

Ernest Renan and To-day.

TO the majority of English readers these days, Ernest Renan is known for the *succès de scandale* of his *Vie de Jésus* some ninety years ago, and the sentimental rhapsodies of his *Souvenirs d'Enfance et de Jeunesse* published in his old age. But there are countless other elements present in the writings of that versatile and unpredictable Frenchman which today are frequently forgotten. Besides his sustained programme of research in Semitic studies, he contributed to the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and *le Journal des Débats* over a period of many years articles which revealed a penetrating insight into the causes of French demoralisation and "intellectual stoppage" in the nineteenth century. Nor was his criticism merely a diagnosis of what he believed to be wrong. He sought, too, to emphasise those aspects of French life and character which made for intellectual and spiritual well-being, and by encouraging the nation to develop them, to realise his dream of a nobler, stronger, more earnest France emerging regenerate from the holocaust of the French Revolution. If, later, his vision deteriorated into a kaleido-scopic view of life as *Vanity Fair*, in which the old Epicurean could indulge vicariously his belated taste for sensuous pleasures, nevertheless, there broke in constantly, even upon the most grotesque of his fantasia, as in his *Dialogues Philosophiques*, flashes of acute intuition, amounting almost to prescience.

As a student of the philosophy of Kant, Hegel and Herder, he had early learned to look upon Germany as his spiritual home. For years he held before the "frivolous" French public the example of German earnestness in religion, education, science and home life. The future of France depended on an infiltration of just those Teutonic qualities which, in the past, had, from time to time, renewed her reserves of energy. Moreover, the future of Europe, and, indeed, of the world, depended on a moral, cultural and political alliance of France, Germany and England. He already foresaw in 1870 the need for the union of Western Europe. Renan's words have for us in 1950 a startling familiarity :—

"It had been my dream to work, as far as my feeble resources would allow, for the intellectual, moral and political alliance of Germany and France, an alliance involving that of

England, constituting a power capable of governing the world, that is to say, of leading it in the way of civilisation, equally removed from the naively short-sighted enthusiasms of democracy and from puerile hankerings after a past which could not be resuscitated.”¹

Or again :—

“Indeed, setting aside the United States of America, whose future, though doubtlessly brilliant, is as yet obscure, and which, in any case, occupy a secondary position in the creative achievement of the human mind, the intellectual and moral grandeur of Europe rests upon a triple alliance, the breaking-up of which is a tragedy for Progress, the alliance of France, Germany and England. United, these three great powers would lead the world, and lead it well, drawing necessarily after them those other elements, still worthy of consideration, of which the European network is made up. . . . With the union of France, England and Germany, the old continent was able to maintain its balance, and keep in rigorous check the new, holding in tutelage this vast eastern world which it would be unhealthy to allow to conceive exaggerated hopes. . . . That was but a dream. A single day has been enough to overthrow the edifice in which our hopes sought shelter, to lay open the world to all kinds of dangers, all kinds of lusts, all kinds of brutalities.”²

His constant dream, he told his former master, Strauss, was of “a congress of United States of Europe, judging the various nations, imposing its will upon them, correcting the principle of nationality by that of confederation.”³ Unless the civilised nations of Europe united to safeguard corporately their common heritage, he foresaw them falling a victim to the inroads of Barbarism, as the Roman Empire had done previously.

Too great a concern with material comfort, philanthropy and equality rendered a people effete, and similarly, too critical an approach to life made men incapable of co-operating with Nature which, demanded of them self-sacrifice, love, faith, surrender. Once they had learned to analyse the springs of conduct, the spontaneous impetus of their actions was checked by an ever-increasing self-consciousness amounting to egotism. Unless the “democratic” and egocentric tendencies of modern civilisation were controlled, the more civilised countries would

¹ Renan, *La Réforme Morale et Intellectuelle* (Paris, 1923). Preface

p. v.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

decline, or fall violently into disruption, before the forces of primordial energy vested in the still undeveloped peoples of the North. Such a force was represented in Renan's day, by the Prussians with their emphasis on military glory, on the hereditary and hierarchical principle, on the individual's complete subordination to the State; but in his more sanguine moments, he dared hope that this war-like and arrogant nucleus within the German Empire might be assimilated into the life of the more peaceful, humanitarian bourgeois of the cities. More ruthless and inexorable a threat was beginning to shadow the European horizon in the growing agitation among the semi-barbaric tribes of Russia.

"Russia, by its deep-seated instincts, by its fanaticism, at once religious and political, kept alive the sacred flame of earlier times, which one finds rarely amongst a people like ours worn out by egotism; that is to say, the readiness to lay down one's life for a cause in which no personal interest is involved." ⁴

It seemed to Renan that the purely commercial and materialist values of France and England, nations which had already attained to power and prosperity, made for pacifism and a dearth of the old heroic virtues which still dominated in the restless, unsophisticated peoples of the North. Only by a revival of that devotion and discipline which "democracy" and industrialism had conspired together to stifle could they hope to withstand the menace of barbarism.

"One frequently begins to fear that France and even England, affected fundamentally by the same trouble as ourselves, the weakening of the military spirit, the predominance of commercial and industrial considerations, might be soon reduced to a secondary role, and that the European stage might be held solely by two colossi, the Germanic race and the Slavonic race, who have retained the vigour of the military and monarchic principle and whose clash will fill the future." ⁵

Renan could hardly be expected to foresee that, in the next half-century, both powers would exchange their hereditary principle, monarchist and aristocratic, for the dictatorship of a Fuehrer and a Communist respectively. But the militaristic spirit remained unmodified in both, so that during the thirties of the present century, with their reserves of primordial energy apparently unlimited and with the unquestioning readiness of

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 119-20.

their peoples to sacrifice themselves to the State, it did seem indeed that these two rival Colossi would decide between them the future of Europe, while the democracies stood by, inert and exhausted. The proud predominance of the German and Russian pavilions at the Paris Exhibition of 1937 seemed symbolical of impending events. The German eagle with its voracious beak, the titanic figures of the Russian workers with naked sickle, were suggestive of the vast rival resources of energy about to be unleashed on a tired civilisation. When, in 1942 the two mighty armies were locked in internecine war before the gates of Stalingrad, it seemed that Renan's prediction had been fulfilled.

Two factors in the international situation he had, however, overlooked in those far-off days in 1870; the emergence of the United States of America as a world power, and the resilience of a Britain, seemingly effete in her democratic Utopianism. Accordingly, he was unable to foresee that the future of Europe would depend, not only upon the union of the Western powers, but also upon the ability of Britain and America to hang together and to preserve friendly relations with Russia. Nevertheless, insofar as he realised, almost eighty years ago, the future importance of Russia in determining world affairs, Renan revealed his flair for sensing the trend of forthcoming events.

Unfortunately, in his own day, his immediate prophecies were to be belied. The war he thought would never happen broke upon a France entirely unprepared. Renan used what influence he had to try to persuade his people not to fight, but in vain. Prussia, he believed, would prove a generous and noble conqueror from whom the France of 1870 might learn the seriousness and ardour she so much needed. But not only did the Franco-Prussian War shatter his dream of a United States of Europe in his generation; he saw his second fatherland represented on French soil by a drunken soldiery, and his belief in German morality and education tottered. He still believed, however, that Germany would, by the clemency of the terms of her treaty, help to rebuild her former enemy and so bring about a nobler future for Europe. When at last peace came, the arrogance and greed of the victors left Renan stunned and disillusioned. But worse was still to follow. He was in Paris for part of the terror of the Commune until, unable any longer to bear the agony of his country's shame, he fled to Versailles and there, in the bitterness of his frustrated hopes, set about writing the Wellsian nightmares of his *Dialogues Philosophiques* and the cynical phantasmagoria of the *Drames Philosophiques*.

From the time of writing *L'Avenir de la Science* (1848) to the very end of his life, Renan was engrossed in discovering the trend of the universe. The purpose of life seemed to him to be

the bringing into being of an ever increasingly developed form of consciousness; to organise the social consciousness out of the individual consciousness, and from the social, to organise a yet higher Consciousness, God. The realisation in *Fact* of God, who as yet existed only in *Idea*, was to be the consummation of the whole process of nature. The exact form in which his imagination clothed this Perfect Being, which he discusses at length in the third section, *Rêves*, of his *Dialogues Philosophiques*, is hardly of interest to us nowadays; but what is bound to strike us as significant is that he envisages these changes as coming about through the harnessing of atomic power.

“Who knows whether man or some other thinking being may not come to know the last word about matter, the law of life, the law of the atom? Who knows whether, being master of the secret of matter, some predestined chemist may not transform everything? Who knows whether, master of the secret of life, some omniscient biologist may not modify its conditions, whether some day the natural species may not pass for the remains of an obsolete, clumsy world whose vestiges will be kept out of curiosity in the museums? Who knows whether, in a word, an infinite science may not bring infinite power, in accordance with the grand dictum of Bacon: ‘Knowledge is Power’?”⁶

A change in the physiology of the race may yet result in a species of beings as different from man as he now exists as man is from the atom, but whatever change is brought about will be the outcome of Science. The resulting Supermen or *Devas* will rule the rest of mankind, not only by their great physical powers, but by their superior scientific knowledge.

“The élite of thinking beings, lords of the most important secrets of reality, would rule the worlds by the powerful means of action which would be at their disposal and would see to it that the highest possible degree of reason should obtain there. . . . It is clear that the absolute rule of one section of humanity over another is odious, if one supposes that the ruling party is motivated only by class selfishness: but the aristocracy which I am imagining would be the incarnation of reason, an infallible papacy. The power of its hand could not be other than benevolent, and one would not have to bargain for it.”⁷

All the resources of human discovery will be concentrated in the hands of this omnipotent oligarchy, who would thereby be capable

⁶ Renan, *Dialogues et Fragments Philosophiques* (Paris, 1923), pp. 183-84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

of holding the rest of the world in subjection and even of destroying the Planet.

“On that day indeed, when certain privileged beings would rule by inspiring absolute terror, because they would hold in their hands the existence of everybody, one can almost say they would be gods and that then the theological state envisaged by the poet as that of primitive humanity would be a reality. ‘*Primus in orbe deos fecit timor*’.”⁸

One's mind naturally jumps to atom bombs, death rays, Hydrogen bombs, and the horrors of bacteriological warfare. But Renan hastens to reassure us that the physical and intellectual development of his Supermen will be offset by a corresponding spiritual progress. One wishes that one could be as sure today that this change has indeed accompanied the growth of scientific knowledge which has come near to translating Renan's grim Apocalypse into a yet more grim actuality.

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⁸ *Ibid*, p. 113.

We are indebted to Rev. E. W. Price Evans, M.A., for pointing out that the statement in our last issue (p. 340), crediting Micah Thomas with having once been Principal of Pontypool Baptist Academy, was erroneous. “Micah Thomas (1778-1853),” writes Mr. Price Evans, “was the minister of Frogmore Street Baptist Church, Abergavenny, from January 1807 until his death. In addition from 1807 to 1836, he was President (the first and only ‘President’) of the Abergavenny Baptist Academy, in which office he did notable service. When he resigned, it was decided to establish a new Academy or College at Pontypool in 1836, and the Rev. (later Dr.) Thomas Thomas, minister of Henrietta Street Baptist Church, Brunswick Square, London, accepted the invitation to be its first President or Principal. He was also the first minister of the newly-formed (1836) Crane Street Church. I need not detail his long life of devoted and distinguished service.”