IV

THE SPIRIT OF BELGIUM

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I

So much has lately been said and written in praise of Belgium, that a Belgian should make an attempt to be impartial when addressing British readers on the spirit of his own people. As no man's character is understood by those who overlook his defects, so a true account of a nation's spirit must take note of the national shortcomings.

In the inquiries about the Belgian soul, *l'âme belge*, instituted before the month of August 1914, the great variety of the answers has disclosed a variety of views and sentiment quite surprising for such a small community. Sectional feeling pitted the partisans of the French ways and language against those of the Flemish or Dutch, and the supporters of Roman Catholic ideals against those of freethought.

The close unanimity which has suddenly asserted itself under the stress of foreign invasion was not apparent in the days of peace. Still a number of thinkers had tried to give a rational account of our century-old cohesion ; and among those accounts two, that of the historian, Henri Pirenne, and that of the lawyer and man of letters, Edmond Picard, stand out as especially noticeable.

M. Pirenne dwells mainly on Belgium's position between the Latin and Germanic world, and on the close ties of language, of tradition, and of commerce which bind her to both. He concludes that she is called to act as an interpreter of each to the other, and as an agent for the interchange of ideas and experiences between them. These facts are obvious enough, but they are just as true of Switzerland and Alsace-Lorraine, which occupy other regions of the same borderland. We may well wonder whether such an intermediate position would favour the growth of originality and independence. Besides, is it possible to conceive a definite character, individual or collective, that would be founded on such negative data as likeness to two outsiders who are themselves unlike one another ?

M. Edmond Picard's reading of the national spirit, while running on somewhat similar lines,

leads up to more definite conclusions. The power to avoid extremes, to strike a sensible average course, seems to him the fundamental peculiarity of his people. If set against the Frenchman's close logic and the German's heavy method, the Belgian's common sense and mother wit, his avoidance of the pitfalls of subtlety and pedantry, mark him as a shrewd judge of facts and men. The defects corresponding to these qualities have been hit off by the poet Charles Baudelaire, for some time a resident in Brussels, when he wrote that Belgians do their thinking in herds, *ils pensent en bande.* Common sense is apt to descend into commonplace ; and an eye too constantly bent on the obvious is in danger of failing to gauge the heights and depths beyond its immediate range.

All the native historians have been struck by the fact that the gregariousness singled out by Baudelaire as the essential Belgian virtue or vice has moulded the institutions and manners of Brabant and Flanders for centuries. Guilds of artisans and traders, sworn brotherhoods of archers and cross-bowmen, municipal corporations and benches of *scabini*, wielded power and shaped and administered the law. The buildings in which they held their meetings and kept their records, town- and cloth-halls, belfries, and houses of corporations, are to this day the most

noticeable monuments in the cities. Ecclesiastical functions and social pleasure are conducted by clubs and fraternities ; in a word, all national interests, from the humblest to the highest, are managed by organised groups of citizens. This accounts for the party spirit and clannish divisions which have always hidden from superficial observers the fundamental unity of Belgium. It also accounts for the toughness with which the nation can face trials and even apparent disaster : no citizen so humble but he feels and acts as one of the guardians of the national life. Reasoning has no power over such a traditional feeling : its foundations are habit and instinct, and it selects its aims by intuition. It will firmly grasp facts, and rise to heights of anger and joy which transcend the individual's interests, and are rendered possible only by communal exaltation.

II

If we look for a great sample to show us at a glance what can be but imperfectly explained in abstract terms, we shall see that the world has recognised one Belgian as the representative national hero : Peter Paul Rubens, the vastness of whose gifts and achievements can only be realised after repeated visits to the great art

collections of Europe. He defies the prejudices of the partisans of Fra Angelico's somewhat cold purity, and of those of Botticelli's morbid subtlety, and stands out as the spokesman of a healthy and superabundant vitality.

Yet neither of the two sections of modern Belgian thought may claim him wholly ; for he has been a faithful servant of the Roman Catholic Church, by whom he was patronised, as well as a bold interpreter of pagan sensuality. That the painter of the " Descent from the Cross " in Antwerp Cathedral should also have given to the world his drunken Bacchanalians and Processions of Silenus startles us at first as an unpardonable self-contradiction. Yet the underlying unity in which it finds its justification will become apparent if we contrast Rubens' work, as a whole, with such a monument of Puritan art as, for instance, the poetry of John Milton.

An imaginary conversation between those two creative geniuses who lived in the same age, would help us to define the Belgian spirit by the study of contrasts. In such a conversation, Milton must unhesitatingly admit that the lusciousness of the Renaissance enters into many a page even of *Paradise Lost*, into the description of the Garden of Eden and the creation of Eve. He must then proceed to

reproach Rubens with having glossed over the moral problems and the spiritual aspirations that lie at the very root of Christianity, to rebuke him for debasing religion by an idolatrous worship of saints, and for honouring paganism by a glorification of the false deities. To this Rubens would reply that even the Crucifixion, the gloomiest scene in sacred history, is but the preface to a fresh and final triumph of life, and that all the tragic divisions and struggles of this earth are to be solved in the transfiguration of the Hereafter. The transfiguration of the body, which will be part of the beatitudes of Heaven, is foreshadowed on his canvas, and he paints the Creation in its pristine harmony, such as it came from the Maker's hands before the Fall.

This argument has brought us back to our former statement—that instinct and intuition are the leading forces in the Belgian soul. Both in his religious and in his mythological painting, Rubens is, as Verhaeren has rightly said, the high priest of life ; and the later phases of Belgian art have mostly been interpretations of the full-blooded joy of living, seen especially through the medium of colour and light.

Even the novelists and poets of nineteenth-century Belgium, both Flemish and French, have learned their craft in the school of the

painters. They visualise scenes and actors, and strive to understand and express the spirit by picturing the attitudes of the body and its relations to the surrounding matter and atmosphere. They may not always succeed in being simple in their art ; but they constantly aim at discovering and bringing home to their readers direct thoughts and elemental feelings, and at keeping simplicity before their eyes as a counsel of perfection.

III

The author who revived, or rather created, a fresh Belgian literature, the Flemish novelist Henri Conscience, is honoured on the pedestal of his statue in Antwerp with the dedication : " To him who taught our people to read." This inscription not only sounds the keynote of his vast body of romances and tales, which are truly of the people and for the people, it also points the direction in which the French and Flemish poetry and prose of Belgium have developed after him. Though they may escape the grasp of the half-educated, through the richness of their vocabulary, the Belgian writers seldom fail to deal with the manners and feelings of the humbler ranks of society. Their typical hero will be found to be a child of nature, taught chiefly by the surrounding landscape and social

environment, sharing the views and habits of those among whom he was born. He will be raised above them by a higher sensitiveness, not by a better trained intellect or a wider experience. He will be what, according to Milton, great poetry ought to be, and what Belgian life at its best aims at being, " simple, sensuous, and passionate." Simple and naïve in judgment and action, sensuous in the apprehension of facts and in the enjoyment of sights, sounds, and tastes, passionate in obeying the natural stir of emotion, which it is not at pains to conceal or repress. No better defence of the theory of art underlying the practice of the half-pagan Rubens could be devised than that which is implied in the formula coined by the great Puritan poet.

This faith in the instinctive, impulsive, forces in man, which we have recognised as the peculiar note of the Belgian modes of existence, shows itself in social habits and politics as well as in art. It was perhaps more universal, but less self-conscious, in the earlier period of the kingdom's independence from the revolution of 1830 to the Franco-German War of 1870. A great change was produced about that date by the industrial development which turned a secluded, nearly mediæval, community, provincial and even parochial in its adherence to inherited

creeds and methods of government, into a beehive of feverish labour, and one of the world's most active producers of coal and iron. While economic evolution was widening the national outlook, a body of French writers and orators, mostly refugees from the Second Empire, were sowing the seeds of a fresh literary growth. In his charming autobiographical sketch, *La vie belge*, Camille Lemonnier has told us how the quiet little city of Brussels wondered at the ways of those strange and illustrious guests, and how their presence stirred the hearts of young men to literary ambition.

The keynote of Belgian politics before 1870 has been a strong consciousness of the freedom of self-government, obtained through an armed rising in 1830, and proudly maintained as an example and a lesson for less advanced Continental nations, who were still in the throes of the struggle against absolute monarchy. That self-government was distinguished from the chartered freedom of former centuries chiefly by being national, and common to all provinces and municipalities, while the states and communes of earlier ages were strictly local and limited in their privileges. Notwithstanding the need for centralisation, felt more and more in these later times, the town or village council, headed by its burgomaster and aldermen, is

still the nearest and dearest representative of every Belgian citizen's liberty. The frequent recurrence of elections, and the great importance attached to their results, favoured partly organisation and discipline, and fostered the gregarious and clannish habit of "thinking in herds."

The greatest writer of that earlier period was undoubtedly Henri Conscience. He combined the humanitarian fervour of the revolutionist with the pious sentimentality of the antiquarian, and welded the various elements of patriotism, landscape, traditions and political reform, into a glorious picture of the national past and present. The idyllic note which is so pervasive in his homely writings, was also felt in the quiet and steady parliamentary progress of his time. In the sister art of painting, Henri de Braekeleere created a world of peaceful content in his luminous interiors, city views, and garden landscapes, instinct with the mere joy of being. The artists who tried to emulate Rubens' great epic style were less successful: Wiertz's large canvases attract few admirers nowadays beyond the foreign tourists. Only Leys, a student of miniatures and primitive masters, reached a powerful composition and wealth of colour that have secured a lasting reputation for his work. If we pursue the comparison between letters

and painting, we shall connect de Braekeleere's scenes of domestic joy with Conscience's tender sketches of humble life, and Leys' historical frescoes and pictures with the novelist's historical romances, among which the most famous is *The Lion of Flanders.*

IV

The sheltered, uneventful period of Belgium's beginnings as an independent state came to an end in consequence of the building of railways, of the opening of the port of Antwerp to international traffic, of the working of coal mines, and of the establishment of steel and iron works and other industries. Old creeds began to be questioned and new needs to be felt. Belgian letters, which had been stimulated by the presence of writers from France, responded to the call by an attempt to assert their independence from French classicism.

Charles de Coster resolved to picture the sixteenth century, the age of the great religious and civil wars, in a vast historical romance, in the centre of which he placed, as his hero, Tyl Ulenspieghel (Owlglass), the incarnation of the bold humorous mother-wit of Flanders, in her struggles against Spanish tyranny. He even revived obsolete words and phrases, and

wrote an archaic form of French, intended to be racier and more picturesque than the style of the Paris Academy. He vindicated the rebels of the Netherlands as the champions, against priestcraft and statecraft, of that right to possess one's own soul and body which we have found to be the principle of the art of Rubens.

The same great national tradition has inspired the work of Camille Lemonnier, the most prolific and representative of the Belgian novelists who have used the French tongue. As de Coster revived the phraseology and described the manners of the sixteenth century, so Lemonnier has adopted words and phrases borrowed from the Walloon dialects to impart fresh colour to his prose, in his description of the scenery and of the ways and speech of the various Belgian provinces. Poachers, goatherds, farmers and shopkeepers are the characters in his numerous stories, the collection of which forms a true and lively account of the customs of the countryside and of the smaller towns. Their coarser deeds and utterances are not softened or concealed, as they are in Conscience, and Lemonnier may in those respects claim kinship with Jan Steen and with the painters of kermesses, of satyrs, and of fauns.

The writers of Flemish fiction who acknowledge

Stijn Streuvels as their leader are also students of the manners of the peasantry and of subconscious psychology. A tragic undertone akin to that of Breughel's rural scenes runs even through the grotesque or coarse incidents which they are at no pains to avoid. Fate and circumstance often direct the course of events in their stories, drive the poor humans along as their tools and victims, and sometimes land them in humorous discrepancies between will and deeds.

In these several ways the strain of feeling of which Rubens is the highest spokesman has been continued from the seventeenth century into the twentieth, and from painting to literature. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to ignore other strains of the national tradition, such as the mysticism that has inspired the theologian Jan van Ruusbroec in his religious writings, and the painter Jan van Eyck in the composition of his triptich, "The Adoration of the Lamb." When the national mind began to expand about 1870, partly through the advent of foreign influences, when Leys had discovered models for his paintings among the masters who had preceded the Renaissance, the time came for literary men to turn away from the luscious, fleshy vigour of the school of Antwerp and to aim at a deeper spirituality.

Flemish verse was first renovated through the powerful genius of the priest and poet Guido Gazelle, who has most intimately fused his feeling for landscape with his own lyrical fervour, and has attuned his language to the deepest and subtlest harmonies. As de Coster rebelled against the strict purism of the French Academy, Gazelle rejected the linguistic predominance of Holland, and raised his native West-Flemish dialect, which had since the Middle Ages lost its status as a literary medium, to the dignity of majestic and impassioned verse. His fame must needs be confined to the narrow circle of readers who are familiar with the language of the Netherlands, but among them he rightly ranks with the greatest and most admired of our writers.

The world at large is better acquainted with the names of Maeterlinck, in whose books it is difficult to trace a specifically Belgian note, and of Verhaeren, who has always striven to remain faithful to the spirit of his native land. Maeterlinck as a thinker owes much to the philosophy of Ruusbroec, but his appeal is not to one particular nation. Even in Verhaeren's poetry, a vigorous, lyrical individuality asserts itself so much, that he speaks rather for himself than for the mass of the people. No doubt the Flemish scenery and characters are there,

but in a somewhat arbitrary selection, and in a peculiarly coloured atmosphere. Superstition is more rampant, animal spirits more unbridled, terror and lust more tempestuous, at least in the earlier poems, than in the productions of the novelists, who are bound to follow realities more faithfully. The gentler affections, and a closer study of facts and thoughts, prevail in the later, maturer verse. To a loving understanding of Belgium there is no safer guide than Verhaeren, if allowance be made for the overflowing energies of the poetical temperament, and if the more restful later poems be set by the side of the violent earlier ones.

One aspect of modern life, the toiler's patient strength, weariness, and suffering, was not foreseen either in Rubens' passionate scheme of feelings, or in the mystic's contemplative mood. It has come more and more to the front as mines have been opened and works and mills erected, and as the agricultural community of 1830 has been turned into the industrial society of later years. It has found its artistic interpretation in the sculpture of Constantin Meunier. Meunier has discarded the prettiness and attitudinising of the Renaissance for a bald severity of line and of pose and a quiet strength that is in perfect keeping with the sombre scenery of the colliery districts, and with the whole tenor

of the labourer's fate. He testifies to the ability of the Belgian mind to evolve new forms of art to answer new needs and solve new problems.

V

If we try to look back on the development of the spirit of Belgium as it has appeared to us in a bird's-eye view, we shall be struck both by the greatness and strength of the tradition that can be traced back to Rubens, and by the possibilities of the side currents and counter-currents which cross and diversify it. As Belgium has vigorously transformed herself in the past, we may trust her to face the contingencies of the future with boldness and success. She possesses all the elements of vitality: she has been neither emasculated by prosperity nor broken by trial; and the sense of brotherhood and power of co-operation that have held her sons together in the dangers of former days cannot fail her in the coming time. Her latest disaster, a repetition of similar events in her history, is tightening the links of affection between her citizens. For the first time they find themselves united under the guidance of a popular dynasty, whose founder was called to the throne by free election, and whose present head is being consecrated by the

baptism of fire. For the first time also their long devotion to liberty has earned them the gratitude and respect of neighbouring states, and created new and lasting bonds of confidence and love that will strengthen the European sisterhood of nations.