

# Edgar Quinet

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**EDGAR QUINET** (1803-1875), French historian and man of letters, was born at Bourg-en-Bresse, in the department of the Ain, France, on the 17th of February 1803. His father, Jerome Quinet, had been a commissary in the army, but being a strong republican and disgusted with Napoleon's usurpation, he gave up his post and devoted himself to scientific and mathematical study. Edgar, who was an only child, was much alone, but his mother (Eugenie Rozat Lagis, who was a person of education and strong though somewhat unorthodox religious views) exercised great influence over him. He was sent to school first at Bourg and then at Lyons. His father wished him on leaving school to go into the army, and then suggested business. But Quinet was determined upon literature, and after a time got his way. His first publication, the *Tablettes du juif errant*, appeared in 1823. Being struck with Herder's *Philosophie der Geschichte*, he undertook to translate it, learnt German for the purpose, published his work in 1827, and obtained by it considerable credit. At this time he was introduced to Cousin, and made the acquaintance of Michelet. He had visited Germany and England before the appearance of his book. Cousin procured him a post on a government mission to the Morea in 1829, and on his return he published in 1830 a book on *La Grèce moderne*. Some hopes of employment which he had after the revolution of February were frustrated by the reputation of speculative republicanism which he had acquired. But he joined the staff of the *Revue des deux mondes*, and for some years contributed to it numerous essays, the most remarkable of which was that on *Les Epopées françaises du XI<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, an early, though not by any means the earliest, appreciation of the long-neglected *chansons de geste*. *Ahasverus*, his first original work of consequence, appeared in 1833. This is a singular prose poem, in language sometimes rather bombastic but often beautiful. Shortly afterwards he married Minna More, a German girl with whom he had fallen in love some years before. Then he visited Italy, and, besides writing many essays, produced two poems, *Napoleon* (1835) and *Prométhée* (1838), which being written in verse (of which he was not a master) are inferior to *Ahasverus*. In 1838 he published a vigorous reply to Strauss's *Leben Jesu*, and in that year he received the *Legion of Honour*. In 1839 he was appointed professor of foreign literature at Lyons, where he began the brilliant course of lectures afterwards embodied in the **Two** years later he was transferred to the College de France, and the *Genie des religions* itself appeared (1842).

Quinet's Parisian professorship was more notorious than fortunate, owing, it must be said, to his own fault. His chair was one of Southern Literature, but, neglecting his proper subject, he chose, in conjunction with Michelet, to engage in a violent polemic with the Jesuits and with Ultramontanism. Two books bearing exactly these titles appeared in 1843 and 1844, and contained, as was usual with Quinet, the substance of his lectures. These excited so much disturbance, and the author so obstinately refused to confine himself to literature proper, that in 1846 the government put an end to

them - a course which was not disapproved by the majority of his colleagues. By this time Quinet was a pronounced republican, and something of a revolutionist. He appeared in arms during the disturbances which overthrew Louis Philippe, and was elected by the department of the Ain to the Constituent and then to the Legislative Assembly, where he figured among the extreme radical party. He had published in 1848 *Les Revolutions d'Italie*, one of his principal though not one of his best works. He wrote numerous pamphlets during the short-lived Second Republic, attacked the Roman expedition with all his strength, and was from the first an uncompromising opponent of Prince Louis Napoleon. He was banished from France after the *coup d'etat*, and established himself at Brussels. His wife had died some time previously, and he now married Mademoiselle Asaky, the daughter of a Roumanian poet. At Brussels he lived for some seven years, during which he published *Les Esclaves* (1853), a dramatic poem, *Marnix de Sainte-Aldegonde* (1854), a study of that Reformer in which he very greatly exaggerates. Sainte-Aldegonde's literary merit, and some other books. He then moved to Veytaux, on the shore of the Lake of Geneva, where he continued to reside till the fall of the empire. Here his pen was busier than ever. In 1860 appeared a singular book, somewhat after the fashion of *Ahasverus*, entitled *Merlin l'enchanteur*, in 1862 a *Histoire de la campagne de 1815*, in 1865 an elaborate book on the French Revolution, in which the author, republican as he was, blamed the acts of the revolutionists unsparingly, and by that means drew down on himself much wrath from more thoroughgoing partisans. Many pamphlets date from this period, as does *La Creation* (1870), a third book of the class of *Ahasverus* and *Merlin*, but even vaguer, dealing not with history, legend, or philosophy, but with physical science for the most part.

Quinet had refused to return to France to join the liberal opposition against Napoleon III., but immediately after Sedan he returned. He was then restored to his professorship, and during the siege wrote vehemently against the Germans. He was elected deputy by the department of the Seine in 1871, and was one of the most obstinate opponents of the terms of peace between France and Germany. He continued to write till his death, which occurred at Versailles on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1875. *Le Siege de Paris et la defense nationale* appeared in 1871, *La Republique* in 1872, *Le Livre de l'exile* in the year of its author's death and after it. This was followed by three volumes of letters and some other work. Quinet had already in 1858 published a semi-biographic book called *Histoire de mes idees*. Quinet's character was extremely amiable, and his letters to his mother, his accounts of his early life, and so forth, are likely always to make him interesting. He was also a man of great moral conscientiousness, and as far as intention went perfectly disinterested. As a writer, his chief fault is want of concentration;

as a thinker and politician, vagueness and want of practical determination. His historical and philosophical works, though showing much reading, fertile thought, abundant facility of expression, and occasionally, where prejudice does not come in, acute judgment, are rather (as not a few of

them were in fact) reported lectures than formal treatises. His rhetorical power was altogether superior to his logical power, and the natural consequence is that his work is full of contradictions. These contradictions were, moreover, due, not merely to an incapacity or an unwillingness to argue strictly, but also to the presence in his mind of a large number of inconsistent tastes and prejudices which he either could not or would not co-ordinate into an intelligible creed. Thus he has the strongest attraction for the picturesque side of medievalism and catholicity, the strongest repulsion for the restrictions which medieval and Catholic institutions imposed on individual liberty. He refused to submit himself to any form of positive orthodoxy, yet when a man like Strauss pushed unorthodoxy to its extreme limits Quinet revolted. As a politician he acted with the extreme radicals, yet universal suffrage disgusted him as unreasonable in its principle and dangerous in its results. His pervading characteristic, therefore, is that of an eloquent vagueness, very stimulating and touching at times, but as deficient in coercive force of matter as it is in lasting precision and elegance of form. He is less inaccurate in fact than Michelet, but he is also much less absorbed by a single idea at a time, and the result is that he seldom attains to the vivid representation of which Michelet was a master.

Bibliography.-His numerous works appeared in a uniform edition of twenty-eight volumes (1877-79). His second wife, in 1870, published certain *Memoires d'exil*, and *Lettres d'exil* followed in 1885. In that year Prof. George Saintsbury published a selection of the *Lettres a sa mere* with an introduction. For many years Quinet received little attention in France, but it was revived, though not very strongly, by the publication in 1899 of Madame Quinet's *Cinquante ans d'amitie* (that between her husband and Michelet), and by the centenary of his birth. On this latter (1903) appeared *A l'occasion du centenaire*, by E. Ledrain; see also *Libres Penseurs religieux*, by E. Paris (1905). There is in English an elaborate *Early Life and Writings of Edgar Quinet*, by R. Heath (London, 1881). (G. SA.)