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# Reception Address to the French Academy

*Gentlemen,*

THE very first words one addresses to the Academy always have a special ring of truth. It is quite remarkable that a speech dictated by custom, a formal acknowledgment which could easily succumb to well-turned, empty compliments, should invariably induce in the speaker the selfsame feeling he utters, a state of pure and perfect sincerity. At this singular point in one's existence, when for a moment one stands facing this Company before becoming a part of it, all our reasons for being modest, which are so frequently torpid and submerged, come forcefully alive. We are moved to appraise ourselves more severely than did the Academy. We feel we are of no weight. Our works seem a mere pinch of dust; and here, on the edge of your gathering, deeply sensible of all I owe to your good favor, I cannot but take stock of myself and conclude that miracles do happen.

You have readily accorded me the high honor of occupying among you one of the seats which so many supremely gifted men have had to spend long years coveting, and not a few of the very greatest, and most deserving, have waited an entire lifetime in vain. I should not be human, gentlemen, if this inescapable reflection did not prompt me to compare, in some fashion, my own with the destiny of others. The past takes hold of the present and I feel hemmed in by ghosts I cannot fail to mention. The dead have but one last resort:

the living. Our thoughts are their only access to the light of day. They who have taught us so much, who seem to have bowed out for our sake and forfeited to us their advantages, ought by all rights to be reverently summoned to our memories and invited to drink a draught of life through our words. It is but just and natural that, at the present moment, my memories should beckon to me, that my mind should be, as it were, revisited by a host of deceased friends and masters whose encouragement and whose perceptions by degrees guided me to where I stand. To many of these deceased I am indebted for being the man, such as he is, whom you have found worthy of election; and to friendship, I owe nearly everything.

It will come as no surprise to you that I single out from among so many dear and respected absent ones, whose presence is so vivid to me, the charming and serious face of your beloved colleague, M. René Boylesve, one of several academicians who persuaded me that I ought to consider the prospect of joining you one day, and who, devising the present occasion for me, sought with evident success to persuade you to feel well disposed toward my candidacy.

When Boylesve and I were together we would often talk about our literary beginnings, comparing our very different recollections of the time when we first met. It so happens that in those days our green enthusiasms, our ideals, our exemplars, our fetishes and infatuations had differed rather widely, for Boylesve had always been cool and level-headed. In a spirit of friendship we would rehearse our former differences just as formerly we had, in much the same spirit, acknowledged them. In the end we would always make common cause, as people who are not getting any younger are wont to do, in nostalgia for our irrecoverable youth. Though

nothing could be more commonplace than bemoaning what is gone, never was it more reasonable to do so, for the era of our youth and vigor had vanished not as it usually does, by imperceptible degrees, but died a violent death; it can only be glimpsed beyond gigantic events. The world that reared us into life and thought is a world now in ashes. We live as best we can among its disordered ruins, ruins that are themselves incomplete, ruins that threaten ruin, placing us in oppressive and formidable circumstances where the fading image of our past seems sweeter and more charming than it would, if time in its imperceptible course had quietly stolen away some tens of years from us.

So violent was this upheaval and so relentless the pressure exerted on men's minds, that a new literature emerged which was radically different from its antecedents. Living in 1890 or thereabouts, one was surrounded by quite another and much simpler pattern of ideas and ambitions. The republic of letters, in every generation raising and brandishing its many divergent mirrors before the world, no longer has the same ways or the same temperament it once had. Then, the various persuasions and sects were more mutually exclusive than nowadays. A youth trying his hand at writing and at the outset losing his way, dazzled as he might well have been by contemporary works and ideas, still lost no time discerning which parties and doctrines were dividing up the present and vying for the future. Before long, in that intellectual amphitheatre whose tiers rise from obscurity to fame, he would have had no trouble deciding on which side his preferences lay. In those days every faction of literary politics had its headquarters and arsenal. There were still two banks to the Seine, and from these enemy emplacements came the tattle of salons and the clamor of

cafés; certain studios bubbled over with a frothy mixture of all the arts. One garret even gained renown, and such was its fertility that it became the only garret in the world capable of giving birth to an Academy, which complements its elder so well that we ought, you will agree, gentlemen, to pay tribute in passing to its distinction and talent.

Categories have ceased to be as tidy as they were in the age of our innocence. Purposes and systems used to clash with greater precision. The entire literary population arranged itself in a few tribes, according to the naïve laws of opposites which pitted art against nature, the beautiful against the true, thought against life, the new against the old. Each of these tribes had its incontestable leader, by which I mean a leader whose authority was contested, if at all, by someone waving the same banner.

Naturalism carried the day under Emile Zola. Grouped round the august figure of Leconte de Lisle, the Parnassian poets practiced rhyming as a rigorous art. In the forefront stood a mixed group, both smiling and pensive, whose influence far surpassed its numbers: the philosophers or moralists, some with severe, even gloomy dispositions, others so fond of irony as to have made of it a universal method, judging, anatomizing, and scoffing at everything on earth as in heaven.

I believe that, of all these ideologues, critics, theoreticians, humanists bred on philosophy, history, and exegesis, invoking the great names of Renan and Taine, not one missed being elected to the Academy.

Zola, Leconte de Lisle, Taine, or Renan: with these few names one could take one's bearings in the tumult of doctrines and personalities. Herein lies the usefulness of great men. Just as famous names are posted at street corners

to tell us where we are, so these stand as guideposts at the major crossroads and many intermediate points of our intellectual memory. Fame thus ceases to be inane; it serves some purpose if it takes on the nature of a symbol and a useful convention in the general mind.

But these victorious schools, these constellations of writers, as they approached their zenith, began to exhaust the energy that had enabled them to rise. Their virtues and arguments ran dry, since most virtues are combative: in winning they are lost. So far as our arguments are concerned, they are for the most part projectile weapons good only for a single throw. Once they had come into their own, Naturalism and Parnassus fell an easy prey to inertia; it was not apparent to them that the only way out of an apogee is down. No young man drawn to letters could doubt—it would have been to doubt himself—that all sorts of extraordinary innovations were brewing in the brightest heads of his generation. Youth is a natural prophet, being what will one day be.

The intellectual air began to vibrate audibly with voices diverse and surprising, singing songs hitherto unheard, with the murmur of a deeply mysterious forest whose whisperings, echoes, and occasionally menacing or portentous gibberings seemed to distress or at least to mock at the reigning powers who, little by little, became secretly persuaded of their imminent downfall. At an age when we ourselves have barely begun to exist we are uncannily aware of the gaps and flaws in what exists already. A throng of short-lived publications, strange lampoons, pamphlets whose contents were startling to the eye, the ear, the mind, appeared and disappeared. Groups were born, died, were reborn, merged or split, testifying to the oceanic vitality submerged in the

literature-to-be. I shall not pretend that the pleasure of behaving unconventionally, sometimes with intent to shock, did not motivate some among us. It was a role we assumed quite readily, that of the literary demon hard at work in his dark haunts tormenting the vernacular tongue, torturing the poetic line, ripping off its lovely rhymes and capital letters, stretching it to inordinate lengths, corrupting its orderly ways, making it drunk on unwonted mixtures of sound.

But, however severely we have been indicted in the past for our assaults, for our strange depredations, it should be borne in mind that we could not have acted otherwise. Men are compelled by circumstances to invent whatever they invent. Denunciations are so many expedients countering other expedients. They are delivered by judges who cannot know our feelings from the inside. Severity is necessarily shallow.

How could we help but be pervaded by the spirit of our age, rich as it was in discoveries, bold in its undertakings, an age which has seen science translated into a tool, and seen the descriptive or contemplative attitude yield to the will to power, the creation of mighty means of action. It is an age that consistently flies in the face of man's observances and has, within a few years, transformed his ways and revised his sensibilities. It requires that we continually adapt ourselves, and we do, to new realities which, with a rapidity and thoroughness by now familiar to us, affect every phase of our lives, our status in time and space no less than our tastes and projects. What takes place one day in some obscure laboratory will, by the next, have had repercussions throughout the human economy.

No tradition could survive this riot of innovations unless by some stratagem. An age that leaves nothing unquestioned,

that lives for experiments and sees room for improvement everywhere, that cannot but view everything as provisional and of provisional value—such an age does not make for stability in the arts and letters. The mentality that strives to make improvements does not strive for perfection. Improvement is one thing, perfection quite another. Moreover, altering the face of a page of writing is no great feat when the entire earth and whole cities are undergoing such extraordinary and radical changes.

Romanticism had already thoroughly stirred up the intellectual world, but the romantic rebel shaped himself in the movement of political violence that characterized the nineteenth century; something of the heat and dramatic frenzy of our revolutions rubbed off on his bearing and language. There was a hue and cry for freedom in the various forms and expressions of art.

The young people whom I knew, on the other hand, or at least those who had something in their souls to risk and to probe, were given rather to the kind of enthusiasm for experimenting, to the appetite for well thought-out innovations, daring solutions, and combinations that have made our science and technique what they are: great and phenomenal tools whose creations eclipse those of the imagination which, envious of these concrete marvels, has begun increasingly to look to them for inspiration.

Unavoidably the boldest experiments had to be tried, and any vestiges of the traditional or the conventional in art had to come under pitilessly close scrutiny. The chief concern in our quarter was to restore the natural laws of the music of poetry, isolating poetry itself from all elements foreign to its essence, gaining a more precise idea of the artistic means and possibilities at our disposal through a

fresh consideration and study of vocabulary, syntax, prosody, and imagery. Not all of us followed this line of thought, some preferring to trust their sensibilities, whose dictates they elaborated ad infinitum; but together we formed a literary movement more wracked by philosophy, more curious about science, more given to reasoning, yet more deeply animated by a mystical passion for knowledge and beauty than any other in the annals of French literature. It was inevitable that investigations so odd and, withal, so bold should produce difficult or disconcerting works.

This had the remarkable effect of creating a deep rift within cultivated society. Between patrons of the kind of beauty that puts up no resistance and lovers of another kind of beauty whose favors are given only if they are won; between those who conceived of literature as an art providing immediate enjoyment and those who sought above all some exquisite and intense expression of their souls and of the world, to be garnered at any price, a kind of abyss opened up, but an abyss bridged by mutual scoffing and taunts: the sort of signals everyone understands. The adepts were decried, laughed at. Opposition arose to the idea of an essentially arcane poetry. Its followers were dubbed initiates, and they found this designation to their liking.

Some had forgotten but others would have had the presence of mind to answer that all human fermentations, all schools and even the world's great religions have always begun as tiny coteries, cells long closed and impenetrable, proud to be flouted, and hoarding their private visions. At the heart of these secret societies new ideas would survive their delicate infancy, growing from germ into a body of thought. Friendship, sympathy, and certain feelings held in common, the unhampered exchange of hopes and discoveries,

the recognition in one another of a kindred point of view the stronger for being shared, and, in some instances, mutual admiration: all these are the rare and perhaps elementary conditions for any intellectual resurgence. These little chapels where minds expand, these enclosures where the tone grows heated, and values inflated, serve as real laboratories for literature. There can be no doubt, gentlemen, that the public as a whole has every right to the regular and proven products of literary industry; but industry, to advance, must frequently be willing to grope, to make daring hypotheses, and even carry daring to a fault; and only laboratories can provide the intense heat, the extremely rare reactions, the degree of enthusiasm without which the sciences and the arts would be relegated to an all too predictable future.

Such were our literary coteries in that day and age. The young man that I was some forty years ago, under the spell of our pure and maligned poets and yet wavering at the threshold of their disturbing literature, which he heard denounced on all sides as mad and fraught with danger, sensed in the air of his time the same excitement, the same emotional state that charges a concert hall as the orchestra tunes up, each instrument seeking the note for itself and singing out, as it were, alone. It is a musical commotion delighting the soul it pierces, a chaos of hopes, an innocent state that is inherently short-lived; yet this living turmoil has something more universal, perhaps more philosophical about it than any symphony conceivable, incorporating as it does all conceivable symphonies, or suggestions of them all. It combines in its single presence the multiple future. It prophesies.

Intoxicated, shaken by these many promises, the budding poet grew amenable to the peculiarities of his age, allowing

himself, like Parsifal—motionless yet moving—to be charmed into the boundless temple of Symbolism.

Meanwhile those wise and staunch divinities who see to it that our literature never deteriorates in some sudden and definitive way nor dozes for long out of sheer boredom with its own perfection had already formed and decked with laurel the very man needed to salvage, from the confusion of different idioms, some few of those graces once common among our purest authors. They had in no way suffered from prolonged disuse. Their revival came as a relief to a public half expecting some such event, and the man responsible for it swiftly and easily advanced to the front rank of his literary generation, distinguishing himself by a great adroitness in the time-honored devices of art, by a kind of caution or restraint rare, even bold, in an age given to impulsive ventures whose charm and merit he keenly perceived, gentlemen, though not so keenly as he did their weaknesses, their excesses, and their shortcomings. Without anyone's knowing when it came about, he acquired the aura and prestige of a classic, among all the aiders and abettors of a scandalously fresh beauty that found in him its most polished antagonist.

The public could not thank my illustrious predecessor enough for giving them water in the desert. By contrast with the highly complex and explosive styles being developed on all sides, the measured cadences of his writing proved mildly and agreeably surprising. It was as though fluency, clarity, and simplicity, the patron goddesses of the average man, had returned to earth. Those who prefer the sort of writing that gives them pleasure without requiring much thought took an immediate fancy to his work, whose seductive charm lay in its totally unaffected appearance,

whose limpidity sometimes allowed a deeper thought, but nothing to mystify; his work remains, however, unfailingly readable, if not always wholly reassuring. He perfected the art of brushing lightly over the most serious ideas and problems. Nothing in his books gives the least difficulty unless it be the wonder itself of encountering none.

What could be more precious than the delectable illusion, created by such clarity, that we are enriching ourselves with ease, deriving pleasure without pain, comprehending without giving our attention, enjoying a free show?

Blessed are those writers who relieve us of the burden of thought and who dextrously weave a luminous veil over the complexity of things. Alas, gentlemen, there are others, whose existence must be deplored, who have elected to strike out in the opposite direction. They have placed toil of the mind in the way of its pleasures. They offer us riddles. Such creatures are inhuman.

Your great colleague, gentlemen, being less naïve about man, did not have this exaggerated confidence in the virtues of his reader, in his zeal and patience. Moreover, his courtesy was such that the ideas he dared to utter were never unaccompanied by the smile that withdrew them. There were good reasons why his elegance did not in any way impair his renown, which, as you know, soared to prodigious heights within a very few years. It soon became apparent that this renown, so inconspicuously acquired, had made him one of the most famous men of his time, and it was difficult not to admire this bantering genius for playing his way into parity with the reigning giants of European letters. He succeeded in adding to the massive and often brutal works of these men, so powerful in their time—the Tolstoys, the Zolas, the Ibsens—the leaven of his own works, in which he

was content to ruffle dangerously what the others seized and shook with all their might, namely, the structure of our society and its customs.

I do not pretend, gentlemen, that it lies within my competence to give you an adequate portrayal of so considerable a man, having seen him only once, briefly, whereas most of you still carry a vivid image of him in your minds.

More than likely I shall miss the truth about him as a person and even as an artist. You must sense, moreover, how unequal I feel to the role of replacing a talent such as his, and how brazen in attempting this portrait of him. When it became clear that I would have to prepare such a eulogy, I realized what a formidable task was facing me. "What a splendid subject!" people exclaimed, which made me reflect that one can founder on even the most admirable reef.

Though a eulogy, gentlemen, draws its essence only from the flower of a man's life, and though it must not belabor the truth it advances, the act of writing it is necessarily animated by a strong and almost solemn sense of justice.

Even as we deliberate over the words we are to utter here about the man whose chair we inherit, we cannot help but feel tormented by the particular judgment we must pass on the deceased, weighing it on our conscience before we can isolate and arrange its finest conclusions and most admirable themes. We may indeed control the light that plays upon our model, but how are we to go about grasping the man himself? How does one form a clear idea of him? What basis have I for an equitable judgment of someone I never knew?

There is certainly no lack of records, opinions, witnesses. Everyone is talking at once. No sooner did the great man die than the image he sought to give of himself, disarmed of his living presence, began, like his flesh, to decay. Death leaves

the dead man defenseless against the image of what he was. Reverential fears vanish. Tongues turn loose. Mischievous memories give vent to their anecdotes (which, you may be sure, are sufficiently savory); they swarm over the character of the departed, devouring whatever merits or virtues they can manage to unearth. Nothing can be more falsifying to the truth than its fragments; each fragment implants itself within the mind and soon becomes a full-grown impostor. The mind of man being incapable of preserving the truth whole and entire, even those who claim to possess it are never so immune to rancor or delight in idle talk as to escape being either piously false or slanderously true.

It is not unheard of for a dead celebrity to become a prey to a school of dangerous friends and anecdotic demons who lecture us on his perishable part. It is the curse of great men, gentlemen, that their fame allots them a second death: they die first as men, then as great men. One would think that the chief consideration for some people was the fact that a man did not measure up to the popular image of himself, whereas what we should consider is something that affects all mankind: that he did contribute to our sense of the dignity of letters and the mind. We have to realize that men are men, so much so that, stripped bare, we would not dare look at one another—each of us, given our obvious equality of faults, dejectedly settling for his own, in silence.

Let us then, gentlemen, wait out the bickering that inevitably rages for a time around fresh graves: let us keep our eyes on the gold that sparkles beneath the ashes.

Through the manifold excellence of his works, the variety and astonishing range of his culture, the consummate freedom of his mind, your colleague rose from a modest situation to

one of the most brilliant, his labors, talents, and destiny guiding him from the grayish dawn that lit his beginnings to the dazzling twilight of his later years.

While musing upon this existence, whose progress was so smooth, upon this career pursued so confidently, at a pace unhurried enough to allow for all sorts of diversions along the way, I could not help but compare the orchestration of such a life with a few of those that could have been lived only a long time ago when nearly all men of intellect and even of wit wore the cloth, their conservative and scholarly intelligence being virtue enough to secure, even for those of humble birth, admittance to the highest circles. Accomplished humanists, metaphysicians thinly veiled in theology, renowned students of Plato, Lucretius and Virgil, figures half literary, half voluptuary, devoutly artistic, and only philosophically of the priesthood, all became cardinals at last, and once established, surrounded themselves with the loveliest shards of pagan antiquity; they were singular and attractive figures belonging to an age that is no longer, when the Church could still tolerate prelates of exceeding refinement and incredible freedom of thought.

Our own age no longer provides the unusually gifted mind with the means to develop at its leisure, sheltered from the ordeals of life, in the shadow of some vast institution. Gone are the prebends and the abbeys. Leisure is no longer a part of dignity. On the contrary, our society, obsessed with precision and the tangible, is notable for its inability to find for the intellectually gifted man an appropriate and tolerable place in its gigantic and crude economy.

The situation was, if anything, worse when your colleague first appeared on the literary scene. The century proved unable to stop breeding literati and equally unable

to find a means of supporting them. The bitterness that ensued! The sorrow! The toll of wasted lives, lives meant for the highest attainments, yet for that very reason rewarded with destitution and the most menial tasks! Things came to such a pass that diplomas were guarantees of misfortune and vouchers of distress. Jules Vallès, Alphonse Daudet have left us frank and frightful accounts of these literate hardships. Scores of young men were trained only in those disciplines which destined them to unemployment; young paupers were brought up to the most useless attainments. They learned, the hard way, that the most knowledgeable elements in any society are also its most expendable. Emerging from adolescence, the future creator of Jean Servien might have observed this plight all around him and entertained legitimate fears that it might become his own. He might have dreaded the fate of a Vingtras or a Petit Chose. But he was too versatile, too rich in general knowledge and, besides, too well-versed in the facts of life not to assume almost instinctively, almost without thinking, the identity he would have one day. His philosophy, which was his very nature, protected him, moreover, from hard and fast resolutions at one extreme and from premature resignation at the other. He would not commit his future. He would not tie himself to a definite profession, or to any literary school. And if one day he did allow himself to be bound, it was with the most pleasing of bonds.

Essential to his inner life, then, was its flexibility and many-sidedness. It allowed for the spiritual and the sensual, for moments of detachment and of desire, for a curiosity huge and ardent but traversed by deep prejudices, a certain complaisance born of passivity but a reflective passivity, the passivity of great readers, which is hard to distinguish from

study, a surface passivity not unlike the stillness of some liqueur with too much body, forming perfect crystals in its repose. It was not with impunity that he acquired so much knowledge, so many ideas, for at times, without always meaning to, he would startle, scandalize people with tastes less various than his. He was fertile in doctrines that contradicted one another in his mind. He would fix only upon those things he found beautiful or piquant, and his only permanent convictions were artistic ones. His habits, his thoughts, his opinions, his political views fell into place within an elaborately harmonious whole that did not fail to astonish and sometimes to puzzle. But what sort of mind is it that does not have contradictory thoughts, that does not place its power to think above any one of its thoughts? The mind that does not baffle itself, does not abandon verdicts it has just reached, routing them with its own weapons, does not deserve the name of mind. Only if he possesses a wealth of conflicting ideas or what we believe to be so, does a man amount to something in the realm of the intellect. So coarsely do we express our perceptions of other people that, as soon as we are confronted by someone of greater scope and freedom than ourselves, our attempt to describe him gets lost in contradictory words and we end up attributing to a human being some monstrous nature, born of our own feeble expressions.

This enormous capacity for contradictory qualities is something we ought, rather, to admire. We must give our attention to the curious phenomenon that, indolent by nature, he was an insatiable reader who somehow produced a considerable body of work; a man sensually inclined who could steel himself to the boredom of an unremitting task, a waverer, mincing his way through life as it were, who, once

he had overcome his initial modesty, rose to the top by indecisive steps; a stammerer who could bring himself to make, sometimes violently, the most daring pronouncements; a man of intellect, and subtle intellect, who could learn to live with the public's simplified image of him, and to wear the rather garish suits of fame; the soul of moderation and temperance, he nonetheless took sides, with great and astonishing vigor, in the main issues of his age; a man of fastidious tastes, he was reputed a friend of the people and, moreover, actually was one at heart.

I am fully aware of the gossip. People have not refrained from whispering—or even from roundly asserting—that because they seemed foreign to his easygoing and careless nature, his more active qualities were really owing to someone's tender and insistent will, to an imperious presence who made her cause the advancement of his fame, standing long vigil over his work, animating, and, so it is said, protecting his mind lest it dissipate itself in the pleasures of society, who persuaded him to draw out of himself all the treasures he might otherwise never have known he possessed or else might have neglected from day to day, renouncing them for the delight of enjoying the beauties to be found in libraries and museums. But even if this were true, even if it could be proved that much of his work might have remained unwritten without the gentle insistence of her affectionate discipline, only malice could derive some advantage from knowing this.

Only very rare talents have the gift of arousing in others such a strong protective instinct, such energetic affection, so sustained a zeal for works yet to be, and so profound a sense that they must be urged into existence. Is it then of no account, to have won the kind of strict and absolute devotion

that hopes, in the end, for no higher reward than the satisfaction of having served to fulfill a brilliant destiny?

Thus, gentlemen, we must fix our attention on the work as it stands.

This work does exist, and survives. Its merits are as clear as its substance. Everyone knows, everyone appreciates the virtues of his art, whose consummate grace achieves an effect of exquisite simplicity.

But here we come upon a singular circumstance in the fortunes of his work, the fact that, with all the dignified beauty of its chaste form, it won not only a high reputation, as you know, but a popular one. This is almost unbelievable. It has no precedent in modern literature, where one must always anticipate, as a matter of course, that only those books in which content swallows form, and effects do not depend on the delicacy of the means, will receive popular acclaim.

Any explanation for this sort of phenomenon would undoubtedly have to be sought in the virtues of our language which so skillful a writer as he so deeply grasped and handled so lightly. He demonstrated that it was still possible in our language to convey a sense of the wealth inherent in a long-continuing culture and to combine the legacies of admirable writers who had followed one another in an unbroken line. Our great writers, gentlemen, are not great solitaries as they frequently are elsewhere, but then France has what other countries do not, an atmosphere favorable to literature, especially so, as it proved, in your colleague's case.

He himself could have been possible and even conceivable only in France, whose name he adopted as his own. Under this name, not an easy one to bear, which only a man flushed with hope would have dared adopt, he won favor with the

entire world, though undeniably he showed the world what it preferred to see, a France wholly embodied in its comely appearance, pleasing without ever giving cause for embarrassment or worry. The world would not be unwilling to have us serve a purely ornamental function; it would put up with us as the jewel of the earth. It would allow us, rather generously, to represent the happy few, in an otherwise crass age, who worship exquisite things, and to pass for a nation of artists and patrons, content with their lot, their heaven, their abundantly beautiful land, forgetting all the blood we have lately shed, the evidence we have given of persistent energy, of unshakable and indomitable will, our collective readiness to perform sacrifices, our ability to muster vast resources while besieged on every side, as though all this, our recent history, did not give us the right to address the most overweening powers with absolute poise, directness, and even authority.

But it is a rather different France which her famous homonym portrayed with such elegance, a gentle, refined, desultory France, a France somewhat weary and seemingly disenchanted, and he captured her image perfectly from that deceptive angle. His own mind was a highly composite emanation of the France he knew. Numerous traditions long since developed and dissipated, revolutions political and ethical, a whole store of contradictory experiences had gone into the making of a mind so encyclopedic and so indecisive. A creature of such freedom as that would seem like the latest born of some ancient and almost collapsing civilization, a born collector of all the beautiful things men have made and preserved. He had long inhaled from books the fragrance of life past, pervaded with an odor of death, and his spirit, redistilling what history had distilled of itself, became

gradually imbued with this refined essence of past centuries. We can picture him in the garden of French culture, leaning over the most scented, the rarest—or sometimes simply the wildest—of flowers; culling his favorite bouquets and trimming his hedges; a great gardener for whom grafting and pruning held no secrets. Thus nourished on honey, flitting through the vast treasuries of history and archaeology much as he fitted through those of literature, without spurning the comforts, the conveniences, the diverse freedoms of his own age, the plaudits of the public and of women, resorting whenever he needed them to the diversions of society, yet not allowing himself to be so lulled by all these advantages and delights as to overlook contradictions, and to let fools go unscathed, he composed, at his leisure, books whose continual charms belie a rather sinister view of the world lurking underneath. Moreover, he knew how to live well.

In no sense was my famous predecessor an innocent. It did not seem likely to him that sometime in the future humanity would be substantially different from what it has apparently always been, or that man's zeal and his quest for the absolute could one day work untold miracles. He did not possess invincible faith in the advantages of the mind, but through his wide and intimate knowledge of all that is readable, and much that is not, from the past, he had made himself independent as it were of the present and the future.

He was born in books, reared in books, forever athirst for more books. He was versed in all the aspects of a book—paper, type, format, binding—and knew whatever was known of its printer, its author, its editions, its sources, its fate. During his lifetime he was in turn a bookseller, a librarian, a judge of books, an author. He was, to the core, a man of books.

I must say, gentlemen, that the mere thought of all those immense stacks of printed pages mounting throughout the world is enough to shake the stoutest heart. There is nothing more likely to confuse and unbalance the mind than scanning the gilt-lined walls of a huge library, no sight could be more painful to the mind than those shoals of volumes, those parapets of intellectual produce that rise along the quais, the millions of tomes and pamphlets foundered on the bank of the Seine like waste, abandoned there by the stream of time thus purging itself of our thoughts. One's heart falters in the face of so many works—even, indeed, so many masterpieces. The idea of writing resembles the idea of adding to infinity—it leaves a taste of ashes on the lips.

In this valley of Jehoshaphat, confronted with such a multitude, even the rarest genius finds his peers, and is indistinguishable among the hordes of his imitators, precursors, and disciples. Every innovation dissolves in the mass of novelties. Every illusion of being original is swiftly dispelled. At the thought of these myriad creatures armed with pens, these innumerable agents of the mind, the soul darkens with mixed feelings of sorrow and the irony of profound pity, for each one fancied himself, in his hour, an independent creator, a first cause, a sole owner of truth, a unique and incomparable source, only to end in the common pit, lost beneath an ever-growing mass of others like him, having labored all his life and consumed his strength to earn immortal distinction. Under the weight of this crushing presence, all is leveled out; nothing survives the unbearable company it is obliged to keep: no thesis is without its antithesis, no affirmation goes unrefuted, no anomaly remains singular, no invention but is rendered obsolescent by another and obsolete by the next, as though some impersonal

process were at work making our language yield every possible combination of its syllables, and as though, in the end, the actions of this host of free and autonomous beings were like the functionings of a machine.

Your learned and subtle colleague, gentlemen, did not feel this unease in the face of great numbers. He had a stronger head. Unlike those who are subject to statistical vertigo and revulsion, he did not need to take the precaution of reading very little. Far from being oppressed, he was stimulated by all this wealth, freely drawing upon it to direct and sustain his own art, with happy results.

More than one critic has taken him to task rather harshly, and naïvely, for being so knowledgeable and for not being unaware of what he knew. What was he supposed to do? What did he do that had not always been done? Nothing is newer than the standard of absolute newness imposed as an obligation on writers. It requires truly great and intrepid humility nowadays to dare be inspired by others, but this is rather less in evidence than a spirit of constraint, a fastidious craving for priority and, by and large, a certain affectation of virginity which is at times something less than delectable. Neither Virgil, nor Racine, nor Shakespeare, nor Pascal took pains to conceal the fact that he had read. But disdaining current opinion and giving this small matter closer scrutiny, we can easily clarify it; it is not at all a matter of aesthetics but, if anything, one of ethics, for it involves vanity. Only because these two ideas have been confused has such discredit fallen on the ancient and respectable custom of combining mine and thine.

A book is an instrument of pleasure, or at least aspires to be one. The reader's pleasure is wholly unrelated to the trouble we have taken making the book for him, just as,

when offered some rare dish, I do not fret over the delicately prepared meat because someone other than the chef may have invented the recipe. What do I care about its inventor? Least of all do I care about the pains he took. I do not dine upon his name and I do not savor his pride. What I am consuming is a moment of perfection. To think otherwise would require nothing less than looking at the world through the eyes of a god, for gods may presume to pass judgment on merit, but we humans have, fortunately, a quite imperfect understanding of merit. The very notion of merit calls for an extremely bold metaphysic; it leads us to hypothesize, in some measure, the ability to be a first cause which we then, going beyond hypothesis, ascribe to someone.

Moreover, our mode of reasoning in such difficult and lofty matters as these is so frivolous that, showing a singular disregard for logic, we confer the highest dignity on authors whom we call inspired. We believe them to be the pure instruments of some afflatus outside themselves, indeed, beyond the whole of nature; we turn them into oracular reeds, thus granting them both the glory of prime merit and the immense privileges of irresponsibility.

Far from espousing current superstition, gentlemen, I find good grounds for admiring someone who is able to choose, who does not pretend that he is oblivious to our heritage of beauty, whose discriminating knowledge of the treasures amassed by time allows him to recapture the means by which such perfection was achieved. The mystery of choice is no less a mystery than that of invention, assuming that the two are quite distinct. Furthermore, we have absolutely no idea what lies at the bottom of the one or the other.

Coupling this gift of choice with its prodigious learning, the

gardener of Epicurus' Garden could not help but reveal in everything he created a mind keenly aware of all the magical resources of language and the intimate presence of the purest and most beautiful models of our art. They were the furnishings of his powerful memory. He felt completely at home with all in our language that is most sonorous, graceful, limpid; and he was equally alert to the ways in which it shows how trenchant, how destructive, how quick-witted and redoubtable, how exquisitely damning it can be. His novels, which are not so much novels as chronicles of a world he openly reviled at the slightest provocation, are written in a tone of classic irony that was his natural, almost instinctive manner of expressing himself; so sustained is it that those rare passages in which he lays aside his smile seem written by someone else, as though for the moment he were not being serious.

It must be owned that the society of his age, which survives in the midst of our own, offered to the satirist a wealth of material. Within and around himself he found a conglomeration of extremely dubious ideas and circumstances which could easily provoke the most skeptical judgments.

I am convinced, gentlemen, that a civilization's age must be computed by the number of contradictions it contains, by the number of irreconcilable customs and beliefs that confront and qualify one another, by the multiplicity of philosophies and aesthetics that so frequently live together in a single head. Does this not describe our own predicament? Does not each of us abound in different notions and biases that are blind to one another? Do we not find that every family now contains a variety of religious persuasions, or races, or political views, as each individual contains a whole armory of internal dissensions? Modern man (and it is in this

sense that he is modern) lives on familiar terms with a host of contraries which have taken root in the penumbra of his intellect.

I should observe here that tolerance, freedom of opinion and of belief, always appears quite late in the life of a civilization; the idea becomes conceivable, and pervades laws and customs, only after minds have been progressively enriched and softened through the exchange of their differences.

At the same time, these mental organisms, because of the inherited cultural incongruities bound up in their substance, become dangerously unstable compounds. A single incident might explode any of those deep contradictions lying at their base, inert and dormant but easily detonated. Remember this, gentlemen! Now, let us promptly forget it!

It was enough for the author of *Contemporary History* to become aware of how incoherent the state of things was, and he was confirmed in that skepticism which earned him so much reproof.

It is difficult to corner a skeptic. He has only to confront us with our own curiously ambiguous attitudes toward doubt. We prescribe it in the sciences; we require it in business. Yet suddenly we will point out its limits and disqualify it as we choose.

We forget that every doctrine trains and urges us to damage or demolish every other. We implore those who make comparisons not to do so, not to push their arguments to a logical conclusion when in fact the latter move and evolve of their own accord in our minds. We do not care to notice that doubt derives from things themselves. It is, intrinsically, a natural phenomenon, an involuntary reaction that protects both matter and mind against intolerable

images, as we see very clearly in the case of a sleeping person whose dreams are so absurd that, even in the absence of reason, this absurdity is enough to evoke a marvelous resistance, a response, a negation, an emancipating act, an awakening that flings him out of an impossible world, restores him to the realm of probability, and, at the same time, provides him with a kind of physical and instinctive definition of absurdity.

Thus it is not so much the skeptic we must indict as the cause and occasion of his doubt, the flimsiness of what he touches and knocks over; and also the inevitable sense of comparison that arises whenever we bring together what we know.

A man distinguished for his inordinate eagerness to know everything was bound to have a skeptical and satirical cast of mind. His immense learning gave him abundant powers of disenchantment; he could easily make any social observance appear mythical and barbarous. To his erudite and ingenious mind, our most respectable customs, our most sacred beliefs, our worthiest ornaments seemed suitable stuff for an anthropological collection, along with the taboos, the talismans, the amulets of primitive tribes, the cheap finery and artifacts of outworn civilizations fallen to the power of curiosity. In such collections and vestiges, the spirit of satire finds its most vulnerable targets. There is not a doctrine, not an institution, not a society or a regime that does not bear the onus of some uncomfortable memory, some undeniable fault or error or embarrassing variation or even, in some cases, inglorious origins, beginnings founded on an unjust act which, in the interest of its latter-day grandeur and pretensions, it would prefer to forget.

Laws, customs, institutions—these are the common and

cherished prey of critics of the human species. The persecution of these substantial and imperfect entities is merely a game, but played so unremittingly through the ages as to have become a tradition. It is pleasant, easy, at times perilous, to belabor them with irony. Indeed, certain souls find nothing more intoxicating than to respect nothing. The writer who dispenses such pleasures to the lovers of his wit allows them to share his own pitiless lucidity and gives them the delicious sensation of being like gods, above good and evil.

The eternal victims of this free and learned mind might have answered, by their mere existence, that were it not for them the world would enjoy precious little freedom and no learning whatever. Freedom and learning are scarcely products of nature. What little of either that men possess they have labored to acquire and used cunning to preserve. Nature is not liberal, and gives us no reason to suppose that it is concerned in the least with the welfare of the mind. On the contrary, mind must struggle against her to assert itself. Men band together to thwart their destiny, chance, the unforeseen, which are things they can never cease to reckon with. What is more natural than chance, and what more unquestionable than the unforeseen?

In short, order is an immense, anti-natural edifice whose parts may be criticized only if the whole remains intact, protecting, sustaining, sheltering its critics, furnishing them with the leisure, the security, and the knowledge they need in order to criticize.

Literature itself requires a whole system of conventions superimposed on those of language.

It is precisely here, in the domain of letters, that our thinker seems, at first glance, to have behaved inconsistently.

The dogmas, the formal laws he treated with such scant

respect when they obtained in the world of morality and politics, are the very idols he consulted when arranging and consolidating his fictions. He esteemed above all other masterpieces those that observe the strictest rules of poetry.

It is common knowledge that he nurtured a veritable passion for Racine.

How Monsieur Racine would have responded to this zealous admirer of his we shall never know, but it might be amusing to imagine a meeting between the Jansenist courtier and the doubting libertarian. I thought for a moment, gentlemen, of arranging a dialogue between these Shades for your benefit, but for fear they might find themselves hopelessly at odds (not to say, exchanging the most cutting remarks) I have left them to rest in peace.

In the one, quite fortuitous, interview I was privileged to have with our great student of Racine, Racine was our one topic of discussion. I was far from imagining that within not so long a time it would be my office to eulogize your colleague, so I was not moved to ask what he would have me say about him here in this chapel, which I never dreamed I should enter. I was filled with apprehension. I sensed that there were quite a few subjects that might bare our differences. I might be tempted to voice certain long-standing grievances. In his prime he had been a critic, and an outstanding one in terms of style and knowledge, if somewhat less so in prescience. He was not one to put his hope in things that might possibly come to be, nor in things newly born, nor one to attune his highly sensitive ear to the sound of grass growing. Such desires sometimes bring on hallucinations of the ear. . . .

May his Shade forgive me for saying so, but he was not very eager to prophesy. He did not believe in prophets and

so he did not obtain the gift of prophecy. At most, he was a "prophet of the past."

In certain passages of *The Literary Life* he showed no great lenience toward the young poets who were just beginning to test themselves, nor toward their chosen masters. He never conceived any great hope for them. He declared that he felt no connection whatever with them, and expected they would amount to very little. Sometimes he compared them to ascetics, which, even coming from him, was after all more or less bearable. But at other times, he found little to choose between them and Hottentots. He wrote that beautiful things are born painlessly, which was not good advice; it is the sort of advice that produces Hottentots. Yet it is true that on other occasions he also declared the opposite.

This exceedingly intelligent man could not and would not bother to ask himself why and how an appreciable number of young people understood and loved what he himself could not fathom.

I have often said to myself, gentlemen, that if criticism had the magical power to abolish what it condemns, if its edicts, carried out to the letter, could do away with everything it considers harmful or deplorable, literature would suffer a sorry fate. Erase the existence of all the hermetic poets, the heresiarchs, the demoniacs; remove the euphuists, the lycanthropes and the grotesques; submerge all the dark, Byronic souls in everlasting night, purge the past of all its literary monsters, defend the future from them, and admit only the craftsmen, desiring nothing more than their miracles of balance, and I predict, gentlemen, that the great tree of our Letters will promptly waste away; even the very art that you admire, and with such good reason, will gradually perish.

But, to come back to this interview of ours, we talked about Racine, great resource that he is—Racine, whom he admired more faithfully, scrupulously, usefully above any other author; Racine, whom he worshiped and read as a very different person, Joseph de Maistre, had done in another age; Racine, whom I, too, have admired in my way.

I admired him as best I could, having discovered him at thirty years' remove from the schoolroom and when I was engaged on some of those tiny yet immense problems that beset the working poet. This incomparable craftsman had seemed to me, when I was young, nothing more than a product of the school education which in those days happily forbore from teaching us to love. I do not regret that long misappreciation, nor belated appreciation. Never do we assess a man's greatness more accurately than in having to compare our weaknesses with his strength. If circumstances set us a hard task, similar to one he has performed, we marvel that he could untie the knot, could surmount the obstacle, and so, in our own helplessness, we have the best and most precise measure of his triumphant powers.

An hour slipped by unnoticed in that only conversation. As I was about to withdraw, my future predecessor payed me a compliment. He said that I had spoken well on Racine, and so I left pleased with him, that is, with myself. I do not remember what fine point he was gracious enough to allow that I had made. All I had done, probably, was to express in my own way the thoughts common to all who delight in music and are moved by perfection. I am quite certain that I praised that astonishing economy peculiar to Racine's art, which atones for the sparse means at its disposal by possessing them so completely. Few people clearly understand how great an imagination is required of the artist who would do



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