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## NATURE-WORSHIP—THE NEW RELIGION.

**R**ELIGION, according to the derivation of the prince of pagan orators, who was guided only by the light of right reason, means an attentive pondering of divine things, a proper understanding of our relations to the Creator, a just appreciation of our dependence upon Him, and an humble recognition of His claims upon us. This appreciation and recognition, becoming habitual, beget in the soul a permanent disposition or inclination to render the Creator the worship due to Him, the homage of the intellect and the obedience of the will.

Taken in this sense, we must admit that religion is not a characteristic of the modern world. Modern thought is a revolt against the Creator, a challenge of His authority, a denial of His rights, an insubordination to His will. Yet are we, therefore, to infer, with Emerson and other professed leaders of modern society, that the human mind has become "self-dependent," "self-sustained," that it "needs no gift, no foreign force," and "resists all attempts to palm other rules and other measures on the spirit than its own"? Far from it. The religious sentiment is deep-seated in the human heart. Man's nature is essentially moral and religious; he can no more divest himself of all religious feeling than of his nature. Banish genuine religion with its hallowed rites and ceremonies, and there will appear in its stead a spurious religion with a superstitious cult and worship. Like Banquo's ghost,

it will not away. It has a message to deliver, and it will not leave you until you hear it. If you do not bend the knee to the Creator, you will bend it to the creature; if you do not adore the author of nature, you will adore nature itself.

Creatures, with the qualities flowing from them, fall under the general designation of nature and constitute the natural order. The Creator alone, with the attributes of His being, is above all nature and constitutes the supernatural order. To worship the Creator, as He should be worshipped, is true religion; to worship the creature is false religion, superstition, or idolatry.

Now, the Creator may manifest Himself to us by the light of right reason in a soul made to His own likeness; or He may manifest Himself to us by a special light, falling upon us like a reflection from His divine countenance. He may make known the manner in which He wishes to be worshipped by the natural revelation of creatures, pointing to the Creator from whose hands they sprang. Or he may make known the manner in which he wishes to be worshipped by the supernatural revelation of faith, poured down in floods from the "inaccessible light wherein he dwelleth."<sup>1</sup> Religion based upon the revelation of the creature is natural religion; religion based upon the revelation of faith is supernatural religion.

Having premised this much by way of definition, we may now distinguish, with Cardinal Manning, three periods of human reason in the history of mankind: a period in which the human reason wandered alone without revelation; a period in which the human reason, receiving the light of revelation, walked under the guidance of faith; a period in which the human reason, after forfeiting the light of revelation which it had, once more wanders alone without a guide, not as before worshipping the God of nature under the sensible form of an idol, but relegating the God of nature to the realms of the unknowable and worshipping nature itself as the only God.

To hasten the advent of this period is the avowed object of the self-constituted leaders of thought—of such men as Carlyle, Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Spencer, Harrison—who would fain persuade us that the old faith and the religion professed by our forefathers are out of date, and are soon to be superseded by "the creed of science" and "the religion of culture." They would resent it as a gross insult to be styled or thought irreligious. They irreligious! Nay, are they not praised by their admirers for their "deeply religious feeling"? Is not Mr. Emerson proclaimed by Professor Tyndall "a profoundly religious man"? Is he not compared by Oliver Wendell Holmes to the Messiah, and declared to be a man of such superior virtue and merit that his life ought to

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<sup>1</sup> Four Great Evils, page 5.

be written as that of a saint? Are not George Eliot and others of the same stripe spoken of as "highly virtuous people"? Are they not all extolled as geniuses, and therefore, on the authority of Carlyle, to be considered as redeemers sent to work out the complete liberation of the race, as superior beings gifted with a divine intuition, and therefore not to be criticised, but to be heard with respectful awe?

They all set themselves up as the prophets of a new religion, as the apostles of a new Christianity, as the evangelists of a new gospel, commingling Judaism, Mahometanism, Buddhism and Christianity in one everlasting revelation, as the high priests of a new cult with symbols and rites expressive of religious thought in its present state of evolution. They often borrow the phraseology of the religion which they seek to destroy, and speak sanctimoniously of "revelations and creeds," of "mysteries and symbols," of a "trinity and an incarnation," of "sacraments and rituals." Should you happen unawares upon some detached excerpts from their writings, you would imagine that you were reading one of the mediæval Fathers, so interlarded are they with terms to which your ear has grown accustomed, so frequent are the allusions to practices to which your heart is attached.

Not that they have any respect for these practices; for, like Carlyle and Emerson, they are hostile to Christian ceremonies, which they condemn as hollow and insincere, as a lying imposture, as empty forms from which the substance has long since departed. Like Carlyle, they not unfrequently insult Christian piety by language such as he uses in his description of a London Sunday: "It is silent Sunday; the populace not yet admitted to the beer-shops, till the respectabilities conclude their rubric-mummies,—a much more audacious feat than beer." But, like Carlyle, who once felt himself attracted by the "dim light" in St. Paul's Cathedral and the "distant *Amen*" of the choristers, they know that sacred ceremonies speak a mystic language to the heart, and that the very names of truths learned in youth have a power to charm the ear. Under cover of these outward forms, they level their attacks not only at revealed religion, but at every religion which adores a Creator.

Their secret is betrayed by Matthew Arnold, one of the exponents of the "religion of culture." "Modern times," he writes, "find themselves with an immense amount of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life; that for them it is customary, not

rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit. The modern spirit is now awake almost everywhere; the sense of a want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit . . . almost every one now perceives . . . . To remove this want of correspondence is beginning to be the settled endeavor of most persons of good sense. Dissolvents of the old European system of dominant ideas and facts we must all be, all of us who have any power of working; what we have to study is that we may not be acrid dissolvents of them."<sup>1</sup> Now, as an able writer in the *Dublin Review* reminds us, the greatest of these "established institutions" and "accredited dogmas" of which Mr. Arnold wishes to be a dissolvent, is Christianity.

Carlyle is even more explicit, when he assures us that, if ever we "are to recover that pure and high spirit of devotion, the loss of which; however we may disguise it or pretend to overlook it, can be hidden from no observant mind, it must be by travelling on the same path, or at least in the same direction, in which the Germans have already begun to travel;" that is, the path travelled by Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling and others, the path afterwards travelled by Emerson until he discovered that "the true Christianity is a faith in the infinitude of man," that man is universal nature, and that nature is the god whom we ought to worship.

A professed Christian minister in a Christian pulpit tells us in a similar strain: "There is a perpetual evolution in religion. We may yet look forward to a grander and nobler form of worship, when the world will recognize God in everything, and the best Christians will be the most natural men and women."<sup>2</sup>

A recent critic in the *British Quarterly*, October, 1885, writes, in an article on Shelley, that this poet's hope in death is to be "made one with nature," that "he is one of the great brotherhood of prophets, or interpreters of nature," and in general that, "as this is an age of material science," so "it is an age of nature-poetry," and, of course, of nature-worship. Here is the clue to the whole system.

Modern science, known to be largely anti-religious, is looked upon by many timorous souls as the most dangerous adversary of religion. This, however, is a great mistake. Science addresses itself to the reason and can be combated by reason. It makes at least a show of argument, and can be met with real arguments. If a man does not despise logic as an intellectual jugglery, which only serves to confirm him in his skepticism; if he does not refuse to admit self-evident principles, to follow an argument, and to see a necessary conclusion correctly drawn from certain premises, it

<sup>1</sup> Essays on Criticism, page 158.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. R. L. Rexford, Universalist; sermon at the Church of Our Father, Detroit.

is no difficult task to disprove the groundless assertions and gratuitous assumptions, or to expose the lurking sophistries and fallacies of modern scientists.

The difficulty lies in the fact that man is not a pure intelligence guided by reason alone, but a compound being moved by sentiments, affections and passions. Reason, it is true, should preside as a queen over the inferior faculties; from her throne she should issue her mandates and be obeyed; she should never allow herself to be controlled, nor her vision to be obscured and her judgment to be warped by feeling. Unfortunately, we find that this is not always the case; we know by experience what Cardinal Newman calls the inadequacy of formal argument to convince even when it overpowers. To reach a man's reason, we must approach him through his prejudices, his inclinations, his tastes. To convince him of the true, we must gratify his sense of the beautiful, and appeal to what is human in him. This we can do most effectually by the medium of literature, of art, and of society. These are the ordinary channels of thought, and often exert a far greater influence than abstract reasoning or pure science, upon the religion and the morals of the masses. Now, these are at present enlisted in the service of the new religion of "culture" and of "nature-worship."

I. Literature has been well defined as beautiful human thought and right human feeling, expressed in choice human language. It is an image of a writer's thoughts and feelings, a photograph of his mind and heart. But it is more than this: it is a mirror of a nation's character and genius, of a nation's longings and aspirations, of a nation's virtues and vices, a reflection, as correct as its theology, of a nation's religion and morality.

Literature, it has been well said, is the embodiment of the pervading spirit of an age or country, or of what our German friends tersely call the *Zeitgeist*. "By literature," writes Cardinal Newman, "is meant the expression of thought in language; where by thought I mean the ideas, feelings, views, reasonings, and other operations of the human mind. Literature, then, is of a personal character; it consists in the enunciations and teachings of those who have a right to speak as representatives of their kind, and in whose words their brethren find an interpretation of their own sentiments, a record of their own experience, and a suggestion for their own judgments. A great author . . . is the one who has something to say and who knows how to say it. . . . I ascribe to him as his characteristic gift, in a large sense, the faculty of expression. . . . He expresses what all feel and all cannot say, and his sayings pass into proverbs among his people, and his

phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech."<sup>1</sup>

In this manner the noblest deeds of heroism and the purest acts of virtue are embalmed by literature in the hearts of the people and contribute in a mysterious way both to form the genius of the language and to mould the character of the nation. "What power has been more abiding," asks the writer in the *Dublin Review*, referred to above,<sup>2</sup> "than that of the masterpieces of genius, conceived in accordance with the moral law? They are with us to this day, not only those whose genius was the channel of inspiration and disclosed the counsels of the Most High; but Æschylus, and Homer, and Sophocles, and Pindar and Plato, the Grecian prophets; and Cicero, and Virgil, and Horace, a less glorious constellation, though likely to endure as long. These, too, had a gift from God and employed it, on the whole, as they were meant."

They are with us, let us add, the great classic authors of our own tongue, Shakespeare, and Milton, and Dryden, and Pope, and Addison, and Goldsmith, exhibiting, indeed, occasional signs of human frailty, yet, on the whole, so favorable to virtue and religion that, with a word of caution, they may be safely put into the hands of intelligent men and women.

They are with us, the early writers of our own land, the Bryants, and Longfells, and Irvings, instinct with the moral life and health of a youthful nation, and offering at the shrine of virtue and religion the first-fruits of American genius. So free are most of them from any blame in point of religion—if we except slight prejudices against a venerable Church which they did not know—so free are they especially from any taint in point of morality, that, according to an English critic,<sup>3</sup> they were found from the beginning in English homes, "on every young lady's book-shelf, where Byron was excluded and Tennyson half reluctantly admitted by maternal strictness."

How different the so-called modern school of "culture," whose spirit, according to the testimony of one of its leaders, is reactionary and anti-Christian, whose aim is to depict a world from which God is excluded and in which the moral laws have ceased to exist!<sup>4</sup> In France this school started with Voltaire, the first of the "littérateurs" or "men of culture." Since his day popular French literature has had a blighting influence on religion and morality, bearing with it, wherever it was introduced, the germs of mental and moral disease, and infecting all the fountains of knowledge. There seems to

<sup>1</sup> Idea of a University.

<sup>2</sup> *Dublin Review*, July, 1885, page 50.

<sup>3</sup> *British Quarterly*, October, 1885, article, "American Poets," etc.

<sup>4</sup> *Dublin Review*, July, 1885, p. 48.

be in the very language a sort of contagion, that makes it particularly liable to breed pestilence among the people. Let us not be misunderstood. We do not yield, we trust, to any one in our admiration for the noble Catholic nation, with whose past exploits every page of history is luminous, nor in our appreciation of the beautiful tongue which was at one time, by universal consent, the language of cultivated European society. We know well that French was long the most common vehicle of Catholic thought and Catholic asceticism. We know well, as a learned English author has said, that "the giants of contemporary French literature, such as Châteaubriand, Gratra, Autran, Laprade, Montalembert, Dupanloup, and Lacordaire, have all been Catholics."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, with the same author, we must admit that "the principal writers in vogue in France, such as Sainte-Beuve, About, Sardou, and Alexandre Dumas, are all anti-Catholic in sentiment and feeling," and that "their works are deeply tinged with immorality." Yet these are the writers translated into English and most commonly read.

There is not one of the whole French school of "culture" whom, on the authority of reliable witnesses, a person can read without blushing and feeling disgraced. George Sand's writings, according to Lord Acton, are simply ignominious, Flaubert and Zola are utterly abominable, Theophile Gautier revolts from everything that in civilized countries has been called decent, the whole company of realistic romancers not only inculcate Atheism, but are unutterably vile and obscene.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is the writings of these men that constitute the popular literature of France, and create the popular sentiment.

Among the English speaking races the new school of "culture" is comparatively recent. It is not indigenous to the soil. Nevertheless, the sprig brought to England from across the Channel is already producing bitter fruit. Our own men of "culture," if less openly atheistical and less repulsively immoral than the French, are certainly more hypocritical and dogmatic. Unless you subscribe to their tenets, they tell you, like Carlyle and Emerson, that the highest sense, the "intuitive" principle "is not developed at all" in you, and stigmatize you as wholly "uncultured and un-æsthetic."

Strange to say, with all our boast of intellectual freedom, there are those among us who submit meekly to this dogmatizing, and believe that no one can think who has not studied Matthew Arnold and Emerson; that no one can write who has not read George Eliot and Swinburne. Emerson tells the "cultured" men and

<sup>1</sup> Henry Bellingham, M.A., M.P., *Social Aspects of Catholicism and Protestantism*.

<sup>2</sup> *Dublin Review*, *supra*.

women who assemble season after season at Concord: "I do not know what arguments are in reference to any expression of thought. I delight in telling what I think; but if you ask me how I dare say so, I am the most helpless of mortal men." He tells them: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen, and philosophers, and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. . . . Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day."<sup>1</sup> At least this is his teaching as formulated in his writings.

And those "cultured" men and women admire his teaching and love to call him the "master." They refuse to sit with the fishermen of Galilee at the feet of the Redeemer; they discard the revelation of the Bible as not sufficiently advanced; they ridicule the inspiration of the Jewish prophets as not conformable to modern thought. Yet they sit at the feet of Ralph Waldo Emerson; they accept his dreams and conceits as the gospel of enlightenment; they reverence his dicta as oracles of wisdom. Religion of some kind men will have; revelation of some kind they will believe; inspiration of some kind they will admit—if not the inspiration of heaven, at least the inspiration of so-called genius too often erratic, unbalanced, and unsound.

Emerson tells those "cultured" men and women: "The true Christianity is a faith in the infinitude of man,"—man's mind "is the only almighty giver in part and in infancy,"—"his thought is the universe." He tells those "cultured" men and women that he cannot distinguish the clouds from himself:

"The clouds are rich and dark, the air serene,  
So like the soul of me, what if 'twere me?"

And those "cultured" men and women believe him and think that they, too, are the clouds, the universe, the almighty giver, endowed with infinitude, the nature-God, whom they must worship. Was there ever such an exhibition of insanity outside of a madhouse? The writer of this paper is well acquainted with an unfortunate inmate of a lunatic asylum—perhaps he ought rather be called fortunate, because he is happy in his delusion—who fancies that he is God the Creator, and spends his days in making the universe over again. He experiences a difficulty, however, with regard to one animal. He cannot make up his mind whether he should make it a biped or a quadruped. As soon as he has resolved this difficulty to his own satisfaction, the face of the world will be renewed. The realization of this difficulty seems to indicate that there is at least one sound spot in his mind. Mr. Emerson experienced no such diffi-

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mr. Ware.



culty; his "mind was the only almighty giver"; his "thought was the universe"; and he was continually creating it for himself and his adorers. And this is called philosophy!

Emerson tells those "cultured" men and women: "If a man claims to know and speak to you of God, and carries you back to the phraseology of some old and mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not." "The faith that stands on authority is no faith." "The height, the deity of man is to be self-sustained, to need no gift, no foreign force." "Free should the scholar be—free and brave." "No laws can be sacred to me but that of my nature" (*i.e.*, of the nature-god, of whom I am a part, an incarnation). "The highest virtue is always against the law." "Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong, what is against it . . . if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil." "In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended." (Humility used to be looked upon as the foundation of "all the virtues.") "This one fact the world hates: that the soul *becomes*; for that forever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside." And this is the religion, this the morality practised by the school of "culture"!

Such are the principles propounded by the "master," disguised and tricked out by the disciples in all the ornaments of a polished style, and devoured by the young and the old as polite literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson has been quoted even by prelates and divines without a word of disapproval; George Eliot has been spoken of as "the most effective preacher of morality England has seen these fifty years"; and her writings have been known to grace the shelves of a girls' library in a convent school, before their tendency was discovered.

Yet the aim of the whole school of "culture" is the same, from Matthew Arnold with his austere Atheism, down to Swinburne with his polished sensualism. One and all, they insinuate that there can be no god except nature, and that nature should be the object of supreme worship. These are the most formidable adversaries of religion and morality—far more dangerous than the infidel philosopher and scientist. Ingersoll may rave against God; Huxley may degrade man to the level of the brute. There is no charm in their blasphemies for the virtuous soul, no argument in their madness for the sound mind; and pernicious as their doctrines are, they are not apt to meet with much favor, unless they are presented under the bewitching form of literature.

II. What has been said of literature is equally true of art; because, like literature, it appeals to the sentiments, affections and

passions of the human heart. It speaks a language of its own, silent, indeed, and mysterious, but as captivating as words and often far more effective.

It is not the writer's purpose to descant upon the nature of art, upon the ideal that it must copy, or even upon the religious feeling that must underlie all true art. He does not presume to improve upon the learned lectures to which many of his readers have listened, and the able articles which they have read in the latest numbers of some of our best magazines. But taking for granted that there is no art without some ideal, without some archetype and mental model or pattern, and that religion has always furnished the highest ideals, prompted the grandest works of art, and inspired the noblest efforts of genius, he will endeavor to show that the irreligious spirit of the age has worked out its own ideals and impressed its features upon the productions of modern art.

Paganism was unable to raise art, as expressive of religious sentiment, to its highest perfection. For, if the ideal is imperfect and defective, the form under which that ideal is expressed must of necessity be imperfect and defective. Now, this ideal the Pagan artist always drew from some one of the many divinities whom he looked upon as endowed with the privilege of immortality, but in all else little better than man, subject to the same passions and animal instincts as the lowest of the human species. Nevertheless, as long as Pagan Greece had some external reverence for its gods, art flourished under the protection of religion and in return helped to keep up the semblance of religion. Olympus was not so far from the thoughts of many an honest Pagan as heaven is from the thoughts of some half-hearted, nominal Christians. God was an abiding reality for him, and false as was his conception of the divine nature, it had an effect on his daily life.

Christian art was from its nature a confession of faith. Its only study was how it might give glimpses of the spiritual world. Its very first efforts evinced the supernaturalizing influence of Christianity. Paganism had cast the gods from Olympus to surround them with the gross clog of matter; Christianity raised men towards heaven, to invest them with the ethereal subtilty of a spirit. "Those who would realize what it is to see a spirit," remarks Mrs. Jameson, "must gaze upon Fra Angelico's risen Saviour."

A high authority has expressed the same idea by saying that classicalism, or the old Greek school, believed in its gross mythology, and its works were as material as its creed; that mediævalism, or the Christian school, believed in its symbolical Christianity, and its creations were as spiritual as its faith; but that modernism, or the school of the Pagan Renaissance, believes in neither, and

its art, like its religion, is a mere negation. We need only add that, in our day, modernism in art has itself evolved into a new religion. The school of "culture" believes in nature-worship, and its productions are as sensual as nature after the fall.

Modern genius makes the mere animal representation of the "human form divine";<sup>1</sup> it "deifies physical loveliness"; it delights in what Matthew Arnold himself has described as "the sensuous tumult of the Renaissance"; it aims at taking the heart captive by awakening debased and prurient sentiment, and asks us to admire its works under pain of being thought "uncultured."

Now, as a well known and much esteemed non-Catholic professor wrote last fall, when the Committee of the Exposition in St. Louis had excluded certain pictures from the Gallery of Fine Art: "There should be no difference of opinion as to the impropriety of publicly displaying pictures of scenes, actions, and sentiments from which all right-minded people strive to shield their sons and daughters. . . . The canons of high art are not always to be imported from Paris. During the past summer it has been my privilege to inspect the exhibitions of living artists, not only at Paris, but in Florence, Munich, Dresden, and London, and nowhere out of Paris did I see any particularly objectionable pictures. Those in Dresden, where there were many of a high order of merit, were strikingly free from blemishes of the character we are considering."

In Paris the "cultured" artist, as well as the "littérateur," no longer hides his real motive. What William Samuel Lilly wrote of Zola, the novelist, is equally true of the cultured artist. He prides himself on knowing how to satisfy the needs of the "bête humaine." "Of what? does the astonished reader ask. We answer soberly, of the *bête humaine*. In Zola's view man is a beast; all men are essentially ignoble and unclean, though education may varnish them over. . . . The *New Democracy* are a collection of *bêtes humaines*, who know that they are human beasts and do not pretend to be anything else, who are well aware that the old religious conceptions which regard them as something else, are cunningly devised fables." Such is the naturalistic evolution. "The visible, when it rests not on the invisible (whether in art or in literature), becomes the bestial. . . . It leaves of him (man) nothing but the *bête humaine*, more subtle than any beast of the field, but cursed above all the beasts of the field."<sup>2</sup>

The authorities we have quoted are, we think, unexceptionable. They are intelligent, fairminded men, who know whereof they speak and are not likely to be carried away by prejudice. But as there is, perhaps, in many of us a latent disposition to identify what

<sup>1</sup> "Religious Feeling in Art," *Month*, for January, 1886.

<sup>2</sup> London Tablet, August 22d, 1885.

is French with what is Catholic, and to regard a disparagement of French art almost as a disparagement of Catholic morality, it will not be amiss to add the authority of the distinguished French Abbé, Joseph Roux, whose "Pensées," recently published in book-form, have elicited the praise even of the bitterest enemies of religion, in France and elsewhere, for their depth and their just appreciation of the subjects which he treats. Contrasting ancient Greek and modern French art, he writes: "Ancient art clothed the human body with chastity and majesty; modern art unclothes even the nude. It is an unchaste, sometimes an impudent art. Athens poured a soul over the body; Paris spreads a body over the soul. The Greek statue blushed; the French statue calls forth blushes."

The school of "culture" among us may be somewhat less shameless than in France, but its art-principles are the same. "Already," as one of our daily newspapers remarked in a well-reasoned article, last fall, "we see the effects of this bastard art in shop-windows, where paintings, engravings and photographs are occasionally displayed which, if offered for sale in small copies upon the street, might make the vender liable to arrest."<sup>1</sup>

We may add: We see the effects in the convenient morality of some of our young art-students, who would fain have us believe that their senses are so sublimated by artistic "culture" as to receive only æsthetic impressions from beholding, studying and copying pictures or objects, "from which all right-minded people strive to shield their sons and daughters." We see the effects in the devotees of "culture," who think themselves obliged to admire everything that comes from Paris, and who take it upon themselves to interpret for us the customs and usages of polite society, to educate the public taste, and, by their example, to give a tone to the community.

III. Extravagant as these pretensions are, polite society seems disposed to regard them with some consideration. It is very yielding and susceptible to outside influences. It readily takes up new theories, and carries them out for the sake of the novelty. It dwells in a fairy-land of speculation, poetry and æstheticism, and often seems somewhat of a stranger amid the bustle and business of real life. It charms the world of imagination down to this world of action, and clothes the ideals of human thought with the tangible forms of living men and women. It acts out what it admires in literature and art. Herein lies the secret of its power over the human heart. "The heart is commonly reached," writes Cardinal Newman, "not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions. . . . Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us."

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<sup>1</sup> St. Louis Republican.

Man is, by nature, a social being; in the company of those who are on the same intellectual and social level with him, he finds his highest and purest natural pleasures. The charm of good manners, the graces of conversation, the magnetism of personal refinement exercise an indescribable fascination over us, and, if we may be permitted to apply the words of the sacred book, "draw us with the cords of Adam." When the tastes and habits of good society are correct and sound, the national life is healthy and vigorous; when they are false and vitiated, the nation seems doomed to inevitable decay.

It is, therefore, of the highest importance to watch over the purity of social life, and not to subscribe, without much caution, to the canons or rules that govern it. Frequently these are not of our own making, any more than the fashions. We are not consulted about them; they are imported from abroad. We are simply told to conform ourselves to them, if we wish to pass for ladies or gentlemen. And, so long as they do no violence to conscience, it may be a mark of good breeding to submit, as gracefully as we can, to their requirements, however arbitrary and unnatural they appear to us.

But, when we are called upon to believe, as Carlyle puts it, that "society is founded on cloth," to subscribe to the "divine idea of cloth," or, in the strong language of Hazlitt, to make dress almost a sacrament—"an outward sign of the inward harmony of the soul"—to hold that "manners are morals," and that "culture is religion," it behooves us, in the interest of our common manhood and womanhood, to enter a vigorous protest against such insane demands.

True, it is not pleasant to be taunted with a want of "culture." But, when "culture" means to recognize what Zola calls the "needs of the *bête humaine*," however varnished over, it is the highest refinement to escape from the contagion. Thus, Paula and Eustochion, under the guidance of Jerome, escaped from the contagion of cultured pagan society, when to mingle in its pleasures meant to offer incense upon the altar of voluptuousness. There is a higher law than that of "cultured" society—the law of right reason and of God. Whatever is not conformable to that law, how fashionable soever it may chance to be, is abominably low and coarse and vulgar.

We may apply to society the remark on art by the learned professor whom we have already quoted: "The canons of good breeding are not always to be imported from Paris." If ever there was a society which made a boast of culture and refinement, it was French society under Louis XIV. and Louis XV. To reproduce in miniature the brilliant circles that gathered at Versailles, to copy

their courtly manners, and even, we are told, to revive the names and the patterns of the costumes worn by them, is the highest ambition of the votaries of modern "culture." For the honor of our country, let us suppose that our "cultured" friends are as ignorant of the historic associations of the persons and characters of those days, as they are proud of their styles of dress and of their "culture." Polished that society undoubtedly was, which flocked to the gorgeous *fêtes* and *carousels* held under the auspices of the *grand monarque*—a very "galaxy of glory and beauty, revolving around one central figure as satellites around their sun."

But, to that bright picture there was a dark side which no art can illuminate. Those "cultured" ladies and gentlemen, though Christians in name, practised the most revolting form of nature-worship. Versailles was the shrine to which the *élite* of French society—excepting only those whom the authority of men like Fénelon preserved from the shameful idolatry—repaired to adore, and to be adored in turn. There was more ceremony there, more abject homage, than in temple of the living God. Men of the first rank deemed it a privilege to wait upon the *grand monarque*, and hand him his royal stockings; ladies made it a matter of etiquette to sacrifice their virtue to the royal pleasure. Nor were they all as penitent as the pale and pensive Louise de la Vallière—the real goddess of the gorgeous temple of nature-worship—of whom we are told that, by "her modesty and humility, in the midst of her erring triumphs (she) drew from all hearts the pardon she had never wrung from her own uncompromising conscience."<sup>1</sup>

Louis XIV. died with ceremony; and the etiquette of "culture" and sin went on increasing, until it culminated, under his ignoble successor, in the apotheosis of the vilest passions. The pagan saturnalia were not more lascivious than the elegant receptions of the French Court. Louis XV. fell a victim to his love of "culture," and died abandoned by all save his two daughters, who had the courage to breathe the poisoned atmosphere of the royal bed-chamber; and the unutterable mass of corruption, once called a king, was hustled into a coffin, smuggled away by a few menials in the dead of night, and consigned, without ceremony or courtiers, to the ready-made grave in St. Denis. With him the *présteige*, attached to the very name of royalty in France, was buried, it would seem, to be resuscitated no more.

Would that Louis XVI. had been allowed to redeem, by his simple habits, the sinful extravagances of his predecessors, and Marie Antoinette to continue playing at shepherdess, and making the groves of Arcadia ring with her innocent peals of laughter! It was too late. The fatal handwriting was upon the wall at

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic World, October, 1872, "Versailles."

Versailles, as it was upon the wall of Balthasar's banquet-hall; nor was there need of a Daniel to decipher its mysterious meaning. The doom was sealed; and the sentence has been executed down to our day with unrelenting rigor. The end is not yet. When shall it come? Who will dare predict? This much is evident to the impartial student of history, that excessive material civilization and luxury are responsible for the crimes and miseries which have poured, like avenging floods, over beautiful France. There is more than a chronological relation between the "culture" of Louis XIV., the blasphemies and ribaldry of Voltaire,—who was among the principal promoters of the sinful splendors of Versailles,—the ravages and indecencies of the first Revolution, the murders and sacrileges of the Commune, and the war now systematically waged against the Almighty by the infidel Republic of Grévy.

Infidelity in France is not something negative, as it often seems to be among us. It amounts to a diabolical hatred of God and of His perfections. "Écrasez l'infâme" was its watchword of old; "Dieu, c'est l'ennemi" is its watchword now. Whence the virulence which distinguishes this mental epidemic in France, and makes it so much more fatal than in other lands? To the writer it has sometimes occurred, that the answer to this question might be found in the very excellence of the gifts of nature and of grace bestowed upon that country, and wantonly abused by the representative and most favored members of society. Do not spiritual writers of the highest authority favor this explanation when they tell us, in the words of the old axiom of the schools, "Corruptio optimi pessima?" Was not Lucifer an archangel before his fall? No wonder, then, that France should be a land of violent contrasts, of strong lights and shades, of heroic virtues and revolting crimes.

But, if we ask further, wherein lies the abuse of the gifts bestowed in so eminent a degree upon France, we shall, probably, have to look for the answer in the worship of nature instead of nature's God. Infidelity among the French is not due, as much as it is among us and our Teutonic cousins, to ignorance, heresy or false philosophy. Of the average French infidel, even more than of the American, the English, or the German, it is true that he "hath said in his heart, there is no God." He is far too clear-headed to say so in his intellect. But he is very prone to say so in his heart. Unless his heart is wholly fixed upon God, it goes astray after creatures, and worships the sensible and the sensuous instead of the spiritual. Hence, to borrow a word of Matthew Arnold's,—whose authority on this subject is of some weight,—the distinguishing feature of French worldliness and false culture is "lubricity." Excepting, of course, devout French Catholics, who are often paragons of angelic purity, Venus nowhere finds more ardent adorers than among the high society of France. What the Catholic

Church and reason agree in condemning as the grossest form of immorality, is so fashionable in the highest circles of France, that, according to the testimony of one who knows, it has come to be called, by a blasphemous perversion of terms, the practice of chastity. It is only necessary to consult the comparative statistics of France and the neighboring countries, given in a recent number of the *Dublin Review*, to see, at a glance, how Heaven is punishing this infraction of its laws in the diminution of her population. Here is the explanation of the rabidness of French infidelity. As the demoniac, possessed by the demon of impurity, when he was brought face to face with Christ, so, too, French infidelity, when it is brought face to face with God, foams and froths, and goes into spasms and convulsions. "God is a spirit, and those who adore Him must adore Him in spirit."

Viewing the present distracted condition of a noble, generous and once happy people, and taught by the logic of events, one is tempted to ask—despite the many old masterpieces of literature, despite the grand monuments of ancient art, despite the high order of Christian culture found, at the present day, among the virtuous elements of French Catholic society—whether it would not be for the good of true civilization and humanity, if French literature, French art and French "culture" were swept promiscuously from the face of God's earth.

There are mothers, and fathers, too,—good, simple souls,—who wonder how it happens that their sons, though educated in Christian schools, have learned to scoff at religion; that their daughters, though nursed like tender plants, have forgotten the modesty which is supposed to distinguish Christian maidenhood. Somehow, when we hear their expressions of surprise, there come back to us, with all the force of first impressions, the words of an infidel French officer, which shocked our ears, some twelve years ago. This officer had a son, just budding into manhood, with the blush of innocence upon his cheek, with the fervor of devotion in his heart. Friends complimented the father upon the brilliant talents of his son, but hinted, at the same time, that the youth would not be likely to follow his father's example, or abandon the strict notions of religion and morality with which he had been imbued at a model Catholic boarding-school. "Oh," replied the officer, in language that shows how coarse the admirers of "culture" can be, "I will knock all that prudery and superstition out of him in two months." And how, think you, kind reader? By introducing him to the "cultured" society of Paris. We have strong reasons to fear that the father's efforts were successful.

Many Catholic children are deliberately exposed, by worldly-minded parents, to similar influences. Yet these parents complain,



of the inefficiency of Catholic education to restrain the excesses of passion ; as if Catholic education meant a perpetual renewal of the miracle wrought upon the youths in the Babylonian furnace, for the special benefit of those who presumptuously throw themselves into the flames. Many children are daily taking lessons in the new school of " culture," and burning incense at the shrine of nature-worship. Yet their parents are astonished that the children learn these lessons. The old family Bible, that formerly lay upon the centre-table, in the sitting-room or parlor, has been replaced by one of the many editions of the new Gospel, by Zola and other prophets of " culture "; the rudely-carved crucifix, that stood upon the mantle, by an artistic statue of a pagan Venus or Cupid ; the sacred prints, that hung upon the wall, by a naturalistic painting of some saint or demi-god of the religion of nature-worship. Children ask what all those objects mean, from which the pure-minded man and woman of maturer years instinctively turn away their eyes ; they learn the " needs of the *bête humaine*," and feel the revolt of passions whose very names the young should not know nor the aged pronounce ; they practise nature-worship far more assiduously than Christianity, and understand infinitely more of the ritual of fashion than of the august ceremonial of their church.

As a consequence, religion comes to be regarded by them as a " respectable adjunct to social usages," consisting mainly in gentlemanly instincts, and to be practised, if practised at all, with a due regard to social "*convenance*." Faith is extinguished, reason clouded, conscience hardened, and all morality summed up in Diderot's maxim, " to follow in everything the cravings of one's heart." In other words, unbridled passions sway the soul, and give for moral resultant what Allies designates as heathenism : " Man, as an animal, will give his body every indulgence in food and other animal pleasures which he can procure ; and, as an animal endued with mind, he will seek no less to satisfy the desires of his mind, such as consist in the cultivation of the affections, in acquiring knowledge, distinction among his fellow men, power over them, whereby he may make them the instruments of his pleasures."

According to all sound philosophy, pagan as well as Christian, it is irrational, and, therefore, criminal, to pursue pleasure for the sake of pleasure ; because the sensible good—the *bonum delectabile*—is designed by the Creator merely as a condiment to give zest to the rational good—the *bonum honestum* ; and, consequently, a life devoted to pleasure, even if it be not sinful pleasure, deliberately frustrates the purposes of the Creator. But the worshippers of nature make as little account of philosophy and right reason as they do of faith and religion. So, far from being ashamed of their

worthless existence, they pride themselves upon it, and, perhaps, they tell you, as they have told the writer, that they wish for a life of enjoyment, short but intense. They remind you forcibly of the threat uttered by the Almighty: "My spirit shall not remain in man forever, because he is flesh." Even before the boy or girl has developed into manhood or womanhood, there is often little left but the form, the hollow shell of humanity. The eyes are without lustre, the cheeks without color, the features without expression, the words without meaning, and, we are almost tempted to say, the body without a rational soul. There is before you a wreck, an intellectual *roué*, a moral *blasé*, "lapped," as a recent writer on Christian art has expressed it, "in asphodel and moly, and making of his being an Æolian harp for the breath of sensuousness to play upon."<sup>1</sup>

Infiltrating from the higher strata of society to the lower, the poison gradually infects every condition, and transforms the hardest races into base Sybarites, whose religion is the idolatry of the senses, whose object in life is the pursuit of animal pleasures.

This process of national deterioration is scarcely perceptible, while it is going on. It is least feared by those who are most affected by it. It is like the transition from day to night; the shadows fall upon us so stealthily, and the eye accommodates itself to the diminished light so gradually, that we are involved in darkness before we are fully aware of it. It is like the decay going on within some luscious fruit; the exterior retains its form and color, long after the canker-worm has eaten out the very heart. It is like the poisonous odors of some tropical flowers; while we are enjoying the scented essences mingled with the air we breathe, we fall into a fatal slumber, perhaps to awake no more.

Observant men of every school of thought deplore the rapid spread of luxury, and give themselves up to the gloomiest forebodings. There are Darwinians, positive in maintaining the gradual evolution of the human race from protoplasm, but equally positive in predicting its gradual deterioration until by its sensual indulgence it has worn itself out, and ends in the total extinction of the species. There are Humanitarians, who look forward with satisfaction to another deluge of barbarism that shall sweep away the effete civilization of modern Europe. There are Republicans, who rest all their hopes upon the social revolutions constantly occurring in such a state of society as ours. The vigorous elements of society, they tell us, perpetually working themselves up from below, will cast off the wasted matter from its surface, even as the agitated billows of the sea cast off the froth and scum. The hardy

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<sup>1</sup> London Month., January, 1886, page 59.

sons of toil will displace the pampered children of luxury, and “the fittest will survive.”

Whatever may be the merit of these peculiar theories, advanced by modern philosophers, they go to show, at least, this much: that the growth of luxury is something alarming to contemplate. If, now, we turn even to the most temperate writers of a very different school from those we have quoted, we shall be told that the signs of deterioration are on every side of us, even where we should least of all expect to find them. Not long ago, they remind us, there were women so prudish that they covered the legs of their pianos with pantalets, and feigned to swoon away if any one called them legs in their hearing. At present, these same women, or their daughters, imagine that they are not refined or attractive, unless they appear in society in such a condition that a man, who keeps a becoming guard over his eyes, dare not look at them; and that their conversation is not “cultured” or fascinating, unless it is racy with what they euphemistically style the “natural,” but what the highest authority condemns in the strongest terms as “flesh and blood—*caro et sanguis*.” They verify, literally, the words of the inspired author: they call good evil, and evil good. Their moral sense is utterly depraved. Physical cleanliness is confounded with moral purity; squalid virtue is decried as immoral, gilded luxury is extolled as highly moral. There are lower depths, into which the votaries of “culture” have fallen; but I care not to sound them to the bottom. Would that those who are gayly dancing upon the brink of the precipice, were to listen to a word of timely warning and retrace their steps! But, perhaps, this is more than we have a right to expect from them; for “the bewitching of vanity obscureth good things, and the wandering of concupiscence overturneth the innocent mind.”

What aggravates the difficulty and the danger in our age is the want of definite religious principles. Without religious principles it is impossible to fix the bounds of morality, to determine when the exaggeration of seeming modesty degenerates into prudery, or the want of genuine virtue becomes lasciviousness. Without religious principles, the customs and usages of cultured society will infallibly end, as they are ending among us, in the grossest sensualism and nature-worship. The only true remedy is to be sought in the salutary restraints imposed by Christianity. As it rescued men from the barbarism of paganism, so it can rescue them from the barbarism of culture. As it reclaims individuals, so it can reclaim society. The task, we admit, is a difficult one. But Christianity has reserved forces that need only be called forth. What is wanted is united, concerted action on our part. The evils which we deplore are the direct effects, not of Atheism in the garb of science

or of rationalism in the disguise of philosophy, but of false culture in the form of literature, of art, and of society.

Men are not tempted to commit mental or moral suicide by an appeal to their reason, but by an appeal to their feelings. They do not covet evil, unless it be presented under the appearance of good. Cleopatra wished to die by the fangs of a viper concealed in a basket of roses; Heliogabalus by a sword of gold; the sentimental young maiden, of whom we read, by a goblet of poison wreathed in her intended wedding-crown. And to borrow an example from a higher authority than profane history, Eve was not tempted to eat the forbidden fruit until she had looked and seen that it was beautiful to behold. It is the fickle heart, the vagrant imagination, the truant senses, which hurry men and nations to destruction.

If, then, we desire to arrest their headlong course, we must not be satisfied with refuting the false principles of a rationalistic philosophy or the assumptions of atheistic science; we must encourage Catholic literature, cultivate Catholic art, and build up a Catholic society.

We must endeavor to make Catholic society what it was made in days past by Thomas More, the martyred premier of England, by Francis Borgia, the sainted duke of Gandia, and what it is made at the present day by those who have remained true to the traditions of the Catholic home: a school of virtue, from which we may return to the privacy of domestic life, not only more refined gentlemen and ladies, but what is infinitely more important, better men and women. This, it seems to us, is the special mission in life of educated Catholics of leisure, who realize that nothing is truly cultured, truly refined, truly æsthetic, truly beautiful, except in so far as it mirrors and reflects the infinite loveliness of God, the prototype, not only of what is true in science, but of what is beautiful in literature, in art, and in society.

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