

# THE WEEK.

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## THE THOUGHTS OF THE ABBE ROUX.\*

"Of making many books there is no end." What would the writer of these words have said, if he had lived in the nineteenth century? Who reads them? we ask, as the eye passes drearily and hopelessly over the weekly columns of advertisements. With what advantage to mankind might three-fourths of the volumes published be instantly converted into waste paper!

All this is true, and it has been felt and said many hundreds of times. And yet there is another side of the question. If many books appear which have no proper right to exist, there are also gems "of purest ray serene" that have never been brought out of their "dark unfathomed caves;" and there are Miltons or at least men of real genius and great power of expression whose voices are never heard by their fellow men beyond the "village" in which they dwell.

Such was very near being the case with the author of the volume now before us. The Abbé Joseph Roux is more than fifty years of age, and, although he has had lying in his desk for years the manuscript of "thoughts" not unworthy to rank with the very best of the kind produced by the writers of a nation which has always excelled in this kind of composition, it is only by a sort of accident that they have seen the light. In fact a considerable part of the MS. was lost some time ago at a railway station in France, containing, as the editor thinks, some of the author's best work, now for ever irrecoverable.

Joseph Roux was born in 1834, and was early destined for the priesthood. When he left the seminary, he was recognised by his Bishop as a man of unusual powers; but, whatever the reason may be, he has found hardly any opportunity for their display. For fifty years he lived unknown, and it was a surprise to himself and to his neighbours when some German men of science began to translate and comment upon some of his contributions to Limousin philology. "It is a profound truth," says M. Mariéton, in his introduction to these *Pensées*, "that no one is a prophet in his own country. The more lofty spirits are like those stars which may disappear from our horizon before a ray of their light has reached us." The writer quoted brought M. Roux into notice by publishing some portions of his philological studies in two French reviews, and it was through this circumstance that he came to introduce the present volume of thoughts to the world.

The earlier of these thoughts, M. Mariéton tells us, were written with a view to publication more or less remote. It was only when there seemed little prospect of realising this expectation that the author gave way to the guidance of his own subjectivity, and his editor thinks that his finest thoughts are the outcome of this. We would gladly dwell upon the excellent introduction to the volume; but we shall perhaps contribute more to

the information of the reader if we offer some extracts from the author's own thoughts, premising that it is impossible to give these in English without sacrificing much of their charm, perhaps the principal part of it.

M. Roux begins with a "prelude" upon Thoughts and Thinkers (*Les Pensées et les Penseurs*). How well he understands his predecessors may be seen from his remarks upon the chief of them. He says: "Pascal is sombre, La Rochefoucauld bitter, La Bruyère spiteful, Vauvenargues melancholic, Chamfort acrid, Joubert kind, Swetchine sweet.

"Pascal inquires, La Rochefoucauld suspects, La Bruyère acts the spy, Vauvenargues sympathises, Chamfort condemns, Joubert excuses, Swetchine pities.

"Pascal has a fixed idea, La Rochefoucauld a prejudice, La Bruyère a point of view, Vauvenargues a tolerance, Chamfort a rancour, Joubert an aspiration, Swetchine a hope.

"Pascal refers everything to a madness, La Rochefoucauld to a vice, La Bruyère to a caprice, Vauvenargues to a sentiment, Chamfort to an abuse, Joubert to an ideal, Swetchine to a belief.

"Pascal is profound, La Rochefoucauld penetrating, La Bruyère sagacious, Vauvenargues delicate, Chamfort paradoxical, Joubert ingenious, Swetchine contemplative."

There may be something a little fanciful in these distinctions; but, for the most part, they are not only true but ingenious and indicative of real insight on the part of the writer. We are not sure, indeed, that the most striking portions of the book are not the author's literary criticisms. It is possible that he was of this opinion himself: at any rate the first division of the thoughts is given to literature and poetry. We give some extracts from this section.

"Whoever publishes a work above mediocrity creates for himself a number of friends and enemies known or unknown." "I should define poetry as the exquisite expression of exquisite impressions." "A beautiful language is Latin! I love it passionately (*d'amour*). It has been said of a Latinist that he spoke Latin in his cradle. I learnt Latin at college, but with as much affection as if it had been the language of my father and my mother. I have it not so much in my memory as in my very bones, so to speak. I have long thought in Latin, to speak in French. More than this, my prose and my verse still swarm with Latinisms. . . . Premeditated? No, the gift of grace."

The remarks on the drama are peculiarly excellent, and, particularly in regard to the French drama, display in our judgment more insight as well as more delicacy of taste than those of Schlegel. "The dramas of Shakespeare, of Goethe, of Schiller," he says, "even in translations, even in bad translations, have a wonderful power to attract, transport, excite. In presence of the personages whom they place before us—of their words, their tears, their aspirations, their struggles with others and with themselves, every one recognises himself, and, like the slave in Terence, cries out: *Homo sum; nihil humani a me alienum puto*."

"Calderon. Happy Spain, where an author can write dramas which are decent, Christian, Catholic, devout. Calderon has been able to do this with tranquillity, with simplicity, with sublimity. Would our critics, who forgive the Spanish priest Calderon for having been a dramatic poet, permit a French priest to write religious dramas or melodramas, and have them acted? If he failed, what apish laughter! If he succeeded, what peacock cries!"

"Corneille, Racine. The sun does not enter into his glory at his rising. He must first struggle with the mists below, with the clouds above, but at last he prevails, and comes forth free, splendid. So it was with Corneille, so with Racine. A first bound placed between them and their masters who went before them a wide interval, which soon became an impassable chasm. Their aims being different, and their routes, their obstacles were unlike. Corneille had only to vanquish mediocrities. This is not his glory. His glory is to have grown great by himself without a model. Racine had to overtake Corneille. Without being his like, he was his equal—a supreme triumph!

"Corneille has a countenance austere, a little harsh; his speech grave, a little rough. He is a father whom we respect, a master to whom we submit, with his faults and his qualities. Racine has a caressing voice, an air sympathetic, gracious, sweet. He is a brother, a friend. Corneille lays hold of our mind like a conqueror; Racine plays around our heart,

\* Joseph Roux: *Pensées*. Introduction par Paul Mariéton, Paris, Lemerre, 1886.