IMPRESSIONS OF TH. BENTZON

NOVELIST AND TRANSLATOR OF AMERICAN AUTHORS.

Her Descriptions of Manners of French Society—The Popularity of Foreign Authors in Paris—Influence of the American Young Girl on the Young Girl of France—Relative Success of Various Novelists of the United States in Gallic Dress.

Two French authors, idealists in art of fiction; cosmopolitan, one by force of atavism and constant, the other by literary filiation from Stendhal and Taine and hesitating, Th. Bentzon and Paul Bourget, compared notes of their American impressions recently, and a symbolist poet who heard them wrote the following sketch on his book of agenda, the covers of which are in mouse-colored sealskin, with silver corners:

"Poets are as butterflies at night, attracted by the light. At the hour when the setting sun dresses the sky in pink and gilt, they saw small, lozenge-shaped panes that it inflamed in their leaden frames, and they went to the flame. They looked through the panes and saw the resplendent purple of fruits, the graceful forms of golden amphoras, the sparkling purity of silver vessels at a table set for a festival, and they were charmed by the spectacle. Above this room suddenly a window was opened and there appeared the head of a young girl, enchanting as Phœbe when she breaches the free air of the forest. The rays of gold that fell on her hair made for her face a celestial diadem. A smile fluttered on her lips, and they saw that she was a child worthy of the adoration of angels."

"How would Mme. Bentzon explain this allegory?" asked somebody.

The poet replied: "Mme. Bentzon will tell you that she greatly admires America and that it is the land of the future."

Therese de Solms, Mme. Blanc, in literature "Th. Bentzon," had Danish forefathers, an English governess, and, by the official situation of her stepfather, the Comte d'Aure, the opportunity precious to a writer, desirous of reflecting in books the manners of her time, of knowing intimately the people who gave to French society its tone in the time of the Second Empire. In these days Octave Feuillet was the Court novelist, Prosper Merimee signed himself "Fou de S. M. l'Imperatrice," and Princess Mathilde, who wore as a brooch a bee chiseled in gold and enameled, found at Pompeii, assembled at frequent intervals in her magnificent drawing room young writers as Gautier, Goncourt, Banville, and others whose equivalents of to-day meet—alas! the times are different—in pessimistic rooms of cafes.

"Are the new writers sympathetic to you?"

Mme. Bentzon replied that she admired their talent. "But they are not always very clear to me," she said. "I am vaguely impressed by the splendor of 'L'Apres-Midi d'un Faune.' I cannot say that I quite understand it.

"Their work," she continued, "has the suggestiveness of English poems, not the classic precision of the French. Then, they are tormented by a sensual obsession."

"They derive this from the realists, do they not?" was asked.

"Or from their mode of life," she replied. "I do not mean that their mode of life is as they pretend. Their viciousness is pure fanfaronade. But they hold the commonplace and the conventional in such horror that they go to the other extreme of not being even slightly in touch with the society of their epoch."

One might easily divine this objection of Mme. Bentzon, for her affable and superb profile, her limpid blue eyes, her mouth, the lines of which are firm and expressive of exquisite benevolence, and every shade that thoughts cast on her sensitive features are gracefully aristocratic. One cannot look at her and not be reminded of the idea expressed by Arthur Sherburne Hardy, that the French society is admirable because the French woman is thoroughly companionable with man. Her influence is elevating because one may talk with her. Twenty or twenty-five volumes that Mme. Bentzon has written may be chosen at random as evidence of the particular charm of that society. They have its fineness of conscientious observation, its delicacy in sentiment, its elegance in tone. "Un Remordis," "Tony," and "Constance" were laureated by the French Academy. Albert Lynch has lent the charm of his delightful illustrations to the imperishable charm of "Jacqueline," "Un Divorce," "La Vocation de Louise," "Une Vie Manquee," "Le Violon de Job," "Chatunent," "La Grande Sauliere," "L'Obstacle," and "Tete Folle" have in their sincerity the fragrance of simple, pretty, exquisitely delicate flowers. "Genevieve Delmas," written for young people, is an inexpressively touching example of tender, motherly solicitude.

"Is the society which you have described undergoing a change?" the interviewer asked.

"The young girl in France shall be transformed by the influence of the American young girl. The latter's example has quite enchanted French society," Mme. Bentzon replied. "The type of the young French girl perfectly described by Paul Bourget in 'Terre Promise,' will disappear. It will be well, because it is not right that marriage should be a contract made in ignorance of one of the interested parties. French novels reflected a sentiment of this wrong and various phases of its inevitable effects, but young girls in France may read only English novels.

"There are many things which I would not have understood as well as I do now if I had not come to America," Mme. Bentzon continued, "and I realize that I should have come long ago. I am doing my utmost to regain the time that I have lost."

"Are you favorably impressed?" was asked.

"Very," she replied. "I do not admire everything, but I am fifty-three and I carry a weight of Old World prejudices. I am much interested in the work that American women have done. I saw in Boston organizations not for charity, but for humanity, that amazed me, and there is at Galesburg, in Illinois, a college where the two sexes receive education in common, that I highly esteem. I intend to travel in the West, in the South as far as New-Orleans, and to stay for two weeks on a farm in the interior of Arkansas."

Mme. Bentzon has described in The Century her first meeting with George Sand, her impressions of the woman who, then, was a grave adviser and writing profoundly studious novels in controversy with Feuillet, her estimate of the writer whom fashion at present disclaims, and her interesting essay is grateful to George Sand for her encouraging letters, but Mme. Bentzon had inherited a cosmopolitanism which Mme. Sand could not have inspired. It is to this cosmopolitanism that French literature owes the excellent translations of American novels and the intelligently critical essays on the works of American authors which Mme. Bentzon has written. In France, before her American work began to appear in the Revue des Deux Mondes, only Cooper and Poe, among the American authors, were known. Ernest de la Bedolliere had made the former popular in the large quarto illustrated editions which Barba published in parts at an insignificant price. Poe had been admirably translated by Baudelaire.

The popularity of foreign authors in France is merely relative; but Poe, who was ardently admired by all artists, and had impressed on a new generation of poets the willfulness of his aesthetics, had a smaller number of readers than Dickens, Heine, Turgenieff, Dostoiewski, or Tolstoi. In 1852 one could buy at the publisher's the "Histoires Extraordinaires," which bore the imprint of 1875, and none of the original editions of the "Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires," the "Voyage d'Arthur Gordon Pym," and the rest, were ever scarce. Mme. Bentzon's work drew Poe into the popularity of American authors that she recommended.

She began with an essay on Walt Whitman, which attracted much more attention than she could expect. Whitman has much influence on the younger poets of France. Mme. Bentzon was not absolutely enthusiastic; there were many reservations in her praise, but her visit to America makes her say: "I will rewrite my essay on Walt Whitman." She is surprised that Poe is not more popular than she finds him in his own country, and wonders if Daisy Miller harmed Henry James. She translated his works and those of Bret Harte, Howells, Bunner, Cable, Crawford, Aldrich, Eggleston, King, and Page. She made known by copious extracts and reviews the works of Emerson and Thoreau, those of Artemus Ward, Mark Twain, and Charles Godfrey Leland, those of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Wilkins, the criticisms and the poems of Edmund Clarence Stedman, the "French Traits" of W. C. Brownell, which she characterizes as the best foreign work that has been written about France. She had an agreeable experience with "Marjorie Daw." She said:

"'Marjorie Daw' came to me with a letter, signed Ralph Keeler, recommending it as a work of an author that I should regret to ignore. The writer said not a word of his profession or of his friendship for Aldrich. I learned these from Mr. Aldrich after I had translated the book. I greatly admired Ralph Keeler's silence about himself."

"Which ones of your translations of American authors were the most popular?" asked the interviewer, with an irresistible passion for measuring talent by measure of popularity.

"The works of Bret Harte, then 'The Hoosier Schoolmaster,' then the works of Cable," Mme. Bentzon replied. "But there were successful reviews and essays, which I wrote before translating, in full, works that were a disappointment when they were published. In these cases I did not fail to explain that the fault was the translator's. Cable's 'Bras-Coupe' was a marvelous success with artists. The author owes this principally to Jose Maria de Heredia, the faultless poet of 'Les Trophees.' He read the story, was charmed by it, and, like La Fontaine after reading Baruc, spoke in praise of the work to every person he met."

The conversation turned to plays and players. Mme. Bentzon expressed surprise that the private life of a player her entered as an element in his lack of popularity. "One may praise his art," she said, "and never think of his shortcomings as an individual."

Of the Revue des Deux Mondes she admiringly spoke: "Its director, Ferdinand Brunetiere, is inflexible in his severity," she said, "but those whom he severely censures are intelligent enough to understand that his temperament implies his inflexibility. He is thoroughly praiseworthy and estimable. The disgrace of M. Buloz was great and lamentable, but he squandered only his own fortune; the funds of the Revue were intact. If you mention the work of the Revue on the literature of America, you cannot fail to note the admirable essays which Emile Montégut has written on Nathaniel Hawthorne and on 'The Blithedale Romance.'"

"Are you to write a book on America?" the interviewer asked.

"Yes," Mme. Bentzon replied, unhesitatingly. "It will be a book of notes on things seen and felt, without comment and without a conclusion."

Americans may be persuaded in advance that it will be vivid, alert, thoughtful, sincere, and charming in style.

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