HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Anatole France (1844-1924)

Anatole France was a serious language gamester, for whom games of the word mind often served to bring out sober truths and bitter actualities. He was at best an agnostic toward traditional Christian belief, and toward expected responses, at least a trickster, who at many points simply refused to be pinned down. One of the author's thought ploys was the animal fable, which like many classical and modern authors he used as a vestment for hard thinking. At the doorstep of his own tradition he had the example of Lafontaine, the late seventeenth century genius of fabliaux animaux, to guide him through his imagination. Think back to such animal fables as the Fox and the grapes, which is alleged to go back to the time of Aesop. How simple it is. A fox is hungry. He climbs a tree or bush from which he spies a juicy bunch of grapes. Impetuous with hunger he throws himself on the grapes, only to find himself embedded in a thicket of brambles. But he cries to himself, who would ever want to eat grapes like those all sour and wrinkled. The psychology at work here could not be more simple, exemplifying as it does the whole contempt we feel for what juicy fruits turn ugly on us.

The witty in the French intellectual s that of Anatole France's Penguin Island. Wit and sarcasm flourish together in such a tradition. We are invited to imagine a French monk who has wandered into Arctic territory on his saving mission. Right there, of course, there surges an outburst of irony. What is irony if not counterfactual discourse, assertion that flies in the face of probability. Why do we play along with the ironic impulse, even while knowing that we are being played with? Is it not that we make a silent contract with the author of our interest? Why, otherwise, do we answer yes to France's invitation to PLAY? It is, presumably because we want to be teased and included in the author's universe, for we rub here against a peculiarity of the modern author that he longs to establish an intimate relation with his reader. The same cannot be said, for instance, of pre modern authors, like the playwrights of classical Greece or Rome. Think of Sophocles in Oedipus the King. The audience are expected to play the same role, as participants, as are the characters, Teiresias and Laius and Jocasta, who live in a distance of tale to which the spectator is given no access, let alone an 'invitation to play, to banter with the author.' Take Vergil's Aeneid, in which the intensity of passion, between Dido and Aeneas remains a closed and private affair between the two lovers. Anatole France aspires to draw you into his tale, in high spirit, and wits. The rollicking tale which follows, plucking at the reader's coat sleeves, inserts that same reader blithely into the absurdities of the human experience. Particularly strident attention is laid, toward the end of this invitation to PLAY on the savage modernization of the themes with which the novel ends. Here we are at the Dreyfus affair, thrashing lustily through the miasma of racial cynicism, and openly self-interested politics. We night as well be in a contemporary Divine Comedy, thrashing out at the whole planet of follies and loves.

Anatole France remains playful, witty, and cynical to the end. When we complete his bumpy ride through the centuries, we are drawn back to the wry near sighted monk with whom we began our adventure to Penguin Island. Who is this monk but the world perceiving old professor Anatole. Are we are not left with the sense that we take from that inscribed granite on the facade of the Yale Library, that we are 'born with the gift of laughter and a sense that the world is mad.'