

EXTRAITS DE CHATEAUBRIAND

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Extraits de Chateaubriand by Robert L. Sanderson

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ROBERT L. SANDERSON

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LES AVENTURES DU DERNIER ABENCÉRAGE.—PASSAGES
TIRÉS DU VOYAGE EN AMÉRIQUE—D'ATALA—
ET DES MÉLANGES LITTÉRAIRES

SELECTED AND EDITED WITH NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

FRANCOIS RENÉ DE CHATEAUBRIAND was born at Saint Malo, in Brittany, September 4, 1768. His childhood and part of his youth were spent in the ancestral manor of Combourg, between a morose and gloomy father and an affectionate but scolding mother. Left a great deal to himself, he indulged his dreamy and contemplative nature, his sole diversion being the listening to the wonderful ghost-stories and knight-legends that the folklore of Brittany is so rich in. He found, however, a companion in his sister, the sweet and graceful Lucile, of the same melancholy nature as her brother, and who first divined in him the poet.

After having intended to enter the navy, then the Church, Chateaubriand went into the army, joining the regiment of Navarre as sub-lieutenant. Previous to this, he seems to have conceived a disgust for life, this being probably the result of his long solitary meditations; although he tells us himself that "he believes that he felt the wearisomeness of life from his mother's womb." He was not yet twenty when he resolved to end his existence; and already the barrel of his gun was turned towards his breast, when the arrival of a gamekeeper stopped him in his rash act.

The Revolution broke out, and Chateaubriand appears

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to have been indifferent to the stirring events taking place about him. Seized with the passion for travels, he started for North America. He tells us that his object was to discover the polar passage on the north-western side of the American continent; more likely is it, that, already weary of the society of men, he sought solitude.

The reader curious to know the various feelings that filled the young man's breast at this epoch of his life, should read *René*. *René* is Chateaubriand himself.

He did not stay long in the cities,—just long enough in Philadelphia to visit Washington; he was longing to get to the forests, the great plains.

In this ardent love of nature it is easy to recognize the pupil of J. J. Rousseau. His mind filled with the teachings of this writer, like him believing that happiness and innocence could be found only among savages, and accusing civilization of man's wretchedness and vices, Chateaubriand resolved to live, for a time at least, with the Indian tribes.

Here it was that he revelled in the beauties of primeval nature. No French writer, perhaps no writer, modern or ancient, ever described with such richness of color and depth of sentiment, the beauties he had constantly before his eyes. His *Journal* is full of descriptions of long nights passed under the canopy of the forests, either watching the moon's rays gliding through the foliage, or listening to the distant rumble of the storm, the moan of the wind, the awakening of nature in early morn. He speaks of these things as a lover would of his *inamorata*, as one who is in constant communion with nature.

From his early youth, Chateaubriand had been steeped in the reading of the Bible and Homer, and he felt, more than any other French writer, perhaps, the poetic simplicity of patriarchal manners. This will account for his style, which has been criticised as affected, sentimental, and his language as metaphorical.

Having learned, through an English paper, that Louis XVI. had fled and been arrested, and that the royal princes, who had left France, were gathering around them the French nobility, Chateaubriand returned at once, in January, 1792. He never accepted the grand principles of '89; he saw in the king only a martyr. It should be said, also, that having lost several members of his family on the revolutionary scaffold, it was hardly to be expected that he would entertain admiration for the new state of things. He immediately took service in *Condé's* army. He was left for dead in an engagement and succeeded, with the utmost difficulty, in reaching London. He was then twenty-five. Here he lived for several years, a most precarious life, doing translation work in the day-time; studying and writing at night for himself. Many passages in the book he produced at this epoch, *Essai sur les Révolutions*, show the bitterness of his heart, caused by poverty and exile.

The spirit of the times was one of unbelief; it did not, however, entirely destroy Chateaubriand's faith; it may be said that his reason refused to believe, but that his heart and imagination remained religious: a thing that may probably be said of many men. His mother's death seems to have been the one event that drove away his remaining doubts. "I wept," says he, "and I

believed." From that time Chateaubriand conceived the project of rehabilitating the Christian religion, that had so severely suffered from Voltaire's attacks. When he returned to France, in 1800, he brought with him his masterpiece, *le Génie du Christianisme*, but waited some two years longer before publishing it. In the meantime, however, in order to prepare public opinion for the coming of his great work, he detached from it the episode of *Atala*, that has been gracefully compared to the dove of the Ark, set at liberty to graze, with its white wings, the world just coming out of the Revolution, and seek a resting place for the Ark.

Le Génie du Christianisme is not the work of a theologian or even a philosopher. It is the work of a poet, whose mind is not so much dominated by Christian dogma, as his imagination is affected and heart touched by the remembrances of the Catholic worship, its ceremonies, churches, pilgrimages. "On Sundays and festival days," says Chateaubriand in *René*, "I have often heard in the great forest, through the trees, the sound of the distant bell, calling to church the man of the fields. Leaning against a young elm, I would listen silently to this pious murmur. Each quivering of the bronze bell brought to my simple heart the innocence of rustic life, peacefulness of solitude, charm of religion, and the sweet melancholy of my childhood. Oh! what man, however depraved, has not felt his heart beat faster on hearing the bells of his native place! . . . There is everything in the enchanting *rêveries*, in which the sound of the native bell throws us: religion, family, country, both the cradle and the grave, and the past and the future."

The keynote of the whole book (*le Génie du Christianisme*) is this: that while the enemies of the Church denounce the Catholic religion as hostile to progress, Chateaubriand discovers in that faith the all-powerful cause of modern civilization; the only bulwark raised against barbarism, the promoter of all social improvements, and at the same time the inspirer of all sciences and arts.

The story of *René*, like that of *Atala*, was inserted in the first editions of *le Génie du Christianisme*. The character of *René* is extremely complex; it is easier to understand him than to define him. *René* is one product of the Revolution, a bitter fruit. He is not the type of the haughty and jesting skeptic who ridicules everything that others respect or believe in. His is a melancholy skepticism; he sees all the disasters and crimes that the Revolution has caused, but he sees nothing else; no good has come of the Revolution; for him, everything is destroyed, society, traditions, principles, religion; he has not the courage to help in the social reconstruction; he does not know where to lean upon for support; he sees no light to guide him, no hope. This *René* is Chateaubriand himself; but he was not alone of this kind; Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, Byron's *Childe Harold* and *Manfred* belong to this same large class of disenchanted and disillusioned individuals. Chateaubriand said in his *Mémoires* that "if he could have destroyed *René* he would have done so," recognizing himself the evil influence of this book; for the number of men who fancied themselves *Renés*, was incalculable. They gave themselves up to a selfish and idle melancholy which seemed to them the noble