

ANATOLE FRANCE THE LITERARY LIFE (1888-1893)

"The Adventures of a Soul." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 656.

The Adventures of a Soul

In France's view, "criticism is, like philosophy and history, a kind of novel" (656). Because "every novel, rightly understood, is an autobiography" (656), France argues, the "good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul among masterpieces" (656). France maintains that there is "no such thing as objective criticism any more than there is objective art" (656). All those who "flatter themselves that they put aught into their work are dupes of the most fallacious illusion" (656). The reason for this is that "one never gets out of oneself. That is one of our greatest miseries" (656):

What would we not give to see, if but for a minute, the sky and earth with the many-faceted eye of a fly, or to understand nature with the rude and simple brain of an ape? But just that is forbidden us. We cannot, like Tiersias, be men and remember having been women. We are locked into our persons as into a lasting prison. The best we can do, it seems to me, is gracefully to recognise this terrible situation and to admit that we speak of ourselves every time that we have not the strength to be silent. (656)

Hence, France's conclusion: that the critic "ought to say: 'Gentlemen, I am going to talk about myself on the subject of Shakespeare, or Racine, or Pascal, or Goethe – subjects that offer me a beautiful opportunity'" (656).