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FRENCH & ENGLISH

A Comparison

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BY

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ADVERTISEMENT

IN the years 1886 and 1887 the author contributed a series of seven articles to the *Atlantic Monthly*, which bore the title of the present volume, and are in great part absorbed in it. The book, however, is essentially new, as it contains much more matter than the articles, and the chapters are either hitherto unpublished or rewritten in a less desultory order.

This work is not intended to be historical. It only professes to compare the French and English of the second half of the nineteenth century.

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P R E F A C E

It may be taken as typical of the author's intentions that he has felt uncertain which of the two nationalities he would put first in the title, and that the question has been decided by a mere consideration of euphony. If the reader cares to try the experiment of saying "English and French," and "French and English" afterwards, he will find that the latter glides the more glibly from the tongue. There is a tonic accent at the beginning of the word "English" and a dying away at the end of it which are very convenient in the last word of a title. "French," on the other hand, comes to a dead stop, in a manner too abrupt to be agreeable.

The supercilious critic will say that I am making overmuch of a small matter, but he may allow me to explain why I put the Frenchmen first, lest I be accused of a lack of patriotism. This book has not, however, been written from a patriotic point of view ; it is not simply an exposition of the follies and sins of another nation for the comparative glorification of my own, neither is it an example of what Herbert Spencer has aptly called "anti-patriotism," which is the systematic setting down of one's own country-

men by a comparison with the superior qualities of the foreigner.

I should like to write with complete impartiality, if it were possible. I have at least written with the most sincere desire to be impartial, and that perhaps at the cost of some popularity in England, for certain English critics have told me that impartiality is not patriotic, and others have informed me of what I did not know before, namely, that I prefer the French to my own countrymen.

It seems to me that the best patriotism does not consist in speaking evil of another country, but in endeavouring to serve one's own. There are many kinds of service. That of a writer is above all things to tell the truth and not to deceive his countrymen even when they wish to be deceived. If he fails in veracity he is guilty of a kind of treachery to his own country by giving it erroneous ideas or fallacious information. Such treachery may become serious when the subject of the volume is international. When public writers are patriotic in the old narrow and perverse meaning of the term, that is to say, when they are full of gall and injustice, when they systematically treat the foreigner as a being who has neither rights, nor merits, nor feelings, then, whether intentionally or not, they are urging their own nation on the path that leads to war. When they endeavour to write truly and justly about the foreigner, with a due consideration for his different position and a fair recognition of his rights and feelings, then they are favouring the growth of a conciliatory temper which, when a difficulty arises, will tend

to mutual concession and to the preservation of peace. Is it better or worse for England that she should maintain peaceful relations with her nearest neighbour, with that nation which, along with herself, has done most for liberty and light? That question may be answered by the experience of seventy years.

I have no illusions about friendship between nations. There will never be any firm friendship between England and France, and a momentary attachment would only cause me anxiety on account of the inevitable reaction. All I hope for and all that seems to me really desirable is simply mutual consideration. *That* is possible, *that* is attainable; in the higher minds of both countries (with a few exceptions) it exists already. If it existed generally in the people it would be enough to prevent bloodshed. Any difficulty that arose between the two countries would be met in a rational temper and probably overcome without leaving rancour behind it. This has actually been done on one or two recent occasions with complete success, a result due to the high patriotism of the statesmen on both sides. A lower and more vulgar patriotism would have aroused the passion of *chauvinisme* which puts an end to all justice and reason.

Whatever the spirit of justice may lead to in the correspondence of statesmen, it is a sad hindrance to effect in literature. I am fully aware of this, and know that, without justice, a more dashing and brilliant book might easily have been written. *Just* writing does not amuse, but malevolence may be made extremely enter-

taining. What is less obvious is that justice often puts her veto on those fine effects of simulated indignation which the literary advocate knows to be of such great professional utility. It is a fine thing to have an opportunity for condemning a whole nation in one terribly comprehensive sentence. The literary moralist puts on his most dignified manner when he can deplore the wickedness of thirty millions of human beings. It is ennobling to feel yourself better and greater than thirty millions, and the reader, too, has a fine sense of superiority in being encouraged to look down upon such a multitude. Justice comes in and says, "But there are exceptions and they ought not to be passed over." "That may be," replies the Genius of Brilliant Literature, "but if I stop to consider these I shall lose all breadth of effect. Lights will creep into my black shadows and I shall no longer appal with gloom. I want the most telling oppositions. The interests of art take precedence over commonplace veracity."

The foreigner may be effectually dealt with in one of two ways. He may be made to appear either ridiculous or wicked. The satire may be humorous, or it may be bitter and severe. The French, with their lighter temperament, take pleasure in making the Englishmen absurd. The English, on their part, though by no means refusing themselves the satisfaction of laughing at their neighbours, are not disinclined to assume a loftier tone. It is not so much what is obviously ridiculous in French people that repels as that which cannot be described without a graver reprobation.

And yet, delightful as may be the pleasures of malice and uncharitableness, they must always be alloyed by the secret misgiving that the foreigner may possibly, in reality, not be quite so faulty as we describe him and as we wish him to be. But the pleasure of knowing the truth for its own sake, when there is no malice, is a satisfaction without any other alloy than the regret that men should be no better than they are.

One of my objects in this book has been to show real resemblances under an appearance of diversity. Not only do nations deceive themselves by names, but they seem anxious to deceive themselves and unwilling to be undeceived. For example, in the matter of Government, there is the deceptive use of the words "Monarchy" and "Republic." When we are told, for the sake of contrast, that England is a Monarchy and France a Republic, it is impossible, of course, to deny that the statement is nominally accurate, but it conveys, and is disingenuously intended to convey, an idea of opposition that does not correspond with the reality. The truth is that both countries have essentially the same system of Government. In both we find a predominant Legislative Chamber, with a Cabinet responsible to that Chamber, and existing by no other tenure than the support of a precarious majority. The Chamber in both countries is elected by the people, with this difference, that in France the suffrage is universal and in England very nearly universal. In short, the degree of difference that there is does not justify the use of terms which would be accurate if applied to countries

so politically opposite as Russia and the United States. Again, in the matter of religion, to say that France is "Catholic" and England "Protestant" conveys a far stronger idea of difference than that which would answer to the true state of the case. In each country we find a dominant Orthodoxy, the Church of the aristocracy, with its hierarchy of prelates and other dignitaries; and under the shadow of the Orthodoxy, like little trees under a big one, we find minor Protestant sects that have no prelates, and also tolerated Jews and unbelievers. Stated in this way the real similarity of the two cases becomes much more apparent, the most important difference (usually passed over in silence) being that co-establishment exists in France for two Protestant sects and for the Jews, whilst it does not exist in England.

It is an obstacle to accurate thinking when differences are made to appear greater than they are by the use of misleading language.¹ France and England are, no doubt, very different, as two entirely independent nations are sure to be, especially when there is a marked diversity of race, but the distance between them is perpetually varying: I hope to show in this volume how they approach to and recede from each other. The present tendency is

¹ Here is an instance of misleading by mistranslation. The English newspapers speak of Parisian "Communists" when they ought to say Communards. A Communist is a Socialist of a particular kind, who wants to have goods in common after the fashion of the early Christians. A Communard is a person who wishes for an extreme development of local government. He thinks that the Commune (something like a township) ought to have more autonomy—be more independent of the State. M. Charles Beslay, an old

strongly towards likeness, as, for example, in the adoption by the English of the closure and county councils, which are both French institutions; and it might safely be predicted that the French and English peoples will be more like each other in the future than they are now. Democracy in politics and the recognition of complete liberty of conscience, both positive and negative, in religion, will be common to both countries. Even in matters of custom there is a perceptible approach, not to identity, but to a nearer degree of similarity. The chauvinist spirit in both countries recognises this unwillingly. A nobler patriotism may see in it some ground of hope for a better international understanding.

As it is unpleasant for an author to see his opinions misrepresented, I may be permitted to say that in politics I am a pure "Opportunist," believing that the best Government is that which is best suited to the *present* condition of a nation, though another might be ideally superior. When a country is left to itself a natural law produces the sort of Government which answers for the time. I look upon all Governments whatever as merely temporary and provisional expedients, usually of an un-

friend of mine, became a Communard and was Governor of the Bank of France under the Commune. He was a most upright and honourable gentleman, and so far from being a Communist that he defended the treasure of the Bank of France throughout the civil war of 1871, and afterwards handed it over intact to the proper authorities. I do not accuse English journalists of intentional dishonesty in this case; there is no English equivalent for *Communard*, the nearest English rendering would be *township home-rule-man*.

satisfactory character, their very imperfection being a sort of quality, as it reconciles men to the inevitable change. To make a comparison far more sublime than our poorly-contrived political systems deserve, they are moving like the sun with all his *cortège* of planets towards a goal that is utterly unknown. Or it is possible that there may be no goal whatever before us, but only unending motion. The experimental temper of our own age is preparing, almost unconsciously, for an unseen and unimaginable future. It is our vain desire to penetrate the secret of that future that makes all our experiments so interesting to us. France has been the great experimental laboratory during the last hundred years, but England is now almost equally venturesome, and is likely, before long, to become the more interesting nation of the two.

I believe Parliamentary Government to be the only system possible and practicable in England and France at the present day. I believe this without illusion and without enthusiasm. The parliamentary system is so imperfect that it works slowly and clumsily in England, whilst in France it can hardly be made to work at all. With two parties the prize of succession is offered to the most eloquent fault-finder, with three a Cabinet has not vitality enough for bare existence. At the present moment the English Parliament inspires but little respect and the French no respect whatever. Still we are parliamentarians, not for the love of long speeches in the House, but from a desire to preserve popular liberty outside of it. The distinction here between England and France is that in France

every parliamentarian is of necessity a republican, a freely-elected parliament being incompatible with monarchy in that country, whereas in England Queen Victoria, unlike her predecessor Charles I., has made it possible for her subjects to be parliamentarians and royalists at the same time.

In the variety of national and religious antipathies we sometimes meet with strange anomalies. Whenever there is any conflict between French Catholics and French Freethinkers the sympathy of all but a very few English people is assured to the Catholics beforehand, without any examination into the merits of the case, and the case itself is likely to be stated in England in such a manner as to command sympathy for the Catholics. This is remarkable in a country which is, on the whole, Protestant, as the very existence of the French Protestants (in themselves a defenceless minority) is due to the protection of the Freethinkers. Without that strictly neutral protection Protestant worship would no more be tolerated in France than it was in the city of Rome when the Popes had authority there. I may also remind the English reader that if genuine Catholics were to become masters of England all Protestant places of worship would be shut up, and the Anglican sovereign would have the alternative of Henri IV, whilst the heaviest political and municipal disabilities would weigh upon all who did not go to confession and hear mass. On the other hand, if Freethinkers, such as the present generation of French politicians, were masters of England, the worst evil to be apprehended

would be the impartial treatment of all religions, either by co-establishment as in France, or by disestablishment as in Ireland. The bishops might be dismissed from the House of Lords, but the bishops and clergy of all faiths would be eligible for the House of Commons, as they are for the Chamber of Deputies.

It is now quite a commonly-received opinion in England that religion is "odiously and senselessly persecuted" in France, but nothing is said against the Italian Government for its treatment of the monastic orders. Neither does it occur to English writers that this is a case of a mote in the neighbour's eye and a beam in one's own. The Catholic Church has been robbed and pillaged by the French secular power, which allows her nearly two millions sterling a year in compensation, and keeps the diocesan edifices in excellent repair. The Catholic Church has been robbed and pillaged by the English secular power, which repairs none of her buildings and allows her nothing a year in compensation. In France the Jewish and Dissenting clergy are paid by the "persecuting" State, in England they get nothing from the State. Catholic street processions are forbidden in many of the French towns; in England they are tolerated in none. In France a Catholic may be the head of the State; in England he is excluded from that position by law. The French Government maintains diplomatic relations with the Holy See; a Nuncio is not received at the Court of St. James's.

The French Government is described as persecuting

and tyrannical because it has sent pretenders into exile after tolerating them for sixteen years. The English Government never tolerated pretenders at all, but kept them in exile from first to last—the *last* being their final extinction on foreign soil.

Another very curious and unfortunate anomaly is the instinctive opposition of French Republicans to England. It exists in degrees exactly proportioned to the degree of democratic passion in the Frenchman. When he is a moderate Republican he dislikes England moderately, a strong Republican usually hates her, and a radical Republican detests her. These feelings are quite outside of the domain of reason. England is nominally monarchical, it is true, but in reality, as every intelligent Frenchman ought to know, she has set the example of free institutions.

An hypothesis that may explain such anomalies as these, is that the ancient national antipathy which our fathers expressed in bloodshed has now, in each nation, taken the form of jealousy of the other's progress, so that although each enjoys freedom for herself she can never quite approve of it in her neighbour. There is also the well-known dislike to neutrals which in times of bitter contention intensifies itself into a hatred even stronger than the hatred of the enemy. The French Freethinker is a neutral between hostile religions, and the English lover of political liberty is regarded as a sort of neutral by Frenchmen, since he has neither the virulence of the *intransigent* nor the vindictiveness of the *réactionnaire*.

In concluding this Preface I wish to say a few words about nationality in ideas.

The *purity* of nationality in a man's ideas is only compatible with pure ignorance. An English agricultural labourer may be purely English. The gentleman's son who learns Latin and Greek becomes partly latinised and partly hellenised ; if he learns to speak French at all well he becomes, so far, gallicised. To preserve the pure English quality you must exclude everything that is not English from education. You must exclude even the natural sciences and the fine arts, as they have been built up with the aid of foreigners and constantly lead to the study of foreign works. These things do not belong to a nation but to the civilised world, and England, as Rebecca said in *Ivanhoe*, is not the world. Her men of science quote foreign authorities continually, her painters and musicians are nourished, from their earliest youth, on continental genius.

But although it is impossible for an educated man to preserve the *purity* of his mental nationality, that is, its exclusive and insular character, although it is impossible for him to dwell in English ideas only when foreign ideas are equally accessible to him, the fact remains that the educated mind still includes far more of what is English than the uneducated one. The man who is called "half a foreigner" because he knows a foreign language may be more largely English than his critic. A rich man may hold foreign securities and yet, at the same time, have larger English investments than his poorer neighbour.

Even with regard to affection, there are Englishmen who love Italy far more passionately than I have ever loved France, yet they love England as if they had never quitted their native parish.

The *Saturday Review* was once good enough to say that I am "courteously careful not to offend." It is satisfactory to be told that one has nice literary manners, but I have never consciously studied the art of avoiding offence, and in a book like this it does not seem possible to avoid it. People are more sensitive for their nation than they are even for themselves. They resent the simplest truths, though stated quite without malice, if they appear to be in the least unfavourable. One evening, at Victor Hugo's house in Paris, a few of his friends met, and the conversation turned by accident on a book of mine, *Round my House*, then recently published. Gambetta, who was present, was in a mood of protestation because I had said that the French peasants were ignorant, and Victor Hugo was inclined to take their part. The sentiment of patriotism was very ardent and sensitive in Gambetta, so he could not allow a foreigner to say anything that seemed unfavourable to France. Yet the French themselves have shown that they were aware of the ignorance prevalent in their own country by their praiseworthy efforts to remedy it.

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