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ARTICLE II.

BRUNETIÈRE AND THE NOVEL OF REAL LIFE.

BY THE REVEREND HENRY A. STIMSON, D.D., NEW YORK, N. Y.

THE group of modern French critics and essayists that began with Sainte Beuve and Taine, with Renan and Littré, as co-laborers, and continued with Scherer, Darmesteter, Hennequin, Doumic, and Rod, lost not the least influential of its members in the death of Ferdinand Brunetière.

It was in 1875 that his critical essay on "Le Roman Naturaliste" appeared. The drama had then given place to the novel as the accepted form of depicting the habits and taste of the times, and realism had already become its note. It claimed to break utterly with the past, and was successful, and defiant of established conditions. Accepting the lead of Balzac, Flaubert and the Goncourts set the pattern which had already led to the puerilities of Malot, the grossness of Zola, and the pretentious prettiness of Daudet. After thirty years, when the French novel has reached the unspeakable coarseness of Huysmans, and the American novel represents a society largely made up of gamblers, drunkards, seducers and seduced, and men mad in the pursuit of money, on the ground that this presents "life as it is," we are once more turning to the drama. The cycle is so far complete; and there is occasion to review the history of the period, and to measure the influence of a critic who did much to arrest the course of a pernicious movement and to expose its pretensions.[1]

[1] The value of Brunetière's contribution both to literature and to

Brunetière connected realism in literature with positivism in philosophy, and ventured to express the fear that they would work, in both art and philosophy, a common degrading transformation. The futility of positivism, or materialism, in philosophy has been completely demonstrated, and it already belongs to the things of the past. A review of Brunetière's criticisms may help to hasten the departure to the same perdition of the novel of "realism." From his essays, scattered over a considerable period, and still untranslated, it is possible to gather and condense his opinions, and to give them substantially in his own words.

He pointed out what the new theories of Art as promulgated by the painters had already produced in literature. If it were only lack of talent and poverty of resource, the sterility of the times, which it was sought to conceal under an appearance of thought, one might wait with patience for better days. It was far worse than that,—it was low intent and a deliberate and foolish purpose to set aside the eternal principles of all true art. Taking Zola as his illustration, he said it is an art that sacrifices form to material, design to color, sentiment to sensation, the ideal to the real; which does not recoil either before indecency or pettiness, or indeed even before the brutish; which in fact talks to the mob, finding it easier to set art to serve the coarsest instincts of the rabble, than to try to raise their intelligence to the level of art.

The attempt to justify art of this kind, by the pretense of uniting it with science, and with the industrial life, the life of the common people, is futile. Commerce, and industry, and science, in proper hands, have already proved rich

morals in his early work is not affected by the subsequent narrowing of his mind and cramping of his powers by the change wrought in him during his service as editor of the Revue des Deux Mondes.

material, even for poetry, and need no new exploiting. When Zola announced his purpose, "in resolving the double question of temperament and environment, to follow the mathematical thread which leads from one man to another," he said: "Heredity has its laws no less than gravitation." Brunetière replied: "We know the law of gravitation, we can only guess at those of heredity,"—a warning it would be well to repeat to the author of "The Fighting Chance." Through all history, art and science have been in eternal and living contradiction; science subjecting the freedom of the human spirit to the yoke of nature's laws, and art, on the contrary, breaking away from the constraint of those laws and assuring to intelligence the full possession of itself.

The realists justified themselves by an appeal to Balzac. Brunetière pointed out that Balzac was the ancestor of the modern realists in his aim to cover all the diversities of modern life, in his accumulation of detail, his limitless description, his technical display; but that he dealt with reality only to transform it. He used his details as the artist does his model, as a means, never as an end. He gives to his characters a logical consistency, a development of passion, a course of conduct which, as traversed by the limitations of actual life, they would not have. His imitators have changed all that. Flaubert and Malot represent a realism content with the minute and puerile exactness of the smallest accidents of reality; Flaubert and the Goncourts, apparently proposing a study of a pathological case, cast in the form of a novel a medical clinic. Others like Daudet, without the poetic imagination and the inimitable accent of personal feeling of Dickens, practise a kind of sentimental realism by affecting an interest in the lot of the humble poor. Romance exists there, un-

questionably, but the realists are finding it difficult to deal with it nobly, and do not remember that there is a kind of low life so gross, or even so stupid, that it is not fit for the novelist to call attention to it, or for the reader to be amused by it.

When he comes to Zola, Brunetière finds it difficult to express his disgust at the absorption of that writer in the odious in his choice of subject, in the ignoble and repulsive in his depicting of character, in the materialism and the brutality of his style. He protests that humanity is not as yet made up altogether of loose women, of idiots and of fools. The artist certainly has his rights, but one of these rights is as certainly not to mutilate nature. It is strange that he should refuse to open his eyes to the light of day, and should not comprehend that this affectation of dealing with vulgar things is not a purpose less narrow, a convention less artificial, an æsthetic less false, than the pretensions to gentility of a day gone by. It is a diseased imagination that pretends to interest us in personages that are not only criminal and vicious, but frankly base, base as they are described, more base in the coarseness of the appetites which govern them. Even when there is a chance for a true idyl and a charming story there is the same low proclivity. Coarse sensuality is mingled with the love story, and in the picture the design is lost in the flaring colors. There is, perhaps, feeling, but it is feeling without soul. Everywhere the emotions are those of the animal. The characters, the author says, are "true to life" as is claimed. So is a drunken man who sleeps and vomits. Is there any more so? Will he give us that?

Reviewing some of the stories of Malot, it must be said at last, these are not real characters, they are caricatures. There exists no heart that has never leaped, no intelligence that has

never thought, no imagination that has never dreamed. As the human body, if it has not under our northern climate that purity of line which it had under the sky of Greece, but degraded by want, deformed by toil, bowed by modern civilization under the yoke of material customs, still preserves something of the nobility and the dignity native to the human form; so we, come as we are to the extreme of democratic equality, absorbed in the miserable exigencies of society life, incessantly driven in the pursuit of fortune and our personal ambitions, do not cease to have, within, something of the man, and to be still capable, by the passionate bound of the heart or by the strength of the mind, to lift ourselves above the reality which oppresses us.

In what, then, consists the pleasure which people of the grosser sort experience in looking at a vulgar melodrama, listening to the sound of coarse music, contemplating the assembling of vivid colors on the canvas, if it is not precisely in the momentary diversion they find from the weariness of existence and the hard labor of life? The cares of life are for the moment dismissed; and, free from all restraint, leaping all bounds, the intelligence is transported into a world which it fashions to its fancy. This protest against feeling and fact, this effort of the better side of our nature toward the ideal,—by what right does realism efface it from the list of our instincts, if not the right which it claims because of its own inability to satisfy and express it?

Without doubt it is necessary to go beyond reality, since the ideal is the essence of things, the raw material, so to speak, of works of art and of imagination. But if whoever affects to despise it in the novel or in poetry, then produces sentimental twaddle, or symbolical abstractions, it is, for all that, the substance to which it is the function of art to give a form.

It is not sufficient to feel; one must see and one must think.

The power to seize in concrete form that which the average man sees only in the abstract is indeed a rare faculty, and one which characterizes the artist; and yet it is still a small matter. Nature only becomes beautiful, or only becomes moving, when seen through the illusion of our feelings, which we transfer to her, an illusion which assigns to her this power of feeling, of which the human heart is the unique and never exhausted source. The glory of the sunrise, the serenity of a lovely evening, have only the value of the emotions they stir in us, now raising the heart to joy, to memory, to love, now as some implacable fate jeering at our despair.

But that is not all. From the midst of things prosaic and low in the scale of existence it is possible to detach what they conceal of hidden beauty; it is necessary to eliminate, to select, to borrow from reality, its forms and ways of expression which may serve to transfigure that reality itself, and compel it to give forth the interior conception of a supreme beauty. In truth we are related to reality through the less noble parts of ourself, this necessity of daily work which reduces us to the plane of machines, or the appetites which unite us to the animals; and all that is superior in us conspires to release us from the lot in which the bondage of material things holds us. In this sense, we may say, that "the world of art is truer than that of nature, and of history," because there one can see disappear the shocking contradiction, which inexorably passes judgment upon the human state, the contradiction between the grandeur of the goal toward which our aspirations push us, and the ridiculous weakness of the means we use to attain it.

If art busies itself solely with rendering the general truth of the type, it will produce, if you will, works of beauty, re-

fined, but cold and inanimate, which will be "like water, pure, and with no flavor"; as, for example, "The Martyrs" of Chateaubriand, "Eudore" and "Cymodocée." If it aims only to touch the heart, and to kindle the imagination, it will produce works of less value, from which, and the disturbance which they for the moment create, it will always be possible for the mind to deliver itself. Such are the novels of Richardson, "Clarissa Harlowe" or "Pamela"; such is "La Nouvelle Héloïse." If, finally, it judges that it has completed its task, when it has produced a servile copy of the real, one will admire the patience of the observer and the skill of the artist's hand, but as for the work itself, it will only completely succeed in giving us the grotesque.

Brunetière returned to the subject in 1880 on the death of Flaubert, in his essay on "Le Naturalisme Français"; again in 1881 in "Les Origines du Roman Naturaliste" and "Le Naturalisme Anglais," and in 1882 in "Le Faux Naturalisme."

In 1856, when Flaubert brought out "Madame Bovary," Romanticism was dead. The world no longer believed in "diplomatists taking counsel with courtesans, in rich marriages obtained through intrigue, in the surpassing genius of jail-birds, in the availability of the gaming-table under the hand of the strong"; and sentiment had ceased to be supreme. Already authors had arisen who thought themselves justly sharers of the fame of Balzac. But the extravagances of Romanticism did not procure acceptance for the vulgarities offered in its stead. The world would none of a realism stripped of invention, of sentiment, even of passion and of reality. "What!" cried George Sand. "You would plane away all individuality? You say one should only paint in a single tone; you prescribe a vocabulary, and one departs from verity

if he does not strip from speech all the light and shade, all the color, that the genius and the passion of the human race have produced?"

Flaubert and his book set the pattern for the new movement. Brunetière recognizes the consummate literary skill, the abundance but strict subordination of descriptive detail, the unfailing and always just emphasis, the flow of description keeping pace with the flow of the narrative, like the change in the sky and in the landscape to one on a journey, the essential relation of the characters to their setting, and the fullness of knowledge which makes "Madame Bovary" as complete and accurate a picture of the life of a French province in 1850 as "Middlemarch" is of an English county in 1870. They have had many imitators, but Flaubert and George Eliot alike exhausted their subject.

Change the setting, and "Madame Bovary" will have to be changed. All the dullness, the commonplace, the vulgarity, the coarseness, is there. She is of it. And Flaubert is the first to make all this live, while keeping himself aloof from it and stamping it with his contempt. He preserved much that it would have been a pity to lose in the art of Romanticism, while he taught what is legitimate in Realism, namely, an intelligent understanding of the laws of representation and of life. The constant effort of the literature of the preceding twenty-five years to shape literary invention more strictly in accord with the living touch of reality, Brunetière declares, had its origin with him.

Brutal as the tale is, and disagreeable, Brunetière is willing to admit that it is not immoral, for this reason: admitting that in the deliberate purpose of the author, or by some fault of execution perhaps, the heroine awakens an interest of which she is wholly unworthy, it is nevertheless true that nowhere

will one find bitterer derision of all the extravagances of the Romanticists. Never was "the divine right of love," "the predestined union of two souls calling to one another across space," the "morality of passion," whether that which is of the earth earthy or that which is from above,—never before nor since, was all this, on the stage or in a novel,—attacked with an irony more contemptuous. As "Don Quixote" held up to ridicule the last exaggerations of the spirit of chivalry, so "Madame Bovary," in its day, ridiculed the last exaggerations of the Romantic delirium.

Compact of passion, vibrating with the force of sensations the significance of which she did not understand, eager to know the meaning of the words "happiness," "passion," "intoxication," which appeared to her so beautiful in books, Emma Bovary is a character possible in all lands and at any time. In her ignorance and with her sensual nature, she knows nothing of the charm or the satisfying poetry of a life of accepted duties. She finds herself listening to "the lyric song of bad women," and in the coarseness of her nature she adds to their number. She is true to type, and from a moral standpoint odious in her personality. The skill with which Flaubert makes her a creation which will live in literature does not conceal the sharpness of the irony and the bitterness of the satire which he turns upon the life to which she belongs, with a violence which seems almost the expression of a personal hatred.

What Brunetière finds lacking in Flaubert, and what constitutes the limitations of later novelists of his school, is the existence of another world, of those interior forces, intellectual and moral, which sustain the fight against the attack of the senses, and defeat the assaults of desire. They know nothing of that higher power in man, which can in a manner detach

itself from the body, can dominate it, and make it serve ends nobler than the gratification of the flesh. It is no wonder that, as the years passed, Flaubert hated to be known as the author of "Madame Bovary." We can imagine a similar experience awaiting not a few of the authors of modern realistic novels.

When one is content to see only the outside of life, he is inevitably superficial in his judgments, and as inevitably is affected by the limitations of his material. Flaubert dealt with characters whom he despised; he acquired a certain despite for man; he came to see little good anywhere; and the bourgeois life which he held up to ridicule had its revenge when it inspired him to write "L'Education Sentimentale."

The skill which seeks to justify itself in the sounding phrases "art for art's sake," "the love of literature for itself," "the religion of the ideal," and the like, is less the power to see "life as it is" than mere dexterity at the trade. The final judgment must be, the ideal remains low, the cult is material, the literature falls into coarseness, and all because the form is made to serve the end rather than the means. As a consequence the day comes when artifice is more important than feeling, when inspiration is summoned rather than felt, when, in a word, what one has been taught, or what one has gathered, is more important than what one possesses as his *gift*, so-called, because it is the one thing which cannot be given and cannot be received.

In his essay on "Les Origines du Roman Naturaliste," Brunetière took in hand Zola, then at the height of his success. He had published a book of essays devoted to the study of Balzac, Flaubert, and Stendhal, as the creators of the novel of actual life, of which he himself was the latest exponent.

Brunetière with difficulty restrains his disgust at the ignorance, the pettiness, the superficiality, and the conceit of the school. He points out, first of all, that, passing by the writers of historical romance, like Walter Scott, who had done the same thing, the whole great school of Romanticists, from Richardson and Rousseau to Chateaubriand, George Sand, and Merrimé, had not only broken away from the bondage of the classical school, by making the novel revolve about the character and experiences of a single personage, but had set that personage in surroundings most real and carefully studied. The realistic novel actually began with "Clarissa Harlowe" and "La Nouvelle Héloïse." Not a single novelist since their day but has claimed to restore to truth, nature, and reality their rights, which had been circumscribed by arbitrary conventions. Rousseau in "La Nouvelle Héloïse" was the first modern writer to treat love seriously. Before him, when love, or more generally the relations of the sexes, was dealt with in literature, it was in one of two ways,—in the Italian manner, that is to say, gallant, as in the novels of Mlle. De Scudary; or libertine, that is to say French, as, for instance, "Le Diable Boiteux." "Gil Blas" and "Manon Lescaut" are the only exceptions. In "La Nouvelle Héloïse," for the first time Love becomes the hero of the story. There, also for the first time, the personages of the drama are placed in dependence upon what we have since learned to call their *milieu;* and there, also for the first time, we find a novelist giving to the public the story of his own life,—so much at least as is found in the scenes in which he has lived, the personages he has known, and the experiences through which he has passed. The world of "La Nouvelle Héloïse" is incontestably larger than that of some of its successors. The actors in it move more freely; they appear in relations more numerous, more

varied, more complex; they are more closely bound up in what goes on about them; but the new method is established.

George Sand carried it still further. Before her, the characters of the story are enclosed in the circle of the family; she set them in perpetual relation to the prejudices, that is to say to the social life, which surrounded them, and to the law, that is to say to the state. After her, other writers deal with the rich in contact with the poor, the employer with the employee, the people with the peasant. Whether their stories are to-day interesting or not, whether their theses are false or not,—and they are sometimes all the more evil because eloquently set forth,—they indicate the movement.

When it comes to the men whom Zola exalts, they seem to have lost both the meaning and the method of the true romance. They are superficial, they are narrow in vision, they are conquered by trivialities of detail, they are fascinated by the brilliancy of their own style. They create scenes which they hang up as pictures, and they have lost the art of composition.

Balzac, of course, stands alone. His distinction is that he introduces into the novel the preoccupations of the material side of life. One must live; to live, one must eat; to eat, one must have money; to get money, one must work; to have work, one must learn a trade, that is, a man must belong to a particular profession, or condition, or class. So he introduced these differences into the novel, each character determined by those peculiar to his class, appearing in the conversations, declaring themselves even in the nature of the intrigue. You have not only the jargon of the atélier, the barbarisms of the workshop, the slang of the street, and the billingsgate of the market, but you have for the first time the question of money, and with it all that the pursuit and keeping

of money bring in its train. With all this Balzac did not create the novel of real life. He simply wrote "Balzac's novels." That surely, as Brunetière says, is sufficient.

As for the others, Stendhal has no following; the Goncourts, laborious and self-conscious artisans of style, depart from nature just in proportion as they apply to the coarsest subjects the methods of an overwrought and unnatural art; and Zola, who fancies that he and his school are the supreme product of an evolution, is in fact but an incident in its course. The realistic novel has had its day; idealism is not dead; and the current degradation of the public taste, which does not need many "Nanas" to carry it to the bottom, will never be corrected by anything produced by that school.

When Brunetière comes to discuss English novels, he points out that realism in literature would, apart from the work of the great English authors, never have been more than a theory; any more than realism in painting would have gone beyond theory but for the art of Holland. Zola and his friends are utterly ignorant of the profound psychology which pervades the great English novels, as they are devoid of the real and intelligent sympathy with the humble life they despise, which characterizes, for example, Dickens and George Eliot. From "Tom Jones" and "Amelia" to "Adam Bede" and "The Mill on the Floss" you find a series of stories distinguished by sympathetic intelligence, where in the French tales you have disdain and contempt. Flaubert knows how to construct life out of the commonplace and the vulgar. George Eliot did better; into the commonplace and the vulgar she wrought the noble. What the French realists do not understand is, that there is another measure for the worth of men than their education, or even their intelligence; and that the nature of the attraction which women exert is not that solely

over the senses, or even that of beauty alone. Herein lie, on the contrary, the dignity, the depth, the real beauty, of the English realism. It is to be said of the Richardsons, the Fieldings, the Dickenses, the George Eliots, that they love their characters because they so thoroughly understand them. If for one moment we suspected irony in their delineations the charm would be gone.

Balzac is extraordinarily powerful, but he is gross. Despite the laborious and conscientious effort he makes to lay hold of them, delicate niceties escape him, as they do Flaubert, because of the lack of that sympathy which is necessary for their understanding. Both have heard of them, but they do not know them. They are skillful physiologists and imperfect psychologists; exact observers and clumsy analyzers; vigorous painters of palpable reality but mediocre explorers in the realm of that reality which lies beyond the sight. Personality only begins when you trace sensation within. It has been well said that sensations are only what the heart makes them. Exterior action is little, interior reaction is what counts. It is the diversity of these interior transformations that makes us the men we are.

Here is the triumph of the English realists. The author of "Clarissa Harlowe" and of "Pamela" was the first to set in the frame of the novel of actual life all the wealth of psychologic and moral observation in the grand preachers of the seventeenth century, and, for instance, in the Bourdaloue of the eighteenth century, whom England knew better than his own country. This triumph of psychologic study reaches its most complete and brilliant example in the work of George Eliot. You are lifted entirely out of the realm of chance. You see not only that the consequences of a single transgression may lead to actual crime, but also, how they do it, by just

what conjunction of circumstances, and by what line of interior perversion. You see, also, the vast importance, for the good or evil of a human being, an act in itself insignificant may prove to possess. Our actions react upon us. We have the power to start their course; the rest follows of itself. Circumstances do not alter our nature, they only reveal it. Events create nothing in us, they show what we carry about within. Every life depends on the direction it gives itself, upon the restraint it places upon itself.

Here is the main difference which, at that point in their development, characterizes English and French realism. The depth of its psychology, its metaphysical solidity, the breadth of its ethics, all in the English realism flow from its expression of sympathy. Three centuries of vigorous Protestant education have infused something of positive moral value into English realism. In France, on the other hand, the novel may serve for an instrument of propagandism, or a machine to batter old and uncomfortable institutions and customs, but it will probably never serve, as with Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, as an instrument of exhortation, of study, of instruction. In France art is not thought of as existing for man, but man is conceived of as material provided by nature for art. "Art for art's sake" is essentially Latin.

The difference in the two schools, working with conditions which are fixed and with materials at their command, is illustrated in the way in which the French would paint the portrait of a coquette like Hetty Sorrel, who from slip to slip was at last guilty of infanticide. They would not give to her, as George Eliot did, "a kind of beauty, like that of kittens, or of very young ducklings, with their soft down, uttering their pretty chatter, or of little children, beginning to

walk, or playing their first pranks." They would describe a beauty heavy, vulgar, sensual, if they thought themselves realists; a beauty fatal, inevitable, breathing crime, if they were idealists, in either case a beauty which prepares the imagination for the crime which is to come.

The final question, in an examination of realism in England compared with that of France, is, Is it possible in the novel to join the classic excellence of composition, of balance of parts, of distribution of masses, of beauty of arrangement, to that minuteness of detail which is necessary, if the ordinary and the commonplace is to be made to have life? The excellence of composition, of general form, setting apart that remarkable tale "Jane Eyre," is apparently lacking in contemporary English realism; on the other hand, in the French realism in general, and excepting one or two instances, we miss that power of sympathy which gives life to the English novel, to the carpenters and the weavers of George Eliot, as has been pointed out. The traits seem to exclude each other. Will any author arise, able to unite them? This is the problem in æsthetics which remains to be solved by the novelist of the future.

The outcome of it all is that the realism which in France thirty years ago held the field, and exerted such extensive and powerful influence in both this country and England, as well as in France, Brunetière denounced as masquerading under a name which it did not deserve. The matter and the manner of the Goncourts, of Zola, and their imitators were not true to nature. On the one hand they are "stylists," using words for their own sake and apart from the idea which they serve to convey, sacrificing truth to brilliancy, to picturesque effort; on the other hand, superficial in thought, and shallow and mean in occupation. Nothing is more worn out,

nothing more untrue to life, for example, than Goncourt's idea that inspiration for action is to be found in the libertinism of the senses and the debauchery of the spirit.

The school had reached its limit of extravagance in "La Faustin" and "L'Assommoir." Brunetière sought to give it a *coup de grace.* It ceased to produce further single, brilliant specimens, but it was already spread like a disease, and there has followed in England, as in France, a crowd of more or less close imitators. They have gradually run their course. We are waiting now for the Walter Scott or the George Eliot, the George Sand or the Balzac, of a new day. Meanwhile, the dramatists once more have the field, and that realism that survives in them is compact of an intense idealism that moves often in the realm of psychological mystery. We have Ibsen, and Suderman, and Maeterlinck, and Hervieu, and Capus, and Mendès, and Stephen Phillips, and Bernard Shaw. The swing of the pendulum is slow and the evolution often lags; a new Brunetière dealing with these workers may arise to help us into a more permanent realm of light.