FOUR BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

IRVING BABBITT'S "THE MASTERS OF MODERN FRENCH CRITICISM"*

It is a truism that the thought of the day is either the flowering of an earlier decade or the violent reaction from a tendency. The intense intellectualism of a Taine, for example, has swung the pendulum through the chaotic impressionism of a Renan to the intuitionalism of a Bergson. Each of these attitudes toward life reveals currents which have been flowing with the thought of the century, and it is in tracing the growth and influence of these currents, as expressed in the critics, that Professor Babbitt's new volume is concerned. It

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is easy to see among these penetrating pages that he feels at times very keenly modern criticism, while it has broadened in knowledge and sympathy, has suffered a corresponding decline in judgment. Though the old criticism was narrow and dogmatic the impressionism of more recent date has entirely neglected the temperamental exclusions of a dilettanti. Scientific criticism, on the other hand, strove to press life into a formula—and life was killed in the process. Yet all these reaches of the human mind have cleared the way for a saner attitude toward the future. Naturalism, with its historical sympathy and scientific analysis, was a necessary corrective to the seraphic idealism of the past. In the midst of our readjustments to-day the search should be toward a standard which will oppose individual caprice—a standard "in the individual and yet is felt by him to transcend his personal self and lay hold of that part of his nature which he possesses in common with other men." It may be interesting to add that Professor Babbitt's ideal critic is one who will combine the spiritual elevation, vision and sense of union which Emerson possesses, with the versatility, breadth and the sense of difference to be found only in a Sainte-Beuve. Though the author looks ahead to this "golden impossibility" his main emphasis is upon the critics who have registered the passing spirit of the time and even if occasionally he seems himself guilty of pressing his criticism into a formula, the result is one of the most brilliant stimulating books possible. His power of phrasing and clear thinking serve to illumine the dusty corners of the subject he has chosen, and the book is all the more novel in that he has dwelt little on the easy appeal of mere biographical detail save as it serve to reveal the thought of the critic. And his endeavour throughout has been to give an estimate of each critic exclusive of his part in the intellectual development of the century.

It is obvious the Sainte-Beuve is the author's favourite critic and in some respects, as he points out, Madame de Staël anticipated him—especially in her feeling that if criticism does not judge it may at least reveal. Her expansiveness, too, both intellectually and emotionally, her interest in national psychology—with the accent upon nationality rather than individuality—contributed to make her the ideal cosmopolitan. Professor Babbitt adds: "She has done more than any one else to help forward the comparative study of literature as we now understand it." But he is careful to point out the danger of moral disintegration to a nation given to excessive cosmopolitanism. Joubert, her great contemporary, though "too resolutely traditional" yet hospitable in mind and feeling toward the future, held his standards in fluidity; but he spoke against the author of *Corinne* and a sympathy which was not ideally combined with selection. With Chateaubriand it was not sympathy, so much as beauty which took the reins. If, in Faguet's phrase, "he renewed the French imagination," he also mingled, as Professor Babbitt says, pseudo-classicism with a perception of form, and he aimed to enchant the imagination rather than convince the intellect. Professor Babbitt also protests against such romantic æsthetes like Rousseau, Ruskin and the author of *Génie du Christianisme* who set themselves up as religious teachers. Æsthetics cannot be a common ground for art and religion, and to believe it is to fall into the underlying romantic error "which may be defined as trying to make the things that are below the intellect do duty for those that are above it." But Chateaubriand, nevertheless, had real influence as a critic, since he showed that one must penetrate beyond the form of an art work to its soul, and since he gave, in addition, the art of local colour to the historical spirit.

We thus see history ceasing to be abstract and colourless and becoming concrete and expressive; we see it getting rid of its old artificial unity and cultivating instead a sense of the variable in human nature—a sense that is not tempered by any new and vital

perception of unity. Thierry possibly overstates Chateaubriand's influence upon himself and others. But it is evident that although Chateaubriand posed as a champion of the old order and the fixed standards it implied, by actual force of his example he helped forward to an important extent the main movement of the century in both history and literary criticism from the absolute to the relative.

But relativity found its true exponent in Sainte-Beuve, whom the author of *The New Laokoon* considers at great length. He, more than any other, reflected the great conflict between tradition and naturalism, which typifies the nineteenth century. Two dominant motifs run through his attitude toward life: the continual triumph of self-love and his theory of the "essential vice" or "master impulse." And it became part of his method to trace these in all he viewed. One comment, showing the influence of La Rochefoucauld, will suffice to explain part of his scepticism:

> What he saw on every hand was self-seeking that disguised itself under rose-coloured clouds of fine sentiments. There was Cousin, the apostle of the true, the good, and the beautiful, who nevertheless put no serious check on his own instincts of domination; Villemain, so great a talent and so great a wit, always professing generous, liberal philanthropic, Christian sentiments, and yet "the most sordid soul, the most mischievous ape alive;" Hugo, in whom he found only "the immense pride and infinite egoism of an existence that knows only itself;" Balzac, whom he had seen "exuding the intoxication with himself from every pore;" Chateaubriand, who posed part of the day as the author of the *Genius of Christianity* and devoted the rest of the day playing the elderly Don Juan. No wonder he made it an essential side of his method to "eschew the academic bust," and to suspect that under the fairest semblances and the finest draperies assumed by the men of his time there was something hollow.

Coupled with this scepticism was his unchecked curiosity which he drew from Bayle. Yet his tolerance—born of wide knowledge—warned him of the dangers which come to the mind if it narrows to a preconceived idea—a hint which Taine might have taken. Always sympathetic and comprehensive he, with time, gradually became judicial. Unanchored as he seems, in the last analysis he best illustrates the spirit of his age with its interplay of thought and feeling, for "if as a scientific naturalist he believed in progress (with certain reservations), as a humanist he believed in decadence." His greatest influence was as a relativist —"the doctor of relativity" he has been called—and he pathetically felt, in his own ultimate detachment, that the idea of unity could only come in comprehending everything.

If the author of the *Lundis* was the great particulariser, Taine, with whom his name is so often linked, was the great generaliser. His love of little facts and local colour were all subordinated to his love of formulæ, which led him to seek the master formula of a race, a nation or an individual. His style, too, "reflects his material age in that it conveyed the impression of sheer power rather than of grace and measure." He typified its frenzied intellectualism while rearing his edifice on the "domain of literal fact." As he was a disillusionised romanticist his greatest influence as a critic was in the realm of scientific positivism; but, his effort to be the "botanist of the human spirit" and to apply his scientific method to the soul as well as to the nation was not successful. For, as Professor Babbitt remarks, he forgot there is a fragment of every person which defies analysis, and thus he failed to grasp the mystery of personality. But he was a thorough stoic and best fitted to personalise the reaction from romanticism.

With Renan, on the other hand, we find impressionism dominant: and in his subtlety and dilettantism we see the newer spirit of modern criticism perfectly embodied. Beauty rather than the truth of religion claimed him and his marvellous power of getting into the direct feelings of the past pleased those who had been troubled by the scientific dogmatism

of the day yet looked backward. His epicureanism and dilettantism were not his only notes, for he retained his scientific faith and clothed it in religious emotion. From Anatol France and his other disciples we see exaggerated his tendency of making philosophy "only one's personal dream of the infinite, a mere romance of individual sensibility." This negation of the possibility of a fixed standard of judgment is savagely attacked by Professor Babbitt, who feels that Renanism, in spite of its rare beauty, is only a subtle form of intellectual corruption." He welcomes then the attacks of Brunetière, who, in his austerity, brought back to criticism its claim to judge. This eminent critic lived only in ideas and proclaimed the supremacy of the intellect in an age of frenzied subjectivity. But like Taine, he became the victim of a formula and tried to prove that the different *genres* evolved in much the same way as the animal species. This "literary Darwinianism" threw little facts to the winds and resulted in the furious attack on mere seekers of details —"the main fetish of modern scholarship —original research."

In the long concluding chapter much of the deductions mentioned in the first paragraph of this review are discussed in detail. One comment on Bergson—the man of the hour—may be added to and *correlated* with the author's feeling that we must achieve a reaction from naturalism itself by rising, with vision, above intellectualism, and not sinking below it.

If the main drift of the movement is to undermine scientific dogmatism, great confusion prevails as yet as to what is to be built upon the ruins.—The philosophy of Bergson, whatever its merits as an attack on scholastic science, is on its constructive side not humanistic, but at most pseudo-humanistic. It is a late birth of romanticism, allied with all that is violent and extreme in contemporary life from syndicalism to "futurist" painting. M. Bergson's appeal to "intuition" in particular has been hailed with delight by romantic dilettantes the world over. It has confirmed them in their existing belief that they do not need to justify rationally their random impressions, that they may go on indefinitely luxuriating in a decadent æstheticism. *Geoffrey Monmouth.*