

The Criticism of Chateaubriand
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THE CRITICISM OF CHATEAUBRIAND.

It must be a very universal maxim to suit all circumstances, and yet there is one which may be applied on all occasions—"Judge not" is the general motto. Take the actions of our nearest friends, and how little do we know of the hopes that instigated, or of the fears that prevailed! We sometimes cannot avoid owning that we ourselves have committed a fault, but how we gloss it over—how we take temperament and temptation into account, till at length it appears to be a thing inevitable—redeemed by the regret it has occasioned, and the lesson it has given. Not so do we reason for others—then we look to the isolated fact, not to the causes: the error shuts out the excuse. The truth is, we know nothing of each other excepting by the aid of philosophy and of poetry; philosophy, that analyzes our thoughts, and poetry that expresses our feelings. Little of the examination of the one, or of the tenderness of the other, enters into our daily opinions, and yet by them we alone know the hidden heart within. "Judge not" is the first great rule of the moral world; it is equally applicable to the literary one. Yesterday is constantly reversing the decree of to-day; our notion of our contemporaries is biassed in many ways—vanities, envyings, and prejudices, are things

"All taking many shapes, and bearing many names;"

but all alike shutting out the light. Time is the great leveller, but he is also the sanctifier and the beautifier. If our judgment, then, of our own literature be liable to so many objections, what must it be when we attempt to decide on that of a foreign nation; the maxim, "Judge not," must indeed be the first principle laid down. No stranger can enter into one great charm thrown around the poetry of every country—namely, that of association. Unconsciously to ourselves, we connect with our favourite writers the emotions which first made us seek in them for expression, and with the scenes amid which we turned their pages. Did we read them in summer, under the silver shiver of the aspen?—they have gathered to themselves the sunshine raining through the leaves, and the freshness on the open air. Were they our companions by the hearth-side on a long winter evening?—they are linked with pleasant memories of comfort and of home. It is impossible for a stranger to share these subtle sympathies, and yet their atmosphere is around the literature of every nation. But literary, like all other commerce, has its incalculable advantages: the merchant brings with him not only wealth, but knowledge. Communication is in itself civilization; we wear away our own prejudices only by contact with those of others. We are forced into making allowances, by seeing how much we need that they should be made for ourselves.

Chateaubriand says, in an admirable spirit of candour, "In living literature no person is a competent judge but of works written in his own language. I have expressed my opinion concerning a number of English writers; it is very possible that I may be mistaken, that my admiration and my censure may be equally misplaced, and that my conclusions may appear impertinent and ridiculous on the other side of the Channel." They can appear neither ridiculous nor impertinent; we

may, and we do differ from many of these conclusions, but we feel that they have been drawn by a clever man, and drawn, too, in a spirit of candour. If any man be entitled to form a judgment, that man is Chateaubriand. A poet himself, his whole life has been a poet's education, and he has studied our literature next to his own. But there is something in the French and the English character so essentially opposed, that it is impossible for them to understand each other. Now a nation's character is in its literature. Some writer says, "The great difference of the two nations is, that the one lives out of doors and the other in; the one thinks of the people that are looking at him, and the other thinks of himself." This principle will account for the frequent self-reference in these pages, which, however, has more the appearance than the reality of vanity. An Englishman is timid of drawing attention to himself—he is afraid of being laughed at; a Frenchman, on the contrary, relies on your indulgence. Chateaubriand believes that genius is a moral problem, which it is matter of general attraction to solve; and he submits rather than advances his pretensions to the public, with a quiet conviction of their interest, which an English writer, however successful, would be too well aware of his and our national characteristics, to adventure. The style of the author of "Atala" has no parallel in our literature—it is what supplies in France the place of blank verse; it is redundant in epithet and simile, many of which appear to us grandiloquent: for example, Shakspeare is called "the young butcher of Strafford." Again, speaking of our writers among the lower classes, he says, "At the present day it is a blacksmith that shines—Vulcan was the son of Jupiter:" the illustration is rather magnificent. By-the-by, to what blacksmith does he allude?—we must confess our ignorance. There is a curious little instance of the mistakes inevitable to foreign critics: Chateaubriand quotes, as a charming specimen of our simple ballad poetry, a stanza of a song:—

"Where tarries my love,
Where tarries my love,
Where tarries my true love from me?
Come hither my dove,
I will write to my love,
And send him a letter by thee."

He appears perfectly ignorant that the song is a burlesque. The lover receives the letter, but

"The generous youth,
Full of valour and truth,
Had not eaten a morsel that day;
So the pigeon he roasted,
His true love he toasted,
And mounted and gallop'd away."

A singular sample of the tender melancholy which marks our lyrics!

Chateaubriand's life has been that of a poet; a life, however, an exception to the general rule. He has known his share of toil and of trouble—he has been poor, proscribed, and imprisoned; still he is among those who,

"All their wand'rings past,
Have safe return'd to die at home at last."

There are few, very few, whose later years of a poetical career are spent

under the shadow of their own laurels ; yet what strange contrasts will his memoirs present ! Now a wanderer in the deserts of the East—then comparing the empire of yesterday with the progress of to-day in the United States—now in the midst of the classical mania which caricatured the horrors of the French revolution—next meditating on their realities amid the ruins of Rome. First an impoverished exile in England, and in the course of a few years an ambassador at our Court. The genius of Chateaubriand is best characterized by the word—*pittoresque*. In the North, he dwells with delight on the massive cathedrals, where painted windows shed

“ A dim, religious light ;”

and on the fallen castles, where the ivy is now the only banner. In the South, he is impressed with the cedar rising like a natural temple, and with the stately relics of

“ The marble wastes of Tadmor.”

He was the first who introduced into French literature that feeling for the beauty of nature, and that tendency to reverie, which are of Scandinavian origin. But we shall give the more accurate idea of a very remarkable work, by selecting portions for examination. We shall therefore pass in review the observations on Luther, Shakspeare, Milton, Scott, and Byron.

LUTHER.—The characteristic of our author's mind which we have called *pittoresque* is essentially opposed to a just appreciation of Luther. He clings with regret to the golden chalices and fragrant incense of Catholicism. He forms, in his mind's eye, the picture of a monk after one Guido's head, “ pale, penetrating, and spiritual ;” and “ Christ, at once a pontiff and a victim, lived in celibacy, and quitted the earth at the close of his youth.” Such is the ideal, but it is the ideal only. Neither is the following image more accurate:—“ Like Socrates, Protestantism may be said to have called minds into existence ; but, unfortunately, the intelligences which it has ushered into life are only beautiful slaves.” Are such minds as those of Bacon and of Locke only “ beautiful slaves ?” and can the many channels of inquiry thrown open by the Reformation be considered other than as conduits to truth ? We are quite prepared to admit that we do not do justice to the beneficial influence exercised by the Catholic church on the darker ages. It was the republic of the time, supported by democratic talent. The man of ability found in the church his theatre of action ; all other avenues to power or to distinction were barred by the sword, which was given as a birthright to the noble. But in the ranks of the Catholic faith the equality, or rather the superiority of intellect was asserted ; and when king and chief knelt at the chair of St. Peter, it was the triumph of thought over strength—it was the weak mind subjugated by the strong. But, as usual, the authority outlived its necessity—other influences began their activity ; and again, as usual, one of those men arose who embody their epoch, and carry its spirit into action. That man was Luther. He was an enthusiast—enthusiasm is needed for action ; calculation never acts—it is a passive principle. He was fierce, angry, and governed by impulse ; but we must remember the old Greek proverb, “ Motives are from man, but impulse is from Heaven.” These qualities only the better fitted the instrument to its purpose. It is touching

to note the tender feelings of the man running in a soft under-current beneath the violence of the fanatic preacher: speaking of his children he says, "What must have been Abraham's feelings, when he consented to sacrifice and slaughter his only son? Assuredly he never said a word on the subject to Sarah."

Again, while deploring the death of his infant daughter:—"Elizabeth, my little girl, is dead. Strange to say, her loss has left me a sick heart, a woman's heart—so intense is my sorrow. I never could have imagined that a father could feel so much tenderness for his child. Her features, her words, her gestures, during life and on her death-bed, are deeply engraven in my heart. Oh, my obedient and dutiful daughter! the very death of Christ (and what in comparison are all other deaths!) cannot, as it should, drive her from my memory."

Chateaubriand appears to us to attach too much importance to Henry VIII. He influenced nothing but the present, of whose circumstances he was at once the toy and the tyrant. He left nothing but a warning as to how power was again entrusted to one hand. He was the last feudal king—and was the type of a system that expired with himself. Brave, magnificent, and courteous, he was cruel, profuse, and uncertain. In the meantime England was in a state of progression; then were first sown the seeds of those great principles which led to the revolution. Henry carried the vices of feudalism to excess, and it is the excess that leads to the remedy. The reign of force was yielding to the reign of opinion, and to this day the struggle is carried on by an engine thus characterized by Luther—"The press is the last and the supreme gift—the *summum et postremum donum*, by means of which the Almighty promotes the things of the Gospel. It is the last blaze that bursts forth before the extinction of the world. Thanks be to God, we at last behold its splendour."

SHAKESPEARE.—The great fault of Chateaubriand's remarks on Shakspeare is, that they address themselves to a by-gone school of criticism; Dr. Johnson's is very far from being the national opinion; and the alterations and adaptations made in Charles the Second's time are held anything but orthodox in the present day. But we shall not enter into the question of preference between the rival queens of the French and the English stage: the foreign critic does not and cannot understand us. But what does our author mean by saying that "all Shakspeare's young female characters are formed on one model?" He might as well say that the rose and the violet resemble each other because they are both sweet. Take, for example, two placed in similar situations—namely, disguised in male attire; and yet what can be more essentially different than the characters of Rosalind and Viola? The last, whose heart

"Tender thought clothes like a dove,
With the wings of care,"

dreaming, devoted, silent, but dying of her silence. The first, on the contrary, is "a gay creature of the element;" a coquette, who delights in teasing the lover, whose danger yet sends the blood from her cheek—witty, sarcastic, with her deeper feelings shrouded as it were in sunshine. What have she and Viola in common?

But Shakspeare has always been a point for dispute between ours and foreign critics. We confess that the present article appears to us a complete Border-land of debatable questions. But what shall we say of the opinion on the sonnets?—"There is more of poetry, imagination and melancholy, than sensibility, passion and depth. Shakspeare loved; but he believed no more in love than he believed in any thing else. A woman was to him a bird, a zephyr, a flower which charms and passes away."

We will not enter on the spirit of the sonnets, because this has already been done in so masterly a manner, in the pages of this very Magazine, that we need only to refer to the articles of last year, on the 'Sonnets of Shakspeare,'—a series of papers eloquent and complete, and bringing out the truth by the light of the imagination. But we protest against the light assertion that "Shakspeare no more believed in love, than he believed in anything else!" Why, the very element of poetry is faith—faith in the beautiful, the divine, and the true. No one was ever great in any pursuit without earnestness,—and who can be in earnest without belief? It was from his own heart that Shakspeare drew his glorious and his touching creations, of which all nature attest the truth. Doubt never was and never will be the atmosphere of genius. He had the true poet's generous reliance on futurity when he wrote

"Not marble, not the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme."

And again,

"Yet do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse live ever young."

MILTON.—To this subject Chateaubriand has brought all his enthusiasm; and his estimate of Milton is infinitely more English—we might say more true, than his estimate of Shakspeare. We should say this arises from having no standard of comparison by which to try the merits of "Paradise Lost." There is nothing like it in French literature, and the critic has no preconceived notions to whose test the foreign work must submit. In speaking of the drama, he is fettered by early associations of admiration, links as slight as those charmed threads Monimia wound the hands of Thalaba, and as impossible to break. But in reading Milton, he is "fancy free," and has to make the rules by which he judges. Moreover, Milton is less national than Shakspeare; he belongs more to that apart world of imagination, solemn and stately, which is to be entered by the ideal faculty alone. Thus has been produced a fine and elaborate criticism, written in the noblest spirit of appreciation.

SCOTT.—We confess that we are not surprised to find that Chateaubriand does not appreciate Walter Scott. Never were two minds more dissimilar. But the reason that he gives is very strange:—"I speak on this subject with some vexation, because I, who have described, loved, sung, and extolled so much the old Christian temples, am dying of spleen from hearing them so constantly depreciated. There was left me a last illusion—a cathedral: it has been taken from me by storm."

This seems a most extraordinary complaint to make against the

poet of Melrose Abbey; but we may safely leave Scott's reputation to its own security. As was said of the royal power, in the celebrated vote of the Commons in George the Third's time—"It has increased, is increasing, and will increase."

BYRON.—Little is said about the author of "Lara," excepting Chateaubriand's surprise that he should not ever have been mentioned by the English poet. We do not remember any French writer named by Byron but Madame de Staël, and that was the result of personal acquaintance. Byron wanted one element of greatness—that of appreciation. We refer this to his social education; and there never was a period of worse taste, of falseness of affectations, and of less generous feeling, than the epoch to which he belonged. But to discuss the influence of society on Byron's genius would be too complicated a subject. We must bring our observations to a close with the most remarkable page in Chateaubriand's two volumes. The following is an encouraging literary picture:—

Calamities of Genius.—"Milton, proscribed and poor, descended in utter blindness to the tomb. Dryden, towards the close of his life, was compelled to sell his talents piece-meal to support existence. 'Little cause have I,' said he, 'to bless my stars for being born an Englishman. It is quite enough for one century, that it should have neglected a Cowley, and seen Butler starved to death.' Otway, at a later period, choked himself with a piece of bread thrown to him to relieve his hunger. What were not the sufferings of Savage, composing at street corners, writing his verses on scraps of paper picked out of the kennel, expiring in a prison, and leaving his corpse to the pity of a gaoler, who defrayed the expense of his interment! Chatterton, after being many days without food, destroyed himself by poison."

No one can deny—no one would think of denying—the vast benefit which literature has conferred on mankind; and with what ingratitude has it ever been received! "The late remorse of love," the monody and the monument, have been, and still are, its guerdon. The most successful author pays too dear a price for success. We do not believe, in the present day, that there is a single popular writer who does not bitterly regret the hour he took pen in hand. The fame is far off, and like sunshine seen in the distance, while only the cold wind is felt on the actual path. The wider circle think but little of all you have done for their gratification, until it is too late to think at all. The nearer circle of intimates and acquaintances never forgive the distinction which separates you from themselves. But genius will at last learn the bitter lesson of all experience: like everything else in the present day, it will be taught to calculate. Its gifted ones will at length

"compress

The god within them!"

Fame is but a beautiful classic delusion. The inspiration of the poet is like the inspiration of the Delphic oracles: what was once held divine is now confessed the promptings of an evil spirit mocking the votaries of whom it made victims. We firmly believe that the time is fast approaching when no more books will be written. The once writers will say—"Why should we sacrifice our whole existence to obtain a vain praise, which, after all, never comes sufficiently home to us to be enjoyed? Why should we devote, to this most barren pursuit, industry

and talent, which, in any other line, would be certain of that worldly success, which, as we live in the world, is the only success to be desired?" Even poets must at last learn wisdom. The bitterness and the hollowness of praise will be perceived; and then who will be at the trouble of writing a book? Again we repeat, the time is fast approaching when no more books will be written.

NOTE.—The list of "literary calamities" is far from being exhausted even in the present day. We quote the following letter addressed by Comte D'Orsay to the "Court Journal," as a practical illustration of the above theory:—

"SIR,—By a judgment of the *Cour Royale* of Paris, a tedious and expensive lawsuit, in which M. Paul de Kock was, in the first instance, successful, has been unexpectedly decided against him; and that celebrated author is not only reduced to sudden destitution by the costs of the award, but, in being forbidden the right to publish a complete collection of his numerous works, deprived of the hope to repair his loss from the resources of his own industry and genius.

"Under circumstances so cruel and unforeseen, and in the full reliance both on the generosity of the British public, and the sympathy which unites the cultivators of literature in either country, it is proposed to open a subscription at Messrs. Ransoms', Pall Mall East, on behalf of the Smollétt of France.

"I have the honour to be,

"Your obedient Servant,

"A. CTE. D'ORSAY."

This letter is written in a generous and enlightened spirit: its appeal is made in behalf of poverty and talent. In our time, can such an appeal be made in vain?

L. E. L.
