

# REMY DE GOURMONT

DECADENCE AND OTHER  
ESSAYS ON THE CULTURE  
OF IDEAS

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**on the Culture of Ideas**

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Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas:*

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## Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas

### INTRODUCTION

When, more than ten years ago, I wrote the first article on Remy de Gourmont which, so far as I know, appeared in America – North America, *bien entendu*, for the author of *La Culture des Idées* and *Le Chemin de Velours* was already well known and admired in such South American literary capitals as Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and La Plata – it was refused by one editor on the ground that he could not assume the responsibility of presenting a writer of Gourmont's dangerous, subversive, and immoral tendencies to the readers of his conservative and highly respectable journal. Gourmont's revenge – and mine – came a few years later when, at the time of his death, in 1915, the same paper paid him editorial tribute, recognizing the importance of the place he had occupied in the intellectual life of France for a quarter of a century.

What was this place precisely? An attempt has been made to define it by a recent French writer, M. Jules Sageret, who speaks of Gourmont as having represented in our time the *encyclopédiste*

*honnête homme* of the eighteenth century, and this is sufficiently accurate, in spite of the fact that Gourmont was no deist, and that he made a much more extended application of that *esprit critique* which he inherited from Diderot and Voltaire. He himself notes the paradox presented by the latter, who, while combating the principle of authority so violently in one field – that of dogmatic theology – accepted it so absolutely and unquestioningly in another – that of poetic art, as stated once and for all by Boileau. Gourmont recognized no such limits of the critic's function. He was, in fact, a fearless, uncompromising, and universal free-thinker —*libertin*— who, endowed with a restless scientific curiosity, a profound disrespect, and an extraordinarily sharp and supple analytical intelligence, confronted all affirmations, all dogmas, in the fixed intent of liberating the life imprisoned in them. "I dislike prisons of any sort," he declared in the preface to *Le Problème du Style*, and he scouted the claims of those who, having constructed a cell, claimed to cabin the truth.

Even the pursuit of truth seemed, to this convinced sceptic of the race of Montaigne, an idle undertaking, unworthy of any truly philosophic intelligence. "It is as absurd to seek the truth – and to find it – once we have reached the age of reason, as to put our shoes on the hearth Christmas Eve." And he cites "one of the creators of a new science," who said to him, "At the present moment we can establish no theory, but we are in a position to demolish any theory that may be established." He adds, summing up: "We must seek to rest always at this

stage; the only fruitful quest is the quest of the non-true." Yet Gourmont himself was carried beyond it in his destructive zeal, when he snatched, somewhat hastily, at the theories of his friend René Quinton, the biologist, to which the fates have not proved altogether kind since they were first stated. For there is usually a positive flaw in the armour of even the most discreet "sower of doubts," and how could Gourmont, who took Pierre Bayle's famous profession as his own device, resist the temptation to avail himself of so formidable an arsenal against the pretensions of the human reason to impose its frail and arbitrary laws upon the universe?

"Reason," he says, writing of Kant's method in *Promenades Philosophiques*, "is only a word – expression of the most convenient ways of comprehending the multiple relations which unite the varied elements of nature. The reason is only a unity of measure, though a necessary unit, and one without which there would be such differences between men's judgments that no society would be possible. But this necessity is not anterior to life; it is posterior to it. What is necessary, what is reasonable, is what is; but any other mode of being, as soon as it was, would be equally necessary and reasonable." Instead of any rationalistic system whatsoever, we need "a flat-footed philosophy, familiar and scientific, always provisional, always at the disposal of the new fact which will necessarily arise, a philosophy which is merely a commentary on life, but on life as a whole. Man separated from the rest of nature is a pure

mystery. To understand something of our own constitution, we must plunge ourselves, humbly, into the vital milieu whence religious pride has withdrawn us, in order to raise us to the dignity of jumping-jacks of the ideal."

It was thus that, in his essay on *La Physique de l'Amour*, Gourmont, in order to disassociate the idea of love, which, rationalized, has itself become a sort of religion, with poets for priests, sought to "situate" man's sexual experience in the vast vital milieu of universal sexuality, and such were the aim and method of all his disassociations. In them he reveals himself as perhaps the most potent corrosive intellectual agent of our time, after Nietzsche, to whom he owed a certain élan, and whom he helped to make known in France. All he offers is, in accordance with his own requirement, a simple commentary on life – on life as a whole – when it is not, more simply still, as in his literary criticism, a mere record of his sensations; but this commentary is so shot through with the light of his searching intelligence, and with his sensual irony, that there is little in the ramshackle structure of accepted truth capable of resisting its implications. To taste it to the full, one needs, no doubt, a certain preliminary preparation in disillusion, but, for those who have already had this, no intellectual poison is more subtly stimulating – or more salutary, either.

Where, as in the case of Gourmont, the wealth to draw upon is so great, a book of selections is particularly difficult. A word may be added here as to the plan of the present volume. In the preface

to *La Culture des Idées*, which gave him his first reputation, and which remains the cornerstone of his critical achievement, Gourmont refers to the incoherence in its composition, which "no preface can either correct or palliate."

"What good is it for me to pretend, for example," he asks, "that these miscellaneous articles are closely bound together by a common idea? Doubtless some of them hang together fairly well, and seem even to grow one out of the other; but, in its ensemble, the book is merely a collection of articles. When Voltaire wanted to give his opinion on a current topic, he published a pamphlet. We, to-day, publish an article in a review or a journal. But Voltaire, at the end of the year, did not gather his various pamphlets into a volume. He let them follow their destiny separately. They were collected only in his complete works, where, then, it was possible, grouping them according to their affinities, to avoid that variegated air necessarily assumed by our collections of articles."

What has here been attempted is a first *trriage* of a part – the essential part – of Gourmont's work, and its logical rearrangement. At the head of the volume I have placed that article on *La Dissociation des Idées*, which Gourmont himself regarded as having "perhaps a little more importance than the others" in *La Culture des Idées*, since in it he exposes his method; and this I have followed with four articles from *Le Chemin de Velours*, which are there grouped together under the general head of *Nouvelles Dissociations*, and which form its natural suite or



sequence. In this way I feel I have been able, not only to offer a book more homogeneous than either of the two from which its contents have been taken, but also, in a measure, to realize for Gourmont a project which, as he explained, the conditions of modern publishing alone prevented him from realizing. So far as I know, this is the first English translation of his essays authorized by Gourmont or his personal representatives.

For the hitherto unpublished portrait of Gourmont which appears as frontispiece to this volume, I am indebted to the very great kindness of Miss Natalie Clifford Barney, of Paris.

*W. A. B.*

Vence (A.M.), France, 26 March, 1921.

# THE DISASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

There are two ways of thinking. One can either accept current ideas and associations of ideas, just as they are, or else undertake, on his own account, new associations or, what is rarer, original disassociations. The intelligence capable of such efforts is, more or less, according to the degree, or according to the abundance and variety of its other gifts, a creative intelligence. It is a question either of inventing new relations between old ideas, old images, or of separating old ideas, old images united by tradition, of considering them one by one, free to work them over and arrange an infinite number of new couples which a fresh operation will disunite once more, and so on till new ties, always fragile and doubtful, are formed.

In the realm of facts and of experience such operations would necessarily be limited by the resistance of matter and the uncompromising character of physical laws. In the purely intellectual domain they are subject to logic; but logic itself being an intellectual fabric, its indulgence is almost unlimited. In truth, the association and the disassociation of ideas (or of images, for the idea is merely a worn-out image) pursue a winding course which it is impossible to determine, and whose general direction, even, it is difficult to follow. There are no ideas so remote, no images so ill-assorted, that an easy habit of association cannot bring them together, at least, momentarily. Victor Hugo, seeing

a cable wrapped with rags at the point where it crossed a sharp ridge, saw, at the same time, the knees of tragic actresses padded to break the dramatic falls in the fifth act;<sup>1</sup> and these two things so remote – a rope anchored on a rock, and the knees of an actress – are evoked, as we read, in a parallel which takes our fancy because the knees and the rope are equally "furred,"<sup>2</sup> the first above and the latter below, at the bend; because the elbow made by a cable thus cast bears a certain resemblance to a leg that is bent; because Giliatt's situation is quite tragic; and, finally, because, even while perceiving the logic of these comparisons, we perceive, no less clearly, their delicious absurdity.

Such an association is perforce extremely fugitive, unless the language adopts it and makes of it one of those figures of speech with which it delights to enrich itself. It should occasion no surprise were this bend of a cable to be called its "knee." In any event, the two images remain ever ready to be divorced, divorce being the permanent rule in the world of ideas, which is the world of free love. This fact sometimes scandalizes simple folk. Whoever first dared to say the "mouth" or the "jaw" of a cannon, according to which of those terms is the older, was, without doubt, accused either of preciousness or of coarseness. If it be improper to speak of the "knee" of a rope, it is quite proper to speak of the "elbow" of a pipe or the "paunch" of a bottle. But these examples are presented merely as elementary types

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<sup>1</sup> *Les Travaillleurs de la Mer*, 2nd part, 1st Book, VII.

<sup>2</sup> Technical term.

of a mechanism which is more familiar to us in practice than in theory. Leaving aside all images still living, we shall concern ourselves exclusively with ideas – that is to say, those tenacious and fugitive shades which flutter about eternally bewildered in men's brains.

There are associations of ideas so durable that they seem everlasting, so closely knit that they resemble those double stars which the naked eye seeks in vain to separate. They are usually called "commonplaces." This expression, relic of an old rhetorical term, *loci communes sermonis*, has, especially since the development of individualism, assumed a slighting sense which it was far from possessing at the start, and even as late as the seventeenth century. The meaning of "commonplace" has also been narrowed, as well as debased, till it has come to be a variant of cliché, or hackneyed expression – that which has already been seen or heard; and, for the mass of men, who employ words without precision, commonplace is now one of the synonyms of *cliché*. But *cliché* refers to the words, commonplace to the ideas. *Cliché* defines the form or the letter, commonplace the substance or the sense. To confound them is to confound the thought with the expression of the thought. The *cliché* is immediately perceptible. The commonplace very often escapes notice if clothed in an original dress. There are not many examples, in any literature, of new ideas expressed in a new form. The most captious mind must commonly content itself with one or other of these pleasures, only too happy when not deprived of both at

once, which is not very rarely the case.

The commonplace is both more and less than a hackneyed expression. It is hackneyed, but sometimes unavoidably so. It is hackneyed, but so universally accepted that it comes consequently to be called a truth. Most truths which travel the world (truths are great travellers) may be regarded as commonplaces, that is to say, associations of ideas common to a large number of men, none of whom would dare deliberately to disassociate them. Man, in spite of his lying tendency, has great respect for what he calls the truth. This is because truth is the staff with which he travels through life, because commonplaces are the bread in his wallet, the wine in his gourd. Deprived of the truth contained in commonplaces, men would be without defence, without support, and without nourishment. They have so great a need of truths that they adopt new ones without rejecting the old. Civilized man's brain is a museum of contradictory truths. This does not disturb him, because he is a "successive." He ruminates his truths one after the other. He thinks as he eats. We should vomit with horror if we had presented to us, in a large dish, the various aliments, from meat to fruit, mixed with soup, wine and coffee, destined to form our "successive" repast. Our horror would be as great were we shown the repellent amalgam of contradictory truths which find lodgment in our mind. Some few analytical intelligences have sought vainly to draw up in cold blood the inventory of their contradictions. To each objection offered by reason, sentiment opposes an immediately valid

excuse; for, as M. Ribot has pointed out, the sentiments are what is strongest in us, representing the elements of permanence and continuity. It is not less difficult to inventory the contradictions of others, where a single individual is concerned; for here we come up against hypocrisy which has, precisely, as its social rôle, to dissimulate the too strident clash of our variegated convictions. We should then question all men – that is to say, the human entity – or at least groups of men sufficiently numerous for the cynicism of some to compensate the hypocrisy of others.

In the lower animal regions and in the vegetable world, budding is one of the ways in which life is created. Scission is seen to take place equally in the world of ideas; but the result, instead of being a new life, is a new abstraction. All general grammars, or elementary treatises on logic, teach how abstractions are formed. They have neglected to teach how they are not formed – that is, why a given commonplace persists in living on without posterity. It is a somewhat delicate question, but it would suggest interesting remarks for a chapter to be called "Refractory commonplaces, or the impossibility of disassociating certain ideas." It would, perhaps, be useful to examine first how ideas become associated, and to what end. The method of this operation is of the simplest sort. Its principle is analogy. There are very remote analogies; there are others so close that they lie within reach of all.

A great many commonplaces have an historic origin. One day two ideas became united under the influence of events, and this

union proved more or less lasting. Having seen with its own eyes the death-struggle of Byzantium, Europe coupled these two ideas, Byzantium-Decadence, which became a commonplace, an incontestable truth for all men who read and write, and thus necessarily for all the rest – for those who cannot verify the truths offered them. From Byzantium, this association of ideas was extended to the whole Roman Empire, which is now, for sage and respectful historians, nothing but a succession of decadences. We read recently in a weighty newspaper: "If the despotic form of government possessed a special virtue, conducive to the creation of good armies, would not the establishment of the empire have inaugurated an era of development in the military power of the Romans? It was, on the contrary, a signal for downfall and destruction." This commonplace, of Christian origin, has been popularized, in modern times, as everyone knows, by Montesquieu and Gibbon. It has been magisterially disassociated by M. Gaston Paris, and is now nothing but nonsense. But, as its genealogy is known – as its birth and its death have been witnessed – it may serve fairly well as an example to explain the nature of a great historic truth.

The secret purpose of the commonplace is, in fact, to express a truth. Isolated ideas represent merely facts or abstractions. To form a truth, two factors are needed – a fact and an abstraction. Such, at least, is the commonest mode of generation. Almost every truth, almost every commonplace, may be resolved into these two elements.

The word "truth" may almost always be employed concurrently with the word "commonplace," and is thus defined, once and for all, as a commonplace which has not yet been disassociated, disassociation being analogous to what, in chemistry, is called analysis. Chemical analysis challenges neither the existence nor the qualities of the substance which it disassociates into diverse elements often disassociable in their turn. It limits itself to liberating these elements and offering them to synthesis which, varying the proportions and adding new elements, will, if it likes, obtain entirely different substances. With the fragments of a truth can be constructed another truth "identically contrary." Such a task would be a mere game, but useful, nevertheless, like all those exercises which limber the intelligence and lead it towards that state of disdainful nobility to which it should aspire.

There are, however, truths that one dreams neither of analyzing nor of denying. Whether furnished us by the secular experience of humanity, or forming part of the axioms of science, they are incontestable. The preacher who proclaimed from the pulpit, before Louis XIV, "Gentlemen, we shall all die!" proffered a truth which the king, though he scowled, did not pretend seriously to dispute. It is, however, one of those truths that have doubtless experienced the greatest difficulty in becoming established, and are not, even now, universally admitted. It was not all at once that the Aryan races connected these two ideas – that of death and that of necessity. Many black



tribes still have not reached this point. There is no natural death, no necessary death, for the Negro. The sorcerer is consulted, at each decease, in order to ascertain the author of this secret and magic crime. We ourselves are still somewhat in the same mental state, and every premature death of a prominent man gives immediate rise to rumours of poisoning, of mysterious murder. Everyone remembers the legends started by the death of Gambetta and of Félix Faure. They connect naturally with those that stirred the end of the seventeenth century – with those which, far more than the facts, doubtless rare, darkened the sixteenth century in Italy. Stendhal, in his Roman anecdotes, overworks this poison superstition which must still, in our day, claim more than one judicial victim.

Man associates ideas, not at all in accordance with verifiable exactitude, but with his pleasure and his interest. That is why most truths are merely prejudices. Those that are least open to question are also those that he has always sought to combat cunningly with the ruse of silence. The same inertia is opposed to the work of disassociation seen operating slowly on certain truths.

The state of disassociation reached by moral commonplaces seems to bear a rather close relation to the degree of intellectual civilization. Here, too, it is a question of a sort of struggle, carried on, not by individuals, but by peoples formed into nations, against palpable facts which, while augmenting the intensity of the individual life, diminish, for that very reason, as experience

proves, the intensity of collective life and energy. There is no doubt that a man can derive from immorality itself – from his refusal to subscribe to the prejudices inscribed in a decalogue – a great personal benefit; but a collectivity of individuals too strong, too mutually independent, makes but a mediocre people. We have, in such cases, the spectacle of the social instinct entering the lists against the individual instinct, and of societies professing, as such, a morality that each of its intelligent members, followed by a very large part of the herd, deems vain, outworn or tyrannical.

A rather curious illustration of these principles will be found by examining the present state of sexual morality. This morality, peculiar to Christian peoples, is based upon the exceedingly close association of two ideas – that of carnal pleasure and that of generation. Any man or people that has not disassociated these two ideas, has not mentally liberated the elements of this truth, namely, that outside of the properly generative act, accomplished under the protection of the laws, whether religious or civil – the second being mere parodies of the first, in our essentially Christian civilizations – sexual acts are sins, errors, faults, weaknesses. Whoever consciously adopts this rule, sanctioned by the codes, belongs evidently to a still rudimentary civilization. The highest civilization being that in which the individual is freest, the most exempt from obligations, this proposition would be open to question only if taken as a provocation to libertinism, or as a depreciation of asceticism. It does not matter here whether

it be moral or immoral. It ought, if exact, to be seen, at the first glance, in the facts. Nothing is easier. A statistical table of European natality will convince the stubbornest that there is a very close bond – a bond of cause and effect – between a people's intellectuality and its fecundity. The same is true for individuals as for social groups. It is as a result of intellectual weakness that working-men allow their homes to be flooded with offspring. The slums are full of unfortunate individuals who, having begotten a dozen children, are surprised to find life harsh. These poor creatures, who lack even the excuse of religious beliefs, have not yet learned to disassociate the idea of carnal pleasure and that of generation. In their case, the first determines the second, and their acts respond to a childish, almost animal cerebral process. The man who has reached a really human stage in the scale of intelligence, limits his offspring at will. It is one of his privileges, but it is among those that he attains only to die of them.

Fortunate for the individual whom it sets free, this particular disassociation is, in fact, far less fortunate for a people. However, it will favour the further development of civilization, by maintaining upon the earth, the spaces required for human evolution.

It was not till fairly late that the Greeks succeeded in separating the idea of woman and that of generation; but they had already disassociated, at a very early date, the idea of generation and that of carnal pleasure. When they ceased to consider woman

solely as an instrument of generation, the reign of the courtesans began. The Greeks seem, moreover, always to have had an extremely vague sexual morality, though this did not prevent them from cutting a certain figure in history.

Christianity could not, without forswearing its own principles, encourage the disassociation of the idea of carnal pleasure and that of generation; but it successfully promoted, on the other hand, the disassociation of the idea of love and that of carnal pleasure, and this was one of the great conquests of humanity. The Egyptians were so far incapable of understanding such a disassociation, that the love of a brother and sister would have seemed nothing to them if it had not led to sexual intercourse. The lower classes of great cities are often enough quite Egyptian in this regard. The different sorts of incest which occasionally come to our notice, testify to the fact that an analogous state of mind is not absolutely incompatible with a certain intellectual culture. The peculiarly Christian form of chaste love, freed from all idea of physical pleasure, is divine love, such as it is seen flowering in the mystical exaltation of the contemplatives. This is the really pure love, since it corresponds to nothing that can be defined. It is the intelligence adoring itself in its own infinite self-made image. Whatever sensual element may be involved has its source in the very constitution of the human body, and in the law governing the interdependence of the organs. No account should, therefore, be taken of it in a non-physiological study. What has been clumsily called Platonic love is thus a Christian creation. It

is in the last analysis a passionate friendship, as vital and jealous as physical love, but freed from the idea of carnal pleasure, just as the latter had already been freed from the idea of generation. This ideal state of the human affections is the first stage on the road to asceticism, and asceticism might be defined as the state of mind in which all ideas are disassociated.

With the waning of the Christian influence, the first stage of asceticism has become a less and less frequent halting-place, and asceticism itself, grown equally rare, is often reached by another route. In our day the idea of love has once more been closely connected with the idea of physical pleasure, and moralists are busy refashioning its primitive association with the idea of generation. It is a rather curious retrogression.

An historical psychology of humanity could be attempted by determining the precise degree of disassociation attained, in the course of the centuries, by a certain number of those truths which the orthodox agree to call primordial. This method ought even to form the base, and this determination the very aim, of history. Since everything in man comes back to the intelligence, everything in history ought to come back to psychology. It would be some excuse for the facts, were they found to admit of an explanation neither diplomatic nor strategic. What was the association of ideas, or the truth not yet disassociated, which favoured the accomplishment of the mission which Jeanne d'Arc believed to have been received from heaven? To answer this question, it would be necessary to discover certain ideas capable

of uniting equally in French brains and in English, or a truth at that time indisputably admitted by all Christendom. Jeanne d'Arc was regarded, at once by her friends and by her enemies, as possessing a supernatural power. For the English, she was a very potent sorceress. Opinion is unanimous on this point, and there is abundant evidence. But for her partisans? For them she was doubtless a sorceress also, or rather, a magician. Magic is not necessarily diabolical. Supernatural beings, that were neither angels nor demons, but Powers which man's intelligence could bring under its dominion, were afloat in the imagination. The magician was the good sorcerer. Were this not so, would a man as wise and as saintly as Albertus Magnus have been taxed with magic? The soldier who followed Jeanne d'Arc, and the soldier who fought her, sorceress or magician, formed of her, quite probably, an idea identical in its dreadful absurdity. But if the English shouted the name of sorceress, the French withheld the name of "magician," doubtless for the same reason which so long protected the usurper Ta-Kiang through the marvellous adventures narrated by Judith Gautier in her admirable *Dragon Impérial*.

What idea, at any given moment, did each class of society form of the soldier? Would not the answer to this question contain a whole course in history? Coming down to our own time, it might be asked at what moment the idea of honour and the military idea became united in the common mind. Is the union a survival of the aristocratic conception of the army?

Was the association formed as a result of the events of thirty years ago, when the people decided to exalt the soldier for its own encouragement? This idea of honour should be clearly understood. It contains several other ideas – ideas of bravery, of disinterestedness, of discipline, of sacrifice, of heroism, of probity, of loyalty, of frankness, of good humour, of openness, of simplicity, etc. The word itself would, in fine, be found to sum up the qualities of which the French race believes itself to be the expression. To determine its origin would be, then, to determine automatically the period when the Frenchman began to believe himself a compendium of all the manly virtues. The military man has remained in France, in spite of recent objections, the very type of the man of honour. The two ideas are united very energetically. They form a truth which is scarcely disputed to-day, except by individuals of slight authority or of doubtful sincerity. Its disassociation is, therefore, very little advanced as regards the nation as a whole. It was, however, for a moment at least, completely effected in certain minds. This involved, from the strictly intellectual point of view, a considerable effort of abstraction which we cannot but admire when we regard dispassionately the cerebral machine in its functioning. Doubtless the result achieved was not the product of normal reasoning. The disassociation was accomplished in a fit of fever. It was unconscious, and it was momentary; but it *was*, and that is the important point for the observer. The idea of honour, with all it implies, became separated from the military idea, which, in this

instance, is the factual idea, the female idea, ready to receive all the modifiers, and it was perceived that, if there was a certain logical relation between them, this relation was not necessary. There is the decisive point. A truth is dead when it has been shown that the relations between the elements are habitual, and not necessary; and, as the death of a truth is a great benefit for mankind, this disassociation would have been very important if it had been definitive, if it had remained stable. Unfortunately, after the effort to attain the pure idea, the old mental habits resumed their sway. The former modifying element was instantly replaced by an element by no means new, less logical than the other, and even less necessary. The operation seemed to have miscarried. Association of ideas occurred again in the very same form as before, though one of the elements had now been turned inside out, like an old glove. For honour had been substituted dishonour, with all the adventitious ideas belonging to the old element transformed into cowardice, deceitfulness, lack of discipline, falseness, duplicity, wickedness, etc. This new association of ideas may have a destructive value, but it offers no intellectual interest.

The moral of this anecdote is that the ideas which seem to us the clearest, the most evident, – the most palpable, as it were – are, even so, not strong enough to impose themselves in all their nakedness upon the average mind. In order to assimilate the idea of the army, a contemporary brain must swathe it with elements which have only a chance or current relation with the



main idea. A humble politician cannot, doubtless, be expected to adopt Napoleon's simple idea of an army as a sword. Very simple ideas lie within the reach of very complicated minds only. It seems, however, that it should not be absurd to regard the army merely as the exteriorized force of a nation, and then to demand of this particular force only those very qualities which are demanded of force in general. But perhaps even this is too simple?

What excellent opportunities the present offers for one who would study the mechanism of the association and disassociation of ideas! We often talk of ideas. We write on the evolution of ideas. Yet no word is vaguer or more ill-defined. There are naïve writers who hold forth on the Idea, with a capital I. There are co-operative societies that start out suddenly in quest of the Idea. There are people who devote themselves to the Idea, who live with their gaze fixed upon the Idea. Just what is meant by such rambling? That is what I have never been able to understand. Employed thus, alone, the word is perhaps a corruption of the word Ideal. Is the modifying term perhaps understood also? Is it a stray fragment of the Hegelian philosophy which the slow advance of the great social glacier has, in passing, deposited in certain heads, where it rolls and clatters about like a rock? No one knows. Employed as a relative, the word is not much clearer in ordinary phraseologies. Its primitive meaning is too far forgotten, as well as the fact that an idea is nothing but an image that has reached the state of abstraction, of notion; but it is forgotten also

that, in order to be entitled to the name of idea, a notion must be free from all compromise with the contingent. A notion, reaching the estate of idea, has become indisputable. It is a cipher, a sign – one of the letters in the alphabet of thought.

Ideas cannot be classed as true and false. The idea is necessarily true. An idea that can be disputed is an idea mingled with concrete notions, that is to say, a truth. The work of disassociation tends, precisely, to free the truth from all its fragile part, in order to obtain the pure, one, and consequently unassailable idea. But if words were never used save in their unique and absolute sense, connected discourse would be difficult. There must be left a little of that vagueness and flexibility which usage has given them; and, in particular, too much stress must not be laid upon the gap separating the abstract from the concrete. There is an intermediate state between ice and water – that in which the latter begins to congeal, when it still cracks and yields under the pressure of the hand plunged into it. Perhaps we should not even demand that the words contained in philosophic handbooks should abdicate all pretension to ambiguity.

The idea of army, which aroused serious polemics, and which was liberated an instant, only to be obscured anew, is one of those that border on the concrete and cannot be spoken of without minute references to reality. The idea of justice, on the contrary, can be considered in itself, *in abstracto*. In the inquiry made by M. Ribot on the subject of general ideas, almost all those who

heard the word Justice pronounced, saw, in their mind's eye, the legendary lady with the scales. There is, in this traditional representation of an abstract idea, a notion of the very origin of that idea.

The idea of justice is, in fact, nothing but the idea of equilibrium. Justice is the dead-point in a series of acts – the ideal point at which contrary forces neutralize each other to produce inertia. Life which had passed this dead-point of absolute justice could not longer live, since the idea of life, identical with that of a conflict of forces, is necessarily the idea of justice. The reign of justice could only be the reign of silence and of petrification. Mouths cease to speak – vain organs of stupefied brains – and arms uplifted in suspended gesture describe nothing further in the frozen air. Theologians situated justice beyond the world, in eternity. There only can it be conceived, and there only can it, without danger to life, exercise once and for all its tyranny which knows but one sort of decree, the decree of death. The idea of justice, then, clearly belongs to the series of ideas that are indisputable and undemonstrable. Nothing can be done with it in its pure state. It must be associated with some element of fact, or we must cease using a word which corresponds only to an inconceivable entity. To tell the truth, the idea of justice is perhaps here disassociated for the first time. Under this name men allege sometimes the idea of punishment, which is very familiar to them, sometimes the idea of non-punishment – a neutral idea, mere shadow of the former. It

is question of punishing the guilty and of not disturbing the innocent – a distinction which, in order to be comprehensible, would immediately imply a definition of guilt and a definition of innocence. That is difficult, these words from the moral dictionary having to-day nothing but a dwindling and entirely relative significance. And why, it might be asked, should a guilty man be punished? It would seem, on the contrary, as if the innocent man, who is supposed to be healthy and normal, were much more capable of supporting punishment than the guilty man, who is sick and weakly. Why should not the imbecile, who has let himself be robbed, be punished instead of the robber, who has certain excuses to offer? That is what justice would decree if, instead of a theological conception, it were still, as at Sparta, an imitation of nature. Nothing exists save by virtue of disequilibrium, of injustice. Every existence is a theft practised upon other existences. No life flourishes except in a cemetery. If, instead of being the denier of natural laws, humanity wished to become their auxiliary, it would seek to protect the strong against the coalition of the weak, and give the people to the aristocrats as a footstool. It would seem, on the contrary, as if that which is to-day understood by justice were, simultaneously with the punishment of the guilty, the extermination of the strong, and, simultaneously with the non-punishment of the innocent, the exaltation of the humble. The origin of this complex, bastard, hypocritical idea should then be sought in the Gospel, in the "woe to the rich" of the Jewish demagogues. Thus understood,

the idea of justice appears contaminated at once by hatred and by envy. It no longer retains anything of its original meaning, and one cannot attempt its analysis without danger of being duped by the vulgar meaning of the words. Yet, with a little care, it would be seen that the depreciation of this useful term arose originally from a confusion between the idea of right and the idea of punishment. The day when justice came to mean sometimes criminal justice, sometimes civil justice, the world confused these two practical notions, and the teachers of the people, incapable of a serious effort of disassociation, have come to magnify a misunderstanding which, moreover, serves their own interests. The real idea of justice appears then, finally, as quite non-existent in the very word which figures in the human vocabulary. This word resolves itself, on analysis, into elements which are still very complex, and among which may be distinguished the idea of right and the idea of punishment. But there is so much that is illogical in this curious coupling, that we should be inclined to doubt the accuracy of our operation, did not the social facts furnish its proof.

We might here examine this question: do abstract words really exist for the people, for the average man? Probably not. It would even seem as if the same word attained only graduated stages of abstraction, according to the degree of intellectual culture. The pure idea is more or less contaminated by concern for personal, caste or group interests, and the word justice, for example, thus clothes all sorts of particular and limited meanings under the

weight of which its supreme sense disappears, overwhelmed.

The moment an idea is disassociated and it enters thus, quite naked, into circulation, it begins to pick up, in the course of its wanderings, all sorts of parasitic vegetations. Sometimes the original organism disappears entirely, devoured by the egoistic colonies which develop in it. A very amusing example of the way in which ideas are thus deflected was recently given by the corporation of house-painters, at the ceremony called the "Triumph of the Republic." These workmen carried a banner on which their demands for social justice were summed up in the cry: "Down with Ripolin!" The reader should know that Ripolin is a prepared paint which anyone can apply, in order to understand the full sincerity of this slogan as well as its artlessness. Ripolin here represents injustice and oppression. It is the enemy, the devil. We all have our ripolin with which we colour, according to our needs, the abstract ideas which otherwise would be of no personal use to us.

It is under one of these motleys that the idea of liberty is presented to us by the politicians. Hearing this word, we now perceive little other than the idea of political liberty, and it would seem as if all the liberties which man is capable of enjoying were summed up in this ambiguous expression. Moreover, it is the same with the pure idea of liberty, as with the pure idea of justice; it is of no use to us in the ordinary business of life. Neither man nor nature is free, any more than either is just. Reasoning has no hold upon such ideas. To

express them is to assert them, but they would necessarily falsify every argument into which one might wish to introduce them. Reduced to its social significance, the idea of liberty is still incompletely disassociated. There is no general idea of liberty, and it is difficult to form one, since the liberty of an individual is exercised only at the expense of the liberty of others. Formerly liberty was called privilege. Taking everything into account, that is perhaps its true name. Even to-day one of our relative liberties – the liberty of the press – is an ensemble of privileges. Privileges also are the liberty of speech granted to lawyers, the liberty of trade unions, and, to-morrow, the liberty of association as it is now proposed to us. The idea of liberty is perhaps only an emphatic corruption of the idea of privilege. The Latins, who made great use of the word liberty, meant by it the privilege of the Roman citizen.

It is seen that there is often an enormous gap between the common meaning of a word and its real significance in the depths of obscure verbal consciousnesses, whether because several associated ideas are expressed by a single word, or because the primitive idea has been submerged by the invasion of a secondary idea. It is thus possible – especially in dealing with generalizations – to write sentences having at once an apparent and a secret meaning. Words, which are signs, are almost always ciphers as well. The unconscious conventional language is very much in use, and there are even matters where it is the only one employed. But cipher implies deciphering. It is not easy to

understand even the sincerest writing, and the author himself often goes astray because the meaning of words varies not only from one man to another, but from moment to moment, in the case of the same man. Language is thus a great cause of deception. It evolves in abstraction, while life evolves in complete concrete reality. Between speech and the things designated by speech, there is the same distance as between a landscape and the description of a landscape. And it must still further be borne in mind that the landscapes which we depict are known to us, most often, only through words which are, in turn, reflections of anterior words. Yet we understand each other. It is a miracle which I have no intention of analyzing at present. It will be more to our purpose, in concluding this sketch, which is merely a method, to undertake the examination of the quite modern ideas of art and of beauty.

I am ignorant of their origins, but they are later than the classic languages, which possess no fixed and precise words to express them, though the ancients were as well able as we to enjoy the reality they contain – better, even. They are intertangled. The idea of art is dependent upon the idea of beauty; but this latter idea is itself nothing but the idea of harmony, and the idea of harmony reduces itself to the idea of logic. The beautiful is that which is in its place. Thence arise the sentiments of pleasure given us by beauty. Or rather, beauty is a logic which is perceived as a pleasure. If this be admitted, it will at once be understood why the idea of beauty, in societies dominated



by women, is almost always restricted to the idea of feminine beauty. Beauty is a woman. There is in this an interesting subject for analysis, but the question is somewhat complicated. It would be necessary to show, first, that woman is no more beautiful than man; that, situated on the same plane in nature, constructed on the same model, made of the same flesh, she would appear to a sensitive intelligence, exterior to humanity, exactly the female of man – exactly what, for man, a jenny is to a jack. And, observing them more closely, the Martian, who wished to learn something concerning the aesthetics of terrestrial forms, would even note that, if there be a real difference in beauty between a man and a woman of the same race, of the same caste, and of the same age, this difference is almost always in favour of the man; and that, moreover, if neither the man nor the woman be entirely beautiful, the defects of the human race are more accentuated in the woman, where the twofold projection of the belly and the buttocks – sexual attractions, no doubt – breaks unpleasantly the double line of the silhouette. The curve of the breasts is almost inflected under the influence of the back, which has a hollow tendency. Cranach's nudes confess naïvely these eternal imperfections of woman. Another defect which artists, when they have taste, remedy instinctively, is the shortness of the legs, so marked in the photographs of nude women. This cold anatomy of feminine beauty has often been made. It is, then, useless to insist upon it – all the more because, unfortunately, its verification is only too easy. But if woman's beauty be so

vulnerable to criticism, how does it happen that, in spite of all, it remains indisputable – that it has become for us the very basis and leaven of the idea of beauty? It is a sexual illusion. The idea of beauty is not a pure idea. It is intimately connected with the idea of carnal pleasure. Stendhal had an obscure perception of this line of reasoning when he defined beauty as "a promise of happiness." Beauty is a woman, even for women themselves, who have carried docility with regard to men to the point of adopting this aphorism which they are capable of understanding only under the form of extreme sensual perversion. We know, however, that women have a particular type of beauty, which men have naturally branded "doll-like." If women were sincere, they would long ago have stigmatized equally the type of feminine beauty by which man most readily lets himself be seduced.

This identification of woman and beauty goes so far to-day that we have had innocently proposed us the "apotheosis of woman," meaning the glorification of beauty, with all the promises contained in Stendhal's definition taken in its erotic sense. Beauty is a woman and woman is a beauty. The caricaturists accentuate the common sentiment by invariably coupling with a woman, whom they strive to render beautiful, a man whose ugliness they stress to the extreme of vulgarity; and this in spite of the fact that pretty women are so rare in life, that after thirty a woman is almost always inferior, age for age, in plastic beauty, to her husband or lover. It is true that this inferiority is no easier to demonstrate than it is to feel, and that

reasoning remains ineffective, once the page is finished, for the reader as well as for the writer; and this is very fortunate.

The idea of beauty has never been disassociated save by aestheticians. The common run of men accept Stendhal's definition, which amounts to saying that this idea does not exist – that it has been absolutely devoured by the idea of happiness – of sexual happiness, happiness given by a woman. That is why the cult of beauty is suspect for moralists who have analyzed the value of certain abstract words. They translate this one by the cult of the flesh, and they would be right, if that last expression did not imply a somewhat silly attack upon one of man's most natural tendencies. The necessary result has been that, in opposing such excessive apotheosis of woman, they have infringed upon the rights of art. Art being the expression of beauty, and it being possible to understand beauty only under the material aspects of the true idea which it contains, art has become almost uniquely feminine. Beauty is woman; and art, also, is woman. But the latter is less absolute. The notion of art is even fairly clear for artists and for the *élite*. The idea of art has been extremely well liberated. There is a pure art which is concerned exclusively with self-realization. No definition of it even should be given; for such a definition could not be made without connecting the idea of art with ideas which are foreign to it, and which would tend to obscure and sully it.

Previous to this disassociation, which is recent, and whose origin is known, the idea of art was connected with diverse ideas

which are normally foreign to it – ideas of morality, of utility, or education. Art was the edifying illustration introduced into religious or philosophical catechism. This was the conception of the last two centuries. We freed ourselves from that yoke. There are now those who would like to put it back upon our necks. The idea of art has again been sullied, this time with the idea of utility. Art is called social by modern preachers. It is also called democratic, both epithets being well chosen, if it was meant by them to imply complete negation of its principal function. Admitting art because it can improve individuals or the masses, is like admitting roses because an eye-wash can be extracted from them. It is confounding two series of notions which the well-regulated exercise of the intelligence places upon entirely different planes. The plastic arts have a language; but this language cannot be translated into words and phrases. The work of art says things which are addressed directly to the aesthetic sense, and to it alone. What it can add, in such a way as to be understood by our other, faculties, is not worth listening to. And yet it is this negligible element which interests the boosters of social art. They are the majority and, as we are governed by the law of numbers, their triumph seems assured. The idea of art will, perhaps, prove to have been disassociated for a few years only, and for a small group of intelligences.

There are, then, a very large number of ideas that are never employed by men in their pure state, either because they have not yet been disassociated, or because this disassociation has

been incapable of achieving stability. There are also a great many ideas which exist in the state of disassociation, or that can provisionally be considered so to exist, but which have a special affinity for other ideas with which they are most commonly encountered. There are still others which seem refractory to certain associations, whereas the facts to which they correspond are, in reality, extremely frequent. Here are a few examples of these affinities and of these repulsions, chosen in the profoundly interesting realm of commonplaces, or truths.

Flags were originally religious tokens, like the oriflamme of Saint-Denis, and their symbolic utility has remained at least as great as their real usefulness. But how, outside of war, have they become symbols of the idea of country? This is easier to explain by the facts themselves than by abstract logic. To-day, in nearly all civilized countries, the idea of country and the idea of flag are invincibly associated. The two words are even interchangeable. But this is a question of symbolism quite as much as of association of ideas. Insistence upon it would lead us to the language of colours, counterpart of the language of flowers, but still more unstable and arbitrary. If it is amusing to note that the blue of the French flag is the consecrated colour of the Virgin and of the children of Mary, it is no less so to find that the pious purple of the robe of Saint-Denis has become a revolutionary symbol. Like the atoms of Epicurus, ideas cling together as best they may, through chance encounters, shocks and accidents.

Certain associations, though very recent, have rapidly acquired a singular authority, like those of education and intelligence, of education and morality. But, at most, education may have something to say for one of the particular forms of memory, or for a literal knowledge of the commonplaces contained in the Decalogue. The absurdity of these forced relations appears very clearly in that which concerns woman. It seems clear that there is a certain sort of education – that which they receive to-day – which, far from stimulating their intelligence, tends rather to blunt it. Since they have been educated seriously, they no longer have the least influence either in politics or in literature. Compare, in this connection, our last thirty years with the last thirty years of the *ancien régime*. These two associations of ideas have, nevertheless, become veritable commonplaces – truths which it is as useless to expose as to combat. They take their place with all those which infest books and the degenerate lobes of man's brain – with old and venerable truths like: virtue-recompense, vice-punishment, God-goodness, crime-remorse, duty-happiness, authority-respect, unhappiness-punishment, future-progress, and thousands of others, some of which, though absurd, are useful to mankind.

It would be equally possible to make a long catalogue of the ideas which men refuse to associate, while delighting in the most disconcerting *débauches*. We have given above the explanation of this stubborn attitude, namely, that their principal occupation is the pursuit of happiness, and that they are much more concerned

with reasoning in accordance with their interests than with the rules of logic.

Thence the universal aversion to connecting the idea of nothingness with the idea of death. Though the former is evidently contained in the latter, humanity insists upon considering them separately. It opposes their union with all its force, never tiring of driving between them a chimerical wedge upon which resound the hammer-blows of hope. This is the finest example of the illogical that we can offer ourselves for our diversion, and the best proof that, in the gravest matters, as in those of slightest concern, it is sentiment which always triumphs over reason.

Is it a great thing to have learned that? Perhaps.

November, 1899.

# GLORY AND THE IDEA OF IMMORTALITY

## I

The idea of glory is not one of the most difficult to resolve. It can be identified with the general idea of immortality, of which it is but one of the secondary and naïver forms, differing from it only in the substitution of vanity for pride. In the one we have the idea of duration fortified by the pride of a being who believes himself of immortal importance, but who consents to enjoy without fuss an absolute perennity. In the other, vanity, replacing pride, puts aside the idea of the absolute, or, declaring itself incapable of attaining it, clings to a desire of eternity, no doubt, but an objective eternity, perceptible to others – a ceremonial eternity which wastes in world-wide repute that which absolute immortality gains in depth and in proud humility.

Abstract words define inadequately an abstract idea. It is better to fall back upon the common opinion. Everybody knows what glory is. Every writer pictures to himself literary glory. Nothing is clearer than this sort of illusion. Nothing is clearer than love and desire. Definitions, which are indispensable for dictionaries only, contain of reality precisely what a net, raised



at the wrong moment from the sea where it awaited its prey, contains of obscure, squirming life. Sea-weed writhes in its meshes. Lanky creatures stir their translucent claws, and here are all sorts of helices or of valvules which a mechanical sensibility keeps tight-shut. But reality, which was a big fish, with a sudden swish of its tail, flopped overboard. Generally speaking, clear, neat sentences have no meaning. They are affirmative gestures, suggesting obedience, and that is all. The human mind is so complex, and things are so tangled up in each other that, in order to explain a blade of grass, the entire universe would have to be taken to pieces; and in no language is there a single authentic word upon which a lucid intelligence could not construct a psychological treatise, a history of the world, a novel, a poem, a drama, according to the day and the temperature. The definition is a sack of compressed flour contained in a thimble. What can we do with it, unless we are antarctic explorers? It is more to the point to place a pinch of flour under the microscope and seek patiently, amid the bran, the living starch. In what is left after analyzing the idea of immortality, the idea of glory will be found a shining speck of gold.

Man still believes himself the last achievement of the creative power. Darwin, corroborating the Bible, ushered the human couple out of the shades on the sixth day only; and the leading scientists take the same stand – a fact which favours those dubious books in which the questionable concordance of Science and Faith is celebrated. But Darwinism is on the eve

of disappearing before preciser notions. To-morrow we shall no longer be obliged to believe that the creator of the universe, having organized the lower species without moral ideas, invented man for the purpose of depositing in his brain a principle which it had got along very well without itself, in the course of its preparatory labours. If man is no longer the latest arrival, – if he is a very old animal in the history of life, – if the flower of the life-tree is not Adam but the Dove, – then the whole metaphysic of morals will collapse. What! after the masterpiece, Man, He (or She, according to which meaningless word may be professed) humbles Himself to make the Bird! What! the stork after Abraham's ancestor! Yet so it is. M. Quinton's labours<sup>3</sup> will no longer permit us to doubt it. It becomes certain that the human intelligence, far from being the goal of creation, is only an accident, and that moral ideas are but parasitic vegetations arising from an excess of nutrition. The phenomena of intelligence, moral consciousness, and all the titles of nobility engrossed on the parchment, might perfectly well, no doubt, have appeared

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<sup>3</sup> *Communication à l'Académie des Sciences (13 Avril 1896)*, certified and rendered more precise by later investigations which M. Quinton has explained to me. Here, without scientific apparatus, is what, as a result of precious conservations, would appear to be the general order in which the animals appeared, beginning with the fishes, and taking account only of those which have yet been covered: The bearing of this list upon any question whatsoever of general philosophy is evident for all who know how to disassociate ideas. It would have thrilled Voltaire. For the rest, I claim the honour of having been the first to announce to the larger public these new scientific views, which will, logically, have a magnificent wealth of consequences. I have already made a less precise allusion to them, notably in the *Wiener Rundschau*, May 1899.

in any other species whatsoever. The birds, whose evolution is as yet incomplete, will not, perhaps, be exempted from them. Their arterial system is superior to man's – simpler and stronger. They can eat without interrupting their breathing. They steal, they speak, they can recite the Rights of Man or the Nicene Creed – supreme achievements of large numbers of men. The bird, chronological king of creation, has remained, till now, and in spite of its improvements, an animal. The bird series does not seem, in point of intelligence, superior to that of the mammals, among which Man figures as an inexplicable exception. Intelligence could then be regarded as an end, only if each of the animal species were rigorously determined and stationary. This is M. Quinton's opinion, at least provisionally. The species, since they are species – since the individuals which compose them are reproduced in beings identical with themselves – the species, such as they are defined, by these very syllables – spec-i-es – may disappear, but they can no longer change. Man has quite certainly passed through various states in which he was not a man; but the day man produced a man, humanity began immutable. It is then possible that human intelligence, instead of being an accident, a derogation, was determined, from the beginning, like the human hand, the human feet, the human hair. It would then have a normal, logical rôle in the universe, and its very excess – genius – would be but exuberance of energy. But we should still have to explain the bird's stupidity. Is it, perhaps, an evidence of the intellectual

degeneration of the creative forces? The most probable opinion is that intelligence is an excrescence, like an oak-apple. To what insect's bite do we owe it? We shall never know.

It matters little whether the intelligence be, as Taine believed, a normal product of the brain, or a malady, especially as a blemish, transmitted as such from generation to generation, ends by losing its pathological characteristics. It becomes an integral and normal part of the organism.<sup>4</sup> Its accidental origin is, however, corroborated by this, that although an excellent instrument for a priori combinations, the intelligence is, one would say, especially unfitted for the perception of realities. It is to this infirmity that we owe metaphysics, religions and ethical systems. As the external world can reach the consciousness only by scrupulously conforming to all the nooks and crannies of the pocket, it turns out that, believing to hold an image of the world, we have only an image of ourselves. Certain rectifications are possible. Analysis of the phenomena of vision has made us admit that. By comparing our sensations and our ideas with what we can comprehend of the sensations and ideas of others, we arrive at a determination of probable averages; but, above all, negative averages. It would be easier to draw up a list of non-

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<sup>4</sup> Intelligence can thus be conceived as an initial form of instinct, in which case the human intelligence would be destined to crystallize into instinct, as has occurred in the case of other animal species. Consciousness would disappear, leaving complete liberty to the unconscious act, necessarily perfect in the limits of its intention. The conscious man is a scholar who will reveal himself a master the moment he has become a delicate but unerring machine, like bee and beaver.

truths than a list of truths. To affirm that a given religion is false, no longer denotes great boldness of intellect or even much intellect. The veracity of any religion whatsoever is to-day a subject for controversy only for the various European clergies who make their living out of it, or for those belated rationalists who, like their master Kant, are ever awaiting the propitious and lucrative hour for opportune conversions. But, to the naïve question presented by those who, like nature, in the seventeenth century, abhor a vacuum: – "What will you put in its place?" – no answer can be made. It is enough, and it is no small thing at that, to have transmuted a truth into a non-truth. The higher calling of criticism is not even, as Pierre Bayle proclaimed, to sow doubts; it must destroy. The intelligence is an excellent instrument of negation. It is time to employ it, and so stop trying to rear palaces with picks and torches.

The history of the idea of immortality is a good example of our congenital inability to perceive realities otherwise than reshaped and worked over by the understanding. The idea of immortality is born of belief in the double. In sleep, and while the body is inert, there is a part of man that stirs, that travels, that fights, that eats, enjoys or suffers, exhibits all the phenomena of life. This part of man, this double of man, this astral body, survives the decomposition of the material body, whose habits and needs it keeps. Such, doubtless, is the origin of the belief in what, since Hellenism, we call the immortality of the soul. In an earlier stage, the Egyptian religion was based upon the theory of

the double. It was for doubles, and not for souls, that first real, and later symbolic, food was placed in the tombs. But the Egyptian religion was already charged, in addition, with the idea of justice, of equilibrium. The doubles were weighed in the scales of good and evil. Ethical metaphysics had obscured the primitive idea of immortality, which is nothing but the idea of indefinite duration.

For theologians, for philosophers – if there still be any to profess these honest doctrines – for the common run of men, the idea of immortality, or of the future life, is intimately connected with the idea of justice. Eternal happiness is a compensation accorded human sorrows. There are also – but these are for theologians only – personal torments to punish infractions of priestly orders, which tortures are, moreover, an additional recompense for the good, and a guarantee against promiscuity. We have here an aristocratic selection, but one based upon the idea of good and bad, instead of upon that of strength and weakness. These strange reversals of values enraged Nietzsche. They should be accepted as at least transitory consequences of civilized man's sensibility. Primitive man, whose nervous vibrations are few, and whose intelligence is passive, feels suffering, though dully, but does not feel injustice, which is moral suffering. To encounter a similar state we must cross the middle regions, and question a Goethe, a Taine or a Nietzsche – men in whom intelligence has finally conquered by its very excess, repelling the pleadings of pity and the sentimental pitfalls of justice. If the idea of immortality had been born in a superior

intelligence, it would have differed only by its greater logic from the brutal conceptions of primitive humanity.

M. Marillier has collected and co-ordinated all that which, in the beliefs of the uncivilized, relates to the survival of the soul.<sup>5</sup> The ensemble of the facts shows that the idea of justice has had not the slightest share in forming the conception of the idea of immortality. There have been few discoveries more important for the history of human beliefs. The idea of immortality was, at first, as M. Marillier has the hardihood to assert, a purely scientific conception. It is the magnification and prolongation of a fact – of a fact badly observed, but still a fact. The future life is the continuation of the present life, and involves the same customs, the same pleasures, the same annoyances. This world also has a double: the other world. The bad and the good, the strong and the weak, continue there as here. Sometimes life, without change in the relations of its elements, is more clement in the other world. Sometimes, in the same conditions, it is worse. But, whether the future life be considered as better or worse, it is the same for all. Better still, it implies perfect equality in those commonplace pleasures which are the average ideal of the civilized man as well as of the savage. The tribes of New Guinea, rendered anaemic by hunger, dream of eating unlimited sago throughout eternity. As it would be possible to discover, even in this egalitarian paradise, some vague idea of compensation,

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<sup>5</sup> *La Survivance de l'Ame et l'idée de justice chez les peuples non civilisés*, Paris, Leroux, 1894.

hence of justice; we must go farther, to Java, where paradise – doubtless because of an excessive toll – was accessible only to the rich; to those resigned races, where alone the kings, the priest and the nobles, were saved; to Borneo, where the hereafter, divided into seven circles, corresponded to the seven circles of the social hierarchy. In another corner of the great island, "every person whom a man kills in this world becomes his slave in the next." There we have a paradise clearly based upon the idea of force, and a belief which laughs a little at the categorical imperative. Not only is the weak not "recompensed," but his weakness and his suffering may, through the caprice of the strong, be raised to the infinite. The slayer has acquired an immortal profit. Societies in which there is poetry, art, laughter, love, still exist with such a morality. The fact may sadden, but it does not surprise us; for it is evident that we have here a terrible element of resistance against foreigners. Such a system has its drawbacks. From time to time, in Borneo, a band of young Dyaks who have not yet killed, dash into a town and slay. Having thus gained immortal life and a slave, they remain more tranquil thereafter. Among the Shans, a man killed by an elephant forfeits paradise. Eaten by a tiger, he becomes a tiger. Women who die in child-bed become ghouls and haunt the tombs, their feet reversed, heels foremost. In the Mariannas, there is a heaven and a hell. Violent death leads to hell, natural death to paradise. These people were destined to be slaves from all eternity. In another region of Oceania, the fate of the soul is decided by the family of the deceased, who throw dice



for it. Odd means annihilation, even eternal happiness. In Tahiti, the blind souls, on leaving the body, wander away to a plain where there are two stones. One, touched first, confers immortal life, the other eternal death. This is almost sublimely absurd. It is as grandiose and terrible as predestination. Saint Augustine placed the one in the night, before birth. The Tahitians situated the other in the shades, after death. Protestantism, to which those poor people have since surrendered, has not much changed their beliefs. Generally speaking, the greatest effort of a religious or philosophical innovator is to put at the end what was originally at the beginning, or vice versa.

By connecting itself with the idea of immortality, the idea of justice has, then, singularly disturbed its original character. It has even contaminated the idea of earthly immortality – the idea of glory.

## II

How glory, first reserved for the kings and warriors sung by the poets, has come finally to be attributed to the poets themselves, even more than to the heroes of their poems, is an historic fact whose exact origin would be of little interest. It would be more curious to discover as a result of what change in the manners and customs, or through what enhancement of egoism and of vanity, the complicated idea of justice came to attach itself to the idea of the perennity of the name and of the work. At what epoch of Greek civilization, did an Athenian dramatist, whose play had been flouted by the public, have the boldness to appeal to posterity? Are any ancient texts known wherein such recriminations may be read? Sensibility has increased to such an extent that there exists to-day no scorned poetaster who does not dream of the justice of future generations. The *exigi monumentum* of Horace and Malherbe has become democratized; but how can we believe that the vanity of authors has ever had a beginning? The fact must be admitted, however, in order to keep within the logic of the successive developments of human character.

Literary glory was at first merely the sentiment of the future duration of the present reputation – a legitimate sentiment which accords fairly well with the facts; for absolute revivals are almost as rare as solid rehabilitations. To-day it is a scientific

probability. Æschylus believed that the relation existing in his own lifetime between the *Suppliants* and public opinion would continue the same throughout the ages. Æschylus was right; but not if he cherished the same dream with regard to the *Danaïdes* and the *Egyptians*. Yet Pratinas saw himself, in the future, one of the rivals of Æschylus, and Pratinas is to-day but a word, scarcely a name. The idea of glory, even in its oldest and most legitimate form, would seem, therefore, to contain the idea of justice, at least by preterition, since its non-realization at once suggests to us the idea of injustice. But men of so ancient a civilization should not be made to reason in terms of our modern sensibility. Pratinas would, perhaps, have submitted to destiny. He would, perhaps, have called a fact, pure and simple, what we are pleased to name injustice.

The idea of justice, since it is subject, to the variations of sensibility, is of the most instable sort. Most of the facts that we class to-day in the category of injustice, were left by the Greeks in the category of destiny. For others, which we ditch under the name of misfortune, or of fatality, they strove to find a cure. In principle, when a people restricts the category "destiny" in favour of the category "injustice," the truth has begun to confess its decadence. The extreme state of sensibility to injustice is symbolized by the gag of Zaina, who breathed only through a veil, in order to destroy no life – a state of intellectual degradation towards which European humanity, with its mystic vegetarians, precursors of sentimental socialists, is also progressing to-day.

Have we not already our "lower brothers," and are we not agreed to praise the machines that spare animals the exercise of their muscles? To weep over the slave who turns the wheel, or the poet who sings in the desert, is a sign of depravity; for the fact is that the slave who turns the wheel loves life more than he suffers from his labour, while the poet who croaks like a frog in his hole finds singing an agreeable physiological exercise.

The physical laws promulgated or established by scientists are confessions of ignorance. When they cannot explain a mechanism, they declare that its movements are due to a law. Bodies fall by virtue of the law of gravitation. This has precisely the same value, in the serious order, as the comic *virtus dormitiva*. Categories are confessions of impotence. To throw a fact into the abyss of destiny, or into the drawer of injustice, is to renounce the exercise of the most natural analytical faculties. The *Lusiads* was saved because Camoens was a good swimmer, and Newton's treatise on light and colours was lost because his little dog, Diamond, overturned a candle. Presented thus, these two events belong henceforth neither in the category Providence nor in the category Fatality. They are simple facts – facts like thousands of others that have occurred without men finding in them a pretext for enthusiasm or for anger. That Æschylus has survived and Pratinas is dead are accidents like those which happen in war. There are some more scandalous, but none should be judged in accordance with the puerile notion of a distributive justice. If justice is wounded because Florus keeps afloat in the

shipwreck where Varius and Calvus perish, it is justice which is wrong. It was out of place there.

However, just as it has attached itself to the idea of paradise, so the idea of justice has become the parasite of the idea of glory. For the immortality for which Tahiti gambled heads or tails, has, with the best will in the world, been substituted providential immortality; but, so far as glory, at any rate, is concerned, we know that Providence, even if it does not determine the name of the elect by lot, is governed by motives that it would, perhaps, not dare to acknowledge. However unjust man may be, by nature and by taste, he is less unjust than the God he has created. Thus, as Ausonius has pertinently remarked, chaste men engender obscene literatures. So, also, the work of the veritable genius is always inferior to the brain which bore it. Civilization has put a little method into glory, provisionally.

Even in the spiritual order, men have almost always been at variance with the decisions of their gods. Most of the saints in the past were created by the people in spite of the priests. In the course of the centuries the catalogue of the saints and the catalogue of the great men have drawn so far apart that they will soon not have a single name in common. Almost all the really venerable men of this last century – almost all those whose clay contained veins or traces of gold – were outcasts. We live in the age of Prometheus. When Providence alone ruled the earth, during the interregnum of humanity, she caused such hecatombs that intelligence nearly perished. In the year 950, the son of a

serf of Aurillac, young Gerbert, summed up almost the whole European tradition. He was, all by himself, civilization. What a moment in history! Men, by an admirable instinct, made him their master. He was Pope Sylvester II. When he died, there began to be built, on that column which had sustained the world, the legend destined to find its culmination in Goethe's *Faust*. Such is Glory, that Gerbert is unknown. But he is not unknown like Pythagoras. It has been possible to write his life, his writings have been preserved. If Gerbert is not one of our great men to-day, he will perhaps be to-morrow. He has kept intact all the possibilities of his resurrection. The reason is that, leaving aside the paradoxical idea of Providence, we have since Gerbert scarcely changed our civilization.

When the Christians came into power, they preserved, outside those few spared by chance, only the books necessary for school instruction. There has survived of Antiquity precisely what would have survived of the seventeenth century, if the professors of the old University, together with the Jesuits and the Minims, had possessed the power of life and death over books. Adding La Fontaine to Boileau's catalogue, they would have burned the rest. The Christians burned much, in spite of their professions of love; and what they did not burn they expurgated. It is to them that we owe the almost burlesque image of a chaste Virgil. The authentic incompleteness of the *Æneid* afforded a good pretext for cuts and erasures. The booksellers charged with the task were, moreover, unintelligent and lazy. But the great cause of the disappearance

of almost all pagan literature was more general. A day came when it was deemed of no interest. From the first centuries its circle had already begun to dwindle. Could a Saint Cecilia find any pleasure in Gallus? This delicious, heroic Roman woman (who was found last century lying in the dust, in her bloody robes) changed her heart with her religion. Women ceased to read Gallus, and Gallus has almost completely perished.

In his interesting book on this subject,<sup>6</sup> M. Stapfer has not taken into account changes in civilization. He has thought only of chance to explain the loss of so many ancient books. Chance is a mask, and it is precisely the duty of the historian to lift this mask, or to tear it. Between the sixth century and our own day, there has been one further partial modification in civilization – in the fifteenth century. About that time, the old literature began to lose its hold upon the public. The novels, the miracles, the tales seemed suddenly to have aged. They were no longer copied or recited. They were seldom printed, a single manuscript having preserved for us *Aucassin et Nicolette*, which is something like the *Daphnis and Chloe* of the Middle Ages. Accidents frighten the poet – and even the critic, who is colder, whose logic is more rigorous – the moment the suggestion is made of separating the purely historical idea of literary survival from the sentimental idea of justice. Till now – and I allude once more to the conservative rôle of modern civilization – the printing-press

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<sup>6</sup> *Des Réputations littéraires: Essai de morale et d'histoire*. Première série. Paris, Hachette, 1893.

has protected writers against destruction; but the serious rôle of printing affects as yet only four centuries. This distant invention will appear some day as if contemporary at once with Rabelais and with Victor Hugo. When a time equal to that which separates us from the birth of Æschylus – two thousand three hundred and seventy-five years, let us say – shall have elapsed between us and a given moment of the future, what influence will printing have had on the preservation of books? Perhaps none. Everything not worth the trouble of reprinting – that is to say everything, with the exception of a few fortunate fragments – will have disappeared, and the more rapidly that the material substance of books has become more precarious. Even the discovery of a durable paper would not give absolute assurance of survival, because of the temptation to employ this excessively strong paper for a thousand other purposes. Thus the value of the parchment has often led to the sacrifice of a manuscript, just as gold articles go necessarily to the smelting-pot once the style has changed. The best material for the preservation of books would be something unchanging, but fragile, slightly brittle, so that it would be good for nothing outside its binding. Would not such a discovery be a curse?



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