REALIST MANIFESTO / МАНИФЕСТ РЕАЛИЗМА

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INTRODUCTION

Writers of each era always need to give back to the public what the public has given to them, and the writer is never as happy or popular as when the public has asked a lot of him, and they have given a lot back. The more he takes from people surrounding him, the more he is a genius. This is exactly what made Molière the best poet in the world; for none has surpassed him in borrowing from human nature, from its vices, its absurd behaviours, its passions, its hates, its loves. Fortunately for future borrowers, even if the core of humanity remains the same, the outer shell always changes, boundless in variations. Each century, what are we saying, each year has its own morals and characters (types); each twenty-four hours humanity rearranges its absurd behaviour and its vices, just as a pretty young lady rearranges the frills and laces of her dress, her jewellery and her gloves; and we miss so much, given that the clothing sellers have Sibylline books just to daily record their empire’s revolutions; why don’t we also, being a frivolous people volatile by excellence, have a register recording all these subtle and revelatory nuances, yet so faithfully reflecting our everyday morals? It is La Bruyère who said it, and he should know: there is not a single year in which the follies of men could not furnish an entire volume of characters (types). And if you please, if only such a book had been written following Theophrastus’ last works, can you think of a story which was more varied, full, charming, animated by various characters and most of all true? Indeed not, historians, forgetting the human species, have entertained themselves by recounting sieges, battles, cities captured and ransacked, peace and war treaties, various untrue, bloody, and futile stories; they have recorded how men fought but not how they lived; they have taken care to describe their armour while neglecting their everyday coat; they have paid at-

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tention to laws but not to morals; they have done so much and it is to their det-
ritment that these miserable seven thousand years, which make up the exist-
ence of civilised man, have been wasted as far as observing and recording
morals is concerned.

Indeed, count how few moralists have attempted to enter into these simple
details of everyday life. See how few comical poets there are compared to the
number of logicians, metaphysicians or even theologians who debate matters
of conscience. In the animated representation of a people’s morals and charac-
teristics, ancient society only lives on through Homer, Theophrastus, Plato and
Terence; modern times rely on Molière and La Bruyère, two light-hearted yet
serious representers of our public life; one is the people’s historian, the peo-
ple’s friend; the other, the court’s historian with which he was far from friend-
ly. From time to time, following these two great masters, we find some subal-
tern writers: Sainte-Fox and Mercier, for example. But among these ‘building
painters’, what shallow and careless judgments we find! How these valets of
history minimize the depth of their poor heroes at will by reducing them to
minuscule proportions! They scribble lines with a trembling hand on the
kitchen wall, but I prefer the satirical writers, a fierce and uneducated race, it
is true, but which nevertheless arrives at a certain resemblance of life which
resembles history in their brutal pages. It is like the fatal knife’s stab resembl-
ing the saving knife’s cut. But seriously! We are not responsible for writing
the history of moralists: we only want to find out how to leave behind a little
something of what we would call the people’s private life; because in the end,
all of us who are alive today will one day become part of posterity. We think
lowly of ourselves, but this is higher than our actual worth, we need to fall
head first into this gaping chasm which we call history and end up absorbing
eternity and God with it. Therefore, given we are still currently at the edge of
this chasm, let us take care to favourably fall into the abyss; our feet may slip,
we may experience vertigo, and then we would fall just like drunk or slumber-
ing cads.

Just think about it, the day will come when our grand-children will want to
know who we were and what we did back then, how we dressed, what cloth-
ing our women wore, what our houses looked like, our habits, our delights,
and what the eternally changing and fragile concept of beauty meant to us.
They will want to know everything about us. How did we mount a horse?
How did we set the table? What were our favourite wines? What was our fa-
vourite type of poetry and did we powder our hair or wear thigh boots? Our
descendants will openly ask us a million other questions we dare not foresee,
which would make us die of shame, as if they were the most natural questions
in the world. This thought already haunts us.

Nevertheless we must bear this burden, my fellow men: what you do and
say today will one day be history. In a hundred years they will speak of won-
drous things such as your bitumen squares, your little steam boats, your sub-
standard railroads, your dimly lit gas lights, your narrow theatre rooms, your
modern dramas which are so bland, the vaudevilles whose comedy is so re-
served and chaste. In that future time one will hear of a capital having ab-
sorbed its whole kingdom, attracting all the fortune and beauty, all the intelli-