The Genius of the French.*

A new book with the title "The French Procession: A Pageant of Great Writers," is certainly promising; dedication and a prefatory letter to Vernon Lee give almost a pledge of that rarest of intellectual treats, a literary *causerie;* the author's name is a guarantee of good work. We in America have long known Mary F. Robinson as a writer whose poetry has a sure though narrow appeal; we know also that as Mrs. James Darmesteter her interpretation of French history has been scholarly and vivid; now, as Madame DuClaux, this Englishwoman with long French affiliations is fully equipped to present what she calls the "literature of a great nation, in its vast succession and continuity, as it passes down the ages." This literature, she says, "appears as a spectacle, a progress, a pageant, wherein every figure is not only a marvel but the embodiment of a whole invisible plexus of secret influences, ideas, traditions, and revolts." Gladly does the reader take a position with the author on her balcony, which she calls "the watch-tower of a tranquil mind," to look on this pageant—"the continuous genius of a people."

A glance at the table of contents, which serves as a telescope to sweep the whole procession into our ken, shows the great divisions of the progress—"In the Distance," "The Romantics," "The Sons of Science." The first division permits a promiscuous grouping. Here are poet, king, scientist, mystic, rebel, in due range. How shall we come close to the spirit of the French nation, if those we look upon differ so markedly in temperament as Fénelon and Voltaire? We listen to the overture to the march in the essay on French Poetry, eager for a clue to the line of thought we are to busy ourselves with as this varied company troops past us. But this overture, though strong and fine, is found to have little relation to what follows. In the entire company there are but five poets—Ronsard, Racine, Victor Hugo, Alfred De Musset, and Beaudelaire,—and these are so distantly scattered in the procession as to lack impressiveness. We must be satisfied, then, with this essay as a comment on French Poetry; for of these five poets only Racine is closely described. Some may think he is given more than his due; others may feel that Villon is more representative of the early modern French spirit than Ronsard, and that Paul Verlaine is more typical of later French poetry than Beaudelaire.

Accepting them, however, as chosen, Madame DuClaux, in interpreting these poets as part of the "continuous genius of the French," shows herself to be more of a biographer than critic. Victor Hugo will not be made clearer to an English reader by the mass of personal detail which in nowise explains his poetry. Alfred De Musset is enmeshed in his amorous intrigues, till the fair soul of the hapless youth seems lost in a maze of gossip. Beaudelaire is not keenly defined as a decadent; and being here in the rank of the poets, he gains no laurels for his beautiful prose. In spite of Madame DuClaux's avowal of allegiance to French poetry, there is reason to doubt its warmth. True, France has no such poets as England; but the French themselves feel no lack in their poetry. From infancy they lisp it in the fables of Fontaine; in early youth they are well grounded in the sen-

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timent of Lamartine and in the wit of Molière. As for Victor Hugo, he is by acclamation the very "genius" of French poetry. But it is just this subtle genius we do not get from mere biographical data. It is well, after looking at these poets, who are far apart in other ways than in this procession, to read again Madame DuClaux's introductory essay on French Poetry, and thus be assured that her feeling for the subject is sincere and even noble.

Not only is the treatment of the poets of the pageant unsatisfactory, that of the great prose writers of France is even more so; for it is through French prose that English readers may best discern the French spirit. Hence one resents a broad inclusion of minor influences in French thought, when these might better give way to the originative forces that have given French literature, in so many aspects, an unquestionable superiority. Voltaire, Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, and Anatole France fill large places in French literature; but do they vitally cohere without Rabelais and Montaigne? Here was an excellent opportunity to define the "continuous genius" of the French people — a genius for satire, for urbane discursiveness, for social insight, for subduing the whole realm of thought and (as with Balzac) of passion, to rhythmic order, to stable congruity; above all, a genius for what might be called *literary consecration*. Any of this group is typical of this one phase of French literary biography — none more so than Voltaire; yet Madame DuClaux allows Professor Lanson to say the only vital thing about Voltaire, a man in whom meet so many tendencies of the French mind — keenness, criticism, a zeal for human progress even when deriding the steps thereto, a passionate interest in the things of the mind independent of race or religion, a catholic intellectuality. Goldsmith's description of him defending English literature in a hostile company symbolizes Voltaire's attitude toward all literature. His impatience of Congreve, for wishing to be thought an English gentleman rather than a writer of witty comedies, suggests the difference between the literary spirit of France and of England. The French subordinate life to literature; the English use literature for some gain in life.

Balzac, whose conquest of literature is Napoleonic, whose *Comédie Humaine* expresses in its very title the French genius for social interpretation, has made but little impression upon Madame DuClaux. In this, as in so much of her book, she is busied with what is adventitious in a man's life, and not with what is essential in his art. She admits that Balzac created the modern novel, and then denies any meaning in this honor by ranking him with Sir Walter Scott. The man who saw society and saw it whole, who caught the secret of passion as it affects life, and of money as a passion, and of vocational success as it is thwarted by or rises superior to either sex or money, has no affinity with Walter Scott. Fortunately, Madame Du Claux saves herself from total error in her estimate of Balzac by a real appreciation of some of his qualities; but his splendid achievement — so all-inclusive, so integrated, so startling in insight, that his name comes to mean life — needs a connotation other than this. So too does Balzac's critic enemy, Sainte-Beuve, who did for French literature what the novelist did for French life — grasped it entire and gave it new meaning, teaching any critic who comes after him that he must know not only literature but history and philosophy in their relation to the individual writer. Madame Du Claux is not a vital literary critic, and therefore does not do justice to the greatest of critics. She does, however, approach something like real critical acumen in her study of Anatole France, whom she discriminatingly contrasts with Maurice Barrès in a few large generalizations which are worth more as criticism than whole pages of intimate gossip.

Madame DuClaux's interest in French history is keen; her ability to trace the undercurrents, to point out the depths and shallows of its wayward course, is sure. It is only fair to give all possible credit to the part of the pageant in which men of historical significance appear. The placing of Louis Quatorze in relation to the spirit of his time is excellent. Rousseau has perhaps never been so thoroughly presented within the small compass of an essay. One may question the right of LaClos and Liancourt to be in this august assembly; but being here, they are amply accounted for. The interpretation of "The Sons of Science" is also illuminating. Whether they are real scientists like Fontenelle, or those who, like Ernest Renan and Hippolyte Taine, applied a scientific method to the study of religion and literature, their part in the procession is made brilliant and convincing. In fact, there is a tendency throughout these discussions to make philosophy and science, as developed by the French, their real genius; whereas the genius of the French is distinctively literary, and everything else is subordinate to this. And because of this literary power

they bear away the palm for movements and measures they did not originate. John Locke anticipated Rousseau's educational doctrine, just as Richardson had anticipated much of the sentimentality of "La Nouvelle Héloïse"; but Rousseau alone possessed the magic of the winged word to blow his truth about the world. He had the power of the angel voice to trumpet his message till it toppled the throne of kings. German theologians pointed out the necessity of Hebrew philology in the history of religion before Ernest Renan. They lacked Renan's sweet reasonableness in proving this; hence Renan is read and the Germans are forgotten. Even Fénelon's lessons to the Duc de Bourgogne are cast in artistic form. Frenchmen, whether scientists, scholars, reformers, or critics, are writers above all else, and form is the priceless wedding-garment which singles them out at the feast of things intellectual. The quality of this form is what we should most wish to see when all these types are massed as a Pageant of Great Writers. But our guide, intellectually alert as she is, forgot this in attending to much which, though creditable to her learning, is not closely according to her initial programme.

No degree of attention to philosophy and science as an expression of the French spirit can keep one from looking, as this pageant passes, for a persistent element in French history and letters — a line of notable women. By the promise made of a literary review in the preface, Madame de Maintenon has a more legitimate right among the choice and master spirits of her age than Louis XIV. She had a finer influence upon Madame DuClaux's favorite, Racine. Madame de Sévigné had a quality of the French spirit beautiful to know. By a perverse selection, we have a paper on "Goethe in France," though the very logic of the subject demands that we see how France went well equipped to Goethe when Madame de Staël was gathering material for her *De l'Allemagne*. The only woman observable from the tower is George Sand, and she is so trivially exhibited that her place might well have been given to Flaubert, who loved to call her master. The enthusiastic Sandist, will resent Madame DuClaux's airing of unpleasant facts which in no way affect the fine imagination of that unique force in literature. There are two essays on George Sand, and scarcely a word about her literary fecundity, her fine idyllic sense, her aptitude for an intellectual comradeship so helpful to Balzac in his precarious career, to Sainte-Beuve's simple life of reading and writing, and to Flaubert in his sullen isolation. The varied gifts of George Sand should not be ignored, even by an Englishwoman. Both Elizabeth Barrett and George Eliot were glad to acknowledge their indebtedness to her. Literature itself has been enriched by her love of the picturesque, her large feeling for things human, her ease and grace in writing. She belongs truly to the French genius.

And what is this genius? Is it not a matchless sincerity toward art, and toward literature as the greatest art? This sincerity is their inspiration to an almost superhuman industry in acquiring a style adequate to every form of expression. Style — that is the gift of the French. It is not in their literature alone, but in their whole range of life, — in their delicate food, their ornate clothing, their fine speech, their distinguished manners, their superb capital which in itself is a glory of art.

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