

"DEGENERATION" IN BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

BY LEWIS PLAGET SHANKS

WE have many books on Anatole France, but we had to wait until the appearance of Professor Cerf's *Degeneration of a Great Artist* in order to enjoy "the first comprehensive account in English."¹ For Mr. May's official biography was deficient because it was published a few months before the master's death, and all other works fail to include his last book. These works are not cited here, for comprehensiveness need not mean an otiose amassing of sources.

It is eminently fitting that a Latin genius should be indicted by a critic who has the perspective of a different nationality, although he did take from Gaul a mental habitation and a name. And Professor Cerf, already known for a simplified French method, invests his criticism with the grace of a Rousseauistic simplicity. "A wide-awake son questions his father constantly and skeptically: What is the good of this? To what is it leading me? If we put the boy's questions to Anatole France, the answer is far from satisfactory. . . . France would retort, as everyone knows, that they lead nowhere because there is nowhere to which they might lead, life being nothing but unintelligible flux. This may all be very well in theory but it will not do in practice because we must move in some direction as long as we live whether there is anywhere to go or not and we want to know in what direction we are moving." So nine-tenths of this volume indicates where we are going if we read Anatole France.

Not that Professor Cerf says it outright, for in diction as in critical ideals the book is ethical. The jacket's superscription: "Now it can be told" is only a catchword, immediately corrected by the assurance that the author "is not concerned with scandal. But"—continues the publisher—"he exposes the sensuality and laziness

¹Anatole France, *The Degeneration of a Great Artist*, by Barry Cerf, Professor in Reed College, Oregon. The Dial Press, 1926. Price \$4.

of France's character and their effect upon his work." And Professor Cerf's "withering criticism" quite carries out this promise, up to the final bibliography proving that France wrote less than fifty volumes in forty years.

So no indiscreet revelations mar the thirty comprehensive pages given to the master's life and career. Yet it contains things novel and hitherto unpublished. No other biographer states that France's name was Thibaut and not Thibault, as he used to sign it. A writer in *L'Illustration* explained about four years ago that France's first book was only a school-exercise calligraphed on stone to provide copies for relatives and friends, but here it seems that it was "privately printed." Most of us thought that "Mr." Turquet-Milnes was a woman, and that Rousseau's "friend Lemaitre" had a different name. We seemed to remember that Anatole France's daughter was Clotilde and not Suzzane, and that she married Ernest Psichari and not Michel. We felt that the three volumes of *Romans Cabalistiques* in *Les Voyages imaginaires* of 1787 alone justified that part of *La Rôtisserie* dealing with "the crazy alchemist d'Astarac", which finds no approval with this student of comparative literature. But when he sums up *Le Lys rouge* as "a study of the ravages of sensuality in the haut monde (p. 25)" and continues: "This great human virtue," we know that this can only be a *lapsus typhothetae*. For despite its title the whole book follows the laudable motto: *Maxima reverentia debetur puero*; hence it omits to reveal how the incidents of his life made France degenerate.

Furnished with all the facts of France's life and literary career, we now take up the 260 pages of criticism. The first and longest chapter is "The Sensualist", which brings us at once to the heart of the matter. "Anatole France, skeptic, apostle of disillusion, prophet of nihilism, enjoyed a singularly happy, serene and successful career. . . ." and "though he was much more convinced than most of us that living is a tragic absurdity, he was not more ready than we to disappear into nothingness." This is appalling. Professor Cerf concedes that all cynics can not be expected to commit suicide, but adds "we feel a little cheated if they expend their genius to make us hate existence while loving it themselves more passionately than we did even before we listened to them." Surely France himself never crushed an opponent with a weightier paradox, nor more delightfully described the adventures of his soul in the midst of masterpieces.

Then Professor Cerf solves his riddle by alleging his author's intense love of life. "Anatole France loved life even in its brutality. . . . He loved it especially for its sensuality. . . . But many more may follow him in his reconciliation with life through the charms of sensuality. One infers this means that many more may follow him "in neglecting the last step in his logical development"—the suicide of the Stoics, whose ideals are here so highly praised. Yet reading this author made Professor Cerf hate existence, and hatred of life often results in its renunciation. Thus Anatole France is indeed dangerous, for his readers may either commit suicide or be reconciled to life—events equally abhorrent to sound moralistic criticism.

Sound, and judicious too, because the critic concedes that "it is no longer permissible to denounce sensuality without qualification." Persuaded by him that "in sensuality there is a satyr as well as a nymph", the reader can now limit his pursuit to the latter alone. But he learns no more about this innocuous nymph: as with the "emotions above the reason" of a greater critic, her image flees like the vision in *L'après-midi d'un faune*. We only see that she is not that refuge from a materialistic reality bestowed by reading or writing; for "it is doubtful if any greater writer or any worthy reader ever looked upon art as a means of escape from life." Thus Professor Cerf, for if "the sound critic censured the excess of aestheticism in the nineties, his successor censures the excess of didacticism of to-day."

After all there is no disquieting novelty about the creed that "Art has always been a criticism of life", and certainly Sylvestre Bonnard, Jérôme Coignard, Bergeret and Crainquebille offer no criticism of life worth setting beside the brief list of books praised by Professor Cerf. For to the philosophers, dramatists and moralists of antiquity he adds the traditional classics Bacon, Shakespeare, Pascal, Burke, Dr. Johnson, Goethe, Joubert and Matthew Arnold. The last name might show why he finds France "no central and important philosophy of life and no real seriousness." No, there is nothing of that in France's early faith in science, nor his skeptical credo in *L'humaine tragédie*, nor in his Pyrrhonic apologia, here cited: "I have believed at least in the relativity of things and in the succession of phenomena."

Clearly Anatole France lacked the seriousness dear to Arnold and did not sup with his band on sweetness and light, among the Olympians. He was one "who sees nothing in life worth attaching

oneself to except curiosity and sensuality"; he was even "an incomplete humanist, because he lacks seriousness." The humanist seeks Truth; not finding it, France could never have sought it seriously. "The style of his work shows a concern for beauty, but of truth he has little to offer us." And even that little had a pernicious effect. For "in his later novels and in his socialistic propaganda, he is so bent upon the establishment of social and economic truths as he sees them that the beauty which he formerly found in life and things is no longer his primary love." His disintegration seems to be a resultant of his pursuit of truth!

He does not identify beauty and truth, like Plato, Arnold and his critic. This is part of "his lack of seriousness, a deficiency which is likely to prove fatal to an artist" in the lapse of time. Professor Cerf, whose own honesty is evident in his candid acceptance of France's statement that he is "totally lacking in imagination", and who admits "that in the study of Anatole France it is difficult for me to discriminate reality and pose" (let us read irony), shows us why future readers will not tolerate the man. "People who must live in the world, and cannot retire with France to pleasant seclusion, are sometimes nettled when he derides them."

Then on page 136 he sums up the degeneration of France from his primitive sentimentality. "As he grew to manhood, his strong sensual impulse, unspoiled at first, dictated the direction in which his sentimentality was to go, and allied it with aesthetic esotericism . . . the current of the time made of him a dilettante and a skeptic and transformed the harmless sensualist of the *Voces corinthiennes* and the soft sentimentalist of *Sylvestre Bonnard* . . . into the cynical and scabrous chronicler of the *Ile des pingouins*, the *Dieux out soif* and the *Révolte des anges*. . . . It must have been lack of will and character in the man which led to his philosophy of life."

It must have been. Later we find that "there really never was a change in France", he only suffered from an inner conflict between a skeptical head and a sentimental heart,—a struggle any serious man can of course avoid. This explains his socialism. But even in that he was not serious, though he went about speaking at meetings; for anyone knows that really serious socialists indulge in dreadful things.

For lack of seriousness, then, Anatole France simply degenerated. And the lesson is carried into the chapter on his "Romantic" style. "He lacks fatally the virility and fire of classic literature.

No man could possess such qualities who had no convictions and believed in nothing except soft pleasures and the flux of things. France loved sensual subjects, but that uneasy perturbation, akin to sensual excitation which the sensitive person and even many others rougher and coarser feel continually while reading him, proceeds even more perhaps from his style than from his subject."

His style did not degenerate: "he never ceased to write with great skill, but more and more he makes sacrifices to the god of irony." And Professor Cerf does not like irony "in season and out of season": he is justifiably perplexed: "there is always lurking in the mind of the reader the suspicion he is tricking him." "One is jaded finally; one searches for relief in a volume of straightforward prose." Professor Cerf does not like sarcasm either: Abbé Coignard's comparison of man to the gorilla sticks in his throat, and he chokes over the aspersion more often and more violently than a fundamentalist.

In short, the reader feels that Professor Cerf found a hard task in tracing the Degeneration of an Artist who never ceased to write with great skill. Turning the leaves of his stimulating study, we sympathise with him for toiling through those forty-five volumes, summed up in his epigraph as "heavy lightness and serious vanity." *Hoc opus, hic labor erat*, and without reward. For "the ironist who, like France, spares no person and no thing, attacks good, bad and indifferent, friend and foe, mocks at the whole world and all that it contains, including himself and his works, all to no serious purpose, may be diverting, but he cannot be important."

His reward could only be incidental. "Anatole France", he tells us, "affords his readers that most agreeable of all sensations—the sense of superiority to one's neighbors." Perhaps too a disciple of Arnold might find a certain joy in judging a foreign writer who has baffled him, and to whom he has soberly addressed the reproach that stupid Mme. Bergeret made to her husband: "I don't understand you, Lucian. You laugh at things that are not laughable, and one never knows whether you are joking or serious."