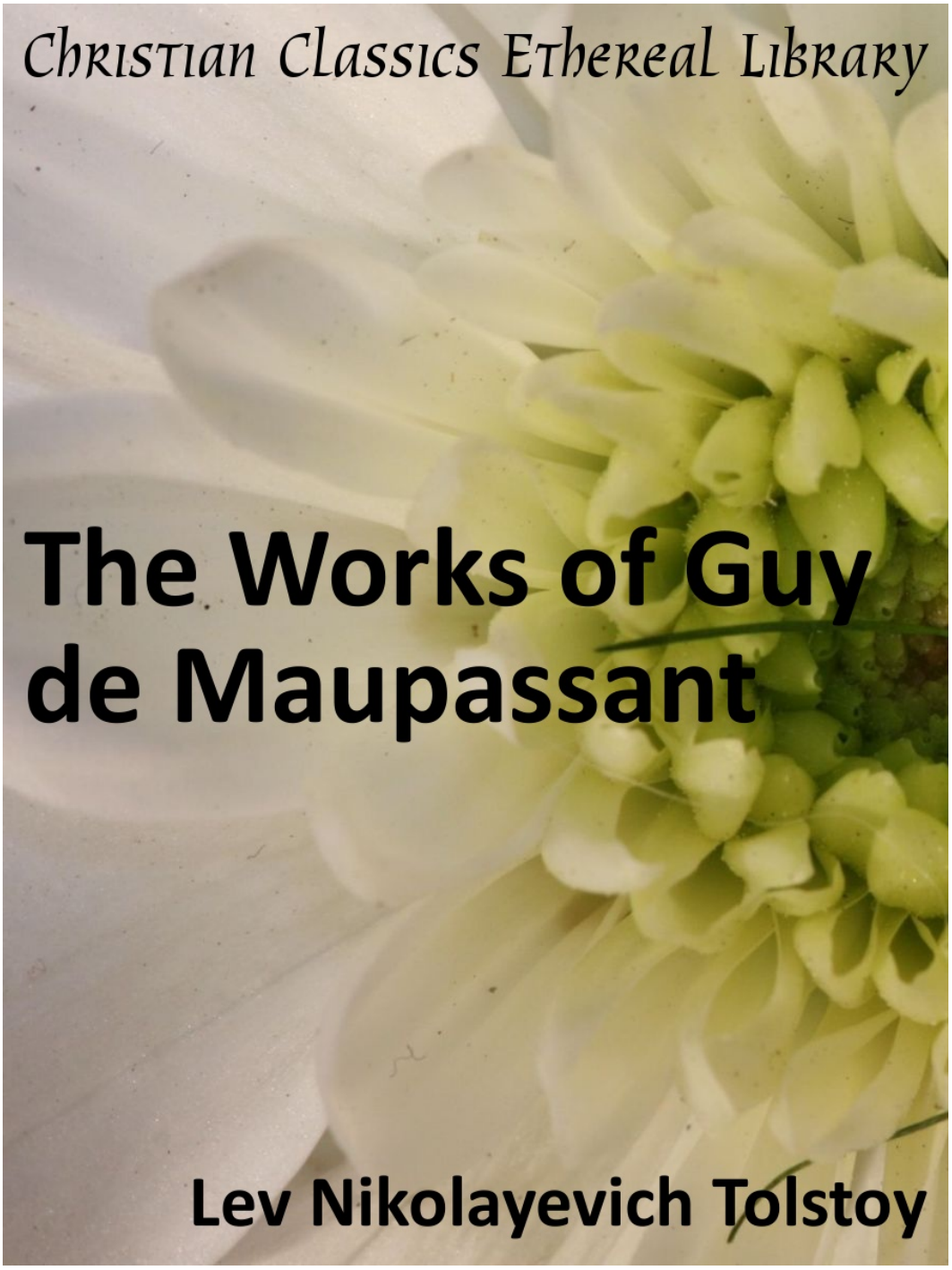
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The Works of Guy de Maupassant
Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy

The Works of Guy de Maupassant

Author(s): Tolstoy, Leo Nikolayevich (1828-1910)

Publisher: Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library

Description: Guy de Maupassant was a popular 19th century French writer, considered one of the great innovators of the modern short story. Tolstoy, at the prompting of a friend, read a collection of Maupassant's stories in 1881, shortly after the Russian novelist's radical conversion. Because of Tolstoy's newfound zeal for ascetic Christianity, he found Maupassant's works trivial and overly sensual. In this essay, Tolstoy, while he comments on Maupassant specifically, lays out his new framework for evaluating literature according to the values of ascetic (and at times Gnostic) Christianity. This framework would go on to shape all of Tolstoy's later works, including *Father Sergius* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*.
Kathleen O'Bannon
CCEL Staff

Subjects: Slavic
Russian. White Russian. Ukrainian

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THE WORKS OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT

by Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy

April 2, 1894
Translated by Professor Leo Wiener, 1905

The Works of Guy De Maupassant

It was, I think, in the year 1881 that Turgenev, during a visit at my house, took a French novel, under the name of *Maison Tellier*, out of his satchel and gave it to me.

"Read it, if you have a chance," he said, apparently with indifference, just as the year before he had handed me a number of the *Russian Wealth*, in which there was an article by Garshin, who was making his debut. Evidently, as in the case of Garshin, so even now, he was afraid he might influence me in one way or another, and wished to know my uninfluenced opinion.

"He is a young French author," he said; "look at it, — it is not bad; he knows you and esteems you very much," he added, as though to encourage me. "As a man he reminds me of Druzhinin. He is just as excellent a son and friend, *un homme d'un commerce sur*, as was Druzhinin, and, besides, he has relations with the labouring people, whom he guides and aids. Even in his relations to women he reminds me of Druzhinin."

And Turgenev told me something remarkable and incredible in regard to Maupassant's relations in this respect.

This time, the year 1881, was for me the most ardent time of the inner reconstruction of my whole world-conception, and in this reconstruction the activity which is called artistic, and to which I formerly used to devote all my strength, not only lost for me the significance formerly ascribed to it, but even became distinctly distasteful to me on account of the improper place which it had occupied in my life and which in general it occupies in the concepts of the men of the wealthy classes.

For this reason I was at that time not in the least interested in such productions as the one which Turgenev recommended to me. But, to oblige him, I read the book which he gave me.

Judging from the first story, *Maison Tellier*, I could not help but see, in spite of the indecent and insignificant subject of the story, that the author possessed what is called talent.

The author was endowed with that particular gift, called talent, which consists in the author's ability to direct, according to his tastes, his intensified, strained attention to this or that subject, in consequence of which the author who is endowed with this ability sees in those subjects upon which he directs his attention, something new, something which others did not see. Maupassant evidently possessed that gift of seeing in subjects something which others did not see. But, to judge from the small volume which I had read, he was devoid of the chief condition necessary, besides talent, for a truly artistic production. Of the three conditions: (1) a correct, that is, a moral relation of the author to the subject, (2) the clearness of exposition, or the beauty of form, which is the same, and (3) sincerity, that is, an undisguised feeling of love or hatred for what the artist describes, — Maupassant possessed only the last two, and was entirely devoid of the first. He had no correct, that is, no moral relation

to the subjects described. From what I had read, I was convinced that Maupassant possessed talent, that is, the gift of attention, which in the objects and phenomena of life revealed to him those qualities which are not visible to other men; he also possessed a beautiful form, that is, he expressed clearly, simply, and beautifully what he wished to say, and also possessed that condition of the worth of an artistic production, without which it does not produce any effect, — sincerity, — that is, he did not simulate love or hatred, but actually loved and hated what he described. But unfortunately, being devoid of the first, almost the most important condition of the worth of an artistic production, of the correct, moral relation to what he represented, that is, of the knowledge of the difference between good and evil, he loved and represented what it was not right to love and represent, and did not love and did not represent what he ought to have loved and represented. Thus the author in this little volume describes with much detail and love how women tempt men and men tempt women, and even some incomprehensible obscenities, which are represented in *La Femme de Paul*, and he describes the labouring country people, not only with indifference, but even with contempt, as so many animals.

Particularly striking was that lack of distinction between bad and good in the story *Une Partie de Campagne*, in which, in the form of a most clever and amusing jest, he gives a detailed account of how two gentlemen with bared arms, rowing in a boat, simultaneously tempted, the one an old mother, and the other a young maiden, her daughter.

The author's sympathy is during the whole time obviously to such an extent on the side of the two rascals, that he ignores, or, rather, does not see what the tempted mother, the girl, the father, and the young man, evidently the fiance of the daughter, must have suffered, and so we not only get a shocking description of a disgusting crime in the form of an amusing jest, but the event itself is described falsely, because only the most insignificant side of the subject, the pleasure afforded to the rascals, is described.

In the same volume there is a story, *Histoire d'une Fille de Ferme*, which Turgenev recommended to me more particularly, and which more particularly displeased me on account of the author's incorrect relation to the subject. The author apparently sees in all the working people whom he describes nothing but animals, who do not rise above sexual and maternal love, and so the description leaves us with an incomplete, artificial impression.

The insufficient comprehension of the lives and interests of the working classes, and the representation of the men from those classes in the form of half-animals, which are moved only by sensuality, malice, and greed, forms one of the chief and most important defects of the majority of the modern French authors, among them Maupassant, not only in this story, but also in all the other stories, in which he touches on the people and always describes them as coarse, dull animals, whom one can only ridicule. Of course, the French authors must know the conditions of their people better than I know them; but, although I am a Russian and have not lived with the French people, I non the less assert that, in describ-

ing their masses, the French authors are wrong, and that the French masses cannot be as they are described. If there exists a France as we know it, with her truly great men and with those great contributions which these great men have made to science, art, civil polity, and the moral perfection of humanity, those labouring masses, which have held upon their shoulders this France and her great men, do not consist of animals, but of men with great spiritual qualities; and so I do not believe what I am told in novels like *La Terre*, and in Maupassant's stories, just as I should not believe if I were told of the existence of a beautiful house standing on no foundation. It is very possible that the high qualities of the masses are not such as are described in *La petit Fadette* and in *La Mare au Diable*, but these qualities exist, that I know for certain, and the writer who describes the masses, as Maupassant does, by telling sympathetically of the "hanches" and "gorges" of Breton domestics, and with contempt and ridicule the life of the labouring people, commits a great error in an artistic sense, because he describes the subject from only one, the most uninteresting, physical side, and completely overlooks the other, the most important, spiritual side, which forms the essence of the subject.

In general, the reading of the volume which Turgenev gave me left me completely indifferent to the young writer.

I was at that time so disgusted with the stories, *Une Partie de Campagne*, *La Femme de Paul*, and *L'Histoire d'une Fille de Ferme*, that I did not at that time notice the beautiful story, *Le Papa de Simon*, and the superb story, so far as the description of a night is concerned, *Sur l'Eau*.

"There are in our time, when there are so many who are willing to write, a number of people with talent, who do not know to what to apply it, or who boldly apply it to what ought not and should not be described," I thought. I told Turgenev so. And I entirely forgot about Maupassant.

The first thing from Maupassant's writings which after that fell into my hands was *Une Vie*, which somebody advised me to read. This book at once made me change my opinion concerning Maupassant, and after that I read with interest everything which was written over his name. *Une Vie* is an excellent novel, not only incomparably the best novel by Maupassant, but almost the best French novel since Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Besides the remarkable power of his talent, that is, of that peculiar, strained attention, directed upon an object, in consequence of which the author sees entirely new features in the life which he is describing, this novel combines, almost to an equal degree, all three conditions of a true artistic production: (1) the correct, that is, the moral, relation of the author to the subject, (2) the beauty of form, and (3) sincerity, that is, love for what the author describes. Here the meaning of life no longer presents itself to the author in the experiences of all kinds of debauched persons, — here the contents, as the title says, are formed by the description of a ruined, innocent, sweet woman, who is prepared for anything beautiful, a woman who is

ruined by that very gross, animal sensuality which in the former stories presented itself to the author as the central phenomenon of life, which dominates everything, and the author's whole sympathy is on the side of the good.

The form, which is beautiful even in the first stories, is here carried to a high degree of perfection, such as, in my opinion, has not been reached by any other French prose writer. And, besides, what is most important, the author here really loves, and loves strongly, the good family which he describes, and actually despises that coarse male who destroys the happiness and peace of this dear family and especially of the heroine of the novel.

It is for that reason that all the events and persons of this novel are so vivid and impress themselves on our memory: the weak, good, slatternly mother; the noble, weak, dear father, and the daughter, who is still dearer in her simplicity, absence of exaggeration, and readiness for everything good; their mutual relations, their first journey, their servants, their neighbours, the calculating, coarsely sensuous, stingy, petty impudent fiance, who, as always, deceives the innocent girl with the customary base idealization of the grossest of sentiments; the marriage; Corsica, with the charming descriptions of nature; then the life in the country; the coarse deception of the husband; the seizure of the power over the estate; his conflicts with his father-in-law; the yielding of the good people; the victory of impudence,; the relation to the neighbours, — all that is life itself, with all its complexity and variety. But not only is all this described vividly and well, — there is over all a sincere, pathetic tone, which involuntarily affects the reader. One feels that the author loves this woman, and that he does not love her mainly for her external forms, but for her soul, for what there is good in it, and that he sympathizes with her and suffers for her, and this sensation is involuntarily transferred to the reader. And the questions as to why, for what purpose this fair creature was ruined, and why it should be so, naturally arise in the reader's soul, and make him stop and reflect on the meaning and significance of human life.

In spite of the false notes, which here and there occur in the novel, as, for example, the detailed account of the girl's skin, or the impossible and unnecessary details about how the deserted wife, by the advice of the abbot, again becomes a mother, details which destroy all the charm of the heroine's purity; in spite of the melodramatic and unnatural history of the revenge of the insulted husband, — in spite of these blemishes, the novel not only appears to me to be beautiful, but through it I no longer saw in the author the talented babbler and jester, who does not know and does not want to know what is good and what bad, such as he had appeared to me to be, judging him from the first book, but a serious man, who looks deeply into a man's life and is beginning to make things out in it.

The next novel of Maupassant which I read was *Bel-Ami*.

Bel-Ami is a very filthy book. The author apparently gives himself the reins in the description of what attracts him, and at times seems to be losing the fundamental, negative

point of view upon his hero and passes over to his side; but in general, *Bel-Ami*, like *Une Vie*, has for its basis a serious thought and sentiment.

In *Une Vie* the fundamental thought is the perplexity in the presence of the cruel senselessness of the agonizing life of a beautiful woman, who is ruined by the gross sensuality of a man; here it is not only the perplexity, but also the indignation of the author at the sight of the welfare and success of a gross sensuous beast, who by his very sensuality makes a career for himself and attains a high position in the world, an indignation also at the sight of the corruption of that milieu in which the hero attains his success. There the author seems to ask: "Why, for what purpose, is the fair creature ruined? Why did it happen?" Here he seems to be answering the questions: "Everything pure and good has perished and continues to perish in our society, because this society is corrupt, senseless, and terrible."

The last scene of the novel, the marriage in a fashionable church of the triumphant rascal, who is adorned with the Order of the Legion of Honour, with the pure young maiden, the daughter of the old, formerly irreproachable mother of the family, whom he seduced, the marriage, which is blessed by the bishop and is recognized as something good and proper by all the persons present, expresses this idea with unusual force. In this novel, in spite of its being clogged with obscene details, in which the author unfortunately seems to delight, we can see the same serious relations of the author to life.

Read the conversation of the old poet with Duroy, when they come out after dinner from the Walters, I think. The old poet lays bare life before his young interlocutor and shows it to him such as it is, with its eternal, unavoidable companion and end, — death.

"It already holds me, *la gueuse*," he says of death. "It has already loosened by teeth, pulled out my hair, mauled my limbs, and is about to swallow me. I am already in its power, — it only plays with me, as a cat plays with a mouse, knowing that I cannot get away from it. Glory, wealth, — what is it all good for, since it is not possible to buy a woman's love with them, and it is only a woman's love that makes life worth living. And death will take that away. It will take this first, and then health, strength, and life itself. And it is the same with everybody. And that is all."

Such is the meaning of the remarks of the aging poet. But Duroy, the fortunate lover of all those women whom he likes, is so full of sensuous energy and strength that he hears, and yet does not hear, and understands, and yet does not understand, the words of the old poet. He hears and understands, but the spring of his sensuous life bubbles up with such force that the incontestable truth, which promises the same end to him, does not appall him.

It is this inner contradiction which, besides its satirical significance, forms the chief meaning of *Bel-Ami*. The same thought sparkles in the beautiful scenes of the death of the consumptive journalist. The author puts the question to himself as to what life is and how the contradiction between the love of life and the knowledge of unavoidable death is to be solved, — and he does not answer the questions. He seems to be seeking and waiting, and

does not decide one way or another. Consequently the moral relation to life continues to be correct in this novel also.

But in the next novels after that this moral relation to life begins to become entangled, the valuation of the phenomena of life begins to waver, to grow dim, and in the last novels is completely distorted.

In *Mont-Oriol* Maupassant seems to combine the motives of the two preceding novels, and repeats himself as regards contents. In spite of the beautiful descriptions, full of refined humour, of a fashionable watering-place and of the activity of the doctors in this place, we have here the same male, Paul, who is just as base and heartless and the husband in *Une Vie*, and the same deceived, ruined, yielding, weak, lonely, always lonely, dear woman, and the same indifferent triumph of insignificance and baseness as in *Bel-Ami*.

The thought is the same, but the author's relation to what he describes is now considerably lower, especially lower than in the first novel. The inner valuation of the author as to what is good and bad begins to become entangled. In spite of all the mental desire of the author to be objective without any bias, the rascal Paul apparently enjoys the author's complete sympathy. For this reason the history of Paul's love, his attempts to seduce, and his success in this produce a false impression. The reader does not know what the author wants, — whether he wants to show the whole emptiness and baseness of Paul, who with indifference turns away from the woman and offends her, only because her form is spoiled from being pregnant with a child by him, or whether he wants, on the contrary, to show how agreeable and nice it is to live the way this Paul lives.

In the next novels after that, *Pierre et Jean*, *Fort comme la Mort*, and *Notre Coeur*, the moral relation of the author to his persons is still more entangled, and is entirely lost in the last. On all these novels already lies the stamp of indifference, haste, fictiousness, and, above all, again that absence of a correct moral relation to life which was noticeable in his first writings. This begins at the same time that Maupassant's reputation as a fashionable author becomes established, and he is subject to that terrible temptation to which every well-known author, particularly such an attractive one as Maupassant, falls a prey. On the one side, the success of the first novels, newspaper laudations, and flattery of society, especially of the women; on the second, the evergrowing rewards, which, however, do not keep pace with the constantly growing demands; on the third, — the insistence of publishers, who vie with one another, flatter, implore, and no longer judge of the quality of the productions offered by the author, but in ecstasy accept everything which appears over the name that has established its reputation with the reading public. All these temptations are so great that they evidently intoxicate the author: he succumbs to them, and, though he continues to work out his novels as regards their forms, and does it even better than before, and even loves what he describes, he no longer loves what he describes because it is good and moral, that is, because it is loved by everybody, and hates what he describes not because it is bad and

despised by everybody, but only because one thing accidentally pleases and another displeases him.

Upon all the novels of Maupassant, beginning with *Bel-Ami*, lies this stamp of haste and, above all, of fictiousness. From that time on Maupassant no longer does what he did in his first two novels, — he does not take for the foundation of his novels certain moral demands and on their basis describe the activity of his persons, but writes his novels as all artisan novelists write theirs, that is, he invents the most interesting and the most pathetic or most contemporary persons and situations, and from these composes his novel, adorning it with all those observations which he has happened to make and which fit into the canvas of the novel, without the slightest concern how the events described are related to the demands of morality. Such are *Pierre et Jean*, *Fort comme la Mort*, and *Notre Coeur*.

No matter how much we are accustomed to read in French novels about how families live by threes, and how there is always a lover, whom all but the husband know, it still remains quite incomprehensible to us how it is that all husbands are always fools, *cocus*, and *ridicules*, and all lovers, who in the end marry and become husbands, are neither *ridicule* nor *cocus'*, but heroes. And still less can we understand in what way all women are loose in morals and all mothers holy.

It is on these unnatural and improbable and, above all, profoundly immoral situations that *Pierre et Jean* and *Fort comme la Mort* are constructed. and so the sufferings of the persons who are in these situations do not touch us much. Pierre's and Jean's mother, who was able to pass all her life in deceiving her husband, evokes little sympathy for herself when she is compelled to confess her sin to her son, and still less when she justifies herself, asserting that she could not help making use of the opportunity of happiness which presented itself to her. Still less can we sympathize with the gentleman who, in *Fort comme la Mort*, during his whole life deceived his friend, corrupted his wife, and now laments because, having grown old, he is not able to corrupt also the daughter of his paramour. But the last novel, *Notre Coeur*, does not even have any inner problem, except the description of all kinds of shades of sexual love. What is described is a satiated, idle debauchee, who does not know what he wants, and who now falls in with just as debauched, mentally debauched, a woman, without even any justification of sensuality, and now parts from her and falls in with a servant girl, and now again falls in with the first and, it seems, lives with both. Though in *Pierre et Jean* and *Fort comme la Mort* there are touching scenes, this last novel provokes nothing but disgust in us.

The question in Maupassant's first novel, *Une Vie*, stands like this. Here is a good, clever, dear human being, ready for anything good, and this being for some reason is sacrificed, at first to a coarse, petty, stupid animal of a husband, and then to just such a son, and perishes aimlessly, without having given anything to the world. What is this for? The author puts the question like that, and does not seem to give any answer. But his whole novel, all

his sentiments of sympathy for her and disgust with what ruined her serve as an answer to his question. If there is one man who has understood her sufferings and has given expression to this understanding, these sufferings are redeemed, as Job says to his friends, when they say that no one will find out about his suffering. Let a suffering be made known and understood, and it is redeemed. Here the author saw and comprehended this suffering and showed it to men. And this suffering is redeemed, because, as soon as it is understood by men, it will sooner or later be destroyed.

In the next novel, *Bel-Ami*, the question is no longer as to why there is any suffering for the worthy, but why there is wealth and glory for the unworthy. And what are this wealth and glory, and how are they acquired? And just as before, this question includes an answer, which consists in the negation of everything which is so highly valued by the crowd. The contents of this second novel are still serious, but the moral relation of the author to the subject described is considerably weakened, and while in the first novel only here and there occur blemishes of sensuality, which spoil the novel, in *Bel-Ami* these blemishes expand, and many chapters are written in mere obscenity, in which the author seems to revel.

In the next novel, *Mont-Oriol*, the questions as to why and for what purpose are the sufferings of the dear woman and the success and joys of the savage male are no longer put, but it seems to be assumed that it ought to be so, and the moral demands are almost not felt; instead there appear, without any need and evoked by no artistic demands, obscene, sensuous descriptions. As a striking example of this violation of art, in consequence of the incorrect relation of the author to the subject, may with particular vividness serve the detailed description of the appearance of the heroine in the bathtub, which is given in this novel. This description is of no use whatsoever, and is in no way connected with the external or the internal meaning of the novel: bubbles cling to the pink body.

"Well?" asks the reader.

"That's all," replies the author. "I describe, because I like such descriptions."

In the next two novels, *Pierre et Jean* and *Fort comme la Mort*, no moral demand whatever is to be found. Both novels are constructed on debauchery, deception, and lying, which bring the *dramatis personae* to tragic situations.

In the last novel, *Notre Coeur*, the condition of the *dramatis personae* is most monstrous, savage, and immoral, and these persons no longer struggle against anything, but only seek enjoyments, of ambition, of the senses, of the sexual passion, and the author seems to sympathize completely with their strivings. The only conclusion one can draw from this last novel is this, that the greatest happiness in life is sexual intercourse, and that, therefore, we must in the most agreeable manner make use of this happiness.

Still more startling in this immoral relation to life as it is expressed in the quasi-novel, *Yvette*. The contents of this terribly immoral production are as follows: a charming girl, with an innocent soul, but corrupted in the forms which she has acquired in the corrupt

surroundings of her mother, deludes the debauchee. He falls in love with her, but, imagining that this girl consciously talks that insinuating nonsense which she has learned in her mother's company, and which she repeats like a parrot, without understanding it, he imagines that the girl is corrupt, and coarsely proposes a *liaison* with her. This proposition frightens and offends her (she love him), opens her eyes to her position and to that of her mother, and makes her suffer deeply. The touching situation — the conflict of the beauty of the innocent soul with the immorality of the world — is beautifully described, and it would have been well to stop here, but the author, without the least external or internal need, continues his narration and causes this gentleman to make his way to the girl at night and seduce her. In the first part of the novel, the author had evidently been on the side of the girl, and in the second he suddenly passed over to the side of the debauchee. One impression destroys the other, and the whole novel falls to pieces and breaks up, like bread which has not been kneaded.

In all his novels after *Bel-Ami* (I am not speaking now of his shorter stories, which form his chief desert and fame, — of them I shall speak later), Maupassant obviously surrendered himself to the theory, which not only existed in his circle in Paris, but which now exists everywhere among artists, that for an artistic production we not only need have no clear conception of what is good and what bad, but that, on the contrary, the artist must absolutely ignore all moral questions, — that in this does a certain merit of the artist consist. According to this theory an artist can and must represent what is true, what exists, or what is beautiful, what, consequently, pleases him or even what can be useful as material for "science," but it is not the business of the artist to trouble himself about what is moral or immoral, good or bad.

I remember, a famous painter showed me once his painting, which represented a religious procession. Everything was exquisitely painted, but I could not see any relation of the artist to his subject.

"Well, do you consider these rites good, and do you think that they ought to be performed, or do you not?" I asked that artist.

The artist said to me, with a certain condescension to my naivete, that he did not know and did not consider it necessary to know: his business was to represent life.

"But do you at least love this?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Well, do you despise these rites?"

"Neither the one nor the other," replied, with a smile of compassion for my stupidity, the modern highly cultured artist, who represented life without understanding its meaning and without either loving or hating its phenomena. Even so unfortunately thought Maupassant.

In his introduction to *Pierre et Jean* he says that people tell the writer: "*Consolez-moi, attristez-moi, attendrissez-moi, faites-moi rever, faites-moi rire, faites-moi fremir, faites-moi pleurer, faites-moi penser. Seuls quel-eues esprits d'elites demandent a l'artist: faites-moi quelque chose de beau dans la forme qui vous conviendra le mieux d'apres votre temperament.*"

It was to satisfy the demand of these chosen spirits that Maupassant wrote his novels, imagining naively that that which was considered beautiful in his circle was the beautiful which art ought to serve.

In the same circle in which Maupassant moved, it is woman, a young, beautiful, for the most part a nude woman, and the sexual intercourse with her that have preeminently been considered to be that beauty which art must serve. Such an opinion was held not only by Maupassant's fellows in "art," by painters, sculptors, novelists, and poets, but also by philosophers, the teachers of the younger generations. Thus the famous Renan says frankly in his work, *Marc Aurele*, while condemning Christianity for its lack of appreciation of feminine beauty:

"*Le defaut du christianisme apparait bien ici, il est trop uniquement moral: la beaute chez-lui est tout-a-fait sacrifiee. Or, aux yeux d'une philosophie complete, la beaute, loin d'etre un avantage superviciel, un danger, un inconvenient, est un don de Dieu, comme la vertu. Elle vaut la vertu; la femme belle exprime aussi bien une face du but divin, une des fins de Dieu, que l'homme de genie ou la femme vertueuse. Elle le sait et de la sa fierte. Elle sent instinctivement le tresor infini qu'elle porte en son corps; elle sait bien, que sans esprit, sans talent, sans grave vertu, elle compte entre les premieres manifestations de Dieu: et pourquoi lui interdire de mettre en valeur le don, qui lui a ete fait, de sortir le diamant qui lui est echu?*

"*La femme, en se passant, accomplit un devoir; elle pratique un art, art exquis, en un sens le plus charmant des arts. Ne nous laissons pas egarer par le sourire que certains mots provoquent chez les gens frivoles. On decerne la palme du genie a l'artiste grec qui a su resoudre le plus delicat des problemes, orner le corps humain, c'est a orner la perfection meme, et l'on ne veut voir qu'une affaire de chiffons dans l'essai de collaborer a la plus belle oeuvre de Dieu, a la beaute de la femme! La toilette de la femme, avec tous ses raffinements, est du grand art a sa maniere.*

"*Les siecles et les pays, qui savent y reussir, — sont les grands siecles, les grands pays, et le christianisme montra par l'exclusion dont il frappa le genre de recherches que l'ideal social qu'il concevait ne deviendrait le cadre d'une societe complete que bien plus tard, quand la revolte des genes du monde aurait brise le joug etroit impose primitivement a la secte par un pietisme exalte*" (Marc Aurele, p. 555).

(Thus, according to the opinion of this guide of the younger generations, it is only now that the Parisian tailors and wigmakers have mended the mistake made by Christianity, and have reestablished beauty in its real, high significance.)

To leave no doubt in what sense beauty is to be taken, this same famous writer, historian, and scholar wrote a drama, *L'Abbesse de Jouarre*, in which he showed that sexual intercourse with a woman is that very ministration to beauty, that is, a high and good work. In this drama, which is remarkable for its absence of talent and especially for the coarseness of Darcy's conversations with the Abbess, where we can see from the very first words of what love this gentleman is speaking with the apparently innocent and highly moral girl, who is not in the least offended by this, — it appears that the most highly moral people, in the sight of death, to which they are condemned, a few hours before it can do nothing more beautiful that surrender themselves to their animal passion.

Thus, in the circle in which Maupassant grew up and was educated, the representation of feminine beauty and love has quite seriously, and as something long ago decided and determined by the cleverest and most learned of men, been considered to be the true problem of the highest art, — *le grand art*.

It is to this theory, frightful in its insipidity, that Maupassant was subjected, when he became a fashionable writer. And, as was to have been expected, in the novels this false ideal led Maupassant to a series of mistakes and to weaker and ever weaker productions.

In this showed itself the radical difference which exists between the demands of the novel and those of the story. The novel has for its problem, even for its external problem, the description of the whole human life or of many human lives, and so the writer of a novel must have a clear and firm idea of what is good and what bad in life, and Maupassant did not possess that; on the contrary, according to the theory to which he held, it was thought that that was not necessary. If he had been a novelist like some untalented writers of sensuous novels, he would have calmly described as good what is bad, and his novels would be complete and interesting for people sharing the same views as the author. But Maupassant had talent, that is, he saw things in their real form, and so he involuntarily revealed the truth: he involuntarily saw the bad in what he wanted to regard as good. For this reason his sympathy is constantly wavering in all his novels, with the exception of the first: now he represents the bad as being good, now he recognizes the bad to be bad and the good to be good, and now again he keeps all the time jumping from one to the other. But this destroys the very essence of every artistic impression, the *charpente*, on which he stands. People who are not very sensitive to art frequently imagine that an artistic production forms one whole, because the same persons act in it all the time, because everything is constructed on one plot, or because the life on one man is described. That is not true. That only seems to the superficial observer: the cement which binds every artistic production into one whole and so produces the illusion of a reflection of life is not the unity of persons and situations, but the unity of the original, moral relation of the author to his subject. In reality, when we read or contemplate an artistic production by a new author, the fundamental question which arises in our soul is always this: "Well, what kind of a man are you? How do you differ from all other men whom

I know, and what new thing can you tell me about the way we ought to look upon our life?" No matter what the artist may represent, — saints, robbers, kings, lackeys, — we seek and see only the artist's soul. If he is an old, familiar artist, the question is no longer, "who are you?" but, "Well, what new thing can you tell me? From what new side will you now illumine my life for me?" And so an author who has no definite, clear, new view of the world, and still more so the one who does not consider this to be necessary, cannot give an artistic production. He can write beautifully, and a great deal, but there will be no artistic production. Even so it was with Maupassant in his novels. In his first two novels, especially in the first, *Une Vie*, there was that clear, definite, new relation to life, and so there was an artistic production; but as soon as he, submitting to the fashionable theory, decided that there is no need whatever for this relation of the author to life, and began to write only in order to *faire quelque chose de beau*, his novels ceased to be artistic productions. In *Une Vie* and *Bel-Ami* the author knows who is to be loved and who is to be hated, and the reader agrees with him and believes him, believes in those persons and events which are described to him. But in *Notre Coeur* and in *Yvette* the author does not know who is to be loved and who is to be hated; nor does the reader know it. And as the reader does not know it, he does not believe in the events described and is not interested in them. And so, with the exception of the first tow, or, speaking strictly, of the one first novel, all of Maupassant's novels, as novels, are weak; and if Maupassant had left us only his novels, he would be a striking example of how a brilliant gift may perish in consequence of that false milieu in which it was evolved, and of those false theories of art which are invented by men who do not love it and so do not understand it. But, fortunately, Maupassant has written short stories, in which he did not succumb to the false theory which he adopted, and wrote, not *quelque chose de beau*, but what touched and provoked his moral feeling. It is in these stories, not in all, but in the best of them, that we see how the moral feeling grew in the author.

In this, indeed, does the remarkable quality of every true talent consist, so long as it does not do violence to itself under the influence of a false theory, that it teaches its possessor, leads him on over the path of moral development, makes him love what is worth of love, and hate what is worthy of hatred. An artist is an artist for the very reason that he sees the objects, not as he wants to see them, but as they are. The bearer of talent, — man, — may make mistakes, but the talent, as soon as the reins are given to it, as was done by Maupassant in his stories, will reveal and lay bare the subject and will make the writer love it, if it is worth of love, and hate it, if it is worthy of hatred. What happens to every true artist, when, under the influence of his surroundings, he begins to describe something different from what he ought to describe, is what happened to Balaam, who, when he wanted to bless, cursed that which ought to have been cursed, and, when he wanted to curse, began to bless that which ought to have been blessed; he will involuntarily do, not what he wants, but what he ought to do. The same happened with Maupassant.

There has hardly been another such an author, who thought so sincerely that all the good, the whole meaning of life was in woman, in love, and who with such force of passion described woman and the love of her from all sides, and there has hardly been another author, who with such clearness and precision has pointed out all the terrible sides of the same phenomenon, which to him seemed to be the highest, and one that gives the greatest good to men. The more he comprehended this phenomenon, the more did it become unveiled; the shrouds fell off, and all there was left was its terrible consequences and its still more terrible reality.

Read his *Idiot Son*," "A Night with the Daughter" (*L'Ermite*), "The Sailor and His Sister" (*Le Port*), "Field of Olives," *La Petit Roque*, the English *Miss Harriet*, *Monsieur Parent*, *L'Armoire* (the girl that fell asleep in the safe), "The Marriage" in *Sur l'Eau*, and the last expression of everything, *Un Cas de Divorce*. What Marcus Aurelius said, trying to find means with which to destroy in imagination the attractiveness of this sin, Maupassant does in glaring, artistic pictures, which upset one completely. He wants to laud love, but the more he knew of it, the more he cursed it. He cursed it for the calamities and sufferings which it brings with it, and for the disappointments, and, above all, for the simulation of true love, for the deception which is in it, and from which man suffers the more, the more he abandons himself to this deception.

The might moral growth of the author, during his literary activity, is written in indelible characters in these exquisite short stories and in his best book, *Sur l'Eau*.

And not merely in this discrowning, this involuntary and, therefore, so much more powerful discrowning of sexual love, do we see the author's moral growth; we see it also in all those higher and ever higher demands which he makes on life.

Not only in sexual love does he see the inner contradiction between the demands of the animal and of the rational man, — he sees it in the whole structure of the world.

He sees that the world, the material world, such as it is, is not only not the best of worlds, but, on the contrary, might have been quite different, — this idea is strikingly expressed in *Horla*, — and does not satisfy the demands of reason and of love; he sees that there is a certain other world, or at least there are the demands for such a world, in man's soul.

He is tormented, not only by the irrationality of the material world and the absence of beauty in it, but also by its lack of love, by its disunion. I know of no more heartrending cry of despair of an erring man who recognizes his loneliness, than the expression of this idea in the exquisite story, *Solitude*.

The phenomenon which more than any other tortured Maupassant, and to which he frequently returned, is the agonizing state of loneliness, the spiritual loneliness of a man, that barrier which stands between a man and others, that barrier which, as he says, is felt the more painfully, the closer the bodily contact.

What is it that tortures him? And what would he have? What destroys this barrier, what puts a stop to this loneliness? Love, not love of woman, of which he is tired, but pure, spiritual, divine love. and it is this that Maupassant seeks; toward this saviour of life, which was long ago clearly revealed to all, that he painfully tugs at the feters with which he feels himself bound.

He is not yet able to name what he is seeking, he does not want to name it with his lips alone, for fear of defiling his sanctuary. But his unnamed striving, which is expressed by his terror in the presence of solitude, is so sincere that it infects us and draws us more powerfully than many, very many sermons of love, which are enunciated with the lips alone.

The tragedy of Maupassant's life consists in this, that, living in surroundings that are terrible because of their monstrousness and immorality, he by the force of his talent, that unusual light which was in him, broke away from the world-conception of his circle, was near to liberation, already breathed the air of freedom, but, having spent his last strength in this struggle, perished without becoming free, because he did not have the strength to make this one last effort.

The tragedy of this ruin consists in the same in which it even now continues to consist for the majority of the so-called men of our time.

Men have in general never lived without an explanation of the meaning of the life they live. Everywhere and at all times there have appeared advanced, highly gifted men, prophets, as they are called, who have explained to men this meaning and significance of life, and at all times the men of the rank and file, who have no strength to make this meaning clear to themselves, have followed that explanation of life which their prophets revealed to them.

This meaning was eighteen hundred years ago simply, lucidly, indubitably, and joyously explained by Christianity, as is proved by the life of all those who have accepted this meaning and follow that guide of life which follows from this meaning.

But there appeared men who interpreted this meaning in such a way that it became nonsense. And people are as in a dilemma, — whether to recognize Christianity, as it is interpreted by Catholicism, Lourdes, the Pope, the dogma of the seedless conception, and so forth, or to live on, being guided by the instructions of Renan and his like, that is, to live without any guidance and comprehension of life, surrendering themselves to their lusts, so long as they are strong, and to their habits, when the passions have subsided.

And the people, the people of the rank and file, choose one or the other, sometimes both, at first libertinism, and then Catholicism. And people continue to live thus for generations, shielding themselves with different theories, which are not invented in order to find out the truth, but in order to conceal it. And the people of the rank and file, especially the dull ones among them, feel at ease.

But there are also other people, — there are but a few of them and they are far between — and such was Maupassant, who with their own eyes see things as they are, see their

meaning, see the contradictions of life, which are hidden from others, and vividly present to themselves that to which these contradictions must inevitably lead them, and seek for their solutions in advance. They seek for them everywhere except where they are to be found, in Christianity, because Christianity seems to them to have outlived its usefulness, to be obsolete and foolish and repellent by its monstrosity. Trying in vain to arrive by themselves at these solutions, they come to the conclusion that there are no solutions, that the property of life consists in carrying within oneself these unsolved contradictions. Having arrived at such a solution, these people, if they are weak, unenergetic natures, make their peace with such a senseless life, are even proud of their condition, considering their lack of knowledge to be a desert, a sign of culture; but if they are energetic, truthful, and talented natures, such as was Maupassant, they cannot bear it and in one way or another go out of this insipid life.

It is as though thirsty people in the desert should be looking everywhere for water, except near those men who, standing near a spring, pollute it and offer ill-smelling mud instead of water, which still keeps on flowing farther down, below the mud. Maupassant was in that position; he could not believe, — it even never occurred to him that the truth which he was seeking had been discovered long ago and was near him; nor could he believe that it was possible for a man to live in a contradiction such as he felt himself to be living in.

Life, according to those theories in which he was brought up, which surrounded him, and which were verified by all the passions of his youthful and spiritually and physically strong being, consists in enjoyment, chief of which is woman and the love of her, and in the doubly reflected enjoyment, — in the representation of this love and the excitation of this love in others. All that would be very well, but, as we look closely at these enjoyments, we see amidst them appear phenomena which are quite alien and hostile to this love and this beauty: woman for some reason grows homely, looks horrid in her pregnancy, bears a child in nastiness, then more children, unwished-for children, then deceptions, cruelties, then moral sufferings, then simply old age, and finally death.

And then, is this beauty really beauty? And the, what is it all for? It would be nice, if it were possible to arrest life. But it goes on. What does it mean, — life goes on? Life goes on, means, — the hair falls out and grows gray, the teeth decay, there appear wrinkles, and there is an odour in the mouth. Even before everything ends, everything becomes terrible and disgusting: you perceive the pasty paint and powder, the sweat, thee stench, the homeliness. Where is that which I served? Where is beauty? And it is all. If it is not, — there is nothing. There is no life.

Not only is there no life in what seemed to have life, but you, too, begin to get away from it, to grow feeble, to look homely, to decay, while others before your very eyes seize from you those pleasures in which was the whole good of life. More than that: there begins to glint the possibility of another life, something else, some other union of men with the whole world, such as excludes all those deceptions, something else, something that cannot

be impaired by anything, that is true and always beautiful. But that cannot be, — it is only the provoking sight of an oasis, when we know that it is not there and that everything is sand.

Maupassant lived down to that tragic moment of life when there began the struggle between the lie of the life which surrounded him, and the truth which he was beginning to see. He already had symptoms of spiritual birth.

It is these labours of birth that are expressed in his best productions, especially in his short stories.

If it had been his fate not to die in the labour of birth, but to be born, he would have given great, instructive productions, but even what he gave us during the process of his birth is much. Let us be grateful to this strong, truthful man for what he gave us.

Voronezh, April 2, 1894.

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