SELECT ESSAYS OF SAINTE-BEUVE: CHIEFLY BEARING ON ENGLISH LITERATURE

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CHARLES AUGUSTIN SAINTE-BEUVE

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Trieste

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OF

SAINTE-BEUVE

Chiefly Bearing on English Literature

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

A GOOD many years ago the present translator ventured to speak a little disrespectfully of a remark of Sainte-Beuve's. When, therefore, in pursuance of a suggestion made by a well-known authority on English literature, who is also great in the councils of University Extension, he was asked to undertake the task of producing a translation of such of the eminent French critic's essays as might, it was thought, be of interest to many students of English literature, it seemed that the hand of Nemesis was at work. Nay, it was manifest in the very matter of the penalty. The remark referred to was part of a sentence in which it was said that to read Dante attentively almost inevitably meant wanting to translate him. Now, to read Sainte-Beuve attentively means inevitably wanting *not* to translate him. It may be true, as Bonstetten said, that in French you have to reject ten thoughts before coming to one which you can clothe properly; but when that one is clothed, how well its clothes fit! 'To read good French,' wrote a master of English once to the present writer, 'almost makes one despair of ever expressing one's self properly.' Still worse is

the case of him who has to express another man's thoughts in words which he is not allowed to select for himself. It is not so much that there is any difficulty in finding words for their words, though *esprit* is no doubt as bad as Mr. Courthope rightly holds Pope's *wit* to be. French has the strength of its weakness. Poor in words, it is forced to use those which it possesses with great precision; and it is the dexterous arrangement of words in a sentence that forms the translator's pitfall—all the more insidious from the very fact that the equivalent words may often stand in just the same order in English without positive violation of grammar, though to the utter detriment of 'style,' and dilution or distortion of sense.

Still, it must be admitted that those who deemed the attempt worth making have the author's own judgement on their side. It is probably more universally true in France than in England that, as he says, works written in a foreign language are only really read when they have been translated: most of us can read French, though few of us can speak it. But even of the most fluent readers it can hardly be doubted that the vast majority will read yet more fluently and with less waste of power by friction, in their own language, especially when the object is rather to learn what a writer has to say, than how he says it.

That what the French critic has to say about English literature will be of interest to English readers, few will deny. A great poet, whom it might be impertinent to call a living case of the converse to the dictum that critics are those who have failed in literature, but who is certainly less great as a judge of other men, has

thought fit in a recently-published work to assail Sainte-Beuve rather bitterly. The only inference we can safely draw from his language is that Sainte-Beuve is dead; but on better evidence we have reason to fear that, as often happens, the man deserves less esteem than the work. So far, however, as concerns the work by which he is best known, the two great series, that is, of the *Causeries du Lundi* and the *Nouveaux Lundis,* we can safely subscribe to the opinions expressed by Mr. Matthew Arnold and Mr. Saintsbury.

The method is not less instructive than the manner is attractive. The critic tries to put himself at the author's point of view; he allows for the influence of surroundings or, in modern slang, 'environment'; he honestly practises his own maxim that a critic's business is to discover talent. Of course he is not infallible. Even in the few essays which the present volume contains some instances of weak criticism may be found. We may question, for instance, the accuracy of his view that the highest degree of sensitiveness to poetic emotion is only possible to those who are themselves poets—if by poets is meant, as the context would imply, persons endowed with the faculty of writing poetry. Undoubtedly little or no inference can be drawn from the power of expression to the capacity for feeling, but if there be any relation it is just as likely to be in the other direction. When the two are combined in a high measure we have a great poet.

As a critic, Sainte-Beuve seems to claim our gratitude especially on two grounds. One is his insistence on the value of form. If it was true in the years when he was writing about Pope and Gibbon, Milton and

Cowper, that form and workmanship, orderliness and restraint were no longer reckoned at their true value, surely, in these days of 'naturalism,' 'impressionism' and what not, the caution is no less needed. When promising young men of letters can satisfy themselves (and editors) by hurling at the public the contents of their notebooks, in which they appear, like the King in Wonderland, to have been trying whether *unimportant* or *important* sounds best in the sentence, and rising poets admit into their more serious stanzas such hideous coinages as *belletrist* and *scientist*, or the happily ephemeral slang of ''Arry,' we do feel that the 'bad time for Pope and Horace,' which the French critic foresaw, has arrived, and that literature, which they and their like tempered and polished, is for the moment once more seething in the melting-pot, with a good deal of scum on the surface of some of the best metal.

The other point for which we have to thank him is his testimony to the great truth that all criticism of art as distinct from craft must be subjective. Seldom do we find him saying, 'this is right;' 'this is wrong.' He lets us see his own preferences, and gives his reasons for them; but he knows that there are no 'invariable principles of poetry,' more than of any other art, and that of all arguments 'ad hominem,' one of the feeblest is, 'You receive pleasure from A, therefore you cannot receive pleasure from B'; or, as it is more often worded, 'A is good, therefore B must be bad.' Let us by all means call upon all people to accept the definitions of the φρόνιμος, but always with the understanding that by the φρόνιμος, in matters of æsthetic criticism,

we mean the man who agrees with us. In spite of the etymology of his name, what makes the successful critic is, as Pope saw, not so much the judicial faculty, as the power of expression; not so much original thought, as the gift of reading the current thought of his moderately-educated contemporaries. Let him use this power and this gift with urbanity and good temper, and though his work will not last like the great creative works, he will do service to his generation and make an honest living.

The essays that have been included in the present volume are mainly those dealing with English literature. Sainte-Beuve had English blood in his veins, which perhaps accounts for his appreciation of certain points in English poetry which do not as a rule appeal to Frenchmen; and also for his power of estimating in some measure its literary form. The fragment on Bonstetten and Gray is extracted from a long essay on the rather remarkable career of the former. It should be said that Sainte-Beuve's habit of giving quotations (translated into French) without references, has made the task of identifying them somewhat laborious. It is hoped, however, that with one or two trifling exceptions all appear as the authors wrote them. In addition to the essays on authors, two, 'Qu'est ce qu'un classique' and 'D'une tradition littéraire,' are given as generally applicable to all literature. They deal with the same subject, but from slightly different points of view.

Notes in square brackets (and perhaps one or two where the brackets have been forgotten) have been inserted by the translator.