THE MODERN LITERATURE OF ITALY SINCE THE YEAR 1870

NOT being a man of letters, but an alienist, I will give you a psychological rather than a literary description of the condition of literature in Italy. My presentation will undoubtedly have many defects and deficiencies in details, but it will perhaps thereby gain in originality of treatment.

It is one of the characteristics of European writers, and especially of Italians, to isolate themselves completely from scientific research. Beauty for itself, the imitation of the ancients—this is the defect, or the strength, of our poets. ALEARDI, it is true, put some years ago a little botany and geology into his poetry, as did, nearly a century ago, Mascheroni, in his celebrated epistle *Invito a Lesbia Sidonia*. ZANELLA, a true priest, has sung in a celebrated ode the *Coquille Fossile*, which portrays in colors truly poetical the last discoveries of paleontology. But this naturalism was only a light varnish, like the golden powder that coquettes sprinkle on their hair, and which falls at the first movement. It is nevertheless true that some poets, not appreciated yet as they deserve, draw their inspiration from nature or from history.

Such is ARTUR GRAF, who in my opinion owes his genius to an intermixture of race, Italian, Greek, and German, and also to a climatic graft, as he comes from Roumania; which shows the favorable influence of the double race-infusion. (See my work on "Genius.") In his poem *Medusa*, Graf has mingled naturalism and Schopenhauerianism with a poetical spirit which is highly original. He has also written *Il Diabolo* and the *Legend of Rome among the Nations of the Middle Ages*; a work which has philological

and historical merit, especially in connection with the Folk-lore of past centuries. These books are in prose, but their form is wholly poetical.

RAPISARDI is truly the Juvenal, and we may also say the Lucretius, of contemporaneous Italy. He began by giving us the best translation of the great Roman poet, and he has absorbed much of his spirit, and perhaps also of the asperity of his verses, and of his contempt for form. His great original poem is the *Giobbe* (Catania), in which he has given a bitter satire of modern society and of contemporary literary men; however, he would seem to be sometimes too personal; so much so that many persons have not forgiven him. Lately he has published a collection of *Religious Poems* (Catania, 1888), in which, despite its title, there is much less religion than naturalism. It is a hymn, worthy of its master, to the religion of nature and to the beauty of truth, without forgetting the grand social ideas of justice which our poets so often forget.

PRAGA may be described as the Baudelaire of Italy. He too, like the latter, lived and died an alcoholic and paralytic. He was the first to break with the Græco-Latin traditions; and has drawn his inspiration from the caprices of his disease, which has given him a powerful and original stamp. His best works are *Penombre* and *Tavolozza*. The same lot, induced by the same disease, has befallen ROVANI, who in his historical novels (*Giulio Cesare* and *la Storia di centi anni*) has performed good work in history and psychology.

Among writers truly original, MANTEGAZZA excels in prose. His is one of those many-sided, versatile minds that are met with in the Latin races; such as Cardano, Leonardo da Vinci, L. B. Alberti, Voltaire, Taine, Richet. He is by turns pathologist, physiologist, chemist, anthropologist, geographer, traveller, and novelist. His novel *Dio Ignoto* is semi-naturalistic. In his *Fisiologia del piacere* he has attempted a new kind of personal observations, although it is met with in the novels of Balzac, of Flaubert, and of Gonoret. In his *Physiology of pain* he has again become pathological, serious; this book has, accordingly, not obtained the success that it merited. In the *Feste ed Ebbrezze* he describes the pleasures of the people.

But Mantegazza, who has the originality of genius, has also its evil and treacherous volubility ; and we cannot say what is his patriotic and philosophic faith. He has written pages that seem dictated by a catholic priest, by the side of others worthy of Aretino (*Amore degli uomini*), and still other pages which could be signed by Victor Hugo.

Less original perhaps, but much more consistent with himself, is M. TREZZA, another versatile writer, a theologian, poet, historian, critic, philosopher, philologist, but who has not changed the facets of his genius, or the conscience of his faith. At one time a priest, he was one of the most ardent preachers ; but the study of natural science and of philosophy drew him away from his faith and plunged him in naturalism. He has preserved all the apostolic warmth of the ardent and honest priest of his youth. Thus he has emerged from it a new being immovable in his faith :

" Come torre che non crolla
Giammai la cima per soffiar dei venti." *

His works in religious criticism *La Religione e le Religioni*, and also in history and philosophy (*Lucrezio, Epicuro e l'Epicurismo, La Critica Moderna*) have received from it a peculiar impress, in which the enthusiasm of the apostle is mingled with the calm observation of science, and history confounds metaphysics. He is the first and the only one perhaps, who has attempted criticism in Italy while preserving a literary brilliancy which reminds us of Carlyle.

But according to universal opinion, among all these stars, the star of first magnitude is GIOSUE CARDUCCI. He is the true representative of the Italians, a graft of antiquity on the moderns, but in which antiquity predominates. His poems (*Le Nuove Poesie, Le Odi barbare, Le Nuove Odi barbare, Le Terze Odi barbare, Le Nuove Rime*) have attracted the greatest attention. He has introduced and revived a new metre, many times tried, but never with success, by Trissino, Campanella, Chiabrera, and others ; a new metre which reproduces the ancient rhythm of Greek and Roman poetry, espe-

* Like a tower that shakes not
In the blasts of the storm.

cially the elegy and the Alcaic ode. His is a new pagan Renaissance with a certain gloss of modernness but with outbursts sometimes patriotic and even revolutionary which the Renaissance lacked. His prose works also consist of archaic reconstructions of Italian literary history and of vigorous polemics, sometimes too personal, but always with a refinement of critique.

By the side of these productions which are known everywhere, and which can be truly called national, there is a substratum, of considerable extent, of literary works that have a local character. Such is the poetry of dialect which has however a great weight with us; for the best satirical poems and the best comedies are almost always written in dialect (*Pascarella* in the Roman dialect, *Fucini* in the Tuscan dialect, *Di Giacomo* in Neapolitan, *Bersezio* in Piedmontese, *Rizzotto* in Sicilian). It must be remarked also that this local division is still maintained in the rolls of the great army of literature, although this does not prevent such works passing beyond the geographical limits of their territory and becoming known throughout the whole of Italy.

We have a Ligurian-Piedmontese school with DE AMICIS at the head,—De Amicis, who now however often attempts social studies with much intrepidity,—and BARILI, FARINA, BERSEZIO, GIACOSA, and FALDELLA, who possess the common characteristic of a sentimentality almost feminine, altogether opposed to the rugged country of which they constitute the glory.

There is the Tuscan-Bolognese school of which CARDUCCI is the chief pontiff and which hovers about the old school. M. PANZACCHI, RICCI, MARRADI, and STECCHETTI belong to it; there was an epoch in the life of the last named in which he launched into a style which seemed naturalistic, but which was at bottom only pornographic; but he immediately compensated for his escapade by a great number of philological memoirs of an erudition truly oppressive, ultra-academical.

There is the Abruzzian school, of which D'ANNUNZIO is the head. Its characteristics are variegated tropical coloring, and a certain studied ornamentation sometimes burdened with similes and metaphors, and an exaggerated objectivity; it lays hold of the out-

side of things, but does not reach to and grasp the soul of the inner life of nature.

The Neapolitan school is made up of compilers and ingenious critics, who will make you an elegant embroidery with gossamer threads on the point of a needle. The most celebrated names of this school are SETTEMBRINI, DESANCTIS, BONGHI, and VITTORIO IMBRIANI.

The Sicilian is the rudest, but it is the most powerful and most original. We could name the great historians CEMARI, LA LUMIA, LAFARINA; and PITTRE, who created Italian Folklore, and who has maintained it with a special journal. Sicily has also given us two great novelists, VERGA and CAPUANA, who are improved Zolas. The *Malavoglia* and *Don Gesualdo* of M. Verga give us the home life of the Sicilian people. In the *Giacinta* of Capuana we have the life of the citizens and of the Italian nobility photographed.

Women always preserve the local type; but with special features. Hardly any write in verse; they compose novels and light productions rather than romances, sketches rather than true portraits. They choose the young girl and the unfortunate married woman; very often they write autobiographies, or the biography of their friends or their husbands. The land-question has nevertheless been dealt with very well by the Marchioness COLOMBI, (pseudonym of Madame Torèlli Viollet) and the woman's question has been treated of with great vigor and statistically by KULISCHIOFF; I have not spoken of ANNIE VIVANTI, another proof of the advantages of crossing, for she is Anglo-American and Anglo-Italian, and a Jewess to boot; she writes in verses which have nothing of the classical element in them—an extraordinary thing in Italy. Her works possess originality, which goes as far as the most extreme naturalism. (*Lirica di Annie Vivanti*, 1890.)

In fine, modern Italy has not many literary masterpieces to show. And this is due to a number of causes. In romances and comedies, dash and spirit demand a certain stock of observations that can be found only in great cities (capitals), and in Italy, Rome and Milan are only beginning to be such.

Originality, multiplicity, and energy of types are very scarce in

Italy, for everywhere the conventional lie dominates ; it is much more difficult to choose models here than it is in certain other countries, for example in Russia ; for genius alone can draw inspiration from inferior and ordinary material.

The classical system of education has prevented us from going to the source of social anomalies, mattoids, madmen, etc.

Besides, classicism, which has dominated us for so many centuries, and which has inspired us with its marvellous beauties, has, like the old, (and it is very old,) lost all its vital force. People have made believe to warm themselves by it ; but they have not succeeded ; they remain cold ; and they admire its adepts only in deference to the conventional lie. Yet the entire education of our youth consists of that. It is the same as in religion. People have made Madonnas and Jesuses of it to such an extent that now there is no longer any means of contriving anything new. Naturalism without being the natural foundation of the people is nevertheless sufficiently advanced not to allow of serious inspiration in religion.

Many authors who have sought new paths have been led out of their way by journalism and politics, which always end in exhausting people, even geniuses. SCARFOGLIO, BONGHI, TORELLI, DEZERBI, and FERRI are among the number.

The difficulty of securing a place in the literary world also very quickly exhausts many. Thus many men, especially of Southern Italy, produce a very good work ; but they have become fathers too late in life, and have only a single son ; such are BERSEZIO, with his *Travet*, BOITO with his *Ballate*, VALCARENGHI with his *Confessioni d'Andrea*.

Political liberty, if it has given an impulse to social and political studies, has prejudiced great literary production, perhaps because under the incitement of foreign domination and of rebellion, the heart draws from a grand source of inspiration, and the pen finds powerful excitation, more powerful perhaps, than liberty gives it.

Art finds more numerous elements of success in minds highly excited. It is the property of great revolutions to elevate the souls of all contemporaries, to impart to them a peculiar disposition unknown before, and which is not slow to disappear. The most

humble, the most obscure, those even who have not taken any part in the events and who have hardly studied them, express, a long time afterwards even, sentiments much superior to those which their ordinary condition allows. It is sufficient to have lived during some passionate epoch to issue from it better, purer, and stronger. The new ideas, the generous impulses which then carry away nations, penetrate into all classes and ennoble a whole generation. We had in our revolutionary epoch, Manzoni, Massimo d'Azeglio, Guerazzi, Giusti, Porta, Miceli, Brofferio, Berchet, Mameli, Boerio, Laquacci, Aleardi, Grassi, Prati. Who have we now to compare with them ?

Turin, March, 1891.

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