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Let me first take Amiel as a critic of literature, and of the literature which he naturally knew best, French literature. Hear him as critic on that best of critics, Sainte-Beuve, of whose death (1869) he had just heard :—

‘ The fact is, Sainte-Beuve leaves a greater void behind him than either Béranger or Lamartine ; their greatness was already distant, historical ; he was still helping us to think. The true critic supplies all the world with a basis. He represents the public judgment, that is to say, the public reason, the touchstone, the scales, the crucible, which tests the value of each man and the merit of each work. Infallibility of judgment is perhaps rarer than anything else, so fine a balance of qualities does it demand—qualities both natural and acquired, qualities of both mind and heart. What years of labour, what study and comparison, are needed to bring the critical judgment to maturity ! Like Plato’s sage, it is only at fifty that the critic is risen to the true height of his literary priesthood, or, to put it less pompously, of his social function. Not till then has he compassed all modes of being, and made every shade of appreciation his own. And Sainte-Beuve joined to this infinitely refined culture a prodigious memory and an incredible

But the Journal reveals a side in Amiel which his critics, so far as I have seen, have hardly noticed, a side of real power, originality, and value. He says himself that he never had clear sight of his true vocation: well, his true vocation, it seems to me, was that of a literary critic. Here he is admirable: M. Scherer was a true friend when he offered to introduce him to an editor, and suggested an article on Uhland. There is hardly a literary criticism in these two volumes which is not masterly, and which does not make one desire more of the same kind. And not Amiel's literary criticism only, but his criticism of society, politics, national character, religion, is in general well informed, just, and penetrating in an eminent degree. Any one single page of this criticism is worth, in my opinion, a hundred of Amiel's pages about the Infinite Illusion and the Great Wheel. It is to this side in Amiel that I desire now to draw attention. I would have abstained from writing about him if I had only to disparage and to find fault, only to say that he had been overpraised, and that his

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multitude of facts and anecdotes stored up for the service of his thought.'

The criticism is so sound, so admirably put, and so charming, that one wishes Sainte-Beuve could have read it himself.

Try Amiel next on the touchstone afforded by that 'half genius, half charlatan,' Victor Hugo :—

'I have been again looking through Victor Hugo's *Paris* (1867). For ten years event after event has given the lie to the prophet, but the confidence of the prophet in his own imaginings is not therefore a whit diminished. Humility and common sense are only fit for Lilliputians. Victor Hugo superbly ignores everything which he has not foreseen. He does not know that pride limits the mind, and that a limitless pride is a littleness of soul. If he could but learn to rank himself with other men and France with other nations, he would see things more truly, and would not fall into his insane exaggerations, his extravagant oracles. But proportion and justness his chords will never know. He is vowed to the Titanic; his gold is always mixed with lead, his insight with childishness, his reason with madness. He cannot be simple; like the blaze of a house on fire, his light is blinding. In short, he astonishes but provokes, he stirs but annoys. His note is

always half or two-thirds false, and that is why he perpetually makes us feel uncomfortable. The great poet in him cannot get clear of the charlatan. A few pricks of Voltaire's irony would have made the inflation of this genius collapse, and rendered him stronger by rendering him saner. It is a public misfortune that the most powerful poet of France should not have better understood his *rôle*, and that, unlike the Hebrew prophets who chastised because they loved, he flatters his fellow-citizens from system and from pride. France is the world, Paris is France, Hugo is Paris. Bow down and worship, ye nations !'

Finally, we will hear Amiel on a consummate and supreme French classic, as perfect as Hugo is flawed, La Fontaine :—

'Went through my La Fontaine yesterday, and remarked his omissions. . . . He has not an echo of chivalry haunting him. His French history dates from Louis XIV. His geography extends in reality but a few square miles, and reaches neither the Rhine nor the Loire, neither the mountains nor the sea. He never invents his subjects, but indolently takes them ready-made from elsewhere. But with all this, what an adorable writer, what a painter, what an observer, what a master of the comic and the satirical, what a teller of a story ! I am never tired of him, though I know half his fables by heart. In the matter of vocabulary, turns of expression,

tones, idioms, his language is perhaps the richest of the great period, for it combines skilfully the archaic with the classical, the Gaulish element with what is French. Variety, finesse, sly fun, sensibility, rapidity, conciseness, suavity, grace, gaiety—when necessary nobleness, seriousness, grandeur—you find everything in our fabulist. And the happy epithets, and the telling proverbs, and the sketches dashed off, and the unexpected audacities, and the point driven well home! One cannot say what he has not, so many diverse aptitudes he has.

‘Compare his *Woodcutter and Death* with Boileau’s, and you can measure the prodigious difference between the artist and the critic who wanted to teach him better. La Fontaine brings visibly before you the poor peasant under the monarchy, Boileau but exhibits a drudge sweating under his load. The first is a historic witness, the second a school-versifier. La Fontaine enables you to reconstruct the whole society of his age; the pleasant old soul from Champagne, with his animals, turns out to be the one and only Homer of France.

‘His weak side is his epicureanism, with its tinge of grossness. This, no doubt, was what made Lamartine dislike him. The religious string is wanting to his lyre, he has nothing which shows him to have known either Christianity or the high tragedies of the soul. Kind Nature is his goddess, Horace his prophet, and Montaigne his gospel. In other words, his horizon is that of the Renaissance. This islet

of paganism in the midst of a Catholic society is very curious ; the paganism is perfectly simple and frank.'

These are but notes, jottings in his Journal, and Amiel passed from them to broodings over the infinite, and personality, and totality. Probably the literary criticism which he did so well, and for which he shows a true vocation, gave him nevertheless but little pleasure because he did it thus fragmentarily and by fits and starts. To do it thoroughly, to make his fragments into wholes, to fit them for coming before the public, composition with its toils and limits was necessary. Toils and limits composition indeed has ; yet all composition is a kind of creation, creation gives, as I have already said, pleasure, and, when successful and sustained, more than pleasure, joy. Amiel, had he tried the experiment with literary criticism, where lay his true vocation, would have found it so. Sainte-Beuve, whom he so much admires, would have been the most miserable of men if his production had been but a volume or two of

middling poems and a journal. But Sainte-Beuve's motto, as Amiel himself notices, was that of the Emperor Severus: *Laboremus*. 'Work,' Sainte-Beuve confesses to a friend, 'is my sore burden, but it is also my great resource. I eat my heart out when I am not up to the neck in work; there you have the secret of the life I lead.' If M. Scherer's introduction to the *Revue Germanique* could but have been used, if Amiel could but have written the article on Uhland, and followed it up by plenty of articles more!

I have quoted largely from Amiel's literary criticism, because this side of him has, so far as I have observed, received so little attention, and yet deserves attention so eminently. But his more general criticism, too, shows, as I have said, the same high qualities as his criticism of authors and books. I must quote one or two of his aphorisms: *L'esprit sert bien à tout, mais ne suffit à rien*: 'Wits are of use for everything, sufficient for nothing.' *Une société vit de sa foi et se développe par la science*: 'A society lives on its faith and develops itself by



science.' *L'État libéral est irréalisable avec une religion antilibérale, et presque irréalisable avec l'absence de religion*: 'Liberal communities are impossible with an anti-liberal religion, and almost impossible with the absence of religion.' But epigrammatic sentences of this sort are perhaps not so very difficult to produce, in French at any rate. Let us take Amiel when he has room and verge enough to show what he can really say which is important about society, religion, national life and character. We have seen what an influence his years passed in Germany had upon him: we have seen how severely he judges Victor Hugo's faults: the faults of the French nation at large he judges with a like severity. But what a fine and just perception does the following passage show of the deficiencies of Germany, the advantage which the western nations have in their more finished civilisation:—

'It is in the novel that the average vulgarity of German society, and its inferiority to the societies of France and England are most clearly visible. The

notion of a thing's *jarring on the taste* is wanting to German æsthetics. Their elegance knows nothing of grace; they have no sense of the enormous distance between distinction (gentlemanly, ladylike) and their stiff *Vornehmlichkeit*. Their imagination lacks style, training, education, and knowledge of the world; it is stamped with an ill-bred air even in its Sunday clothes. The race is practical and intelligent, but common and ill-mannered. Ease, amiability, manners, wit, animation, dignity, charm, are qualities which belong to others.

'Will that inner freedom of soul, that profound harmony of all the faculties, which I have so often observed among the best Germans, ever come to the surface? Will the conquerors of to-day ever civilise their forms of life? It is by their future novels that we shall be able to judge. As soon as the German novel can give us quite good society the Germans will be in the raw stage no longer.'

And this pupil of Berlin, this devourer of German books, this victim, say the French critics, to the contagion of German style, after three hours, one day, of a *Geschichte der Æsthetik in Deutschland*, breaks out:—

'Learning and even thought are not everything. A little *esprit*, point, vivacity, imagination, grace, would do no harm. Do these pedantic books leave

a single image or sentence, a single striking or new fact, in the memory when one lays them down? No, nothing but fatigue and confusion. Oh, for clearness, terseness, brevity! Diderot, Voltaire, or even Galiani! A short article by Sainte-Beuve, Scherer, Renan, Victor Cherbulioz, gives one more pleasure, and makes one ponder and reflect more, than a thousand of these German pages crammed to the margin and showing the work itself rather than its result. The Germans heap the faggots for the pile, the French bring the fire. Spare me your lucubrations, give me facts or ideas. Keep your vats, your must, your dregs, to yourselves; I want wine fully made, wine which will sparkle in the glass, and kindle my spirits instead of oppressing them.'

Amiel may have been led away *deteriora sequi*: he may have Germanised until he has become capable of the verb *dépersonnaliser* and the noun *réimplication*; but after all, his heart is in the right place: *videt meliora probatque*. He remains at bottom the man who said: *Le livre serait mon ambition*. He adds, to be sure, that it would be *son ambition*, 'if ambition were not vanity, and vanity of vanities.'

Yet this disenchanted brooder, 'full of a tran-

quail disgust at the futility of our ambitions, the void of our existence,' bedazzled with the infinite, can observe the world and society with consummate keenness and shrewdness, and at the same time with a delicacy which to the man of the world is in general wanting. Is it possible to analyse *le grand monde*, high society, as the Old World knows it and America knows it not, more acutely than Amiel does in what follows?—

'In society people are expected to behave as if they lived on ambrosia and concerned themselves with no interests but such as are noble. Care, need, passion, do not exist. All realism is suppressed as brutal. In a word, what is called *le grand monde* gives itself for the moment the flattering illusion that it is moving in an ethereal atmosphere and breathing the air of the gods. For this reason all vehemence, any cry of nature, all real suffering, all heedless familiarity, any genuine sign of passion, are startling and distasteful in this delicate *milieu*, and at once destroy the collective work, the cloud-palace, the imposing architectural creation raised by common consent. It is like the shrill cock-crow which breaks the spell of all enchantments, and puts the fairies to flight. These select gatherings produce without intending it a sort of concert for eye and ear, an improvised work

of art. By the instinctive collaboration of everybody concerned, wit and taste hold festival, and the associations of reality are exchanged for the associations of imagination. So understood, society is a form of poetry; the cultivated classes deliberately recompose the idyll of the past, and the buried world of Astræa. Paradox or not, I believe that these fugitive attempts to reconstruct a dream, whose only end is beauty, represent confused reminiscences of an age of gold haunting the human heart; or rather, aspirations towards a harmony of things which every-day reality denies to us, and of which art alone gives us a glimpse.'

I remember reading in an American newspaper a solemn letter by an excellent republican, asking what were a shopman's or a labourer's feelings when he walked through Eaton or Chatsworth. Amiel will tell him: they are 'reminiscences of an age of gold haunting the human heart, aspirations towards a harmony of things which every-day reality denies to us.' I appeal to my friend the author of *Triumphant Democracy* himself, to say whether these are to be had in walking through Pittsburg.

Indeed it is by contrast with American life that *Nirvâna* appears to Amiel so desirable:—

‘For the Americans, life means devouring, incessant activity. They must win gold, predominance, power; they must crush rivals, subdue nature. They have their heart set on the means, and never for an instant think of the end. They confound being with individual being, and the expansion of self with happiness. This means that they do not live by the soul, that they ignore the immutable and eternal, bustle at the circumference of their existence because they cannot penetrate to its centre. They are restless, eager, positive, because they are superficial. To what end all this stir, noise, greed, struggle? It is all a mere being stunned and deafened!’

Space is failing me, but I must yet find room for a less indirect criticism of democracy than the foregoing remarks on American life :—

‘*Each function to the most worthy*: this maxim is the professed rule of all constitutions, and serves to test them. Democracy is not forbidden to apply it; but Democracy rarely does apply it, because she holds, for example, that the most worthy man is the man who pleases her, whereas he who pleases her is not always the most worthy; and because she supposes that reason guides the masses, whereas in reality they are most commonly led by passion. And in the end every falsehood has to be expiated, for truth always takes its revenge.’

What publicists and politicians have to learn is, that 'the ultimate ground upon which every civilisation rests is the average morality of the masses and a sufficient amount of practical righteousness.' But where does duty find its inspiration and sanctions? In religion. And what does Amiel think of the traditional religion of Christendom, the Christianity of the Churches? He tells us repeatedly; but a month or two before his death, with death in full view, he tells us with peculiar impressiveness:—

'The whole Semitic dramaturgy has come to seem to me a work of the imagination. The apostolic documents have changed in value and meaning to my eyes. The distinction between belief and truth has grown clearer and clearer to me. Religious psychology has become a simple phenomenon, and has lost its fixed and absolute value. The apologetics of Pascal, Leibnitz, Secrétan, appear to me no more convincing than those of the Middle Age, for they assume that which is in question—a revealed doctrine, a definite and unchangeable Christianity.'

Is it possible, he asks, to receive at this day the common doctrine of a Divine Providence direct-

ing all the circumstances of our life, and consequently inflicting upon us our miseries as means of education?

‘Is this heroic faith compatible with our actual knowledge of the laws of nature? Hardly. But what this faith makes objective we may take subjectively. The moral being may moralise his suffering in turning the natural fact to account for the education of his inner man. What he cannot change he calls the will of God, and to will what God wills brings him peace.’

But can a religion, Amiel asks again, without miracles, without unverifiable mystery, be efficacious, have influence with the many? And again he answers:—

‘Pious fiction is still fiction. Truth has superior rights. The world must adapt itself to truth, not truth to the world. Copernicus upset the astronomy of the Middle Age; so much the worse for the astronomy. The Everlasting Gospel is revolutionising the Churches; what does it matter?’

This is water to our mill, as the Germans say, indeed. But I have come even thus late in the day to speak of Amiel, not because I found him supplying water for any particular mill, either



mine or any other, but because it seemed to me that by a whole important side he was eminently worth knowing, and that to this side of him the public, here in England at any rate, had not had its attention sufficiently drawn. If in the seventeen thousand pages of the Journal there are many pages still unpublished in which Amiel exercises his true vocation of critic, of literary critic more especially, let his friends give them to us, let M. Scherer introduce them to us, let Mrs. Humphry Ward translate them for us. But *sat patriæ Priamoque datum*: Maïa has had her full share of space already: I will not ask for a word more about the infinite illusion, or the double zero, or the Great Wheel.

THE END









