

To tell the truth, monsieur, it is only after considerable hesitation that I have decided to furnish you these biographical notes that you have requested concerning myself. Upon reflection, the very conception of bovarysm, which is the key-note of my philosophical thought, has decided me. Bovarysm stipulates, as you know, that every being, who has knowledge of himself, conceives himself other than he is. It follows from this that there can be no absolute knowledge of the self by the self. Our ignorance shields our modesty. We can never entirely bare ourselves. The psychological Isis, our intimate reality, remains veiled, as impenetrable to our gaze as the goddess, who, to her Egyptian priests, typifies the identity of reality and essential mystery.

A biography, moreover, is not a portrait; it is only the frame therefor. Such are these notes. In the frame that they form, it devolves upon you to insert—if you so desire—a portrait whose elements you will find in my philosophy. In fact, I believe that the philosopher like the artist—I maintain that philosophy is an art—is entirely revealed in his work.

I was born in Paris, June 2, 1858, in the rue de Verneuil near that " ruisseau de la rue Bac " made famous by the sojourn and regrets of Madame de Staël. My parents and grandparents on both sides were of Parisian birth; and, although, through a more remote ancestry, I belong to various provinces of France—the Périgord, l'Isle de France, la Bourgogne, la Provence—there has been no admixture of foreign blood in my lineage for four generations back, so far as I know. As to residence, my childhood was spent in Paris and in that section of Normandy known as " la petite Suisse normande ". In this picturesque countryside a succession of hills and valleys threaded by tumbling streams insures a variety of soil, where pastures, enveloped in early mists, alternate with cultivated fields, with woods, rocks and great forests of beech, oak and chestnut. In the far distance the sea and the glorious bay of Mont St. Michel are visible. I was physiologically influenced by this distinctive terrain and by the vicinage of the sea—so much so that I have never been able to live without distress in a flat country, and that, when I am residing in an interior town, I feel as though I were shut up in a room without windows. As to social milieu—a blending of both the aristocratic and the bourgeois (I). My grandmother on the paternal side belonged to a Parisian family devoted to the liberal professions, among which figured J. F. Peyron, " peintre du roy et directeur des Gobelins " under Louis XVI.

So much — as Epictetus would say — for what does not depend on myself. But what does depend upon ourselves? Our opinions and our judgments, says Epictetus. What presumption!

What did not depend on me either was that the fortune of my people, when I was still a very young man, became seriously reduced, and I was obliged to concern myself with a career. In the United States, you would especially esteem—and, rightly—the young man, who, in such circumstances, resolutely devoted himself to a

lucrative calling and remade the fortune lost by his family. Now I must confess that I did nothing of the kind. I think—Epictetus to the contrary, notwithstanding—that the decision that had then to be made was also not dependent upon myself. Nietzsche ironically says that we locate our liberty in our strongest instinct ". If I am not free," I thought, " should I not at least seek my most essential self in my strongest instinct? ". Following this clue, I clearly recall the despotism of an instinct operating in the Freudian manner, on the threshold of the unconscious, and, which, before I knew exactly what I wanted, determined my decisions without any concern for the considerations or motives dictated by what might be termed " common sense " or " practical reason ". It was indeed in this instinct that I was constrained to recognize my more veritable, my more fundamental self on that day when I realized that the impulses of the instinct were confounded with my voluntary and premeditated desires, and when I deliberately approved in the present all that it had accomplished spontaneously in the past.

Theophile Gautier said: " I am a man for whom the exterior world exists ". " I am a man," thought I, " for whom the metaphysical world exists — a man concerned with making for myself a coherent representation of the ensemble of existence, and with establishing my personal relation therewith ". But such an enterprise necessitates secluded meditations supported by one's whole vitality. I see now that my secret instinct had been concentrating on the task to prepare me for this very solution. I recall that in my early childhood, whenever problems concerning either my sensibility or will arose, this secret instinct intervened on every occasion when the possibility of my pursuing this subjective career was jeopardized. So it was at this critical juncture in my life. I was constrained to select a career of such a description that, while earning a living, I would be free to pursue the meditations indispensable to self-expression, although, at the time, I did not know exactly what turn it would take. I entered then the Ministère des Finances at a time when the work of the bureaux still left some leisure to those with outside interests, provided such persons had no administrative ambitions. Such was exactly my case; and it was during my twenty-five-year connection with the Ministère that my particular vocation took shape, and that, for the secret domination of an instinct, was soon substituted the clear knowledge of what that instinct intended.

I do not mean to say that at this time I did not participate in the ordinary human joys and sorrows. Such a detachment has, in my opinion, nothing in common with a philosophy whose device might well be " nihil humani alienum ". (I) But the instinct that guided me — of which I was gradually becoming aware—kept me from any commitments by which social conformity would have entrapped me and exercised an influence on the orientation of my self-expression, of which I still did not know all of the exigencies. To illustrate. During this epoch, a marriage would have exposed me to the suggestions of a new social milieu; so too would have

membership in any political party, or a connection with any literary group or school, with any journal or review, whereby I should have to adopt the opinions of a clientèle or of a class.

Six years elapsed, during which, in notes and in essays not written for publication, I gave a body to the meditations which, amidst diversions however distracting, never ceased to haunt me — although often interrupted.

I was about thirty-six years of age when I began to embody my meditations more explicitly in articles for reviews and in books. At this epoch I became associated with the REVUE BLANCHE, in which appeared a series of articles entitled " L'Introduction à la Vie Intellectuelle ". These have not as yet been published in book form; but I attach a great importance to them on account of the implicit orientation that has ever been my guide. I quitted the REVUE BLANCHE in 1898, the celebrated Dreyfus affair having placed me in the opposite camp to that occupied by the directors and the principal editors of that review.

It was then that I joined the staff of the MERCURE de FRANCE, whose code was absolute freedom of expression — a sine qua non (I) for me. It was in the Mercure that appeared in 1899 the series of studies which were later incorporated in my first book, " De Kant à Nietzsche ", published in 1900. For five years I served as philosophical critic on the Mercure, meanwhile contributing a number of other studies. During this Parisian period, my works "Le Bovarysme " and " La Fiction universelle " were also published.

I married in 1901. At the close of 1903 I quitted Paris and, having been appointed a collector of taxes, I dwelt successively at Condé sur Escaut in the north of France; Dieppe, where I was back again by the sea; and, finally, Roanne, where I was located when the war surprised me.

After my departure from Paris, my biography takes on more the character of a bibliography, the latter being the measure of the time and effort which I could spare from other pressing duties. It will suffice to state that " Nietzsche et la Réforme Philosophique ", " Les Raisons de l'Idéalisme ", " La Dépendance de la Morale " et " l'Indépendance des Mœurs " are identified with my sojourn at Condé sur Escaut from 1904 to 1910. " Comment Naissent les Dogmes " was published in 1912, while I was at Dieppe. " Le Génie de Flaubert " (1913) was my last work before the war. I was then at Roanne, where I was for six years obliged to suspend practically all writing for publication, but not, however, all metaphysical speculation. After the first three months of the war, bringing to me both anguish and a kind of sublime fascination, routine supervened; but the tasks that overwhelmed me claimed my almost undivided attention. As a result, subconscious philosophic activity — constantly grazing the threshold of the conscious mind and there being driven back on itself — acquired an abnormal, a dolorous violence. This conflict lasted until the beginning of 1920, when I recovered my definite liberty. But I was then assailed with such force by the reflections and thoughts that had been repressed for six years

that I found it difficult – and still do – to choose among them or to arrange them in order of priority.

Under these conditions, I contributed articles to the *Mercure*, the *Revue philosophique*, and the *Monde nouveau*, and wrote my books, " *La Philosophie Officielle et la Philosophie* " (published by Alcan in 1922), and " *La Vie Mystique de la Nature* " (published by Cres in 1924).

In 1925, "Les Editions du Siècle", a new publishing house, having requested me to undertake the editing of a series of works on intellectualistic philosophy, I accepted the offer and inaugurated the series with my work, " *La Sensibilité Métaphysique* ".

This biography would be incomplete if I should fail to call especial attention to the series of seven studies that I contributed to the *Revue philosophique* during the period between 1908 and 1914. These afford the material for a contemplated work, stressing the difference between my conception of philosophy as being an effort of the "instinct de connaissance" to express itself, and the generally current conception that philosophy's primary concern is with morals.

In this projected work, I shall maintain the thesis that the time has now come for an entire shift of the philosophical point of view. The ancient philosophical quest was preoccupied with an inquiry into what life must be in order that it be good, and into what men ought to do to make it so. These philosophies assumed that life was evil, but that it could be ameliorated and brought to perfection by human intervention. This assumption involved the further one that men – if they chose – could become other than they were, and that they could thus change life also.

All such philosophies, as I have remarked, are, as a matter of fact, systems of morals. Now it does not appear that, so far, morals have been a success. Neither is it at all evident that there has been any amelioration of spiritual life. "Moral philosophies" have had, for centuries, a field to themselves and the heartiest public support; yet they have succeeded in demonstrating nothing other than their presumption and futility.

Philosophy for me has an entirely different signification; its only concern is with knowing. Things are what they are; we can change nothing; but we can compose a representation of the way by which things are brought about. The spectacle thus presented is one of prodigious interest to those in whom the intellectual instinct has been developed. Moral judgments, always fallible, decide what is good and evil into good; but they will never succeed in changing evil into good. Intellectualistic philosophy can never change the world; but it inquires if it is not possible to discover within ourselves a point of view from which the world escapes the handicap of moral judgments. The esthetic sense gives access to this point of view, whence good and evil appear under the sole aspect of beauty. All true artists have attained this viewpoint. The philosophy of the intellectual instinct concludes that the world is justified as a phenomenon of beauty.

As the above notes did not touch upon some points that I considered of vital interest to those who might become interested in the doctrines of M. De Gaultier, I propounded some further queries to him, which, with his replies thereto, follow:

Query: Please indicate the nature of your religious training and family influences during childhood. If strictly orthodox, how did you escape there from ?

Answer: Catholic and necessarily orthodox. My family was a pious one. There are no sects in Catholicism as there are in Protestantism; there is no choice; one must accept all the teachings and dogmas or reject them all. When the chain of dogmatism is broken, the mind acquires its absolute independence at once. In my case, this break occurred in my sixteenth year. At the same time, I broke with all theism, with all messianism. I was attending a religious college (Stanislas) when this internal event occurred. No external influences; a question of sensibility rather than reason. It appeared to me that I must choose between God and myself. I did not hesitate long. It was the happiest event of my intellectual life; it has brought a sure serenity that has never failed me. Nevertheless, I am glad that I had an early religious training. I have always observed that there was something lacking in the sensibility of those who have missed such a training. Furthermore, in my case as in Nietzsche's, it was by virtue of the sensibility developed in me by religious culture that I broke with all religious ideas. Like Nietzsche again, I have utilized this sensibility to the limit of its logic.

Query: Please specify the writers that exercised the greatest influence on your thought, in the order that they influenced you. I am particularly anxious to learn the priority as between Flaubert and Nietzsche.

Answer: Schopenhauer is the only philosopher that has profoundly influenced my thought. He initiated me into the hindouistic and pantheistic conception of the world. He performed for me the inestimable service of weaning me from all dualistic, deistic and creationistic occidental philosophy, which to me is as unintelligible as it is fanciful.

I have the greatest admiration for Flaubert. But I do not think that I would have discovered the bovarysm of his characters, had I not already formed the conception of bovarysm in its metaphysical and universal significance before becoming acquainted with his works. What is admirable in Flaubert is that this conception is implicit in his work as an involuntary, spontaneous, tyrannical artistic vision.

Nietzsche has been one of the most beautiful contacts of my life. But he, like myself, is indebted to Schopenhauer for the initial orientation of his own thought. However Nietzsche's philosophy and mine may differ from that of Schopenhauer, he is our common ancestor. My philosophical conceptions were already too definitely formed for Nietzsche — when I came to know him — to

exercise any considerable influence over them. But no mind has been more truly akin to mine; he ended my solitude.

Among the writers who have influenced me, I should not forget La Rochefoucauld, who initiated monism in psychology. He contributed especially to my conception of psychological bovarysm. I should also mention *The IMITATION of JESUS CHRIST*, Erasmus's *IN PRAISE OF FOLLY*, and Spinoza.

Query: Am I not right in assuming that you do not subscribe to Nietzsche's doctrine of "hardness", patterned on the impersonal ruthlessness of nature, and that you reject his fancy of the "eternal recurrence"?

Answer: I do reject the doctrine of the "eternal recurrence"; so, eventually, did Nietzsche. His "be hard" is a moral regimen for those who are too "soft" — his own case. From the national point of view, it is also the case of France. Unfortunately, we have not adopted this policy; we do not even know how to utilize it. It is a great misfortune for us and for the world, which will fall under the domination of more egotistica and brutal races. The dawn of a more kindly, more "spirituelle" civilization will thus be retarded, or, possibly, forever sidetracked.

Query: As I understand it, your early articles on the intellectual life (in the *Revue Blanche*) constitute both a — precis of your philosophical orientation and a call to your intellectual kin scattered over the world. Is there any prospect that these articles will be published in book form in the near future?

Answer: Inside of a year they will probably be issued in a limited edition de luxe. An important work, but rather brief.

Query: It appears to me that your three works of greatest interest to both philosophers and artists are "*l'Introduction à la Vie Intellectuelle*"; "*De Kant à Nietzsche*"; and "*La Vie Mystique de la Nature*". Do you concur in this estimate?

Answer: Outside of "*l'Introduction à la Vie Intellectuelle*", I regard the following four books as of equal importance in expressing my philosophical attitude:

"*De Kant à Nietzsche*"; "*Le Bovarysme*"; "*Les Raisons de l'Idéalisme*"; and "*La Sensibilité Métaphysique*". You are perhaps right in including "*La Vie Mystique de la Nature*". It should reach a larger public, perhaps, than my other works, as it was designedly a non-technical diversion intended for those interested in general culture. THE END .----