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A Conversation with Ernest Renan

Leaves from a Diary

BY ROMAIN ROLLAND

TWENTY-FOUR young men had come that year—1886—from the four corners of the French horizon to form the entering class of the Normal College, I among them. For about a month we had been feverishly studying one another and carrying on tremendous discussions about every problem of art and philosophy. For at that moment in our lives all roads seem to lie open to the eager spirit within us. Afire to follow them each in turn, it dashes along first one and then another, beating about through woods and fields as joyful and impatient as a young dog. From the very first we had picked up the scent of the Russian novelists, and the first thing our small reading committee did was to buy Dostoyevsky's "The Possessed" and Tolstoy's "Katia." I had introduced "War and Peace" into the old house on the rue d'Ulm, and I have elsewhere described ("Life of Tolstoy") the variety of reactions and enthusiasms aroused by this orchestral book, which left none of our aspirations unanswered and spoke to us each in our own language.

There was another magician to

whose spells we succumbed, a magician whose wand raised before us the bewildering spectacle of innumerable and contradictory arguments—our famous neighbor, in short, Renan at the Collège de France. His resplendent old age was finding in the dramatic contradictions of his thought an absorbing game, and he lent it all the savor of his serene and tragic irony. Of his intellectual "dramas" I admired the "Priest of Nemi" most. And as our interpretations conflicted violently, and each one of us impudently presumed to have shut the doors of his individual cage on the freedom-loving bird that no one has ever been able to capture, I asserted with perfect assurance that Renan was in reality a Stoic. "Paradox!" objected my classmates, "and, moreover, unjustifiable!"

Whether it was or not, I determined to have Renan himself decide. With the imperturbable cheek of the very young, I wrote him a long letter, in which I was at some pains to explain to him what he must have meant!

The wise old man replied at once, most affably, and with sly kindness, asked me to come to see him. The

very next Sunday—it was the morning of the twenty-sixth of December—I started out, happy, trembling with excitement, and knocked on a second-story door at the Collège de France. It was Renan's way to be charming and delicately flattering. He knew how well young people love sugar,—and old people, too!—and the compliments he paid me were such as to go straight to my heart. He spoke of my letter, which, so he assured me, he had retained word for word; and after asking me various friendly questions, he in turn submitted to answering mine. I blush to think how that indiscreet youth stayed on and on and made the great man talk for an hour or more!

What a twenty-year-old boy had to say in that interview it is of no moment to remember; but what that very wise and very patient old man said to him really belongs to every one, and I offer it here, word for word as it was spoken, for everything he had said I noted down in my journal on my return to college, and it is those notes I to-day transcribe. As I write I hear again that slow, heavy, good-humored voice, and I see that large head, with its mass of rumpled white hair, sunk between the shoulders, and that heavy body settling down on itself like a weight in a sack, the waistcoat grown too wide, the protruding paunch,—oddly like Punchinello's;—all the poor flabby covering of an old body that is fast wearing out, but, within, what a divinely alert and divinely laughing spirit! Around us the dull white light of a winter morning; a cold fog in the court outside; silence. A little student, who does not dare to move, but sits huddled in his overcoat, his collar still turned up, for he is too timid to venture to turn it down, and upon him

the kindly eyes of the old man as, a-twinkle with sly humor, they study the adolescent from under their heavy lids.

“ . . . I have great confidence in the future of humanity, but I feel less confident about the future of France . . . for the natural leaders of the French people, the aristocrats who ought to be guiding it and offering the inspiration of example, have turned completely away from the general movement . . . and the church teaches us nothing. Fortunately, our people are a fine, a good race. Our nation as a whole is far from having the same degree of intelligence we intellectuals have. But it has something we lack—the instinct of the race. The French people is a brave people, and faces death on the battle-field with high courage . . . even though, for fifty years now, there has been a moral decline . . . not as much however as one might think! There was a time when Catholicism provided a strict discipline for the people of our nation . . . to-day that discipline exists no more, hence an apparent disorder that is less serious than it appears. . . . So far as courage and morality in general are concerned, the French of to-day are certainly the equals of the ancient Gauls. . . . Besides, if our nation should by any chance grow weak and cowardly, it would be our duty to hope that braver, stronger nations might triumph over it, which in such a case would be inevitable, anyway.”

From that the talk had drifted to some of the ideas expressed in “The Priest of Nemi,” and I asked Renan if he really believed that the dream of Antistius and the Sage might be realized on earth.

“The infinity of time is in our fa-

vor," Renan replied. "Our planet will still exist ten thousand years from now. . . . Ten thousand? A geologist could easily prove to us that it will exist a hundred thousand years from now. . . . It is simply beyond conception. Progress, especially in the last century, has been enormous. The chariot of progress is running on rails now, and at top speed. There is so much to do! First, the development of the earth itself. There is enough land on our planet for every human being to have a share, there are enough arms to cultivate that land; yet thousands of men are starving, and thousands of leagues of the earth's surface are waste spaces. . . . Yes, we must cultivate our earth, we must do it together, and in harmony. . . . That is certain to come about . . . but I would dread to see such a thing come to pass now. For of necessity a tyrant would arise, and the essence of progress is liberty. . . ."

"Anyway, no need to go so far! There are a number of nations which still have n't made their presence known, so to speak, in so far as humanity's great tasks are concerned. The Slavic nations, for instance, have many new elements to contribute,—capacity for devotion, for sacrifice, for heroism,—but with it all, they are still bound to such stupid superstitions. Through Turgenieff, who was my friend,—he was typical of his race,—I know the Slavic nature thoroughly. And there is no doubt that these peoples will contribute some new ideas to humanity . . . doubtless, not without also causing a great disturbance in the actual state of things. But the Barbarians also caused a slight disturbance in the society of the fourth century, you remember; yet there can

be no question but that we owe them much."

At this the young man breaks out. He is bursting with Russian ideology. He talks Dostoyevsky. Was the great novelist right, he inquires, in describing the Russian people as "god-producing"? Can a new religion come out of the intellectual and social disturbances of Russia?

"Yes, the Russians are still very much like children," said Renan. "They have the naïve vanity to wish to make a religion. But they are singularly and completely wrong in their ambition. The age of dogma is gone. Jesus Christ is no more possible now than Mohammed. . . . The farther we go, the wider the chasm between religion and social life. In a hundred thousand years every one will believe whatever he likes. Naturally, we will learn to accept and live up to certain obligations and duties, since that is essential to the existence of society . . . besides our consciences force us to it. Human beings in those future ages will also be taught mathematics and the other exact sciences. What a field of work that opens up! For almost everything still remains to be done in it. In astronomy, how outworn is the fine old hypothesis of Laplace! . . . We have scarcely begun to study life yet. . . . What have we to do with 'good Gods'?"

Renan spends some time grumbling humorously about "the death of the 'good Gods'" and the end of religious systems, and young Rolland, who had some four years earlier uprooted himself from the Catholic faith of his childhood, and who knows what anguish it costs to recover one's equilibrium on the edge of the abyss, and to fashion

out of the stuff of one's thinking a new faith better suited to one's growing size, timidly ventures (he was thinking of those who are too weak for the struggle, those who never see it through):

"But is n't it true that there are a great many souls who are n't strong enough to get along without a God to protect and love them? Take God away from such people, and they suffer too cruelly. Will they, do you think, be able to endure the cold comfort of science?"

Renan laughed gently.

"So much the worse for them, so much the worse if they are overwhelmed by science. All they had to do was simply *not to seek the truth.*"

And then, remembering perhaps, at sight of my distress, that he too had once been very young, he added:

"You think the transition state is painful and that the pretentious half-science that middle-class minds brag of is more dangerous than complete ignorance? Why, no; it is better than complete ignorance, since it leads finally to complete knowledge. One must not be discouraged because the moment is difficult. Despite everything, progress is sure. Look at what we were one century ago, two centuries ago, three. We fall back at times, we will always have moments of retrogression. At such moments everything we have been fighting for seems to be destroyed. But have no fear. The road humanity is traveling is a mountain trail, zigzagging back and forth; it winds and turns; there are times when apparently we are turning our backs to the goal. Just the same, we are drawing constantly nearer."

He drew then in great rapid strokes a picture of the march of progress: first, the Jews, demanding justice for

the weak; then Christianity, with its excellent moral influence and its execrable intellectual influence. And I must say, it was the latter Renan dwelt on.

". . . Christianity has been a terrible handicap for the human mind. It was Christianity—you'll say the Barbarians had something to do with it—that made the darkness of the Middle Ages, and humanity came very near going down to its death in that darkness—massacres, ignorance, sheer stupidity. . . . Nothing is so dangerous to the future of humanity as superstition; and nothing is more fatal than to believe not only that one is thinking the truth, but that one must prevent others from thinking otherwise: that means the death of the human mind. . . . Besides, even the immense and helpful influence Christianity has exerted morally is due largely to the fact that our European races are fundamentally good, fundamentally healthy. Look at what Christianity became in the Orient! . . . Its effects there are not more happy than those of other religions.

"Oh, I know well enough that Catholicism as a reagent is not yet exhausted, and that it will cause a few more reactions still—a few more; but they will not last very long. The age of dogma is past . . . the progress of science tends more and more to bring out the absurdity of ancient religious beliefs; both nature and God are growing larger. . . . Oh, yes . . . there are still plenty of us who would like a small universe all our own, with a little Jehovah to put his finger in the pie now and then." (Again that good-natured, bantering laugh.) "You're sure that one is dead and buried! He does n't exist. But the

Other One, that is different! The real God—He Who is all. . . .

“And if we were condemned always to look out on a world like the one we see to-day through this transparent yet impenetrable, gray fog,”—he pointed to the window,—“we certainly would invent a world of our own! For then even our most learned scientists would have no more than an intuition of a great luminous body, a sun or a moon, existing somewhere outside the earth. . . .

“Don’t be discouraged,” he repeated several times as the talk went on. “Life is good. It is the creation of a beneficent demiurge. . . . When we think of all the joys life offers us; yes, offers to spirits of real distinction as well as to the common run of humanity! . . . I am sixty-four years old . . . if I am allowed to live only a few years more, I shall leave this world perfectly satisfied. To see all that I have seen for sixty-four years,—the superb spectacle of the universe, the achievements of the human mind,—it is prodigious, miraculous! But we must be resigned never to know everything. . . . We ask too much of life; at least that is the fault of the intellectual. But there is some comfort in knowing that the intellectuals of the past were not a bit less unhappy than those of to-day; they were perhaps even more so!”

He paused then to ask me some questions about myself and my classmates at the Normal College. Did we work much? he wanted to know; I told him that more than anything else we read, and that we discussed all kinds of subjects together.

“By far the best thing one can do,” he exclaimed. “Despite the respect I feel for higher education, I think

reading is more important than anything your instructors can teach you. . . . Have you any bent for research, either in science or history?”

“For both science and history; more especially for history. But I have n’t made up my mind yet about what I am going to do. I want two years more to let my mind grow a bit before pinning it down to some particular groove.”

“Good enough! That is what our minds need—to contemplate the whole of nature and formulate a few general ideas. After that, specialize, so that, with whatever generalizations you may have arrived at, you can make your contribution to progress, to the task humanity has before it. . . . The classics, Greek and Latin, will always be the basis of our education. But there remains little in that field to discover. In history, on the other hand, nearly everything still remains to be done. . . . There are so few documents as yet, and such wide stretches of the unknown! If only we had the key to the Assyrian characters . . . we have four volumes of them already, and every day we discover new ones . . . but what a light that will throw on the Orient and on the history of man!”

How often since I have regretted not heeding this call to Asia, mother of arts and religions! Two sirens distracted me from it; music and Italy holding me captive, for a part of my life, at least, on Mediterranean shores. But I have never had any trouble in maintaining the utmost fidelity to history; for, even when I was writing my novels or my plays, I was still a historian.

Finally I decide to leave the industrious old worker in peace. I had al-

ready broken up his morning for him. But with ironical forbearance, and a quite archaic courteousness of manner, he persisted in offering me his thanks, as though he were really grateful!

As I bore away with me the image of my "Stoic," who had proved also an epicurean, a pessimist-optimist, a man of belief and doubt, above all a man human and honest, I marveled at the presumption of those who try to make all these harmonized contradictions fit into the formula of a group or school. Rich music of a transition period, freighted with the past, and bearing within it the future! The moment for unifying the innumerable strong currents of the wise old man's intellectual life had not yet arrived. It was on the very eve of the first social whirlwinds, Boulangisme, the

Dreyfus Case, just beginning to shake a France which had been quiet ever since the convulsion of the Commune of 1871. But, in that last hour of tranquil gestation, the play of his mind, the dramas it built for him, were of a rich and nourishing succulence that provided him with a final and supreme pleasure. Life pleased him—but so did nothingness; "yes," "no," "perhaps" pleased him even better; for he gave to each a full rich savor.

"Living is a delightful business, but it does n't amount to much," the sage old fellow seemed to be saying.

Was it "but" he said, or "for"? Well, anyway, he went on:

"The true philosopher is brave. He can face death better than the rest of mankind. He sees the vanity of everything."

Seven P.M.

BY MARK VAN DOREN

Slow twilight bird,

Suspended, as you sail, along the nearer edge
Of nightfall and the beechwood, are you heard
In places past my ears? Are you a wedge—

Slow tapered wing—

Driving into the outer walls of time?
Eternity is not so strange a thing,
At evening, when the towers that were to climb—

Slow searching beak—

Lie level with your progress in the soft,
Dark-feathered dusk, and there are known to speak
Gentle, wild voices from the dark aloft.