

# THE MASTERS OF MODERN FRENCH CRITICISM

BY

IRVING BABBITT

*Professor of French Literature  
in Harvard University*

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*“La critique universelle est le seul domaine  
qu'on puisse assigner à la pensée délicate,  
fuyante, insaisissable du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.”*

RENAN.

## PREFACE

WHAT I have tried to do in this volume is not to criticise criticism, at best a somewhat languid business, but to criticise critics, which may be a far more legitimate task, especially if the critics happen to be, as in the present case, among the most vital and significant personalities of their time. Matthew Arnold speaks in one of his sonnets of "France, famed in all great arts, in none supreme." Yet elsewhere he accords to Sainte-Beuve a supremacy in the art of criticism of the same order as that of Homer in poetry. That Arnold was the last man to underestimate a supremacy of this kind we may infer from the familiar sentence in his essay on translating Homer: "Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort."

To study Sainte-Beuve and the other leading French critics of the nineteenth century is therefore to get very close to the intellectual centre of the century. We may thus follow the main movement of thought through this period and at the same time build up the necessary background for the proper understanding of the ideas of our own day, whether they continue this earlier thought or react from it.

The so-called anti-intellectualist movement of the present time especially can only be understood with

reference to such a background; it is a reaction from the dogmatic naturalism that reached its height in the second half of the nineteenth century, a sign that the world is growing weary of scientific positivism and its attempt to lock up reality in its formulæ. The walls of that particular prison house of the spirit are plainly crumbling. Parts of the edifice have been collapsing of late with almost dramatic suddenness. We must rid ourselves of all forms of the metaphysical illusion (including the scientific form), says M. Bergson, perhaps the chief spokesman of the new tendency, and so make philosophy vital. This attempt of philosophy to escape from mere intellectualism is in itself highly laudable. With the older type of metaphysician ordinary mortals felt that they had very little in common. They could at most address to him the Virgilian query:—

“*Quid struis? aut qua spe gelidis in nubibus haeres?*”

But the philosophers have of late been coming out of their chilling clouds of abstraction. They have been growing literary, so literary, in fact, that the time would seem to have arrived for the men of letters to return the compliment and become to the best of their ability philosophical.

The literary critic especially should be willing to meet the philosopher halfway, if it be true, as I have tried to show in this volume, that they are both confronted at present by the same central problem. For, to inquire whether the critic can judge, and if so by what standards, is only a form of the more general inquiry

whether the philosopher can discover any unifying principle to oppose to mere flux and relativity. We are told by the new school that any attempt on the part of the intellect to unify life and impose upon it a scale of values is artificial, and that we must oppose to this artificial unity our vivid intuitions of change, of the infinite otherwiseness of things. Now, however little we may accept the whole of this thesis, we must grant that M. Bergson — and James, as it seems to me, even more than M. Bergson — has rendered a substantial service to philosophy in thus turning its attention to what Plato would have called the problem of the One and the Many. Most people, James admits, do not lose much sleep over this problem, yet he is right in thinking that all other philosophical problems are insignificant in comparison. If philosophy once gets firmly planted on this ground, it may recover a reality that it has scarcely possessed since the debates of Socrates and the sophists. Instead of the intricate fence with blunted foils to which the intellectualists have too often reduced it, we may once more see the flash of the naked blade.

In their dealings with the problem of the One and the Many, both M. Bergson and James have adopted, it would seem sufficiently plain, not the Socratic but the sophistical side of the argument. I have expressed my own conviction in the following pages that what is needed just now is not merely a reaction from scientific positivism (that we are getting already), but a reaction from naturalism itself. By this I mean that we should

effect our escape from intellectualism not by sinking below it, after the fashion of the Bergsonians and pragmatists, but by rising above it, and this would involve in turn a use of the Socratic and Platonic method of definition. Instead of reducing the intellect to a purely utilitarian rôle, as M. Bergson does, we should employ it in multiplying sharp distinctions, and should then put these distinctions into the service of the character and will. If we are told that in order to get at reality we must abandon intellect for intuition, the obvious reply is that only by means of the intellect can we lay the proper foundations for a philosophy of intuition. In short, the word intuition itself is very much in need of being treated Socratically. If I have contributed even in a small degree to dissipate the dangerous sophistries that are accumulating so rapidly around this word in contemporary thought, I shall be satisfied. I have tried to show, especially in the essays on Joubert and Taine, that the term intuition is not simple but complex, that there are different orders of intuitions. Good sense itself, according to Dr. Johnson, is intuitive, and this is a kind of intuitiveness of which we stand in special need at the present crisis; for this word is not too strong to apply to a time when the philosophy of the flux is proclaimed so confidently and received with so much applause. This same naturalistic vertigo, we may remember, seized upon ancient Greek society at the very height of its achievement and marked the first downward step towards the abyss. "Too many of our modern philosophers in their search after the nature of things," says Plato in words

that might have been written yesterday, "are always getting dizzy from constantly going round and round; and then . . . they think that there is nothing stable or permanent, but only flux and motion, and that the world is full of every sort of motion and change."

I have just said that to study the chief French critics of the nineteenth century is to get very close to the intellectual centre of the age. I am of the belief, however little I may have justified it by my practice, that this question of the One and the Many, on which all the other main aspects of our modern thought finally converge, may be studied to special advantage in connection with these critics. I have aimed, however, to estimate the work of each critic in itself and not to study it simply as part of an intellectual development. To this end I have made a very liberal use of quotation, on the principle laid down by Sainte-Beuve: *Avec des citations bien prises on trouverait dans chaque auteur son propre jugement*. In such a way one may stand aside and let the authors speak for themselves.

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# THE MASTERS OF MODERN FRENCH CRITICISM

## I

MADAME DE STAËL

THE first year of the nineteenth century was appropriately marked by the publication of Madame de Staël's "Literature considered in its Relations to Social Institutions." This relationship between literature and society upon which the new century was to insist more than any previous century had been forced upon its notice by the very suddenness of its separation from the past. As Stendhal was to say later: "How could you expect a man who had been on the retreat from Moscow to care for literature written for the men who had taken off their hats at Fontenoy to the English column and said, 'Fire first, gentlemen'?" "Nothing in life should be stationary," wrote Madame de Staël in the "Germany," "and art is petrified when it no longer changes. Twenty years of revolution have given the imagination other needs than those it felt when the novels of Crébillon portrayed the love and society of the time."<sup>1</sup> Chateaubriand, at variance with Madame de Staël on so many other points, agreed with her that men's charac-

<sup>1</sup> *De l'Allemagne*, 2<sup>e</sup> Partie, c. xv.

ters had been profoundly transformed by the Revolution and that literature should reflect this transformation.

We should err, however, in supposing that the public in general at the beginning of the nineteenth century felt the need of changes in art and literature to express a changed society. The Empire as a whole was a period of artificiality and formalism. This would seem less strange if those who had learned nothing and forgotten nothing politically had alone shown zeal in maintaining the Old Régime in literature. On the contrary, the men who had innovated most rashly in other ways were often conspicuous for their literary conservatism. Men who had toppled over altars and beheaded a king were ready to kneel down superstitiously in the little Temple of Taste;<sup>1</sup> like Byron who, according to Goethe, showed no respect for any law human or divine except the law of the three unities. An occasional writer who felt a new spirit stirring vaguely within him, and set out to be original, only succeeded in becoming odd. Thus Népomucène Lemerrier (Népomucène le Bizarre), after precipitating a bloody riot by the liberties he took with the unities and verbal decorum in his play "Christophe Colomb," afterwards declared in his "Cours de littérature," that a tragedy must fulfil precisely twenty-six rules<sup>2</sup> or conditions under penalty of ceasing to be.

The society of the Empire, made up as it was largely

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Merlet, *Tableau de la Littérature française, 1800-1815*, III, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Cours analytique de littérature générale* (1817), I, 179. Comedy must observe twenty-two rules, epic twenty-three.

of parvenus and of persons whose education had been broken off abruptly by the Revolution, was almost naïvely willing to be schoolmastered. It wished to get on the easiest terms that tincture of humane literature that was deemed necessary not only to good taste but to good breeding. Hence no doubt the popularity during the first twenty or thirty years of the century of the "Lycée" of La Harpe, the last eminent critical authority of the Old Régime; for no one was better fitted than he to give a first general initiation into literary tradition. Sainte-Beuve calls the critics of the Empire the small change of Boileau—Boileau, conceived, of course, after the late neo-classical fashion, as the policeman of Parnassus, the vigilant guardian of literary orthodoxy. Sainte-Beuve points out that they had not only the limitations but the merits of the older type of critics: they were preëminently judicial. They felt themselves supported, moreover, in their judgments by a public opinion that had grown weary of the chaos and anarchy of the Revolution, and are even less important in themselves than as the mouthpieces of this opinion.<sup>1</sup>

Geoffroy, the representative critic of the period, was fitted by his past to play the pedagogue. He had been professor of "eloquence" at Paris before the Revolution and taught school in the village where he concealed himself during the Terror. Geoffroy, however, cannot be dismissed as a mere political and literary reactionary, though in a sense he was both. He makes frequent use of the historic method and is guided in his actual judg-

<sup>1</sup> See the whole article in *Causeries du Lundi*, I, 371 ff.

ments even more by vigorous good-sense than by a regard for formal requirements. At the age of fifty-eight, he created a new *genre*, the dramatic feuilleton, and for twelve years ruled the playwrights and actors of his time with a rod of iron. Like Jeffrey, with whom he has been compared, he belongs only partly to the old critical order by his method, but entirely to it by his temper, which was hard, imperious, and vituperative. According to an epigram, he died as a result of having sucked inadvertently the tip of his own pen.<sup>1</sup> His violence, like that of his opponents, is due to the same poisonous intrusion of politics into literature that one finds at about the same time in England. No wonder that a man who has to repel almost daily charges of venality and gluttony should in the long run become pugilistic. Quite apart from politics, however, Geoffroy believed in the virtues of *la critique amère*; and something may as a matter of fact be said in behalf of a tonic bitterness in criticism. Unfortunately, he not only flourished the ferule too openly, but had against him the deeper currents of his time. He stood at most for a minor movement of concentration in an age which was in its underlying tendency expansive, and which, caring little for discipline, aspired towards a vast widening out of knowledge and sympathy. Of this underlying expansive tendency the true representative is Madame de Staël.

<sup>1</sup> "Nous venons de perdre Geoffroy.

— Il est mort ? — Ce soir, on l'inhume.

De quel mal ? — Je ne sais — Je le devine, moi ;

L'imprudent, par mégarde, aura sucé sa plume."

## I

It has been said that the rôle of Madame de Staël was to understand and make others understand, that of Chateaubriand to feel and teach others to feel; which is only another way of saying that Chateaubriand is more intimately related to romanticism than Madame de Staël. That "unnatural amount of understanding" in Madame de Staël of which Schiller complained sets her sharply from the romanticists and connects her with the eighteenth century. Her style is of that age; it lacks, however, the epigrammatic neatness of the eighteenth century before Rousseau, and though not always free from the sentimentality and declamation that the late eighteenth century had caught from Rousseau at his worst, it lacks the imaginative freshness and warmth of coloring of Rousseau at his best. It has its own merits as a medium for conveying ideas, but it is deficient in both the old art and the new poetry.

Madame de Staël belongs no less decisively to the Old Régime in preferring society to nature and solitude. Napoleon, in his ten years' duel with her, discovered that he could inflict sufficient torment simply by keeping her at a distance from Paris. She was especially impatient with those who suggested that she had a compensation for her enforced absence from the capital in the panorama of the Alps that unfolded itself before her at Coppet. She spent years in the presence of this panorama, as has been pointed out, without receiving from it the suggestion of a single image. However, her often quoted remark that she would travel five hundred

leagues to meet a man of parts, but would not open her window to look at the Bay of Naples, gives a somewhat exaggerated idea of her indifference to nature.

In spite of her excess of understanding, her love of the drawing-room and her comparative coolness towards nature, Madame de Staël is nevertheless a disciple of Rousseau. We merely need to define carefully this discipleship. She might have said, though in a somewhat different sense from Rousseau, that "her heart and her head did not seem to belong to the same individual." Like Renan she was fond of attributing the conflict of which she was conscious in herself to a mixed heredity. "To be born a French woman," she says, "with a foreign character, with French taste and habits and the ideas and feelings of the North, is a contrast that wrecks one's life."<sup>1</sup> In the "Germany" Madame de Staël says that Rousseau introduced an alien element into French literature, an element that is Northern and Germanic. Now the element that Madame de Staël conceived to be common to Rousseau and herself and at the same time to distinguish the Germans, manifests itself especially in the power of "enthusiasm." She is, then, not only temperamentally an enthusiast, but also an enthusiast by the direct influence of Rousseau as well as by the Rousseauism that she received from Germany.

The more we study the literary revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the more it becomes plain that everything hinges on the word enthusiasm. The romantic movement in its modern phase is even

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Friederike Brun, July 15, 1806.

more a renascence of enthusiasm than a renascence of wonder, or rather wonder itself is only one aspect of the new enthusiasm. The process by which the word enthusiasm itself changed in the course of the eighteenth century from a bad to a good meaning, by which the enthusiast and original genius supplanted the wit and man of the world, is one of the most important in literary history and can scarcely be traced too carefully.

Illuminating passages on the nature of the new enthusiasm and at the same time on Madame de Staël's relationship to Rousseau will be found in her very youthful "Letters on the Writings and Character of Jean-Jacques Rousseau." "Is it not in our youth," she exclaims in the preface to that work, "that we owe the most gratitude to Rousseau, to the man who succeeded in making a passion of virtue, who wished to convince by enthusiasm and made use of the good qualities and even the faults of youth to render himself its master." Elsewhere she says that "he invented nothing but set everything afire"<sup>1</sup>—even to the point it would appear of setting virtue afire. Virtue thus becomes an involuntary impulse, a "noble enthusiasm," a "movement which passes into the blood and sweeps you along irresistibly like the most imperious passions."<sup>2</sup> In other words, for Madame de Staël as for Rousseau, virtue is a mere process of emotional expansion, related to the region of impulse below the reason rather than to the region of insight above it. Rousseau and his followers introduce universal

<sup>1</sup> *De la Littérature*, 1<sup>e</sup> Partie, c. xx.

<sup>2</sup> *Discours préliminaire de la Littérature*.



confusion into morality, as Joubert says, by thus conceiving of virtue not as a bridle but as a spur. Of Madame de Staël in particular, he said that she had a native ethical gift which was corrupted by her notion of enthusiasm. "She took the fevers of the soul for its endowments, intoxication for a power, and our aberrations for a progress. The passions became in her eyes a species of dignity and glory."<sup>1</sup>

It would not, however, be entirely fair to Madame de Staël to see in her conception of morality a mere Rousseauistic intoxication. The two ruling passions of her life were hatred of Napoleon and love for her father, and as she grew older she showed herself more and more not merely the daughter but the disciple of Necker. Both her rationalism and her emotionalism were tempered by the traditional views of morality and religion of the Swiss protestant. In her political thinking again, both on her own account and as a follower of her father, she departed from Rousseau in putting her chief emphasis on liberty. In the very passage where she says that Rousseau invented nothing but set everything afire, she goes on to say that "the sentiment of equality which produces many more storms than the love of liberty, and which causes questions to arise of a quite different order, — the sentiment of equality in its greatness as well as in its pettiness stands out in every line of Rousseau's writings." Rousseau was nearer to the French in this respect than Madame de Staël. In making the love of liberty the mainspring of the Revolution, she was

<sup>1</sup> *Pensées*, 387 (édition Paul de Raynal, 1866).