism and has glorified man in his most painful and moving joys and emotions. The novel that concentrates on vice is more harmful than the age-old tale of human love, for vice being much easier to suggest and insinuate is more accessible to the prosaic and the uninspired: "Le roman du vice, Madame Sand ne l'a jamais écrit."

The article is terminated by a neat comparison between Sand and Balzac as two complimentary artists who have, each in their own manner, seized the essentials of life. For the two axes of the universe are love and hunger. Balzac has made hunger, ambition, cupidity and the struggle for life his domaine. Sand has completed his vision and is none the less great for being always convinced that man's

primary concern is love. To this view, France the 'voluptueux' offers his whole-hearted agreement: "Pourtant, il semble que la nature entière n'ait d'autre but que de jeter les êtres dans les bras l'un de l'autre et de leur faire goûter, entre deux néants infinis, l'ivresse éphémère d'un baiser."¹

As previously noted, this article of La Vie littéraire is the only one concerning George Sand that France ever republished in book-form. But in the same way that his cult of Sand does not begin at this point, so does it continue in his uncollected articles of L'Univers Illustré. In this journal, he reviews her published correspondence on the 3rd March 1883 and again on the 23rd August and the 1st November 1884, closely following the successive appearance of the fourth, fifth and sixth volumes. In his article of the 3rd March 1883 (entirely devoted to the fourth volume), he is touched by her letters to Flaubert and by the grace and wisdom that characterise her last years:

"Tout le monde ne gagne pas à vieillir. Madame Sand y gagna beaucoup; elle y gagna la sérénité, la paix du coeur, l'ampleur de la pensée et cette sagesse affectueuse qui fit d'elle la plus adorable des grand'mères alors qu'elle était

¹La Vie littéraire. I. p.347.

encore par ses livres la Muse de la Passion." Together with this wisdom, time and painfully acquired experience have brought a greater understanding of human weaknesses, moral wealth and a universal charity. These are the points that France illustrates with numerous extracts from her letters to Flaubert, pointing out the delicacy and the depth of this illustrious friendship. But most characteristically, he is struck by George Sand's modesty and unselfishness, her total lack of artistic vanity. For to maintain that one's work is bad is still a proof of vanity, but to forget one's work completely when it is quoted by all is a unique feat of modesty that only George Sand could have accomplished. "Laissez donc le vent courir dans vos cordes. Moi, je crois que vous devriez laisser faire 'l'autre' plus souvent," is the celebrated advice that Sand gave to Flaubert. France, too, inclines to the view that Flaubert should have shown greater human sympathy.

"L'autre, vous entendez, la partie instinctive de nous-mêmes," he comments. "Eh bien voila un conseil que Flaubert n'a pas suivi."¹

With unabated interest, he reviews the fifth volume of George Sand's correspondence published in August 1844. "Ces pages sont pleines de choses, elles sont fortes et

¹L'Univers Illustré. 3 March 1883. (Cf. La Vie littéraire III. p.305, where France expresses the same view on Flaubert).

saines. C'est la ferme en hiver quand le cellier est plein, quand les greniers regorgent."¹ And as we have previously pointed out, the appearance of the sixth volume prompts him to dwell with satisfaction on Sand's letter to Charles Edmond concerning the young and gifted M. France, who now somewhat older but still devoted, seizes all occasions to repay the debt.²

On the 9th August 1884, L'Univers Illustré published a special number in honour of George Sand to mark the inauguration of her monument at La Châtre. On this occasion, France reproduces his first article on La Nature dans les romans de George Sand and ends on a topical note with the wish that the Jardin du Luxembourg, the garden of the young, may shortly possess its own statue of a novelist who loved youth and shared throughout her life its ardour and generosity.³ Nearly ten years later, in the same journal, he dedicates an entire article to Henri Amic's George Sand, mes souvenirs, and in spite of his growing sympathy for Zola, once more expresses the hope that George Sand's first novels "too greatly neglected by the present

¹L'Univers Illustré. 23 August 1884.

²L'Univers Illustré. 1 November 1884.

³L'Univers Illustré. 9 August 1884.

generation," should again become popular favourites: "Les sentiments qu'ils retracent touchent aux côtés généreux de la nature humaine. Les dépeindre, c'est glorifier l'homme dans ses joies les plus douloureuses et les plus profondes."¹

Anatole France's Introduction to de Musset's Le Souvenir, published in 1910 in his edition of Les Poèmes du Souvenir, is the only essay in which he has evoked George Sand as a lover. In this short and elegant account of the Venetian adventure, his portrayal of the ill-matched couple is vivid, humorous but never unkind. Decidedly, his sympathy lies with George who is designated as the strong-minded and sensible partner to an indolent and unbalanced Alfred. "A trente ans, parée de ses beaux yeux noirs cernés de bistre, après d'éclatantes aventures, elle gardait le goût d'être une héroïne. Au fond, tranquille dans sa gloire, raisonnable, ordonnée, laborieuse."² If the liaison with Pagello lends itself, as France suggests, to an interpretation à la Boccaccio, he remains sufficiently tactful to suppress the temptation, although de Musset's ludicrous position on recovering from his delirium does indeed call for an ironical comment: "Quand il se retablit,

¹L'Univers Illustré. 15 April. 1893.

²Les Poèmes du Souvenir. op. cit. p.31.

on lui fit comprendre facilement que George Sand était sa mère, Pagello son père, qu'ils s'aimaient et l'aimaient et que c'était bien ainsi."¹ The story of the subsequent reconciliations and of the ultimate parting is narrated with understanding and discretion and to France must go the honour of defining George Sand as a lover in one short and incomparable formula:

"Elle était volontiers une amante-infirmière."

When France asks that his generation should read the first novels of George Sand, can we be sure that he practised what he preached? No doubt can be left in our mind that he knew Lélia very well and that to this novel he owes a celebrated episode in Thaïs.

The critics who have sought to discover the sources of Thaïs, generally agree that the Legenda Aurea, the Vies des Pères des déserts (an XVIIIth century study of the Cenobite monks by le Rev. Père Marin) and Flaubert's La Tentation de Saint Antoine have provided valuable literary inspiration.² It has not so far been observed that the most unmistakable model for the ascetic monk Paphnuce is provided by Sand herself in the shape of the mad priest Magnus of Lélia. For the moral preached by Sand in the

¹Ibid. p.32.

²E.P. Dargan. Anatole France. 1844-1896. op. cit. pp. 441-453.

episode of Magnus is simply that only a few exceptional beings are suited for a life of celibacy and that Nature may take a drastic revenge on a priest whose chastity has become a burden. "Tu t'es cru assez grand pour cette terrible vertu le célibat, tu t'es trompé," says Lélia to the demented Magnus.¹ And thus, too obstinate to renounce his vows, too strong and pious to side with the Devil, Magnus finds himself in that state of utter spiritual desolation where neither God nor the Devil will come to his aid. "Satan ne voulait ni me prendre ni me lâcher. Dieu ne daignait ni m'appeler ni me repousser."² This is precisely the evolution of Paphnuce in Thaïs. In exactly the same manner as George Sand, France has followed, with a pitiless precision of psychological detail, the degeneration and the final madness of an ascete. In this respect, France owes nothing to Flaubert's Saint Antoine who, with the sunrise, has overcome the temptations of the flesh. In his heartless contemplation of a losing battle, he has sided with George Sand and also with the Devil.

Was it then merely their anti-clericalism that prompted these two writers to take a priest as their model,

¹G. Sand. Lélia (Paris: Bonnaire. Revised. edit. of 1839). Vol.III. p.296.

²Ibid. Vol. I. p.118.

or do they owe this cruel choice to their strong romantic tendency to exalt the imperative decrees of natural passions and instincts? Only superficially, for the less obvious but none the less insistent point that they develop in their respective tales is that Magnus and Paphnuce have not betrayed Nature but their own nature. Neither writer has denied the efficacy of true grace for Lélia and Thaïs have not thwarted the natural development of their lives. Lélia and Thaïs have believed in loving ardently, life has belied their dreams and religion comes almost by accident into their existence as a peaceful and joyous solution. They enter serenely on their new life, like plants, they thrive and become strong and finally they are recognised as Saints in their respective communities. But towards Magnus, Sand observes the same hostile attitude as France towards the ascetic redeemer of Thaïs. They have brought upon themselves a nasty state of affairs. So much the worse for them. Their struggles are observed with the mercilessness of a child who pierces an insect with a pin.

The priest Magnus first begins to play an important role in Sand's Lélia at a time when the heroine is lying on her death-bed. Lélia in fact does not die but manages to survive two more volumes of Sand's eloquent prose. Why then does Magnus joyfully proclaim to the poet Sténio that

Lélia is dead? Because it is necessary for his unbalanced mind to believe that she is no more. She has inspired in him a physical desire so intense that her vision is ever present in the performance of his most sacred offices.

Lélia has become a hallucination. Around him animals and holy statues speak to him of his obsession. He is fighting to save his soul but his thoughts have become impious. He no longer believes in the God who has abandoned him. The vision of Lélia appears constantly before him and "encircles him with her black hair, her dark eyes and her strange smile". He loses consciousness and falls fainting on the steps of the sanctuary. When his tears and his prayers temporarily restore his faith, his strength is immediately overcome by new apparitions:

"Je rentrais consolé, je regagnais ma cellule silencieuse accablé de fatigue et de sommeil. Mais savez-vous ce que faisait Lélia, ce qu'elle imaginait, la railleuse impie, pour me désespérer et me perdre? Elle entra dans ma cellule avant moi, elle se blotissait maligne et souple dans le tapis de mon prie-dieu ou dans le sable de ma pendule, ou bien dans les jasmins de ma fenêtre; et à peine avais-je commencé ma dernière oraison, qu'elle surgissait devant moi, et posait sa main froide sur mon épaule en disant "Me voici". Alors il fallait soulever mes paupières appesanties et lutter de nouveau

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avec mon coeur troublé, et redire l'exorcisme jusqu'à ce que le fantôme fût dissipé. Parfois même, il se couchait sur mon lit, sur mon pauvre lit solitaire et froid; il s'étendait sur ce grabat, l'horrible spectre, et quand, j'entr'ouvrais les rideaux de serge pour m'approcher de ma couche, je le trouvais là qui me tendait les bras et qui riait de mon épouvante."¹

This is the episode and more particularly the passage that France was to remember in writing Thaïs.

Ephraïme who has accompanied the courtesan Thaïs to Albine's convent and locked her in a cell, truly believes that she is dead to the world and that by converting her, he has saved both his soul and her own. But one morning the vision of Thaïs in all her finery, wearing a wreath of violets, appears in the hermit's cave, "et tandis qu'il pleurait elle s'était glissée dans sa couche."² From that moment, Thaïs becomes a hallucination and his supplications and exorcisms are in vain. His dwelling is invaded by jackals and by demons who mock him and speak to him of his obsession. Demented, he retires to the desert and finds an abandoned tomb. Here he hopes to find relief by holiness, prayers and greater asceticism. But on the walls of the

¹Ibid. Vol. I. pp.183-184.

²Thaïs. p.222.

tomb are depicted scenes from the life of the dead man who is interred in its vault. These murals become animated, a slave girl playing the cinnor descends from the wall and like the ghost of Lélia, completes the saint's damnation:

"Vois: je suis mystérieuse et belle. Aime-moi; épuise dans mes bras l'amour qui te tourmente. Que te sert de me craindre? Tu ne peux m'échapper: je suis la beauté de la femme. Où penses-tu me fuir, insensé? Tu retrouverais mon image dans l'éclat des fleurs et dans la grâce des palmiers, dans le vol des colombes, dans les bonds des gazelles, dans la fuite onduleuse des ruisseaux, dans les molles clartés de la lune, et, si tu fermes les yeux, tu la retrouveras en toi-même ... Tu me reconnais bien, Paphnuce. Comment ne m'as-tu pas reconnue? Je suis une des innombrables incarnations de Thaïs."¹

Demons and satyrs return to torment him. Around him he hears sighs and strange whispers. Like Magnus, he falls fainting on the steps of the tomb.

Since France as a novelist has, in this case at least, resurrected one of Sand's most grotesque visions, since as a critic, he has constantly acclaimed her as the "admirable woman", the sensitive poetess of nature and of human passions who has created the French Idyll and

¹Thaïs. pp.257-258.

served as a valuable counteraction to the realistic excesses of his day, we would willingly stop with him at his last essay on George Sand: the Introduction to Le Souvenir, written in 1910. But honesty must compel us to seek further, even at the risk of introducing a disturbing note in this harmonious relationship.

France did not write again on George Sand until 1922, at which date, having to revise his Alfred de Vigny, he made a slight and enigmatic correction in the manuscript. The passage in which this correction appears, relates to Marie Dorval's friendship with George Sand which proved to be one of the main causes of the former's parting from Alfred de Vigny. The facsimile of the 1922 manuscript shows that France had originally decided to retain a sentence that he had written in the 1868 version and which referred to George Sand as "une femme à qui la beauté, unie au génie, permettait tout". M. Claude Aveline, the editor of the revised Alfred de Vigny, states in the commentary which accompanies this facsimile, that France then sent him a special request, asking him to alter this line to "une femme à qui la gloire et la beauté permettaient tout".¹ Such a slight correction, unless it be a mere correction of style, makes us wonder whether in his last years, France still retained his glowing enthusiasm for

¹C. Aveline. Le Manuscrit Autographe. January-February 1928: Sur l'Alfred de Vigny d'Antole France.

the good lady of Nohant who, half a century previously, had encouraged the young author of Les Noces Corinthiennes on the threshold of his career.

CHAPTER XV.

Towards a greater realism: Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal and Prosper Mérimée.

Balzac, Stendhal and Mérimée, three novelists who by their powers of observation and their psychological precision, maintain the cultural tradition of the XVIIIth century more than any other writer of the Romantic epoch, have not inspired in Anatole France's criticisms the same whole-hearted admiration which he accords both to the personality and the art of George Sand.

However greatly posterity may have disproved his choice, his commendation of Sand is unreserved but in his criticisms of Balzac lurks an ill-disguised wariness which springs mainly from their totally opposed conception of the novelist's craft.

As early as 1895, Théodore de Wyzewa had observed that France could not compose a novel in the strict sense of that word because he did not concentrate his thought on the study of a unique and rigorously limited subject.

"Il s'est trop et de bonne heure accoutumé au rêve qui ne souffre point de ces barrières et se promène sur les choses d'un mouvement plus libre."¹ Does France attempt to develop

¹T. de Wyzewa. Nos Maîtres. (Paris: Perrin. 1895). p.218.

a plot, immediately he dallies 'en route', plucks a flower, lingers over a comic episode. The plot is, in fact, often left dangling in mid-air while his characters dream, digress and serve to reflect the play of their creator's elastic and versatile mind over the many facets of a given problem, often totally irrelevant to the main theme. It would often appear that in his novels, France lacks the energetic impulse to propel his characters onwards, to follow them doggedly, step by step to the fatal and inexorable climax, as Flaubert in Madame Bovary.

In his earliest novels, Les désirs de Jean Servien, Jocaste and Le chat noir, France had attempted to apply the realistic and objective method and, discarding the superfluous digression, had observed the psychological reactions and the minute material details that determined the fate of his characters. These works are now regarded as immature efforts and are practically forgotten. In later life, he recaptured this gift of concentration and realistic evocation in one novel alone, Les Dieux ont soif, in which the plot is so consistently and dramatically developed to an energetic climax, in which both the historical background of Paris during the Revolution and the main character, Evariste Gamelin, are so closely and faithfully observed, that even such a noted anti-Francian as André Gide has

admitted that this work is his very best.¹

A novel such as Les Dieux ont soif proves that France did not lack the gift of concentration and energetic propulsion but rather that in his other works, he deliberately chose to discuss, to linger and to dream because these digressions serve to reflect his own personality, a personality that is ever obtruding and demanding self-expression. Therefore, if we regret that France has spoken of Balzac in guarded terms, we must firstly observe that his own creative method is totally incompatible with the cosmic vision, the power and the massive architectonic sense of the author of La Comédie humaine. The domaine of France is one of dreams, fantasy and the play of ideas. Numerous sensations flit across the restless stream of his consciousness. All this goes a long way towards explaining his sympathy for George Sand although any comparison between the works of these two novelists would of necessity be very forced. It is interesting to note at this point that France retained throughout his life an unbounded admiration for Dickens and that, dismayed by the news of Dickens's death in 1870, he compared his genius to that of Balzac. In an old review Le Bibliophile Français where this article has been consulted, he expresses the quaint wish that Balzac

¹A. Gide. Journal. op.cit. 15 April 1924. Vol.III. p.18.

may be interred at Saint Denis as Dickens was buried in Westminster Abbey.¹ But later, when he came to regard Balzac with less indulgence, his enthusiasm for Dickens remained because of the fantastic element in Dickens' portrayal of humanity, his understanding of odd and eccentric beings, his more sensitive, more 'nuancé' view of mankind.² The importance that France attaches to the whimsical and the fantastic element in his own writings is not properly speaking a French trait and has contributed greatly to the popularity of his work in England and America.

In the article George Sand et l'idéalisme dans l'art, France praises George Sand and Balzac for having seized in their respective writings the essential motives of human conduct. Sand concentrated her thought on the passions of love, Balzac on the passions of hunger, cupidity and devouring ambition. "Il a montré avec une extrême précision toutes les fonctions de la griffe, de la mâchoire et de l'estomac, toutes les habitudes de l'homme de proie."³ But when France designates his own literary tastes, we see that he preferred the love story as related by Virgil,

¹Le Bibliophile Français. July 1870. p.181.

²Cf. La Vie littéraire. I. p.177. Les fous dans la littérature.

³La Vie littéraire. I. p.347.

by Shakespeare, by Racine and by George Sand herself who depicts love as a compelling and divine force, and that his own characters (Paphnuce, Dechartre, Gamelin) become all the more vital and real when they are impassioned, even though their love is more compelling than divine. But most important of all, Balzac as a creative artist appeared too heavy and massive for this narrator of the delicate and intriguing tale to regard his particular form of literary craftsmanship as truly representative of the French tradition.

In the article Demain where France explains his literary 'profession de foi' to the Symbolist poet Charles Morice, he observes that to write a great novel that can survive the test of time and become a classic is one of those rare, well-nigh impossible feats that few have accomplished. The XVIIIth century, which he regards as the most fertile in prose fiction, has left us less than ten novels that belong to the timeless category. The XIXth century has produced too many novels and they are all "too long". The shorter the tale, the more it is likely to endure:

"Ce qu'on lit toujours c'est Daphnis et Chloë, c'est La Princesse de Clèves, Candide, Manon Lescaut, qui sont épais comme le petit doigt. Il faut être léger pour voler à travers les âges. Le vrai génie français est prompt et concis. Il était incomparable dans la nouvelle. Je voudrais qu'on fît encore la belle nouvelle française;

je voudrais qu'on fût élégant et facile, rapide aussi. C'est là, n'est-il pas vrai? la parfaite politesse d'un écrivain."¹ Balzac is not mentioned at all in this characteristic assertion of a personal taste stated as a universal opinion, but we are obliged to infer that Balzac is not representative of "the true French genius" and that he is not precisely "polite".

In a later article of La Vie littéraire, France commends Marcel Schwob for his mastery of the short story and becomes more explicit on the subject of Balzac. The short story, he affirms, is a more delicate and discreet art-form than the tedious and unending novel:

"La nouvelle suffit à tout. On y peut renfermer beaucoup de sens en peu de mots. Une nouvelle bien faite est le régal des connaisseurs et le contentement des difficiles. C'est l'élixir et la quintessence. C'est l'onguent précieux. J'admire infiniment Balzac; je le tiens pour le plus grand historien de la France moderne qui vit tout entière dans son oeuvre immense. Mais à la Cousine Bette et au Père Goriot je préfère encore, pour l'art et le tour, telle simple nouvelle: La Grenadière, par exemple ou la Femme abandonnée."²

Because his reaction to George Sand is always

¹ La Vie littéraire. IV. p.198.

² Ibid. p.320.

characterised by responsiveness and generosity, France has been somewhat inconsistent in never referring to the length or to the quantity of her novels. In his early article La Nature dans les romans de George Sand, he makes some attempt to explain his partiality and insists that Sand possesses a lighter and more delicate touch in her descriptive passages than Balzac. Recalling the incredible spray of flowers worn by Madame de Morseuf in Balzac's Volanté, he maintains that Sand is the more sensitive artist in her simple evocation of a fragile plant:

"Quand Balzac fait des bouquets pour madame de Morseuf, ces bouquets sont monstrueux, tant les fleurs sont entassées. Rien de moins modéré, rien de moins exact. C'est une orgie de couleurs et de parfums. Les fleurs du printemps s'y mêlent surnaturellement avec les fleurs de l'automne. Et cette amoncellement de bottes odorantes est analysée avec une fureur minutieuse, sur les épaules des amoureux, par je ne sais quel Titan chimiste, ivre de science et de volupté. Il faut à George Sand une moindre affaire. Une branche d'azalée lui suffit pour tout un amour ou, si une femme cueille des fleurs dans la forêt, ce sera assez d'une parole."¹

It is fortunate for France's reputation as a critic

¹Le Temps. 18 April 1876.

that his fundamental artistic incompatibility with the robust and fertile temperament of Balzac has not prevented him from studying his subject with thoughtfulness and respect, or from commending Balzac's two incomparable gifts: the power of his creative imagination and the social and historical understanding of his time. On receiving the newly published Répertoire de la Comédie humaine by Gerfberre and Cristophe, how genuine are the astonishment and admiration of the critic as he reviews this incredible catalogue. Two thousand characters. An entire world contained in a single mind! It is truly inconceivable that one man should have followed the threads of these existences without error or confusion. "Je ne veux pas me faire plus balzacien que je ne suis. J'ai une préférence secrète pour les petits livres. Mais quand Balzac me ferait un peu peur et si même je trouvais parfois qu'il a la pensée lourde et le style épais, il faudrait bien encore reconnaître sa puissance. C'est un dieu."¹ For when Balzac does not fall prey to the chimerical and the romanesque, France pursued, he is the most perspicacious historian of the society of his time. He knows and reveals all its secrets. Only he could have so faithfully interpreted the transition from the ancient to the new regime or could have explained

¹La Vie littéraire. I. pp.150-151.

so well the two great roots of the new social tree: the purchaser of national properties and the soldier of the Empire. But for all that he lacked the taste of Jules Sandeau who by choosing a narrow and charming setting for this same society in Mademoiselle de la Seiglière displayed a sense of measure that Balzac never possessed. (Why Balzac should have chosen a 'charming' setting when dealing with life is a point that the critic does not choose to clarify). Yet for relief and depth, Balzac is incomparable: "Il a plus que tout autre, l'instinct de la vie, le sentiment des passions intimes, l'intelligence des intérêts domestiques." His novels, France concludes, are all the more valuable as historical documents because Balzac avoids the mistake of introducing historical characters in his work. Napoleon is made to appear but six times and in a purely incidental manner in the entire Comédie humaine. Being an inspired novelist who understood the laws of his art, Balzac chose as his hero the unknown man whose deeds history has not recorded and who is every man.¹

Gustave Michant notes in his Anatole France, étude psychologique that France's "invincibly subjective disposition" is absolutely incompatible with the large, impartial sympathy of such great imaginative creators as

¹La Vie littéraire. I. pp. 151-152.

Balzac. "Il ne sort point de lui, il ne s'oublie point."¹ He asks if we can truly affirm that France's characters "step out of his pages" and by their vital quality live in our minds. We are obliged to point out that N. Michaut has failed to do justice to France by not observing that a few of his characters are bold and vital creations. Paphnuce, Crainquebille, Camelin live with a startling force precisely because they are conceived as the 'other person' and are totally detached from the personality of France. Although we agree that these characters are not numerous and that this most egotistic of artists does indeed rarely forget himself, by a law of compensation, the power of imaginative creativeness, the gift of absorption by which the artist's flesh and blood are temporarily annihilated and transcended into another being is one that France particularly admired in Balzac. To Nicolas Ségur, he would relate the story of Balzac who visited by a friend troubled with domestic worries, once retorted: "Maintenant laissons tout cela, arrivons à la réalité. Parlons du Père Goriot." How enviable was this man who could create his own kingdom and liberate himself from the harshness of reality.²

¹G. Michaut. Anatole France, étude psychologique. op.cit. p.94.

²N. Ségur. Dernières Conversations avec Anatole France. op. cit. p.209. This appears to be a confusion with the authentic episode of Jules Sandre~~au~~au who having lost his sister, spoke to Balzac of his distress. "Tout cela est bel et bien," answered Balzac, "mais revenons à la réalité: avec qui marierons-nous Eugénie Grandet?"

It is to this creative Balzac that France dedicates an article of L'Univers Illustré written in his most personal manner. He recalls the house in the Faubourg Saint Honoré where Balzac died in 1850. As the house had been demolished by the time he published this article (in April 1890), it is interesting to note how France remembers it as forming part of the ancient pre-Hausmann Paris that he loved so well, for he believed with Hugo that the new city possessed the artistic perfection of a chess-board. France describes this house as a mysterious, haunted dwelling that he would contemplate in a kind of trance. "On eût dit le Château de la Belle-au-Bois Dormant, une de ces demeures soumises à quelque maléfice, tant la lèpre rongait les murailles, tant la moisissure grimpait le long des volets clos, tant le silence regnait dans ce vieil hôtel abandonné." The ghost that haunted it was none other than Balzac, enveloped in his monk's robe and writing throughout the night:

"C'était un beau rêve qu'il faisait tout éveillé, vivant avec une intensité prodigieuse la vie même de ses personnages, ambitieux avec Rastignac, romanesque avec la duchesse de Maufrigneuse, éthéré avec Henriette de Morsauf, bibelotier avec Pons et Schmück, faiseur avec Birotteau, avare avec Gobseck et voluptueux avec Lucien de Rubempré.

Doué d'une puissance d'intuition tout à fait spéciale, c'est dans les quatre murs de ce vieil hôtel abandonné,

dont la possession lui avait coûté tant de travail et tant d'ennui, qu'il devinait, pour ainsi dire, tous les dessous, tous les mystères, toutes les intrigues de cette société du règne de Louis-Philippe, qu'il connaissait cependant si peu par expérience; mais ce qu'il inventait était plus vrai, - ou mieux plus vraisemblable que la réalité."

For Balzac, like Zola, sought the human document, but unlike Zola, he could, from a sundry detail read in the morning paper, perceive in a flash all the conditions of a human existence in the same way that Cuvier could reconstruct a prehistorical animal from a single bone. Balzac understood the soul of the characters he created. He did not find it necessary to sup with Coralie, do business with Mercadet or join Louchard's police-force in order to verify his facts. Then in a brief and cruel sketch, the Naturalists' arch-enemy describes Zola as he had once met him in a theatre, prowling around the artists' foyer, examining the boxes, interviewing the dresser and the stage-hands. Zola departed, convinced that he understood theatre life thoroughly and he wrote Mana in whom he thought to have incarnated 'la fille', just as Pot-Bouille symbolises 'la bourgeoisie' and L'Assomoir 'le peuple'. And so France, passing with typical rapidity from his favourite game of baiting this much-maligned figure to a

nostalgic evocation of the past, returns to Balzac's haunted dwelling:

"Donc, bien souvent quand je montais les hauteurs du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, je m'arrêtais pensif devant cette demeure mystérieuse aux volets clos, et j'éprouvais comme un certain plaisir inconscient à voir ainsi les choses rester en état. Il me semblait que l'âme de Balzac devait planer entre ces vieilles murailles évocatrices du passé et que la maison pouvait ainsi subsister - même en ruines - comme un pieux souvenir."¹

Therefore in spite of his "secret preference for small books", Balzac of the powerful creative imagination, Balzac the social historian of the transitional period was the figure that France chose to remember when on three occasions, he asked in his columns of L'Univers Illustré that a monument be raised to the great novelist in Paris.²

¹L'Univers Illustré. 12 April 1890.

²L'Univers Illustré. 24 November 1883, 5 March 1887, 12 April 1890. The first article relates to the projects for a statue in Paris and we learn with amazement that Alexandre Dumas, who made a collection for this purpose in 1853, ended up with a net profit of 1000 francs. The second article relates to the efforts of Charles Spoelberch de Louvenjol in view of a monument at Tours. The third is the most direct and impatient of France's requests concerning the Parisian monument: "Vraiment, est-ce qu'il ne finira pas par l'avoir un jour?"

For France made much of the significance of the 'plaque commémorative' and the statue in his journalistic period, as we have had sufficient occasion to note in the case of Rousseau, Lamartine, de Vigny and George Sand.

A surprising discovery in the study of so voracious a reader as France is the fact that he did not become properly acquainted with Stendhal before the last years of his life. His first and only article on the novelist was written in 1920 and published in La Revue de Paris.¹ In this essay, France recognises that he had deprived himself of a great pleasure in not frequenting Stendhal sufficiently. We must not infer that he had previously neglected Stendhal completely for in one of his earliest reviews, published in L'Amateur d'Autographes, he comments that Voltaire's inability to gain the favour of Louis XV resulted primarily from the sharpness of his wit and that unfortunately, he had not the advantage of reading Stendhal's "profound pages" in La Chartreuse de Parme on the tactful and hypocritical manner that all good courtiers must needs adopt.² But before 1920, France, like many other critics of his day, sadly neglected the intriguing figure of Stendhal and his tardy discovery is significant of the

¹La Revue de Paris. 1 September 1920. The article Stendhal was then published in a private edition (Paris: Les amis d'Edouard. 1920).

²L'Amateur d'Autographes. May 1869. p.148.

novelist's growing importance in our time.

The article on Stendhal is all the more interesting because it is the only literary essay that France wrote in the last years of his life and although we shall never know how he would have re-written his study on de Vigny, we can at least ascertain by this unique example that he had greatly corrected his habitual tendency to digress instead of entering directly into a subject. He had greatly corrected it but had not yet overcome it, for the element of fantasy still persists in a disconcerting introduction that celebrates the shapeliness of Stendhal's legs. The digressive tone is soon abandoned however and we are compensated by a biographical account in which France reveals both a psychological understanding of the novelist and an attachment to this most complex of personalities.

The most endearing quality that he observes in Stendhal is his complete naturalness: "Il est toujours vrai et quand il ment, ce qui lui arrive quelquefois ... il est vrai encore, naturel et semblable à lui-même, intime, confidentiel et le plus galant homme du monde."¹

In Stendhal the lover (for it is characteristic of France in his last period that he should have dwelt at length on this subject and with undisguised enjoyment²),

¹Stendhal. op. cit. pp.2-3.

²Cf. The episode of de Vigny and Marie Dorval as related in Alfred de Vigny (1923).

we may observe the complexity of a timid nature who overcoming the agonies of shyness by continuous and energetic effort, became a skilled opportunist. He was always in love, or imagined that he was. To the young, he preached the necessity of the strategic approach and taught that diffidence and hesitation are the greatest of sins. But where the 'grande passion' was concerned, shyness took the uppermost. Stendhal remained the troubadour and his friend Mérimée knew of only two great love-passions in his life.

Stendhal understood the art of living: music, painting, love, friendship and study were the occupations and the amusements of this 'galant homme'. Yet he was not an Epicurean, for in all these pursuits, he showed so much ardour: "Ce n'est point l'être que de l'être comme lui avec emportement et fureur."¹ With his cultural formation, France discovers a closer affinity. Stendhal was at heart an XVIIIth century 'philosophe', a disciple of Helvétius and Condillac, an undemonstrative atheist who had no desire whatsoever to preach his godlessness to the multitude, for the opinions of mankind inspired in him a "respectful disdain". Here we see that France speaks for himself as well as for Stendhal and very typically

¹Stendhal. op.cit. p.16.

expresses his own misanthropy.

But if Stendhal shunned the contact of fools whom he feared more than reveals, he could not escape the clutches of that silent, uninvited guest 'ennui', who darkened his existence:

"Auprès de lui, la tristesse avec ses voiles ondoyants et le jeu de ses ombres, nous sourit presque; lui, il est nu, sans visage, et sans forme et muet; et dans notre vie d'un instant, il nous hante pendant des siècles. D'où vient que ce compagnon qui s'attache à la plupart des hommes et préfère les esprits les plus cultivés, semble à tous si affreux? N'est-ce pas parcequ'il nous entretient de la condition humaine et nous révèle ce que nous sommes? Stendhal l'a connu autant et plus qu'un autre, mais assurément, il n'en eût pas parlé comme j'en parle ici, de peur de trop accorder à la mélancolie et de donner dans le Senancour. Je dois cet hommage à son caractère."¹

In this context, we may observe the deepening pessimism that characterises the last years of France's life, the 'melancholy of the intelligence' that Nicolas Ségur has so well recorded in the Dernières Conversations. And it is not the least paradox of his contradictory and

¹Ibid. p.25.

versatile temperament that France, who admired Stendhal's reticence on the ravages of 'l'ennui' should himself have fallen prey to the Senancour mood in a passage so lyrical that it yields to the ear definite verse rhythms.

This disciple of Helvétius and Condillac who loved life so intensely and yet became a victim of the romantic malady, belonged moreover to that category of 'odd' characters for whom France has always shown a marked sympathy. Stendhal was secretive, he took an eccentric pleasure in dissimulating his most innocent actions. All those false names that he assumed, those mysterious Italian and English phrases dispersed in his manuscripts which are the delight and the despair of his editors! Were these idiosyncracies or merely a childish hoax? Can he really convince us that his life was endangered by spies or his peace by feminine jealousy? And must we deem them unworthy of a superior mind? Only fools, affirms France, cannot understand the joys of this type of mystification. The great novelist leading a tranquil existence wished to create the illusion that, like his Fabrice, he incurred the most terrible dangers. Therefore who shall blame him for enriching his life with fantasy and adventure?¹

¹We know that France was equally fond of mystifying his readers. In 1864, he published in L'Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux (August 10th), 'ten lines by André Chénier' of his own invention. These lines were presently incorporated in the critical edition of Chénier by Becq de Fouquières.

We cannot wonder after this if France attaches more importance to the personality of Stendhal than to his work. "Il me semble que lorsqu'on lit Beyle, c'est Beyle qu'on cherche, et qu'on préfère l'homme qu'il fut aux plus belles inventions qu'il a laissées."¹ From this we may conclude that France had tardily become a 'Stendhalien' of the more refined and delicate category. But Stendhal as a literary artist, far from being neglected, is considered by France to be unique in his time: He is not representative of the XIXth century novel and has no points in contact with Walter Scott or with Balzac. In his scrupulous recording of psychological motives, he belongs to the XVIIIth century and bears a closer connection with Laclot, Goethe or Constant. He did not seek to be a literary artist or to embellish a style that is spontaneous and completely natural.

We must recall that towards the end of his life, France became firmly convinced that with the advent of Chateaubriand and the sonorous, romantic phrase, the French language had degenerated beyond repair. Finding himself obliged, in his article on Stendhal to answer the question: "Beyle écrivait-il bien?", he proceeds by a method of comparison. On contrasting Stendhal's prose to the pure

¹Stendhal. op.cit. p.31.

and limpid flow of La Bruyère and Racine, to the perfect manner of Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau, France is obliged to admit that Stendhal expressed himself badly. But by placing Stendhal in his time and by comparing him to the most gifted and lyrical of the XIXth century prose-writers, he is convinced that Stendhal wrote very well indeed and that by the purity and simplicity of his style, he was greatly superior to Chateaubriand. And if we conclude that Stendhal was not an artist because he wrote spontaneously, then the same reproach may be directed against such masters of the language as Henri IV, Saint-Simon or Fénelon.¹

Anatole France was attracted by the personality of Stendhal and consequently he paid insufficient attention to his writings. We observe the same tendency in his criticism of Prosper Mérimée. Apart from a short notice in L'Univers Illustré and several anecdotes on the cynicism of Mérimée related in the same journal, the article Prosper Mérimée republished in La Vie littéraire is the only essay that France has left us on this novelist. His article was occasioned by the publication of Count Cltenin d'Haussonville's biography Prosper Mérimée which appeared in February 1888.

¹Ibid. pp.33-35.

D'Haussonville who shared neither the political nor the religious opinions of Mérimée had nevertheless attempted to rehabilitate the novelist as a sympathetic character and to demonstrate, by the use of unpublished letters, written by Mérimée towards the end of his life, that he was in reality a sensitive individual wounded by his contact with life.¹ France, reviewing d'Haussonville's study, shares the author's conviction and is therefore concerned mainly with justifying the character of Mérimée to his own generation whom, he feels, has retained a false impression of the writer as a callous and immoral personality.

Mérimée, writes France, was wont to find a perverted pleasure in following the example of his master Stendhal and in teaching "a systematic immorality" in the conquest of women. But the brutality that he affected was merely a pose, a grimace. He was in reality a deeply affectionate and sensitive man who was capable of showing great delicacy and tenderness towards his friends. The letters published by Count d'Haussonville, those in particular that Mérimée addressed to an English friend, Mrs. Senior, prove him to have been confiding and affectionate. He was always sincerely convinced of the legitimacy and undeniable rights of the passions. All he asked was that they should be real and strong and that such social and religious conventions as

¹Le comte Oltenin d'Haussonville. Prosper Mérimée, étude biographique et littéraire. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy. 1888)

marriage and chastity should not be allowed to impede them. In his letters to the virtuous Mrs. Senior, he would attempt to shock her by elaborating these views with cynical abruptness but the sensible lady remained unperturbed by these demonstrations and judged him to be a "good-natured man". France, who holds the same view, proceeds to illustrate Mérimée's fundamental sensibility with extracts from his correspondence. For Mérimée had suffered cruelly in love and in his contact with reality. He was incapable of surrendering himself to self-pity and could only express his sorrow and bitterness in the 'conte' and the impersonal narrative. At heart, he was proud and timid, a disillusioned idealist whose irony and cynicism were but weapons of self-defence.¹

This sympathetic interpretation of Mérimée's character results from a strong psychological affinity. In an article of L'Univers Illustré written in the same month as the essay of La Vie littéraire, France traces this affinity in a more personal manner:

"M. d'Haussonville, dont on ne saurait trop louer le sens et l'équité, a bien raison de dire que les lettres inédites qu'il a publiées nous montrent Mérimée sous un

¹La Vie littéraire II. pp.47-54.

jour nouveau. J'en suis heureux, parceque j'avais toujours senti de la sympathie pour cet homme qui osait penser, méprisait l'opinion, et qui, dans un temps de démocratie, ne courtisa jamais la foule. Si l'on interroge les personnes qui l'ont connu, on s'apercevra que les hommes ont gardé de lui une impression parfois défavorable, mais qu'il a laissé dans le coeur de toutes les femmes un souvenir excellent. Je ne veux pas d'autre preuve pour être convaincu de l'exquise délicatesse des sentiments de Mérimée. Il y a une fleur d'honnêteté qu'un homme ne montre que dans ses relations avec les femmes."¹

Because of his personal understanding of Mérimée's reserved and delicate nature, France can obviously not accept the moral conclusions of his biographer. For Count d'Haussonville, seeking the causes of the melancholy that assailed Mérimée in the last years of his life, thought to have discovered them in his knowledge of a squandered existence which viewed retrospectively left him with the bitter taste of futility rather than contentment. France can see no reason why Mérimée should have entertained such regrets. What had he to repent? In his life he recognised energy as the greatest virtue, passion as an undeniable right:

¹L'Univers Illustré. 25 February 1888.

"Sa tristesse n'était-elle pas plutôt celle du sceptique pour qui l'univers n'est qu'une suite d'images incompréhensibles et qui redoute également la vie et la mort, puisque ni l'une ni l'autre n'a de sens pour lui? Enfin, n'éprouvait-il pas cette amertume de l'esprit et du coeur, châtement inévitable de l'audace intellectuelle, et ne goûtait-il pas jusqu'à la lie ce que Marguerite d'Angoulême a si bien nommé l'ennui commun à toute créature bien née."¹

M. Ernest Seillière who dwells on this passage in La jeunesse d'Anatole France, considers it, and we believe quite rightly, to be a personal confession.² In its fundamental pessimism, Anatole France's view does not differ greatly from the one that he was to develop thirty-two years later in his essay on Stendhal, except that in the later essay his sadness appears to have deepened. In his belief that intellectual melancholy is a burden of distinction, France continues to be the disciple of de Vigny who so profoundly influenced his thought.

If we regret that France paid insufficient attention to the writings of Stendhal and Mérimée and concentrated

¹La Vie littéraire. II. p.55.

²E. Seillière. La jeunesse d'Anatole France. op.cit. p.165.

almost exclusively on their personality, this very characteristic tendency is but one of the many illustrations of his admission: "C'est l'homme et l'homme seulement que je cherche dans l'artiste"¹, and for a student of France there must always be a compensation in the fact that this most subjective of critics, bent on the search of another, blithely and at time quite unconsciously discovers himself.

¹Le Jardin d'Epicure. p.84.

CHAPTER XVI.

A concluding assessment of Anatole France's interpretation of Romanticism.

If we take Anatole France entirely at his word (which is a dangerous thing to do when dealing with a thinker so versatile and contradictory), we must believe that in effect he makes no positive contribution whatsoever towards a better understanding of literature:

"Pour être franc, le critique devrait dire:
- Messieurs, je vais parler de moi à propos de Shakespeare, à propos de Racine, ou de Pascal ou de Goethe."¹

Thus, we are obliged to infer that the numerous literary essays and articles he has left us all converge towards one point: a better understanding of the temperament of Anatole France. It seems that inhibited and misled by doubt and by his very insecure belief that man cannot discover the nature of the exterior world, France tends at all times to belittle his creative accomplishments. To support his contention that his literary criticism are nothing but the expression of his individuality, we would

¹La Vie littéraire. I. Preface p.iv.

have to overlook his numerous studies based on his erudition and on his sound knowledge of historical data. In the present thesis we see that even the essays La jeunesse de Chateaubriand and Lucile, written before his period of fame, are based on careful documentation: Les Mémoires d'outre-tombe, the correspondence of Lucile and Chénodollé etc., and they constitute very clear, objective studies. Anatole France's Alfred de Vigny has a historical significance. It is the first attempt at a complete portrayal of de Vigny and from it derive the numerous scholarly investigations into the life and work of this meditative poet which have appeared from the end of the XIXth century to our day. Nor must we forget that France was the first critic to write the biography and to publish the correspondence of Julie and Jacques Charles. In this respect too he has, by original research, contributed to a better understanding of the life of Lamartine. But in spite of these accomplishments, which we must never overlook, it is true that viewed as a whole, Anatole France's interpretation of French Romanticism represents the expression of an individual temperament that is unique in the history of criticism.

The first and most striking feature revealed by the critical studies we have reviewed in this thesis is that France's benevolent approach to Romanticism is to a great extent a reactionary movement: a violent recoil from

contemporary literary groups which attempt to formulate their aesthetic programme in dogmatic terms. France rejects the Romantic ideal of impersonality, because he holds, and with some foundation, that all would-be Impassives, headed by Leconte de Lisle, reveal nothing but their intimate self. In a more questionable manner, he rejects the Naturalists' detailed and realistic interpretation of life because he feels that they see nothing but its crude and offensive aspects, and Symbolism, he contends, is an attempt at mystification, a proof of obscurity and affectation. Thus Lamartine in his spontaneity and simplicity is judged by France to be as great as the deliberate Leconte de Lisle and is preferred to Jean Moréas. George Sand and her idealistic interpretation of life, Balzac and his creative imagination, are extolled to the detriment of Zola.

In these comparisons, France points to a greater freedom, a welcome naturalness and a superior understanding of literature in his own century. But even when he does not proceed by this dubious method of comparisons, France continues to assert his personal tastes. Amongst all the Romantic writers we have reviewed in the second Part of this study, we see that France is primarily drawn to those with whom he feels a psychological affinity because in their irony and their scepticism, they show themselves to be true descendants of the XVIIIth century. His wholly sympathetic

interpretation of Constant, de Vigny, Stendhal and Mérimée results from their own negative and disillusioned view of the universe. In varying degrees, France tends to observe the personality of these writers, to overstress their disdain, their misanthropy or their nihilism. Even Chateaubriand becomes a human and likeable character when France discovers in Les Mémoires d'Outre-tombe "un orgueil que l'ironie tempère." He seeks in these writers some expression of philosophical irony. He is attracted by those who are affected with him by the melancholy of the intelligence. He is at his most lyrical when he celebrates the 'ennui' of the conscious thinker either as a personal experience or as he thinks to discover it in others. We cannot fail to observe how this tendency has caused him at times to misinterpret Constant and de Vigny, by ignoring in the former Constant's great sincerity as a Liberal, by obscuring in his criticisms of the latter, de Vigny's fundamentally optimistic belief in the progress of mankind through the human effort.

Another characteristic feature of Anatole France's studies on the French Romantics is that his criticisms appear to be neither motivated nor guided by a constant and underlying aesthetic principle. To what extent are the literary criticisms we have reviewed based on a faithful adherence

to a classical ideal? We see that France shows open hostility towards writers who have not proved to be sufficiently modest or retiring, those who by their personality have dominated an epoch: Rousseau who engenders the feminine and emotional current of the Revolution, Chateaubriand whose artificial neo-Catholicism stems for over half a century the traditional pagan sources of French poetry, Hugo the perennial "sonorous echo" ringing in hollow tones in the ears of the disillusioned, hyper-civilised 'fin-de-siècle' generation. France shows himself particularly appreciative of Romantic poetry because poetic form implies concise limits. Amongst the poets, he seeks qualities of naturalness, truth and universality because these are eminently classical traits and above all, he is drawn towards poets such as Lamartine, de Vigny or de Musset who remain in contact with mankind and celebrate common, human aspirations. Hugo dwells in the realms of the excessive and the messianic. In all respects and to an alarming degree, he surpasses the Francian conception of measure. Towards Balzac, France remains extremely wary and frequently stresses copiousness and enormity of vision. But all attempts to define his interpretation of the Romantic writers as a classical interpretation, must break down when we survey his numerous and eloquent tributes to George Sand. For Sand

is the most prolific of writers and in her earlier works, the most unrestrained and imaginative. The truth she presents is a truth so personal and abnormal that in such novels as Indiana, Lélia, or Jacques, she appears to have no contact with the world around her. Her vision, far from being related to the real world, occasionally borders on the surrealist. If France had been content to dwell merely on the Arcadian simplicity and the idyllic qualities of her rustic tales, we should understand his preference but he stresses constantly the beauty of her earlier works. "Je voudrais qu'on les relise tous." There are few modern readers who would not shudder at this implication. His support of George Sand represents the most irrational and emotional aspect of his nature. We are tempted to question his sincerity when he tirelessly contrasts her to Zola but this method of comparison does not appear to be inspired by wilful opportunism. He could have cited other salutary examples, far more appropriate and applicable, to the stalwart exponent of Naturalism. France's articles on Sand are motivated and guided by pure feeling compounded by sentimental recollections of a great-hearted personality, a warm response to her generous and idealised vision of humanity, and a love of the peasantry and of the country-

side from which his ancestry derives.

France has warned us in his expositions of his critical method that we must not seek consistency and must not expect him to maintain a definite position in his approach to literature. It must also be realised that the criticisms of individual Romantic writers assembled in this study are compiled synthetically: many of these are purely verbal and all represent the evolution of his thought in the course of a long and active life-time. The great and insurmountable contradiction in his thought is that he should have condemned Romanticism in sweeping generalisations and yet have shown such great sympathy for a large number of its exponents. This was once noted by a friend as a characteristic idiosyncrasy. "Pendant un dîner en honneur de George Brandès, France excella, malmenant tour à tour et louant le romantisme," recalls Nicolas Ségur.¹ Yet in practically every case, France does maintain a consistent attitude towards a given writer, whether this attitude be negative or appreciative. We must therefore ask ourselves what France has given us (apart from the scholarly efforts previously noted) towards a better knowledge of the Romantic generations. For a critic may form whatever aesthetic judgment he pleases, but the old and undeniable test is: how greatly does he

¹W. Ségur. Conversations avec Anatole France. op.cit. p.67.

stimulate us to some fresh and deeper understanding of a writer?

France frequently tells us that systematic and erudite study are abhorrent to his temperament. His criticisms are occasionally superficial, at other times they are lacking in correctness or justice. But in spite of these defects, France does give us a criticism of value. There are many writers of the Romantic epoch whom France had either encountered directly or associated intimately with the Paris he loved. The remote and aged figures of Chateaubriand, Lamartine, de Vigny, Charles Asselineau, Auguste Vacquerie, he remembered clearly from his early days and there are few portraits to equal the vivid sketches from life that he has left us of these writers. George Sand and de Musset had dwelt at no. 19 Quai Malaquais, the house where he was born. Charles Nodier, he relates in an early article, would stray into his father's bookshop as he waited for the omnibus to the Arsenal.¹ The homes of Balzac and Hugo were familiar landmarks in his ancient city. Because the Romantic writers were the objects of his wide curiosity and his affection - for France does not fail to betray his sentimental affection even for the ones he most condemns - they emerge as vital personalities because they

¹Le Chasseur bibliographe. February 1867. p.36.

live in an emotional manner and live with a startling force in his own mind. Because he is more interested in the personality of writers than in their work, he seeks their moral qualities: sincerity and candour which he finds in all writers of the Romantic period except Chateaubriand, nobility of mind and heart which he stresses in the case of Lamartine, Sand, de Vigny and Mérimée. In his own incomparable manner, he finds the formula which conveys, sometimes by the simple juxtaposition of words, his own personal and emotional conception of these writers, whether he dwells on "le pauvre, grand Rousseau", or Sand, "le grand et naïve amante des choses". He seizes upon the importance of the Romantic authors in their own time but he interprets with even greater precision their posthumous significance and their topical interest for his own generation. Through France, we can discover something of the influence of de Vigny and Hugo in the Parnasse, the importance of the latter as the heroic patriarch of a turbulent century, the development and evolution of early critical studies on Romanticism (studies to which he contributed by research and by encouragement), the historical significance of national ceremonies and tributes to the writers of the previous generations.

No greater harm can be done to France than to designate him as the fore-runner of the host of modern critics who have stressed the barbarian and foreign element bequeathed to French literature by the late XVIIIth and the XIXth centuries. He interprets literary Romanticism as an eminently national and French accomplishment and shows himself to be well-versed in the works of the Romantic period. We have in the course of this study indicated many passages where France echoes thoughts, emotions, phrases and rhythms inspired by Romantic literature and as he ranges from exotic descriptions to Satanism and to the expression of infinite, indeterminate longing, he is not always successful in concealing his sources. The world of the future which Anatole France apprehended towards the end of the 1914-18 war would place, he knew, a very different set of values on the writers of his century. An extract from a letter written in 1917 to M. Jules Couët, the librarian of the Comédie française, reveals how firmly he believed the Romantic writers to be an inherent part of the French cultural tradition:

"Les jeunes gens que je vois tiennent Baudelaire et Verlaine pour des anciens et ne distinguent rien au delà. Vos romantiques se perdent pour eux dans la nuit des temps. Il n'y a plus ni tradition, ni culture; cette guerre a tué le génie français et je meurs au seuil de la barbarie."¹

¹The letter sent from La Béchellerie on the 25th June 1917 is quoted by J. Suffel. Anatole France. op.cit. p.354.