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Estaunie's Naturalistic Period and Spiritual Period

By BERTRAND LOGAN BALL, JR.*

Although Edouard Estaunié is not widely known outside of France, his novels are stimulating to study because of the great interest which his ideas have for those devoted to the quest of high moral and spiritual values. A popular writer in his own country during the 1920's, at the time of his election to the French Academy, he is still interesting today because of his evolution as a novelist. He began writing in the tradition of the naturalists who were essentially materialists and fatalists, but later, during his metaphysical or spiritual period, he developed toward a high spirituality and a clear concept of free agency or freedom of the will.

Edouard Estaunié (1862-1942) was born in Dijon, France, of a family of the upper middle class. A Jansenist gravity characterized the Languedocians of his father's side; ascetic tendencies ran strongly among the Burgundians of his mother's family. His father died before he was born. M. Monthieu, his maternal grandfather, took charge of his education. The boy was required to study assiduously, and he was not permitted to indulge in many distractions. He received love, encouragement, and understanding from his mother, who compensated in some measure for the sternness of M. Monthieu.

Estaunié prepared for a career in civil engineering which began in 1886, when he successfully passed the examination for the Administration of Post Offices and Telegraphs. He rose steadily to positions of importance, eventually becoming Inspector-General of the Administration of Telegraphs. During the first world war, the British government appointed him to a high post in telecommunications. After the war, he was called to Strasbourg by the French government to head a commission for the liquidation of German property in Alsace-Lorraine.

Despite this extensive and rigorous career in public life, he maintained a consistent literary career launched before he enter-

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ed public life with the publication in 1884 of his first literary work, *Symphonie en ut mineur*, a short lyric piece.¹ His literary vocation had been discovered by his mother when he was only seven years old. This precocious talent, modified by the scientific education which he received affected his early novels. He developed his psychological, critical, and artistic powers in the field of journalism. He contributed some seventy articles of criticism, in the field of art and literature, to three periodicals: *La Gazette Diplomatique*, *Le Mémorial Diplomatique*, and *La Revue des Musées*. In spite of his many responsibilities as a civil servant, Estaunié persistently set aside two hours in the middle of the day to work on his novels. He retired from government service in 1919 in order to devote more time to writing. He was elected to the French Academy in 1923. He died in Paris.

The novels, novelettes and short stories of Estaunié can be divided into two groups: those of the naturalistic period and those of the spiritual or metaphysical period. Estaunié himself acknowledges the validity of this dichotomy.

Dans ma vie de romancier il y a deux périodes bien distinctes qui correspondent à un changement métaphysique. La première va jusqu'à *La vie secrète* en passant par *L'empreinte* et *Le ferment*. La seconde est la période actuelle.²

The first period was naturalistic.

J'ai fait mes débuts de romancier en poeine époque naturaliste. J'avais écrit tout d'abord deux livres de science pure . . .³

Mes fortes études scientifiques m'avaient imprégné d'un positivisme éperdu que j'ai exposé plus tard dans *L'épave*.

Mais les deux ouvrages les plus caractéristiques de cette période furent successivement *L'empreinte* et *Le ferment* . . .

Dans *L'empreinte*, j'avais déterminé les effets d'une éducation religieuse trop forte et laissant insuffisamment place au libre arbitre, mais bientôt, dans *Le ferment*, j'étudiais au contraire les conséquences d'un enseignement purement scientifique, dans des esprits dépourvus du soutien de la morale.⁴

¹*Symphonie en ut mineur trouvée dans un carnet*. Plaquette published under the auspices of La Nouvelle Gaule, an ephemeral literary group, 1884. Re-published: *Semaine Littéraire* (Geneva), January 9, 1897, pp. 22-23.

²Robert Valette, "Entretien avec Edouard Estaunié," *Revue des Visages*, VI (March, 1928), p. 3. See also: Henri Villemot (ed.), "Quelques propos de M. Edouard Estaunié," *Bourgogne d'Or*, (December, 1933), p. 38.

³*Les sources d'énergie électrique* (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, 1895); *Traité pratique de télécommunication électrique (télégraphie-téléphonie)*, (Paris: Dunod, 1904).

⁴Valette, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

The principal works of this period are: *Un simple* (1891), *Bonne-Dame* (1891), *L'empreinte* (1895), *Le ferment* (1899), and *L'épave* (1901). *La vie secrète* (1908), although containing characteristics of naturalism, is more properly placed in the second period.

The naturalistic works are motivated by the concept that human beings are a product of heredity, environment, and the attendant circumstances of life; Hippolyte Taine termed these factors *race*, *milieu*, and *moment*. The dénouement of the novels of this period is an inevitable result of the interaction of these forces upon the individual.

Un simple concerns a young bourgeois of Toulouse, Stéphane Deschantres. He inherited weak health. His early environment hampered his physical and emotional growth; he was forced to study long hours without exercise and social contacts. Having lost his father, he was raised by a domineering mother, who treated him alternately with effusive tenderness and unreasonable severity. His schoolmates teased him unmercifully because he was awkward, timid, and slow of mind. During the summer of his nineteenth year, he and his mother sojourned in the country. The daily contact with nature strengthened his health and hastened his emotional and sexual maturity. Sensual desires awakened within him, causing him to feel excited and guilty at the same time. He eventually discovered that his mother was carrying on a clandestine love affair with a married cousin. Stéphane's delicate and sensitive nature was shocked so deeply that, failing in his attempt to persuade her to leave her lover, he ended his life by drowning himself in a river. The dénouement is an inevitable result of the forces of heredity, environment, and circumstances acting upon the protagonist over a period of time.

Léonard Clan, the hero of *L'empreinte*, was an orphan raised at the Jesuit school of Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague at Nevers. He had inherited keen intelligence and sensitivity. His early environment developed his religious nature to the utmost; pressure was brought upon him by the Jesuits to enter their order. His intelligence, however, recognized the inadequacy of the academic instruction which he was receiving and the underhanded methods of his teachers. His pride refused to submit to a rule of absolute obedience to one's superiors. Upon graduation, he rejected the priesthood and left for Paris. Having lost

his religious faith, he turned to social reform. He wrote a few articles and aspired to give a series of lectures. Yet his Jesuit education had neglected to stimulate his intellectual curiosity and to develop within him the ability to examine documents and ideas with scientific objectivity; he lacked the prerequisites for becoming an effective social leader. He lost the opportunity to give the lectures because of a plot against him on the part of his former teachers. His contempt for women made him unfit for marriage. His religious nature craved a faith which he could not find in a society of agnostics and materialists. After the death of his only close friend, Léonard returned to Nevers and decided to enter the Jesuit order in an attempt to regain his lost faith.

Julien Dartot, the protagonist of *Le ferment*, was a peasant who had inherited the ugliness of his father. As an engineering student in Paris, he came to scorn his peasant background. Studying diligently, he dreamed of a life of prestige, luxury, and pleasure which he would lead after graduation from the Ecole Centrale. Once he had received his diploma, however, he was unable to find a position in Paris and was obliged to accept a mediocre factory job in Belgium. He felt that society had treated him unjustly since he had made the effort in school to achieve success and wealth and yet had been denied these rewards in the outside world. Upon the death of his father, he inherited a small amount of money which he risked at gambling. Having won a fortune, he returned to Paris to engage in dishonest financial manipulations and avenge himself on the world. He soon rose to rank and wealth.

Determinism is expressed many times in the naturalistic novels. Nature is conceived as a vast accumulation of matter and energy, of force and equilibrium, in a constant state of flux. Man is a tiny, unimportant part of the universal scheme of things. His mind and body are subject to mechanical laws. The concept of good and evil is only a figment of his imagination.

L'homme ne vit que par la nature; il n'est que pour la servir. Elle le façonne, l'élève; docile, plein d'illusions, il obéit, accomplit son rôle et, modifiant les énergies disponibles, concourt à l'oeuvre commune de transformation.

Regardez encore de plus près: il n'y a partout que justice. Rien ne se perd ni ne se crée, dit un axiome de physique: chaque force, quelle que soit sa nature, rencontre une autre

force qui lui est égale. Notre être misérable n'échappe pas à l'universalité de la loi. Matière et esprit subissent les mêmes nécessités mécaniques. Il n'y a, je le répète, ni bien ni mal; il n'y a que des forces et des équilibres.⁵

It must be borne in mind that the protagonists of the novels of the naturalistic period, although products of heredity, environment, and circumstances, are not the character-types created by Zola. They are not symbolic representations of a whole social class. They are not conceived in terms of instincts and primitive emotions. On the contrary, they are individuals, unique and different from others; they are sensitive beings, endowed with intelligence and strong wills. Estaunié carefully analyses their thoughts and emotions in the course of his narratives, noting the manner in which they react to their environment.

The second phase of Estaunié's literary development may be termed spiritual.

"La seconde partie de ma vie littéraire," reprend Edouard Estaunié, "que commence à partir de *La vie secrète*, est due à une crise métaphysique. Je venais de découvrir la solitude intérieure et le silence—l'impossibilité d'atteindre le mystère de notre destin.

"Nous nous étendons en surface, mais pas en profondeur, de là l'idée que la science ne joue pas un rôle absolu, et ne nous conduit pas, Voyez-vous, nous sommes enveloppés d'inconnu. Il y a des forces agissantes, en dehors de nous-mêmes et qu'on n'a pas encore déterminées. La rupture entre la matière et les forces intellectuelles n'existe pas. Le trait d'union est encore l'inconnu."⁶

The principal works of the spiritual period are: *La vie secrète* (1908), *Les choses voient* (1913), *Solitudes* (1917), *L'ascension de M. Baslèvre* (1919), *L'appel de la route* (1921), *L'infirmes aux mains de lumière* (1923), *Le labyrinthe* (1924), *Tels qu'ils furent* (1926), and *Madame Clapain* (1931). The chief characteristics of these works is the emergence of spiritual phenomena, such as the soul, the "secret life," and solitude, as dominating realities in Estaunié's universe.

The concept of the soul as an entity separate from the body is first developed in *La vie secrète*. Spiritual health is regarded as determining physical health. One of the characters, Dr.

⁵*L'empreinte* (Paris: Perrin, 1895), pp. 268-269.

⁶Valette, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Pontillac, states: "J'estime qu'en tout temps, la santé de l'âme commande au corps."⁷

Extrasensory perception is a notable feature of the writings of the spiritual period. The characters are sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others, even though they do not communicate with them through the five senses. In moments of crisis, souls have recourse with direct contact. "A certains moments, la parole cesse de compter: on n'est plus sensible qu'au peuplement de l'air par l'invisible émanation des âmes."⁸

M. Lormer, in *L'appel de la route*, loved his daughter so intensely that when her attitude toward him changed, he sensed it immediately.

Si par hasard vous avez aimé, ce dont je vous plaindrais, fallait-il que vous *vissiez* pour apprendre quand on était las de votre présence? Vous le sentiez! Ce que l'on sent est autrement certain que ce que l'on voit. Sentir, c'est happer l'impondérable, tâter l'invisible, atteindre là où le regard ne pénètre pas. Dans un doute poignant, je vous le demande, est-ce vos yeux que vous consultez ou la perception intime, continue, que la raison méprise et qui, heureusement, veille à sa place pour notre garde?⁹

Adèle Doublet and her daughter, Aurélie, characters of *Tels qu'ils furent*, had such apprehension toward the future that their emotion filled the atmosphere of their house.

Il est très difficile d'expliquer pourquoi une maison change, et même en quoi elle change. Il est cependant incontestable qu'à certains moments et tout d'un coup, sans que rien soit modifié dans le train de vie ou l'aspect matériel des choses, l'atmosphère se transforme, l'air vibre autrement, chacun rôde d'une pièce à l'autre sans les reconnaître, et la paix coutumière fait place à une irrésistible anxiété.¹⁰

The souls of the dead communicate with the living. M. Baslèvre, the protagonist of *L'ascension de M. Baslèvre*, learned to love Claire Gros in a pure and unselfish way. Her death brought them closer together spiritually. Claire's soul accompanied M. Baslèvre wherever he went, counseling and guiding him. The protagonist of *Madame Clapain*, Ida Cadifon, learned

⁷*La vie secrète* (Paris: Perrin, 1908), p. 312.

⁸*L'appel de la route* (Paris: Hachette, 1930), p. 280.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰*Tels qu'ils furent* (Paris: Perrin, 1927), p. 86.

the reason for the suicide of her boarder, Madame Clapain. She kept the secret for which the latter had sacrificed her life and gained a spiritual joy which transfigured her former self. Once, she saw the dead woman before her, peacefully speaking to her of the rewards of self-sacrifice.¹¹

Things, that is the material possessions of the characters, become vessels which receive their souls. The innermost emotions and desires of individuals are preserved in these things forever. Three pieces of furniture in an old house in Dijon witness violent and tragic events occurring over a period of three generations. The clock, the mirror and the desk are witnesses to a crime and its expiation. It is their recollections which form the basis of the novel entitled *Les choses voient*.

Solitude is the most important phenomenon in all of the novels of Estaunié, both those of the naturalistic period and those of the spiritual period. The importance of solitude lies in the decisive effect which it exercises on the lives of the characters. In the naturalistic novels, solitude was conceived as the result of heredity, environment, and circumstances. Stéphane Deschantres' solitude was due to his naïveté and timidity, stemming from weak health and early environmental conditions. Léonard Clan's solitude was developed as his keen intelligence and sensitivity were fashioned in such a way that he could not adjust to the outside world. Julien Dartot's solitude arose from his feeling of inferiority at being an ugly peasant.

In the spiritual period, solitude is conceived as a transcendent reality imposed upon all men. It is not essentially derived from heredity or environment. It stems from the very nature of man and the universe. In the spiritual novels, solitude is first conceived in terms of the "secret life." This phenomenon is defined and described in the novel *La vie secrète*. The "secret life" is the spiritual force which rules the human soul and determines its destiny. Human beings experience it as the love which they have for some activity or some person, perhaps themselves. It remains unknown to others, for each person is walled in by his own emotional and spiritual nature. For a long time it appears that the "secret life" does not exist; it is masked by conventional behavior. Suddenly it bursts forth, upsetting the life of the individual. Great joy comes to those who forget themselves to give unselfishly to others; destruction is

¹¹*Madame Clapain* (Paris: Perrin, 1932), pp. 322-326.

the punishment reserved for those who persist in striving solely for personal gain.

To illustrate the manner in which the "secret life" works, let us examine the life of three characters in *La vie secrète*. They are inhabitants of the village of Montaigut in the Haute-Garonne. Noémi Peyrolles, a wealthy middle-aged spinster, was outwardly austere and unyielding; inwardly, she was passionately attached to her struggling young nephew, the illegitimate son of her brother. Although she had paid for part of her nephew's education, she had refused to have any social contact with him. Now he came to her as a poor young doctor who needed money for his tubercular mistress, who was expecting a child. He had been too poor to marry her. In order to help him financially and gain his affection, Noémi had to overcome the jealousy she felt toward the other woman and renounce her narrow religious and moral views. After a struggle, she yielded to the call of her heart and gained great joy.

M. Taffin, the benign village priest, was inwardly tormented by solitude. His loneliness was relieved by worshipping a local saint, whom he imagined to be a beautiful woman pouring out her love to him. When a noted hagiographer declared this local saint as unworthy of sainthood, the weak faith of M. Taffin gave way completely and he determined to leave the priesthood. Before he could carry out his intention, however, he was called to bring spiritual comfort to some suffering parishioners. He became more clearly aware of his responsibilities toward others and the comfort that he could bring them even though he did not have a strong faith himself. He decided to remain in his post.

M. Lethois, a middle-aged recluse, had spent years secretly observing the habits of ants in the hope of gaining prestige and wealth as a scientist. But a fatal illness carried him away before he could finish his research. The reward of his selfishness was suffering and death.

The phenomenon of the "secret life" is interrelated with solitude and suffering, which hold Estaunié's attention in later novels. Solitude results from the passionate attachment of a person to an activity, or more commonly, to a person whom he desires to possess completely. Pierre Jauffrelin, the hero of "Les Jauffrelin" (a part of the trilogy *Solitudes*), loved his wife in such a way.

Aimer n'est pas seulement se sentir soulevé par le désir d'une femme; ce n'est pas uniquement avoir l'obsession de ses lèvres et la hantise de son corps: c'est posséder les pensées qui fleurissent en elle et les images de ses songes; c'est, la cherchant dans ses yeux, s'y retrouver comme dans un miroir sans cesser pourtant de l'y apercevoir.¹²

Such a possessive and selfish love made Pierre feel completely alone. He saw his wife's face as an impenetrable mask concealing feelings and thoughts which he would never know.

Some of Estaunié's characters are able to escape the anguish of solitude. They must renounce possessive love and think only of giving.

S'il [l'amour] fabrique du bonheur, ce n'est jamais pour lui, mais seulement pour l'autre. Il ne prend rien: il donne tout. J'ai souvent imaginé qu'on pouvait aimer un être désespérément, sans presque l'approcher, sans parfois qu'il le soupçonne. Qui sait si un grand amour muet n'est pas la plus belle fleur qui ait jamais paré une âme humaine? Qui sait aussi quelle ivresse intime peut sortir d'un tel sacrifice où rien n'a été sacrifié que soi-même?¹³

The love of M. Baslèvre, the protagonist of *L'ascension de M. Baslèvre*, for Claire Gros was both spiritual and physical. Since Claire was married to another, the physical expression of love would have been selfish and immoral. M. Baslèvre was able to overcome his physical lust and his jealousy toward Claire's husband; he contented himself by serving her. Since their love became entirely spiritual, it could not be destroyed by death. After her demise, her invisible presence accompanied M. Baslèvre everywhere, advising and directing him.

Estaunié's characters all suffer from solitude. He focuses his attention upon the suffering caused by solitude in *L'appel de la route*. Three friends gathered in a café after the first world war. They discussed the problem of suffering. One claimed that it was unjust; another insisted that it was incomprehensible; and the third asserted that it was merely not understood. In order to illustrate his contention, each friend told a story. But the three stories concerned the same people and the same events. Without knowing it, each friend had been witness to a different phase of the same chain of events. The third

¹²*Solitudes* (Paris: Perrin, 1917), p. 211.

¹³*L'Ascension de M. Baslèvre* (Paris: Perrin, 1919), p. 181.

story concluded with an exposition concerning the effect of suffering on human lives: it detaches people from the life which they know and focuses their attention upon the more important life beyond the grave. Thus, suffering itself is the "call of the way." It called the characters from their egocentric earthly life to a greater spiritual life beyond.

In the spiritual period, destiny is a transcendent force, logical and implacable. It is external, however, and independent of the will and psychological proclivities of the characters. It influences them in their thoughts and actions, but it does not take their free agency from them. Noémi, one of the characters of *Les choses voient*, was a young woman who lived in the house of her employer, Marcel Clérabault, and kept his accounts. Her desperate love for this middle-aged man was of no avail; he had made up his mind to marry another young woman. Noémi felt certain there must be some way to change disaster to triumph. Following a hunch, she took a pile of old letters out of the kitchen cupboard. They had been written by Marcel's deceased wife to her lover. Upon a sudden inspiration, Noémi changed the date of one of the letters so that it would appear as if written by Marcel's present fiancée, who had the same name as his deceased wife. Noémi's actions, abetted by the invisible force of destiny, set off a chain reaction of violence and death which was not expiated until the third generation.

Fate may also insinuate itself into the life of a character in direct opposition to his conscious desires, but not perhaps in opposition to his subconscious desires. Jean Pesnel, the protagonist of *Le labyrinthe*, struggled in vain to pay off the debts of his deceased father. A miserly aunt died; since she had left no will, her fortune went by default to Jean, the nearest relative. He repaid the creditors joyously, satisfying his wounded pride. But he was uneasy in his aunt's mansion; he felt the presence of her hostile spirit. One night, in looking through some old books, he found a holograph will written by his aunt on a slip of paper; she had left her entire fortune to her private maid, Alice de Vaubajour. He visited Alice and, finding her beautiful in spirit and in body, he married her and gave her the legal right to his fortune. In this way he hoped to assuage his guilty conscience. But the deep love that united the two was marred by Jean's selfish calculation. Although he eventually told her of the existence of the will, he could not efface in her

the suspicions that he had aroused in trying to conceal the truth. The lovers wandered in a perpetual labyrinth of anxiety and doubt.

For Estaunié, the past is a spiritual force as well. It resurges in the lives of the characters to establish justice and bring retribution. Noémi Peyrolles' brother, Oscar, had left home to lead a dissolute life. His mistress became pregnant, but Oscar's father refused to permit the marriage or succor the expectant mother. Noémi, however, sent money secretly and continued to support partially the illegitimate nephew, Marc, as he grew to maturity. She never permitted him to visit her, however, for she felt that he did not belong to her social class. By dint of hard work, he became a doctor, but was too poor to marry the woman he loved. His mistress became pregnant, and at the same time was suffering from tuberculosis. Marc appealed to his aunt for aid. She was now a lonely middle-aged spinster who craved his constant presence. Yet her moral and religious scruples would not permit her to help him.

Ils [Noémi et Marc] s'étaient levés. Ils criaient: le passé! En même temps, ils tendaient les poings vers lui, comme s'il venait d'entrer; et c'était vrai qu'il était là, témoin tragique revenu à vingt ans de distance et sans changement. Etait-ce Marc ou son père qui revendiquait ainsi la liberté d'épouser sa maîtresse? Lequel des deux invoquait ici le droit de l'enfant? Rien n'avait changé, ni la pièce où ils parlaient, ni le costume noir de Mlle Peyrolles, ni même les personnages: celle-ci à peine blanchie, Marc si pareil au mort qu'il semblait celui-ci rajeuni.

Frémissante, Mlle Peyrolles retomba sur sa chaise. Qu'il y eût dans ce retour une justice souveraine, qu'après avoir tant fait souffrir, elle souffrît à son tour par les mêmes moyens, cela ne la frappait pas.¹⁴

Noémi had to sacrifice her moral convictions and acknowledge in her heart the injustice of her former attitude. Only by doing this and by giving her nephew the money which he needed did she gain the peace and joy which she craved.

As we have seen, the spiritual novels presuppose the existence of spiritual phenomena which impinge upon the lives of the characters without depriving them of their free agency. Noémi Peyrolles and M. Baslèvre freely chose to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others, just as M. Lethois and

¹⁴*La vie secrète*, p. 263.

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Pierre Jauffrelin deliberately chose to remain selfish. The actions of the characters are rewarded or punished according to transcendent spiritual laws. Thus Estaunié as a novelist evolved from a concept in which determinism, in the form of heredity and environment, played a major role in the characters' lives to a concept in which free agency, against a backdrop of spiritual laws and forces, functioned to determine the characters' destiny.