

# THE WEEK.

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## THOUGHTS FOR THINKERS.\*

WE have arrived at that period of the year when books are a burden, and "much study is a weariness to the flesh." And yet, to many of us, a holiday without a book would be intolerable, and those productions which are distinguished by the name of light literature are often apt to become very heavy; so that we know not where to turn. We want something that shall give us themes for thought without exacting an amount of labour which we are unable to supply.

We cannot imagine any class of literature that will more perfectly respond to this demand than that which is put forth under the title of *Thoughts*—a kind of writing which is peculiar to no people or language, but in which the French may be said, above all other writers, to have excelled. Of course we have admirable specimens of this kind of literature in Hebrew, such as the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; in Greek, as the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, and the Manual of Epictetus; even in Latin, as the Morals of Seneca, to say nothing of the Confessions of Augustine, and some of the writings of S. Bernard and S. Anselm; in German, as the Monologues of Schleiermacher, the Quiet Hours of Rothe, and the Table Talk of Luther; in English, as the writings of Hales, of Hall, and of Coleridge, especially the Aids to Reflection of the last. But after all, the French are the masters in this kind of writing. Whether the genius of the people has given its form to the language, or the language has moulded the genius of the people—and probably both of these theories have a measure of truth—as a result we have a language unequalled for lucidity and preciseness, the supreme language not only for conversation and oratory, but also for epigram. Let any one attempt to put a number of the terse sayings of the best French thinkers and epigrammatists into another language, and he will be made conscious of the remarkable excellence of that vehicle of expression which is possessed by Frenchmen. And yet there is perhaps no language ever spoken by man so easy to translate, in general, as the French language.

That which Amiel says of the *Pensées* of Joubert is, in a great measure, true of more French writers of this kind of literature: "The merits of Joubert consist in the grace of the style, the vivacity or  *finesse* of the criticisms, the charm of the metaphors. . . . Altogether he is a writer of reflections rather than a philosopher, a critic of remarkable gifts, endowed with exquisite sensibility, but, as an intelligence, destitute of the capacity for co-ordination. . . . It is not that he has no claims to be considered a

philosopher or an artist, but rather that he is both imperfectly, for he thinks and writes marvellously, *on a small scale*. The whole is more subtle than strong, more poetical than profound, and leaves upon the reader rather the impression of great wealth of small curiosities of value, than of a great intellectual existence and a new point of view. . . . He is one of those men who are superior to their works, and who have themselves the unity which these lack."

Although Amiel considered this view of Joubert, whom Mr. Matthew Arnold has made known to the English public, to be somewhat severe, and liable to subsequent modification, he did not, in fact, greatly modify it. Of the *Correspondence* contained in Joubert's two volumes he says: "It has greatly charmed me; it is remarkable for grace, delicacy, atticism, and precision."

Of this kind of literature in general Amiel remarks: "The *pensée* writer is to the philosopher what the dilettante is to the artist. He plays with thought, and makes it produce a crowd of pretty things of detail, but he is more anxious about truths than truth, and what is essential in thought—its sequence, its unity—escapes him." Here we must interpose a remark. A great deal of this is excellent and admirably expressed and widely true. But we must put the great Pascal in a class by himself; and certainly many of these brilliant sentences are entirely inapplicable to him. With this protest we allow M. Amiel to continue. "In a word, the *pensée* writer deals with what is superficial and fragmentary. He is the literary, the oratorical, the talking or writing philosopher; whereas the philosopher is the scientific *pensée* writer. The *pensée* writers serve to stimulate or to popularise the philosophers. They have thus a double use, besides their charm. They are the pioneers of the grand army of readers, the doctors of the crowd, the money-changers of thought, which they convert into current coin. The writer of *pensées* is a man of letters, though of a serious type, and therefore he is popular. The philosopher is a specialist, as far as the form of his science goes, though not in substance, and therefore he can never become popular. In France, for one philosopher (Descartes) there have been thirty writers of *pensées*; in Germany, for ten such writers there have been twenty philosophers." Were we not, then, right in saying that the light literature of thoughtful men must be found in the *pensées*, and that we had better go to France for the best of them?

If we have placed the name of Pascal in the list at the foot of the page, it is not with any thought of recommending this great thinker. That is a stretch of audacity to which even the omniscient editorial mind could hardly attain. We merely want to say that for the ordinary reader the cheap and handy edition of Havet in one volume will be quite sufficient, and is very superior to all the editions put forth before Faugère published the text as Pascal left it. For special students of Pascal, the larger edition of Havet, or the edition of Faugère (when may we expect the long promised edition of the complete works?), and for those who wish to see the very words of Pascal as he spelt them, the beautiful edition of Molinier may be recommended.

The *Pensées* of Joubert, long ago introduced to English readers by Mr. Matthew Arnold, quite deserved perusal, although nearly all that Amiel has said respecting them is perfectly true. Of the Abbé Joseph Roux, in some respects the most remarkable writer of this kind after Pascal, we must treat in a separate paper, and consecrate what remains of the present to the posthumous journal of the late Professor Amiel, of Geneva, from which we have already quoted. Amiel, like a good many Swiss thinkers and writers, has a strong graft of German in his constitution and in his thought. In this respect he resembles his distinguished countryman, Vinet, to whom he often refers, and his contemporary, Scherer, who edited his Journal. Born at Geneva, educated to some extent in Germany, appointed first to the chair of Æsthetics, and then to that of Moral Philosophy in his native city, Amiel was in the superficial sense of the word an incurable sceptic, and was oppressed through all his life by the burden of doubt which he was never able to shake off. For this reason, chiefly, it was that his great abilities never had free play, and he disappointed the expectations which all his friends had formed of his literary achievements.

\* *Pensées de Pascal*, edition of E. Havet, Paris, 1883. *Joubert, Pensées*, 2 vols., Paris. *Amiel's Journal*, translated by Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Macmillan; 1885. *Joseph Roux, Pensées*. Paris, 1886.