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The Real Prosper Mérimée.

Some time has gone by since M. Michel Lévy issued, under the auspices of M. Taine, a posthumous work which threw unusual light on the career and peculiar temperament of one of the most remarkable personalities of this century. In France, wearied by intestine and foreign warfare, the sickened mind of the intellectual public has, for three long years, given unmistakeable tokens of transient sterility ; the living appear momentarily incapable of healthy productions. Authors themselves are full of the national cares, political fever swamps that moral repose which is needed for meditation, and readers are fain to be content with the literary treasures of the past, whence a recent influx of posthumous works, of more or less interest, in the shape of private correspondences. The Parisians have had before them letters of Lamartine, letters of Sainte Beuve, and of others, all of which afforded a valuable insight into the real character of their writers. None, however, deserved more study than those of the late Prosper Mérimée, and critics of both countries have paid a deserving homage to these confidences of a complex genius. The *Revue des Deux Mondes* and the *Quarterly Review* have in turns given exhaustive treatments of the subject. Nor should we venture on re-opening a field of speculation that has called forth such universal notice, but that, in our own opinion, there is further room for interesting remarks, mainly owing to the scope within which the reviewers of the *Lettres à une Inconnue* have seen fit to remain. Far from us be the presumptuous thought of analysing better what others have analysed so ably ; our meaning is that the work has been considered rather in regard to its intrinsic merits as a literary production than used as it ought to be, namely, as a key to a curious psychological study. Some have deprecated the laxity of morals the writer betrays in more than one instance ; others have taken *seriatim* divers remarks on men and things, apparently forgetting that many hidden thoughts that have crossed the minds of most men are consigned to intimate correspondence—thoughts the author would have been loth to affirm in public ; and, to the best of our knowledge, none have allotted to Mérimée the place to which he has a right. Our purpose would be to repair this omission. The readers of Mérimée's critics may still ask in vain : "Who was he ? A vulgar sceptic, or a typical incarnation of a time ; a man of genius, or a distinguished *lettré ?* What was his influence on his contemporaries, and how will posterity estimate him ? And how is it that Mérimée attained celebrity of a peculiar kind which far surpasses that of geniuses superior

to his ?" Perhaps the following observations may be useful towards a satisfactory answer.

It was not without reason that the author of the *Life of Jesus* recently described Prosper Mérimée as the Petronius of his epoch. He was not merely an eminent man of letters of the ordinary calibre, a novelist, a *savant* ; he was something more, a type of the modern race of Frenchmen, a man whose adamantine nature was the receptacle of all doubts and disbeliefs. Together with these two illustrious sceptics, Sainte Beuve and Stendhal, he made up a trio which might well have passed for the treble incarnation of haughty and resigned despair. Sainte Beuve possessed a store of amiability which daubed his scepticism with a pleasant glaze of varnish. Stendhal was, like all those who have scrutinised the vices of human nature with a magnifying glass, of a dark and desponding mood, corrected by considerable tenderness of heart; but he, Prosper Mérimée, stood an image of perfection in character, a strong, invulnerable sceptic, whose acquired toughness was proof alike against love and hatred—a human Mephistopheles, not of the capacity of Goethe's, but rather like the evil spirit such as he has been personified by a famous singer—polished, refined, elegant; stabbing with daggers of the finest steel and richest work, darting a murderous epigram in the choicest language, working the same havoc as the bitter spirit of German creation, but killing, tearing, and wounding with the exquisite politeness of a perfect gentleman. Having so far guarded himself against the invasion of banality and shown the teeth to most men, he tried his hand at everything, attained perfection in most things, threw them up in disgust after becoming their master, and one day awoke one of the most forlorn of human creatures. And still Prosper Mérimée was not born what he was hereafter. Such sentiments as he possessed and prided on do not issue from the cradle. A man gifted with the choicest faculties, as Mérimée, must have the embryo of high qualities of heart; and if his judge will take the trouble to follow the incidents of the first years of his life, he will soon find singular instances in support of this. More than any other, a youthful creature owning to an unusual degree the faculty of observation should be attended to by his educators, for, if we judge by the present instance, the slightest lesson wrongly given and erroneously understood will turn a precocious child into a dire path of thought. M. Taine tells us, in his interesting preface, that when he was nine years old Mérimée was scolded by his parents for some trifling breach of manners, and dismissed from the drawing-room in an agony of shame. While still in tears at the door, he heard his friends laughing and saying: "Poor child! he thinks we are very angry." Even at that tender age he was revolted at the idea of being made a fool of and deceived, and henceforth he pledged himself to repress his sensibility, to be constantly on guard against enthusiasm and effusion, and to speak and write as if in the presence of a harsh and bitter hearer.

To this petty occurrence, which would have left but little impression

on other children, may, on Mérimée's own admission, be traced the origin of the programme he set to himself to fight his way through life. Hence he studied a part, and applied his rich gifts of intellect to a manufacture of an artificial self. He curbed his passions, tastes, and desires under a strong hand; he had a sensitive heart; he repressed his sensitiveness so that it did not seem to exist; later on the artificial process got the better of him, and it was really suppressed altogether. His disposition naturally tended to affection; this he concealed in the same way—not that he was yet irreclaimable, but, to quote Taine's happy metaphor, certain race-horses are so well bred by their masters that when they are in hand they dare not indulge in the slightest gambol. So that he entered the lists clad in an inward cuirass which the contact of society was to harden more and more, and bent on regarding the world much as one contemplates a forest full of murderous robbers. He looked about him, and bitterly disposed as he was he applied himself more to the observation of what is contemptible in human nature than to an appreciation of its nobler sides. His remarks justified preconceived ideas, and from the first, as he said himself, quoting Hamlet, man pleased him not, nor woman neither. Let us say, however, that his contempt for his fellow creatures came not from a personal and disparaging comparison with himself, for his letters to the unknown lady in whom he confided show that the shortcomings he despised in others he equally derided in himself. One of his subjects of ironical commentary was that throughout his life he was credited for qualities not his own, while he was blamed for defects which he had not. With such thoughts there was nothing surprising that he should adopt as a first fundamental maxim the paradox that speech is given to man to conceal his yearnings, and, as a second principle, Talleyrand's recommendation to guard oneself against generous movements because they are usually the best.

A natural consequence of this moral perversion was that he affected, in the process of writing, theories of a totally different cast from those of others. First of all he examined with a critical eye the manner then predominant among the finest writers France has produced in this age. The Romantique renovation was in full efflorescence; Mérimée set at work over dishes of the same taste. A story is told of an original who stopped to look at one of the hottest street fights of the Revolution of July 1830; a National guard was obstinately firing on the Royal Suisses without the slightest effect, and the stranger was looking on in apparent disgust. Presently he walked up to the unsuccessful marksman, took the rifle from his hands, and volunteered to show how the work should be done; he fired and one of the Suisses fell dead. As he attempted to return the rifle to its owner, and as the other urged him to keep the weapon he could use so well, the stranger gravely replied: "No, thank you; I am a royalist; it isn't my opinion." Likewise Prosper Mérimée joined the Romantiques; he wrote Spanish sword and cloak comedies, which he gave as translations from the text of an unknown genius, thereby mystifying the public and

proving that it was in his power to affect the tone and style of the new school as successfully as the best, although "it was not his opinion." He tried the trick once more with the same felicitous result in *La Guzla*. And then he gave up romanticism, and took to writing according to his own ideas, after contemptuously observing that such masterpieces as he had achieved only demanded the knowledge of a word or two of a foreign language, a sketch-book of a foreign country, and a tolerable style. Nothing could be more withering for himself and others.

Prosper Mérimée seems throughout his existence to have been filled with that restlessness which according to Mr. Forster affected Charles Dickens, although his studious care was to conceal any sign of such a disposition, and to appear a man of marble. He did certainly devote enormous study to French literature, and especially to contemporaneous productions, but marvellously keen at detecting the strings which set the machine in motion, ever intent on scanning the details, he ignored their real beauty of *ensemble*, lost sight of the pregnant sides of a work, and soon wearied of the best. It had been the same with Art; a painter of no little ability, he had become convinced of the sterility of the brush, because the purely mechanical side of art had no secret for him. It was the same reason which induced him to sift the delicacies of six languages, and ransack their literature: occasionally he brought forth a gem and set it in French, adding the perfection of his style to some pregnant novelette of Ivan Tourguenef's; but eventually he wearied of polyglotism too, and deeming nothing among the living worthy of notice, he turned his eyes to the past, and turned the final leaf of his literary existence, that of a man who could never apply his talent to the services of a definite idea, who had every natural element to be happy and illustrious, and who failed in being the one and but just attained the other. Mérimée henceforward wasted priceless faculties in artistic attempts which could only be entitled to the place of curiosities of literature. He doted on imparting life to things of the past; he liked to transfer himself, like Théophile Gautier, into the midst of dead civilisations, constructing an admirable story on the sight of an inscription, a ruin, using his acuteness of observation in the framing of types to people the archaic visions he indulged in. He even went so far as to observe his surroundings merely with the purpose of guessing by means of induction the gait and ideas of their predecessors. In this ungrateful labour he has shown well enough what he was capable of doing if he had applied himself to the serious analysis of contemporary characters. Without possessing the intensity of observation of a Balzac, his intellectual condition might have entitled him to a place but just below this great master. And it is strange and painful to follow him as he sedulously narrows his own scope in art.

All the reasons we have adduced above fatally drove him into the rankest egotism which was ever the bane of a writer. His historical works no one, not excluding himself probably, took a very great interest in; they are cold and stately—comparable for the matter, if the

metaphor be permitted to us, to water contained in the finest Bohemian glass. As to his essays in fiction it is vastly different. When he has deigned to remain in his own time, and to pick out his personages and action from modern society, his productions have always been admirable both in matter and form. His process was much like Stendhal's. As he wrote for the select (if indeed he ever wrote for the edification of any one) he disdained the imbroglio of commonplace sentiments, the banalities of ordinary conversation; he obviously aimed at concentration and abridgment, at probing the acts of man by certain telling features of human nature, and, in fact, at leaving much for the reader to guess by suppressing what vulgarities are wearisome to the "profound few." This kind of work offers equal dangers and advantages; it excludes two thirds of the general readers who may be wanting in the quick sagacity requisite for the proper comprehension of the author's process, although in the main they may be qualified to appreciate the essence of his work; further, it circumscribes the repute of a writer in a narrow circle, and, moreover, such style always tends to fall into obscurity and enigma. On the other hand, the omission of a great many strictly useless details preserves a work from the caprices of fashion and change of customs, and *Carmen* and *Colomba*, free as they are from descriptions of transient and superficial interest, and consisting solely of the condensed description of passions and impulses that are eternal, will be eternally useful, just as Shakspeare and Milton are. These masterpieces are but few in number, and they serve rather to show what their conceiver might have done than what he has done.

We have now done with Mérimée until we find the new and characteristic *Lettres à une Inconnue*. Their literary merits are of secondary consideration; suffice it to say, in departing from the subject once for all, that their form, wit, and ingeniosity are paramount. As to the *Inconnue*, there is no need to inquire after her. What is thoroughly engrossing is the perusal between the lines of the desolate story of unhappiness the great sceptic relates. There are expressions for every disgust, words eloquent in their brevity expressive of deceptions, weariness, *ennui*; bitter estimations of men, impeachments of what he calls human imbecility; contemptuous allusions to his best friends, and topping all a clear disbelief in goodness, and those noble commonplaces, honour, love, chivalry, abnegation. It is worthy of special note that Mérimée is withal open to superstition, several instances of this being manifested in different letters; so strong is the yearning of every one towards a faith, whatever it may be. We have found but one good note* in the two volumes of this

* The passage we allude to has been quoted by the *Quarterly Review* as very cynical. The opinion we hold being somewhat different, the passage should be given: "I went to a ball given by some young men of my acquaintance to which all the *figurantes* of the Opera were invited. These women are mostly stupid; but I have remarked how superior they are in moral delicacy to the men of their class. There is only a single vice which separates them from other women—poverty." The *Quarterly* goes on to remark that a man must be far gone in cynicism to hazard such a

correspondence; as to the harsh ones, they abound; on Frenchmen especially his satire never tarries: "The greatest nation in the world is made up of a set of scapegraces, inconsistent, anti-artistic, illogical, bigoted, and not even possessing the religion that comes from the heart." He was a senator of the Empire, not out of any particular liking for a dynasty or a principle, but because, as he said, "tyrants had over Republicans the advantage of washing their hands;" in his official capacity he was once called upon to make a speech in the Senate, and as it was his first public address he felt rather timorous. "I gained courage," he writes to the *Inconnue*, "when I bethought myself that I was speaking to two hundred fools." On another occasion he relates to the same person how, answering a toast to European Literature at a dinner of the Literary Association, presided over by Lord Palmerston, he gravely spoke nonsense in English for a quarter of an hour, which seemed to be highly appreciated by the so-called learned men who listened. Further on he writes: "You cannot imagine my disgust for our present society; it seems as if it tried, by its stupid combinations, to augment the mass of annoyances and troubles which are necessary to the order of the world." Speaking of Englishmen, he says that individually they are stupid, but as a whole admirable. Few things, in fact, find grace in his eyes. On marriage, he says that nothing is more repulsive: "The Turks, who bargain for a wife as for a fat sheep, are more honest than we Europeans who daub over this vile transaction with a varnish of hypocrisy but too transparent." It may be seen at this stage how the scepticism of the first days has begot a cynic. He might have sought happiness in union with a lovely and amiable woman (for he was a great favourite with the sex); but he discarded marriage and women by principle. Much of this insensibility is revealed in the following lines: "The other day I went out boating on the Seine. There was a quantity of small sailing-boats filled with all kinds of people about the river. Another large one was freighted by a number of women (of those of the bad tone). All these boats had gone to the shore, and from the largest emerged a man about forty years old, who had a drum, and who drummed away for his own amusement. While I was admiring this lubber's musical dispositions, a woman of about twenty-three comes up to him, calls him a monster, says that she followed him from Paris, and that it would fare ill with him unless he admitted her to his party. All this was going on ashore, our own boat being twenty yards away. The man with the drum was drumming away while the woman was remonstrating, and he at last told her with much coolness that he would have nothing of the kind. Upon this, she ran to the boat furthest from the shore and jumped into the water, thereby splashing us abominably. Although she

paradox, and that the "Unknown" must have been singularly destitute in feminine dignity and self-respect could she have endured to be told that she was only separated from such a class of women by poverty. We hope the "Unknown" did endure it and approve of it, for, unless the *Quarterly* has entirely misunderstood Mérimée's meaning, no worse construction could be put on a very sensible remark.

had extinguished my cigar, indignation did not prevent me, nor my friends, from saving her before she had swallowed a glassful. The handsome object of her despair hadn't stirred, and he muttered between his teeth, 'Why take her out if she wanted to drown herself?' . . . The question to which this incident gives rise in my mind is, why are the most indifferent men the most beloved? That is what I should like you to tell me, if you can."

Such was his opinion on feminine love. Believing as he did that a man is no longer cherished from the moment he shows any affection for the woman he distinguishes from others, Mérimée probably deemed that the best way of avoiding misery and pain was not to love at all. Perhaps the unknown might have replied to his query that she used precisely the means alluded to to win her illustrious correspondent's heart; but in any case it may be affirmed that she did not succeed.

II.

It is within the present writer's recollection to have met Prosper Mérimée at one of those Parisian cafés which form the resort of the pith of the literary world. The place was generally well attended by famous men, but it was never more crowded than when Mérimée happened to be there. His brilliancy of conversation, the effective manner in which he poured out the overflowing of his wit, made of him one of the most desirable men of Paris. On this occasion a young sculptor of talent was holding forth on artistic theories, and he came to speak of glory with the fervency of an adept. "*La gloire!*" said Mérimée, with a caustic smile. "Do you then believe in glory, young man?"

This exclamation remained in our memory as the dejected profession of faith of a wasted life. Such, indeed, was Prosper Mérimée's; and it can be safely affirmed that this unfortunate result was provoked by counteraction against nature, and the valuable information afforded by his correspondence goes to support this view. Throughout the emptiness of his life prevails. To sum up, he sifted languages, literatures, and characters; he studied his species in all parts of the globe; and, as a just retribution for spurning all subjects of study after devoting his attention to each, instead of drawing consequences from the synthesis of things, he sickened, and looked about him for something to love or to like. Failing in his endeavours, he led the brilliant and sterile life of a delicate *désœuvré*, and listlessly wandered through the drama of life, obviously without object, and certainly without desire. What was the use for him to apply his energy to some great work; to labour for a definite enterprise? He was a sceptic, and much of a cynic too; his soul was as well closed to narrow egotism as to a noble faith in the perfectibility of human attempts. Vanity he had none; he cared not a whit for glory. If he achieved a few masterpieces it was for his amusement, not for others—he despised others too much for that; and in his sometimes heroic contempt, the

trace he would leave of his passage in this world troubled him but slightly. As most men who look upon the details of life too critically, he had lost sight of the good features of human nature only to give paramount importance to its vices. He commenced life on the defensive: suspicion bred bitterness; bitterness bred scepticism, scepticism bred the cynic. It is clear that such negative sentiments were not primarily in his heart, and that they derived their origin from mistaken notions. It is also clear that this singular man's heart never thrilled with love, and that a fatal distrust, on which we have commented, deprived him of a solace which might have made of him a far different individual from the polite, caustic, stoically desponding Mérimée, whom Renan gives as a type of a period. The "Unknown" was merely the recipient of those confidences which every mind has an irrepressible tendency to unfold; but that alone is no proof of amorous affection. Proud as he was, Mérimée doubtless selected her as the fittest person to preserve his secrets; and perhaps another deception might be added to the others, could he know that even this trust has been betrayed. Howbeit, the *Inconnue* was no more than a confidante. She might perchance have been more had she liked; and her own letters to Mérimée would show if she is responsible for preventing a very distinguished man from seeing clearly through his mistakes, and reconciling himself with his fellow-creatures.

This, however, is merely speculation, and one should only reason by facts on such delicate ground. What facts we have lead us to point to Mérimée as the most unhappy of men. In the tumult of court life, amidst the uproar of the gayest society, he was more forlorn than in the solitude of a desert. His heart was dry to the core; the eventualities of daily existence were to him as the phases of a nightmare, in which he was forced into playing a part although convinced of its vanity. He must, indeed, have longed to cast off the clay as well as his official gear. His death was in unison with the mournfulness of his life: it occurred shortly after the overthrow of the Second Empire. France was going to pieces; no one thought of a single individual in this whirling tempest, and Mérimée's demise was not more noticed than a simple soldier's. He expired in the arms of two faithful English friends. Two hours before breathing his last he wrote the note which closes the second volume of his correspondence. He was borne silently to the grave, momentarily forgotten. No doubt he would have approved of this oblivion and indifference.