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# Anatole France

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## ANATOLE FRANCE

The true author is recognisable by the existence on every page of his works of at least one sentence or one phrase which none but he could have written.

Take the following sentence: "If we may believe this amiable shepherd of souls, it is impossible for us to elude divine mercy, and we shall all enter Paradise – unless, indeed, there be no Paradise, which is exceedingly probable." It treats of Renan. It must be written by a disciple of Renan's, whose humour perhaps allows itself a little more licence than the master's. More we cannot say.

But take this: "She was the widow of four husbands, a dreadful woman, suspected of everything except of having loved – consequently honoured and respected." There is only one man who can have written this. It jestingly indicates the fact that society forgives woman everything except a passion, and communicates this observation to the reader, as it were with a gentle nudge.

Or take the following: "We should not love nature, for she is not lovable; but neither should we hate her, for she is not deserving of hatred. She is everything. It is very difficult to be everything. It results in terrible heavy-handedness and awkwardness."

There is only one man who would excuse Nature for her indifference to us human beings in these words: "It is very difficult to be everything."

Read this passage: "It is a great infirmity to think. God preserve you from it, my son, as He has preserved His greatest saints and the souls whom He loves with especial tenderness and destines to eternal felicity."

It is an Abbé who speaks thus, and who speaks without a trace of irony. One is conscious of the author's smile behind the Abbe's seriousness.

Few are so pithy in their irony as France. He says: "Cicero was in politics a Moderate of the most violent description."

Few are so picturesque in their satire as he. Others have used the phrase: Equality before the law – that means equality before the laws which the well-to-do have made for the poor, and men for women. Others have maintained that the ideal of justice would be an inequality before the law adjusted to the differences between individuals. Others have said: If there is inequality in law itself, where is equality to be found?

But there is only one man who can have written: "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread."

This one man is Anatole France. Most noticeable in this style is its irony; it stamps him as a spiritual descendant of Renan. But in spite of the relationship, France's irony is of a very different description from Renan's. Renan, as historian or critic, always speaks in his own name, and we are directly conscious of himself in the fictitious personages of his philosophic dramas, and even more so in those of his philosophic dialogues. France's irony conceals itself beneath naïveté. Renan disguises himself, France transforms himself. He writes from standpoints which are directly the opposite of his own – primitive Christian, or mediæval Catholic – and through what is said we apprehend what he means. Other writers may be as witty, may be or appear as delicately ironical – they still do not resemble him. If we enter the dépôt of some famous china manufactory with a piece of china from some other factory, as faultless and as beautiful in colour as those by which we are surrounded, the saleswoman takes it into her hand, looks at it, and says: "The paste is different."

In France's case we may search long for paste of the same quality as that which he has succeeded in producing after thirty-six years of labour.

Anatole France is no longer young, but his celebrity is of comparatively recent date. On April 16, 1904, he completed his sixtieth year, but only for the last eleven years has he really been famous.

He began as quite a young man to write literary and historical essays and tasteful poems, but he was thirty-seven when he first attracted attention by his simple tale, *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, and it was not until 1892-93 that he gave proof of his originality.

His remaining so long in the shade is attributable in the first place to the tardy development of his complete individuality. He had not the courage to be completely himself; encouragement from without was necessary to him.

Another reason for it was the occupation of the foreground by great novelists who have now disappeared, story-tellers like Maupassant, Daudet, Zola; and yet another, that men of talent such as Bourget and Huysmans had not yet gone over to clericalism, or Jules Lemaître to nationalism, or Hervieu to the theatre. More-over – and this of prime importance – the great artist in style whose heir he is, Ernest Renan, was still with us.

Not until the acute sceptic and enthusiastically pious thinker in whose footsteps he trod, and those luxuriantly fertile authors whose books excited most attention had passed away, was the space round that tree of knowledge which Anatole France had planted sufficiently cleared to allow the sunlight to fall upon it and the tree to become visible from every side.

Those other Frenchmen were all born in the provinces – Daudet and Zola in Provence, Maupassant in Normandy, Renan in Brittany, Hervieu at Neuilly, Bourget at Amiens; Huysmans is of Flemish descent. France, who is cast in softer mould, and from the very beginning showed himself to be less sturdy than the Provençals and Normans, is a Parisian born, and bears the genuine Parisian stamp.

His master, Renan, did not become a Parisian until towards the close of his life, until he had lost the Breton stamp, and ceased to be a pupil of the Germans. France was a Parisian from the beginning.

The light and air of Paris were his native atmosphere, the Luxembourg Gardens were to him French nature, and the street was his school. As a child he watched the dairy-girls carrying milk and the coal-heavers coals into all the houses of the Quartier Latin. He knows the Parisian artisan and small shopkeeper well.

The windows of the stationers' shops riveted his attention with their pictures, and his first instruction was received in turning over the leaves of the books in the boxes of the poor salesmen on the Seine quays.

He himself was the son of a poor bookseller, or rather bookseller's assistant. He was born in a book-shop, and brought up amongst old, wise books, mysterious reminders of a life which was no more. From them he learned how ephemeral existence is, how little of the work of any generation survives; and this has inspired him with a fund of sadness, gentleness, and compassion.

It is extraordinary how many small book-shops he has described, in Paris and elsewhere – their books, their frequenters, the conversations held in them. Again and ever again does he occupy himself with these worthy booksellers on the banks of the Seine (who now look upon him as their guardian spirit), with their wretched life, as they stand there in the cold and rain, seldom selling anything.

We, to whom not one of the Frenchmen of to-day seems so French as Anatole France – for he embodies in himself the whole national tradition, descending from the romance-writers of the Middle Ages through Montaigne to Voltaire – we are not surprised that he should have boldly assumed the name of his country in place of his own. France, however, was also the Christian name of his unassuming father – he was France Thibaut. But to the humble people of the street in which he lives, the little Allée Villa Said, the author is not France; they call him Monsieur Anatole.

The streets by the Seine are always in his mind. He says somewhere: "I was brought up on this Quai, amongst books, by humble, simple people, whom I alone remember. When I am no more it will be as if they had never existed."

Elsewhere he calls these river-side streets the adopted country of all men of intellect and taste.

And in a third place he writes: "I was brought up on the quays, where the old books form part of the landscape. The Seine was my delight... I admired the river, which by day mirrored the sky and bore boats on its breast, by night decked itself with jewels and sparkling flowers."

A book-lover he was and is.

One of the first characteristics which strikes the reader of France's works is this literary culture, unusual in a novelist and story-writer, and also its nature. Amongst French authors as a class we are accustomed to the unlearned, whose culture is restrictedly French, to the pupils of the Normal School, whose culture is one-sidedly classical, and to the learned, whose culture is European. But France's is a wide, ample culture, gained in a Europe from which the Germanic nations are excluded. He knows neither English nor German. This is the chief difference between his culture and Renan's. But the want is less felt in him than in others. Renan was the Oriental philologist. The Semitic languages were his field; his intellect had been nourished upon German science. What France is thoroughly at home in is Latin and Greek antiquity; but he is also well versed in the Latin and Italian literatures of the Middle Ages. Therefore he is, be it noted in passing, a keen supporter of classical school education. "I have," he says somewhere, "a desperate attachment to Latin studies. Without them the beauty of the French genius would be gone. We are Latins. The milk of the she-wolf is the best part of our blood."

He has made himself specially familiar with the age of ferment when Christianity was struggling with paganism in the ancient mind, with the Christian legends, which he retails with naïveté and well-concealed irony, and with Italian and even more particularly French history, from the days of Cæsar to the eighteenth century, the beginning of which lives in his *Reine Pédauque*.

His art occupies itself very frequently with religious feelings and situations. And here the contrast with Renan is strongest. For whereas Renan's mind was always religiously disposed and his language often unctuous, France, in treating of religious subjects, in spite of apparent reverence, is as callous in his inmost soul as Voltaire.

To his pictures of the past have been added in the last stage of his development pictures drawn from the France of to-day, and portraits of personages who have as lately formed the subjects of conversation as Verlaine and Esterhazy.

It is not modern life, however, which he favours as author or man. One day, when a visitor to whom he was showing his books expressed surprise that there were so few, and apparently no modern works among them, France said: "I have no new books. I do not keep those which are sent me; I send them on to a friend in the country." (The "friend in the country" was very probably a French euphemism for one of those booksellers on the Seine quays whom France knows so well.) "But do you not care to make acquaintance with them?" "My contemporaries No! What they can tell me I know quite as well myself. I learn more from Petronius than from Mendès." It was, therefore, doubtless half unwillingly that France for several years undertook to discourse critically, in the feuilleton of the Temps, on the productions of his contemporaries. The four volumes in which he has collected his articles are, nevertheless, extremely interesting. In them, from beginning to end, he maintains that such a thing as pure, impersonal criticism is impossible, that the critic can never do anything but represent himself – that, consequently, when he speaks of Horace or Shakespeare it simply means that he is speaking, in connection with Horace or Shakespeare, of himself.

France, then, spoke always of himself. "I hope that when I speak of myself every one will think of himself." As critic he communicated his personal impressions, and often related anecdotes, chiefly of occurrences during his own childhood and early youth, which elucidated and explained these impressions. A critic in the strict sense of the word he was not, and when his books began to sell better he gave up criticism. His utterances in the four volumes referred to are most characteristic of his personality, revealing, as they do, its spirit, its limitations, and its prejudices – prejudices which he has gradually outgrown.

The friend to whom France replied, "I have no modern books in my house," asked, smiling: "Not even your own?" "No," answered France; "what a man has built himself – even supposing it to

be a palace – he knows so well that he cannot endure the sight of it. I could not bear to have my own books in my hands. Why should I look at them?"

"To avoid repetition."

"I certainly do perpetually repeat myself."

This is unfortunately true – it is one of the besetting sins of the author. Too often does the same thought recur in his pages, expressed almost in the same words. At times he repeats in one book, page for page, what he has written in another.

We can see what a faithful portrait of himself France has given us in the person of the sculptor in *Le Lys Rouge* by comparing the above answer with the following passage.

Madame Martin-Bellême says: "I see none of your own works, not a single statue or relief."

Dechartre replies: "Do you imagine that it would be a pleasure to me to live among my own works? I know them far too well ... they bore me."

That Dechartre is only a mask for France is almost acknowledged in what follows: "Even though I have modelled a few bad figures, I am no sculptor – rather a bit of a poet and philosopher."

In France's literary life, after a preparatory stage which lasted fifteen years, there are two periods, which differ so much from each other that one might almost say: There are two Frances.

In the first of these periods he is the refined satirist, who, from a station high above the human crowd, observes its endeavours and struggles with a superior, compassionate smile. In the second he appears as the combatant. He not only attaches himself to a party, but affirms as he does so his belief in the very things at which he has jested and scoffed – the sound instinct of the people, the significance of the majority, the increasing reality of progress – in the doctrines which as a thinker he had declined to accept, those of democracy and socialism.

When a friend once politely but plainly reproached him with this attitude as not perfectly honourable, France answered in a manner which avoided the real point by asking: "Do you know any other power capable of opposing that of the Church and Nationalism in combination except the Socialist Labour party?"

He turned the theoretical into a practical question.

When the friend remarked that he himself, under similar circumstances, had plainly announced his practical adherence to a party, but at the same time his dissent from its doctrine, France turned to some ladies who were present, and said, laughing: "Is he not impossible? As honest and obstinate as a donkey!"

For more than half of his life France undoubtedly agreed with his Abbé Coignard, who had an affectionate contempt for mankind, and who would not have signed the Declaration of the Rights of Man, not a line of it, "because of the sharply defined and unjust distinction made in it between man and the gorilla." He in those days inclined, like Coignard, to the belief that men are mischievous animals who can be kept under control only by force or cunning.

Even many years later, after he has proclaimed himself a democrat, he makes his mouthpiece, Bergeret, say to his dog: "To-morrow you will be in Paris. It is an illustrious and noble city. The nobility, to tell the truth, is not common to all its inhabitants. It is, on the contrary, to be found in only a very small number of the citizens. But a whole town, a whole nation, exists in a few individuals who think with more power and more justice than the rest." And later, in the same book, when Biquet, with gaping jaws and flaming eyes, has flown at the heels of the clever workman who has been setting up Bergeret's book-shelves, his master explains to him that what exalts a nation is not the foolish cry that resounds in the streets, but the silent thought which is conceived in a garret, and one day changes the face of the earth.

France does not share the reactionary's fear of the power of the masses. But if he does not fear it, it is not because of their wisdom. It is because of their caution. He knows that fear of the unknown renders universal suffrage a perfectly safe institution. He has made too good use of his eyes and his reasoning powers to have more reverence for the sovereign people than for any of the

other sovereigns to whom men throughout the ages have offered homage and flattery. He knows that knowledge is sovereign, not the people. He knows that a foolish cry, though taken up by thirty-six millions of voices, does not cease to be foolish, and that truth is irresistible and will make itself ruler of the earth, though it may be perceived and proclaimed only by a single man, and though millions may unite and shout in chorus against his "individualism."

France is no optimist. He has seen too much declension and apostasy around him in France and Europe generally, to believe in the fable of uninterrupted progress. He has lived through times of universal indifference and apathy, when no sting was sharp enough to stir men to think, much less to act. When men's souls are hungering and thirsting after unrighteousness, it is of little use offering them a refreshing draught of culture. As is said of the "people" in Bergeret: "It is not easy to make an ass which is not thirsty drink." France knows, too, what popularity means. He has good reasons for making one of his principal characters say: "If the crowd ever takes you lovingly into its arms, you will soon discover the vastness of its impotence and of its cowardice." And we have elsewhere his quiet, witty explanation of the election of a Nationalist candidate for the Municipal Council and the defeat of the Republican. The Nationalist candidate was entirely ignorant of all the subjects connected with the office, and this ignorance stood him in good stead; it rendered his oratory more spontaneous and eloquent. The Republican, on the contrary, lost himself in technical questions and details. Although he knew his public, he harboured some illusions regarding the intelligence of the electors who had nominated him. From a certain respect for them, he dared not venture on too much humbug, and entered into explanations. Consequently he seemed cold, obscure, tiresome – and all support was withdrawn.

But, on the other hand, France is no pessimist. He knows and says of the France of to-day: "The weak are in the wrong. That is the sum of our morality, my friend. Do you suppose that we are on the side of Poland or Finland? No, no! That is not the way the wind blows at present!" But he also knows that the earth will not finally belong to armed barbarity. Alone, unarmed, naked, truth is stronger than everything. Might and violence oppose it in vain. It strikes at injustice and annihilates it. The word of man changes the world. The alliance of strong reasons and noble thoughts is an indissoluble alliance, and against its onslaught nothing can stand. Bergeret, the tranquil philosopher, is absolutely certain of the final victory of reason. "The visions of the philosopher have in all ages aroused men of action, who have set to work to realise them. Our thoughts create the future. Statesmen work after the plans which we leave behind us."

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