

THE TRAVAILS OF FRANCOIS
Some insights from French Literature

An essay

On a bright Wednesday afternoon in the small town of Forcalquier, finishing a light lunch and enjoying the gentle air of Provence, I become aware of something amiss around the restaurant. The few men who came in an hour ago and sat at the bar, discussing soccer scores and local politics, are lingering there with no thought of returning to work. Two tables near me are occupied by middle-aged people who have finished their coffee. They make no move to get up and resume some activity. Bored, they light cigarettes and just stare at the far-away mountains. The square in front of us looks lost and deserted. Something is wrong here, as in those end-of-the-world science fiction movies where everything just hangs hopelessly.

One of President François Hollande's commitments shortly after assuming power in May 2012 was to "reverse the curve of unemployment." The number of people seeking jobs had risen from two million in 2008 to three million, close to 10% of the labor force, amidst a crisis variously blamed on Americans, on the policies of Nicolas Sarkozy, or both. In August 2014 the figure had climbed to 3.4 million and showed no sign of "reversing" itself. The idle men who shuffled into the *café-restaurant* in Forcalquier were testimony to this enduring disaster.

As usual with French politics, there is no lack of theoretical advice from economists, exhortations from the Left and proclamations from the Right. In the meantime the agony of long-term unemployment strikes very deep, from factory workers and truckers to the middle class, company managers and even well-trained graduates from elite business schools. Some unemployed are content to get a welfare check every month like the men around me lighting their third cigarette, while many have stopped looking for work altogether -- further distorting the statistics. The crisis is real, it now strikes most families, and the very notion of work is in question.

Productivity is actually quite high in France, although difficult to measure across boundaries: A bloated public sector absorbs over 55% of the gross national product (the figure continues to grow under Hollande) and its maintenance in the circumstances to which bureaucrats have become accustomed demands the highest tax burden on families among European nations. This

creates a dissonance and an image of working life at odds with the reality one finds in offices and factories. As fantasy takes over it is striking to observe how French culture in general distorts, belittles or even ignores the world of work.

Indeed one of the secrets of French literature is that its protagonists are generally free from the need to find and hold any kind of gainful employment. In the classical novels that are supposed to sculpt the little brains of French pupils nobody does any work. Madame Bovary doesn't set her alarm clock to be on time at the Peugeot factory.

A systematic critique of the French literary corpus reveals an imaginal universe where the value and indeed the need of work have been eliminated.

In *La Révolte des Anges*, that delightful jewel by Anatole France, Maurice d'Esparvieu, age 25, "doubts that any profit might flow to a man from all his activity under the sun." The author adds indulgently, "He never over-exerted himself. Since his tenderest childhood, this family scion studied the avoidance of study."

In *Gigi*, by Colette, Aunt Alicia "survived from rental income she claimed to be modest." In other words, she had never worked a single day in her life, and wasn't feeling any worse for it.

In Victor Hugo's writings the only people who do work are the ugly Quasimodo and the despicable Inspector Javert. André Gide, in *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, confesses he had the leisure to "sink into overwhelming accesses of languishment that were not healed by sleeping. I went to bed after eating; I slept, I woke up even more tired, the mind benumbed as in a metamorphosis."

Having read this, the American student or the Japanese salaryman who attempts to grasp French culture may form an image of a country filled with vague sugary delights where everyday life is made up of a thousand secrets hidden from those who, like them, must *make a living*.

Take the index of the book by Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, and try in vain to find any mention of the great writer's means of existence. Between "Renoir, Auguste" and "Revue de Paris, La" you will not find the word "*Revenus*" but only "Réservoirs, hôtel des – (Versailles)."

During the autumn of 1914 Marcel Proust decided to cut off all links with an ugly world, canceling his telephone subscription. His chambermaid writes:

"Inside, he may have explained, as was reported, that he was ruined. That was an excuse. What is certain is that it didn't stop him from continuing his other expenses according to his fancy."

An American investigator, trained to "follow the money" in Watergate fashion, would blunt his

logic against such characters. *Money? What money?*

A few French novels do show us characters who identify with the world of labor. Unfortunately they only confirm the rule: Their lives are nothing but a series of disasters. We could mention *Germinal*, which plumbs the depth of the tragedy of exploitation among the proletariat, but even more hopeful novels like Hervé Bazin's *La Tête contre les Murs* illustrate the point, depicting individual liberty in a futile fight against the complexities of modern life. The main protagonist, Gérane, is a scatterbrain whose existence consists in a series of fugues and petty thefts. He tries to settle down. He finds a job in a farm. Bad idea: The Gendarmes are after him. He ends up outside society, or rather behind its bars, at Sainte Anne hospital for the insane or in prison. One gets the impression that he isn't being punished so much for breaking the law as for ignoring the rules of French literature: If he hadn't tried to hold a job he could've run free across the land.

What can we say about *L'Immoraliste*? This young man works, or rather he studies. At first Michel, a would-be scholar, publishes a few papers. "I reached my 25th year without knowing that we were wealthy. I imagined, without thinking about it much, that we just had enough to live."

His father dies. He is the only heir. His life as a literary protagonist under Gide's pen really begins when he no longer has to work: "I came to despise within myself that science which was once my pride. These studies that once were my whole life, they only seemed to retain an accidental, conventional relationship with me. I found myself to be different and I existed—O joy!—outside of them."

O Joy! Here we touch the hidden spring of French classics, in that cry that is a confession.

Michel reaches Syracuse, where he wallows among vice and poverty. He scatters "the small change I had in my pockets." Indeed he observes that "Man's poverty is slavish. In order to eat, he accepts work that brings no pleasure. Any work without pleasure is detestable, I thought, and I would pay for several of them to rest. I used to say, 'don't work, it only bores you.' I was dreaming for everyone to have that leisure without which nothing novel, no vice, no art can blossom."

Later on, Michel returns to Tunisia. He meets again with the young men he once knew as adolescents. Lo! They have been forced to earn a living: "So much ugliness on these faces where

such youth was blooming! What labors have so soon damaged these beautiful bodies?” Michel sees his friend Agib again; he has become a butcher. “He gets fat, he is ugly, he is wealthy...How stupid one becomes in an honorable career!”

Only one is still handsome: Moktir, just coming out of jail.

Gide, Proust, Bazin, Colette, isn't that an old story? Library shelves are loaded with their books; every word they've written has been analyzed; dissertations are read at the Sorbonne about their every thought, figure of style and emotion; they inspire references in the speeches of politicians. But they wrote in an era when aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois were still a significant part of French society. One could be an intellectual while living well from dividends and rents in those days, which is rare in contemporary life. Literature must adapt to the reality of work.

The idea is logical. And wrong. In the novel by Houellebecq : *Plateforme*, the French best-seller of 2001, we read on page 30 about the thoughts of his protagonist, Michel, as he boards the train back to Paris after the funeral of his father, assassinated by a fanatical Islamist:

“Oddly, it is at that moment that I first became aware that I was about to become a rich man; well, relatively speaking. The wire transfer from my father's account had already taken place.”

Two pages later, as he imagines a discussion with his banker, he concludes: “In summary, I didn't need to entertain too many worries anymore.”

The other Michel, the one in *L'Immoraliste*, would have cried: “O Joy!”

Both have inherited from a father about whom little needs to be said, who worked his whole life.

François Hollande, like Nicolas Sarkozy before him, presides over a country where the idea of work triggers diametrically-opposite reactions: a strong desire to participate in the life of society (and be rewarded for it) contrasted with a sense of injustice among hard-working private sector employees who bear the burden of national productivity; and a contradiction between over-achievers who aspire to control the economy and the growing numbers of disenfranchised who reject a System they see as deeply unfair—or get rejected by it. Given the lack of social mobility in modern France, the lure of intellectual and economic freedom gets translated into social movements demanding earlier retirement, greater perks, generous pensions and lifetime

employment—privileges that are found today in the French public sector, but are unheard-of among the private sector. Why should we be surprised to find an increasing number of Frenchmen seduced by the freedom for which characters like Michel (the Michel of Gide or the Michel of Houellebecq) have provided the model?

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