# CHAPTER XXVI

## ON MODERN ENGLISH CRITICISM, AND THE CONTEMPORARY RELATIONS OF ENGLISH TO FRENCH LITERATURE

NOTHING is more important for the student who loves literature than to become intimately acquainted with its great critics; for they alone can guide him in his judgments, can teach him to distinguish and classify merit, and can ultimately enable him to estimate literary values for himself. There are critics and critics; hundreds of them are useless, even mischievous; the great ones alone are worth knowing, those few men to whose judgments we can submit our own without hesitation. No course of literature could be complete without some mention of these; and I must speak to you to-day of the best living English critics of English literature. There are good French critics of English literature also; but we need not for the present consider them. A remarkable fact is the small number of really great English critics of English literature as compared with the number of great French critics of French literature. You can count the latter by dozens, the French having obtained supreme excellence and supreme ease in this branch of literature. But if I were asked to name the great English literary critics of to-day, I could name only three. It is of these three that I wish to speak.

These three are George Saintsbury, Professor of English literature in the University of Edinburgh; Edmund Gosse, Professor of English literature in Cambridge University; and Edward Dowden, Professor of English literature in Dublin University. These are pre-eminent. With some hesitation might be added to these names, but only in a second or third class capacity, the name of Stopford Brooke, whom

you may know as the author of a primer of English literature, and of a history of Anglo-Saxon literature. But we have to concern ourselves now only with the work of the other three.

The first fact to observe about the work of these three is the degree to which it has been influenced, directed and coloured, by the study of French. Each one of the professors named is an equally good authority upon French as upon English literature; and two of them have written histories of French literature. The best work upon French literature in the English language is Saintsbury's "Short History of French Literature." It is not so very short as the name might imply. It is accompanied by a companion volume entitled "Specimens of French Literature"; and the two should be studied together. Professor Dowden, on the other hand, has given us one excellent volume on modern French literature. As for Mr. Gosse, a great number of his best critical essays deal with French subjects, and show the results of French study upon every page. I believe that all of these men are furthermore students of other foreign literatures. Mr. Gosse is a Scandinavian scholar. Mr. Saintsbury knows Anglo-Saxon and Provençal. Mr. Gosse, an excellent classical as well as modern scholar, has also busied himself with original poetry, and the study of verse in many languages. Again I suppose you know that Professor Dowden is famous as the biographer of Shelley—he provoked Matthew Arnold, by his life of the poet, into a very celebrated essay. The only one of the three who has attempted no creative work outside of criticism is Saintsbury. Perhaps for that very reason, he is the strongest, concentrating all his power in one direction. When we come to think of the acquirements of these men, it is impossible not to wonder at their powers of study. To master even one literature is the work of an ordinary life-time. But to master two, or even three literatures, in addition to the literatures of Greece and Rome, five in all, is certainly a prodigious feat. It is something which reminds us of

Gibbon's tremendous powers of reading and digesting what he read. But Gibbon was a rich man, with nothing to do except to please himself. England's three greatest modern critics are comparatively poor men, obliged to teach in order to live.

Of the three the greatest charm of style is shown by Mr. Gosse. In the course of this lecture I may quote some passages to you, in order to show you how very exquisitely he can write. This exquisiteness has been learned chiefly by the most careful study of French models. There are times also when Mr. Dowden approaches him. Mr. Saintsbury, altogether the shrewdest critic, is not the best stylist. Sometimes he is almost careless, though he can perform miracles. I imagine that he has always thought it more important to utter the thought than to care about the form of the utterance. But then, consider the enormous quantity of his work on two literatures—his "History of French Literature", his "History of Elizabethan Literature", his "History of Nineteenth Century Literature", and his volumes of essays, and the number of texts edited by him. He has done the work of five or six men; and if he had given more attention to style, we should have been deprived of some of the benefit of his knowledge.

Concerning the opinions of any one of these three critics, I should say to you, "Submit to their judgments." If any one of them should happen to be unjust in a single case, he would certainly be right in ninety-nine cases. No man is infallible in literary judgment. The nearest approach to the infallible in literary judgment is represented in the colossal work of the teacher of all these three, the greatest critic that ever lived—not an Englishman, but a Frenchman, the wonderful Sainte-Beuve. I have said that he was not an Englishman; but I must not forget to add that his mother was of English descent. He was born in 1804 and died in 1869, so that he is a very modern person. It was he who really created the highest art of criticism, and whose influence entirely changed critical methods during the

latter part of the present century. He was the critic of the great French romantic movement which began between 1820 and 1830. If we have to-day in England such good critics as Saintsbury and Dowden and Gosse, it is because Sainte-Beuve taught them how to be critics. I do not mean to tell you that they imitated him; indeed, no one of them would agree that Sainte-Beuve's method should be followed in all things. But it was by studying his method that they made the new English critical method.

We must say a few words now about criticism in general —what it means. Put into the simplest language possible, criticism is the art of discovering and of stating what is good and what is not good in a book. The old fashioned criticism, the criticism of the eighteenth century and of the centuries before it, signified very little in the modern meaning of the word. When it was the rule that a subject should be chosen in a certain way, and ordered in a certain way, and written about in a certain way; when there were fixed laws not only for the general construction of a sentence, but for the construction of every part of the sentence, and for the position of each and every word in the sentence— then criticism meant very little more than censorship and measurement. A thing was good if the subject was conventional, if the language was conventional, if the forms were conventional. On the other hand a book was not praiseworthy if the subject or the language or the thought was not according to the old fixed rules. Early in the nineteenth century higher forms of criticism made their appearance. Macaulay, as I told you long ago, was the founder of a new school of criticism, which consisted in analyzing the value of the book in relation to moral and aesthetic ideas, and in relation also to the whole range of the subject treated. Macaulay would take a book upon Italian history, for example, and then compare what it contained with his own idea of the whole subject of Italian history; then he would consider the author's ideas in relation to accepted moral ideas, and the author's sense of

beauty in relation to accepted standards of beauty. This was a much larger and better way of criticism than had been followed before, but it was still far from perfect. Macaulay belonged by taste and feeling to the classical school of the eighteenth century; his standards of morality and ethics and philosophical truth were all old-fashioned, somewhat narrow, and above all English. Now a great criticism ought not to be any more English or French or German, than it should be Greek or Hebrew or Sanskrit. A great criticism should be equally true in all times and countries and conditions. For the highest criticism should not concern itself with any questions except those of beauty and of truth—nay, I should add, eternal beauty and eternal truth.

Here is the great difficulty about criticism. Let us consider for a moment how very few persons are capable of judging beauty and truth apart from everything else. A man who has been brought up to think in a narrow way may not be able to see beauty or truth at all. A pious Roman Catholic may not find beauty in a thing not written according to the mediæval spirit of the religion to which he belongs. Whatever thought is contrary to the teaching of Christianity of the middle ages, may fill him with horror. Again, in the narrower Protestant creeds the education given is usually anti-aesthetic and anti-scientific; the narrowness of mind produced is very hard, and absolutely hostile to independence of expression or originality in feeling. The religious bias, as Spencer calls it, is almost necessarily opposed to fair criticism. Then there is the national feeling, the strong prejudice of country and of race. The average Englishman cannot consider the inhabitant of another country as good as an Englishman; and it is very difficult for him to acknowledge the superiority of anything foreign. Well, it is the same in most countries. These very prejudices have their usefulness; they keep up the healthy spirit of race-pride — but they are utterly opposed to fair criticism. Furthermore, we have the social prejudices—those prejudices

which prevent a man who belongs to the upper class of society, from justly considering what concerns the lower classes of society. There is also the prejudice of custom, and this prejudice extends into the highest strata of the intellectual world. The old generation refuses to accept the ideas of the new; the new despises the old. At the present time there are a great many men living who were educated before the time of the new philosophy, who know nothing about it, who detest it, and who cannot consequently understand the best literature of our time. For a man with the ideas of the eighteenth century cannot possibly understand a poem or an essay nor even a thoughtful story written by one who thinks according to the evolutional philosophy. Such men — many of them are great scholars — think they can understand because they read the words, but of the thought behind the words they do not perceive anything. This is only one of many examples. To be able to judge the beautiful and the true, our minds must be free from all such influences as I have been describing — from religious prejudices, from the prejudice of ignorance, from national prejudice, from race prejudice, from social prejudice, from class prejudice, from philosophical prejudice. How many men can free themselves from all of these? Certainly very few; and that is why there must always be very few great critics—especially in England, where all conventions have a more vigorous life than they have in almost any other country.

Now to return to the subject of Sainte-Beuve. Sainte-Beuve made himself a great critic not only by getting rid of all the prejudices which I mentioned, but by studying them and understanding them. He approached the vast subject of literature only after having prepared himself in a most extraordinary way. He studied medicine, because medicine is in itself one of the greatest sciences for the development of the mind that can be studied without any very exceptional faculties. To understand men's minds, men's feelings, one must indeed first know something about

their bodies; and in choosing this study Sainte-Beuve somewhat anticipated the evolutional school of psychology, which is based upon a knowledge of the nervous system. But he did not intend to become a doctor, and he dropped this study when he had learned enough of it to satisfy his own mind. Thereafter he studied religion, in order to understand belief; then he studied all forms of free thought, in order to understand scepticism. Subject after subject he thus took up and investigated, according as it served his purpose. Becoming one of the most learned of men in general knowledge of this sort, and also perhaps the most widely read man of his time, he entered upon his career of critic—without any bias, any prejudice, any narrowness, but with a great love of beauty in every form, and a wonderful genius for finding and for describing it.

Of course it is not enough to have read everything and to know everything in order to be a critic. One must have been born with intuitive and perceptive faculties of an extraordinary kind. One must have a certain kind of genius. It is very much like the difficulty of understanding the characters of men. Every one among you has remarked that some persons of your acquaintance understand men much better than others can do; they are born with that power; and all the experience possible would never make certain other persons whom you know able to exercise the same judgment. Now consider what a great book is. I think that there is no better definition of a great book than the definition made by Victor Hugo—the book is the man. And some of you who heard my lecture last year upon style will remember that I then said style is nothing more than the peculiar character of the writer. Sainte-Beuve saw this truth when he entered upon his career of critic. He perceived that to understand a book, the reason of what is good in it, the reason of what is bad in it, the reason of the influence which it exerts, we must understand the man who wrote it. There is nothing more difficult than to understand common characters; much more is it difficult to

understand uncommon characters. A man is the product of millions of years, and the depth of him is the depth of the whole night of eternity. Nothing is deeper than a mind, nothing is more difficult to learn. As I said before, one must be born with the power to study minds and feelings; and Sainte-Beuve had this faculty.

He attempted the study of literature in a way that no other man had ever thought of at that time. He would start out by studying the character of an author, all the details of his life, his personality, his habits, his experiences. Next he would consider that man in relation to the society and the time to which he belonged; he would try to discover to what extent the character of the man accorded with the character of that time, with the sentiments and beliefs and ideas of that society. Then he would consider the sources of the writer's inspiration, not only the books that he had read, but the origin of the ideas in those books, tracing back the thought of a nineteenth century writer either to the middle ages or to Greek civilization, or to intellectual influences imported from Oriental and other countries. Only when he had done all this did he think himself prepared to write his criticism. Of course, you must not suppose that Sainte-Beuve undertook in the case of every writer he criticized to read over again all the books which that author had studied, and all the books relating to the time in which he lived, and all the books treating of the subject which he had treated. Not at all. These things he already knew. He had read them; and having a memory as prodigious as that of a Hallam or a Macaulay, he remembered what he had read.

A word about the mass of his work. Much of it first appeared in newspapers. The criticism which appears in English newspapers is not, as a rule, of much literary value; that which appears in American newspapers is of no literary value. But much of what appears in French newspapers is of the very highest literary value. French journalism concerns itself much less about news than does other European

journalism, and much more about literature. It allows its writers plenty of time to do their work. A great deal of such work is produced at the rate of two or three short articles in the course of a month. Sainte-Beuve contributed regularly about once a week, or four times a month, to certain Paris papers what he called his "Monday Talks" (*Causeries du Lundi*); and these Monday Talks became the greatest literary events of the week in Paris. Besides these, however, he produced a number of independent literary studies which he called "Criticisms and Literary Portraits" (*Critiques et Portraits Littéraires*); also a series of "Contemporary Portraits" (*Portraits Contemporains*). Published in book form, these alone represent fifty or sixty large volumes. But a more important production still was his literary and philosophical *Histoire de Port-Royal* in three volumes, which cost him alone twenty years of study. In this book his critical power was manifested in the very highest possible form. Perhaps some of you may never have heard of Port-Royal. The subject is not closely connected with this lecture; but I may say a few words about it. Port-Royal was a convent situated in France about eight miles from the King's palace of Versailles, during the seventeenth century, the time of Louis XIV. At Port-Royal there was a very peculiar society of monks and nuns, a new religious society composed of ladies and gentlemen, scholars and philosophers of the highest accomplishments; and the dream of these persons was to make a reformed Catholic religion in harmony with scientific knowledge. In order to oppose the influence of the Jesuits, the Port-Royal people became educators; they taught religion and science together; they taught nobly and liberally; and they considered truth before theology. The great Pascal was one of their friends, and fought for them, silencing the Jesuit controversialists. The religious system which the Port-Royal people adopted is still known as Jansenism, so called from Bishop Jansen of Ypres. Then began a bitter war between the Jesuits and Port-Royal. Having greater influence at Rome, the Jesuits first

got the Pope to condemn the doctrines of Port-Royal; then they went to work politically and socially to crush and ruin the institution. After many years they were successful. Port-Royal was made bankrupt, was even given into their hands. Triumphantly entering into the deserted establishment, they destroyed every vestige of anything that might recall the memory of their enemies. There was, however, something they could not destroy, and which Sainte-Beuve preserved for us — the noble thoughts and the great truths uttered and taught by the vanished society.

Now to reconstruct that convent at Port-Royal, to repeople it with the forms of all who had lived and died there, to make us not only see the faces and hear the conversation, but even know the thoughts and feelings of the dead, was a wonderful bit of magic. This Sainte-Beuve accomplished, and more. For in reconstructing Port-Royal, it was necessary for him also to resurrect the atmosphere and the scenery of the time of Louis XIV, and it was also necessary for him to teach us everything about the conflicting ideas and emotions, religious and social, of that time. But in all his criticisms he has done magic of this kind. Criticism by Sainte-Beuve is biographical; it is historical; it is philosophical; it is artistic. Therefore to read him is an education. But do not think that any painful effort is needed to read him. Not even Macaulay has such a charm of style. Sainte-Beuve teaches by the use of pictures. He does not discourse only, he paints. He does more than paint; he puts the living man before you so that you hear his voice, feel the touch of his hands, apprehend the soul-sympathy existing between yourself and him. When you read Sainte-Beuve, the dead come back and talk to you; and as in dreams, you forget that they are dead, and imagine all that is said and done to be as real as it is natural.

This method has been called by a great many names. Most of these names are inadequate. It has been termed naturalistic; but this is no more correct than it would be to call the method romantic. There is only one name that it

might be called by — that is, the method of Saint-Beuve. It is a combination of every possible way of studying and treating any subject critically, and if it is distinguishable by anything very peculiar, that peculiarity is the author's genius, his infinite sympathy, his irreproachable tolerance, his profound humanity. I imagine that this humanity is especially shown by his habit of studying an author less through the admiration of his friends than through the hatred of his enemies. He always took this view of things, that a man of original genius cannot be in perfect harmony with his century; that he cannot therefore be in perfect accord with the society in which he moves; and that he must therefore be disliked, and very probably persecuted or calumniated. From the contempt, the abuse, or even the falsehoods that have been uttered or manifested towards a great man, we can often learn more about him than we can learn from the praise of those who loved him. Of course this requires extreme superiority of knowledge in matters of psychology. But the good critic must be a good psychologist.

The greatest of Sainte-Beuve's pupils was the historian Taine; and the best example of the influence of Sainte-Beuve upon Taine is, perhaps, the volume written about the character and life of Napoleon. But Taine was not so learned nor so clever nor so sympathetic as Sainte-Beuve. He was apt to use the method somewhat one-sidedly—thus showing, not its defects, but its difficulties. To criticize like Sainte-Beuve one must be as generous and as wise; and no living critic is that. But the method of Sainte-Beuve will perhaps be still more perfected in the future by other great minds, for the best of all reasons — namely, that it is in perfect accord with the philosophy of evolution. No other method of criticism is exactly that. There was no evolutional philosophy when Sainte-Beuve was young, but he might be said to have in a certain way anticipated it. The innumerable critics who to-day follow the evolutional method, I mean those who trace the history of anything in literature back through all its centuries to its very beginning, and describe

how the thing grew and budded and blossomed — these, for the most part, are not students of Herbert Spencer; they are imitators of Sainte-Beuve.

It has been well pointed out by Professor Saintsbury that in some respects the influence of Sainte-Beuve has been a little mischievous. Many people thought that they could imitate him by writing foolishly exact biographies of authors, and trying to connect the details of such biographies with passages in the books of the writers discussed. We have now every year hundreds of stupid books published, full of useless and impertinent gossip about the private lives of authors. Now Sainte-Beuve really never did anything of the kind. He never mentioned facts about an author's private life except when these facts happened to have particular value for critical use. He never made mistakes. He never made misjudgments. What he said remains as true to-day as when he said it, and will remain equally true for hundreds of years to come. It is possible, however, only for really great men to follow his system successfully. The three English critics mentioned at the beginning of this lecture have all followed it to some extent. One of them, Professor Dowden, not only acknowledges his immense debt to Sainte-Beuve, but assures us that all the important criticism during the latter part of the nineteenth century owes an equal debt to Sainte-Beuve. This means nothing less than that all the existing schools of English, French, Italian, German, and I may add Russian criticism, have been made or modified by Sainte-Beuve's teaching. We are now immeasurably beyond the critical method of Macaulay, great as Macaulay's method became in his own hands.

Let us return to the special subject of the three great living English critics, and their relation to Sainte-Beuve. Of the three, Saintsbury is much the least attractive, both as to style and method. He is extraordinarily compressed, compact, condensed, never saying more than is absolutely necessary to express his meaning clearly. He is not attractive in any sense of the word, not a writer whom you can

love, but he is a writer who commands your respect. And he commands it in strange ways, particularly by oppositions, by contradictions, by astonishing judgments totally at variance with the judgments of other great critics. Furthermore, he is provokingly cautious. Never does he allow himself to become enthusiastic even about the greatest dead writers; as for living writers, he makes it a rule never to speak about them when he can help it. Unlike Mr. Gosse and Mr. Dowden, he has none of that literary generosity which makes new reputations. Rather he is a destroyer of old ones. No critic with whom I am acquainted is more provoking at times, by his coldness, by his quaint manner of sneering, by the frigid contempt with which he passes over great names in silence. In all these peculiarities, you will find that he is the most typically English of the three. I should say that he has all the repellent qualities of the Englishman quite as strongly marked as the good qualities of the Englishman. But I must say that I should trust him most of all. I do not believe that he will ever mislead you. And he is singularly free from prejudices. Sometimes his sneer, or some single sentence expressing contempt, would lead you to believe that his judgments are coloured by religious or by moral prejudices. But it would be easy to cite judgments which proved the contrary. Observe for example, his eminently just, though reserved, praise of Huxley, of Hobbes, of Mandeville, of others who were strongly opposed to ecclesiastical influence. Or take, on the other hand, his severe criticism of Wyclif. Again you might suspect him of prudishness, the great English hypocrisy of prudishness, because he strongly condemns certain immoralities in certain English writers. But read his splendid reviews of the work done by writers like Carew in English, work as unchaste as anything can be; or read his very fine appreciation of Baudelaire, a name held in horror by prudes both in France and in England; or read his estimates of French writers like Gautier, Hugo, Maupassant, not to mention older French men-of-letters who went quite as far

in offending against what we call moral standards. He has certainly impartiality enough in everything relating to religion and ethics.

As I have said, he provokes. He tells us, for example, that Byron's poetry is not true poetry, that it is pinchbeck, sham; he tells us that it is about as much like true poetry, as the painted scenery in a theatre is like a real landscape. This is one instance of what you may expect from him. He will tell you that there is not even one page of Ruskin which does not contain some untrue or questionable statement. Ruskin is almost the only living writer, except Swinburne, to whom he has given much attention. He will tell you that De Quincey is tiresome, gossiping, and at times absolutely foolish. But if you have patience to examine the reasons which he gives for these statements you will find that they are very truthful. Examine Byron carefully, and you will find that there is scarcely a perfect verse in the whole of his work. Balance Ruskin's judgment carefully, without suffering yourself to be blinded by the dazzling splendour of his language, and you will discover that his value is not that of direct truth, but only of suggestiveness. Take those pages of De Quincey severely criticized, and forget for a moment the pages that cannot be criticized; then you will learn how very tiresome and worthless some of De Quincey's work really is. On the other hand you will obtain from Saintsbury a deeper knowledge of the merits of the same three writers than any other English critic has given us. And an astonishing fact is that Saintsbury's judgments in French literature are quite as sound and concise as his judgments upon English literature. He is the best guide that I know of in both literatures, better even than Professor Dowden. And I do not know that he has exhibited any idiosyncrasies to quarrel with in the whole of his production, except perhaps his obstinate position on the subject of the line between poetry and prose. Although he has praised, and praised highly, certain splendid forms of poetical prose, both in French and in English literature,

he fights for the theory that poetical prose ought not to be written. In this respect I am glad to say that Dowden and Gosse do not agree with him, and that the best French critics do not agree with him.

I should like you to approach Saintsbury always with this conviction in your mind, that he is never so simple as he appears. You must not try to read him quickly. Everything he says deserves to be thought about, and there is a great deal more in his sentences than you can imagine when you read them for the first time. Saintsbury's books are books which you should keep in your libraries, to be read not once only but many times; for only by reading them over and over again can you discover the great power that is in them. Of course in the case of his literary histories, it is of no use for you to read them without having read the literature described. But whenever you have learned to like a French or an English writer, turn to those books for Saintsbury's estimate, and read that estimate many times. Then you will learn how great a teacher he is.

Although influenced by Sainte-Beuve, Saintsbury has never attempted to carry out Sainte-Beuve's method in the direction of biography. He does not try to explain a man to you by the circumstances of that man's parentage, life or social surroundings. In short, he never theorizes when he can help it, because he is afraid of drawing false inferences. But he gives you biographical facts, and he leaves you to make your own conclusions from them. Perhaps this is the safest way, and it has one great merit — it helps to make the student think for himself. This is about all which is necessary to say in regard to Professor Saintsbury. No biography of him has yet been published.

It is quite different in the case of the other two great critics. We have plenty of biographical material concerning them, for the simple reason that they went outside of the rôle of critics and scholars, to appear as poets and dramatists, which made the public want to know everything about them. Mr. Saintsbury does not write poetry, nor do any-

thing outside of the severe limits of his critical profession. But the productions of Professors Dowden and Gosse have been of an extremely varied kind.

Perhaps Professor Gosse is the more remarkable of the two; and I imagine that he is certainly the greatest writer of the three, in point of style. He is also very much the best known to the public at large. His career has been rather curious. He is the son of the naturalist, Philip Gosse, and was born in 1849. He began life as a clerk in the library of the British Museum. Then he became translator to the Board of Trade. Later still his extraordinary talents attracted attention, with the result that he was elected lecturer on English literature at Trinity College, Cambridge. Besides those histories of literature of which I have already spoken, he has produced five volumes of poems, five volumes of essays, and two volumes of literary biography —prodigious work for a man still comparatively young. As to the five volumes of poems, I am sorry to say that I think they are of no importance at all. As verse there is no fault to be found with them; they are perfectly correct, very musical, very clever. But there is really nothing new in them and nothing very strong. It is quite different in regard to the five volumes of essays. There is much more poetry in the prose of those essays than in the verse of the other volumes. Indeed, I do not hesitate to say that they are the best essays written by any living Englishman, and I think that there is no essay-work by any other writer of the nineteenth century which surpasses them. Perhaps they have never been equalled in English. To be still more definite about their merit, I shall say that these essays are the nearest approach ever made in English to the elegance and grace and astonishing colour of the best French essays. In other words Mr. Gosse writes English almost as beautifully as the best of French writers write French. But remember, this is due to the fact that Mr. Gosse has studied French with a special view to perfecting his own style. Moreover, he has adopted the method of Sainte-Beuve in

the fullest manner possible, and in most cases with surprising success. He studies the man, the writer, from every point of view, in relation to the time, in relation to heredity, in relation to his social circumstances. And he has extended a great deal of generous notice to living writers, made a great many reputations, and endeared himself to literary aspirants all over Europe. In America he is very much loved, and he gave there a series of lectures which have been very popular, notwithstanding the fact that he dared to say that America had never produced a great poet, and perhaps only one man who could be called even a good poet in a small way.

It is very difficult to give you any idea of the splendour of Mr. Gosse's English by extracts, because, in any of his essays, everything is so woven up with everything else that the effect of any part really belongs to the whole; and when you detach one sentence or paragraph, it loses much of the colour and beauty which it displayed when united to the rest of the living texture. But I shall try the effect of a quotation or two. Here is a little description of the character of the poet Lord de Tabley, which as a description seems to me to teach us something new about the power of the English language when managed by a master-hand: "His mind was like a jewel with innumerable facets, all slightly blurred or misted; or perhaps it would be a juster illustration to compare his character to an opal, where all the colours lie perdue, drowned in a milky mystery, and so arranged that to a couple of observers, simultaneously bending over it, the prevalent hue shall in one case seem a pale green, in the other a fiery crimson."*

I cannot conceive of anything finer in English than that. Of course the idea of the comparison itself has a natural splendour; anybody who has seen an opal, and who knows how to write, must say something striking about it. But even when Mr. Gosse talks, not about jewels, but about the most common and vulgar things, his style is equally splendid

* *Critical Kit-Kats*, p. 165.

and equally surprising. I give you, in illustration, two little paragraphs taken from the narrative of a visit which he made to Whitman some eight or nine years ago: "Whitman, in his suit of hodden grey, and shirt thrown wide open at the throat, his grey hair and white beard voluminously flowing, seemed positively blanched with cleanliness; the whole man sand-white with spotlessness, like a deal table that has grown old under the scrubbing-brush. . . . If it be true that all remarkable human beings resemble animals, then Walt Whitman was like a cat—a great old grey Angora Tom, alert in repose, serenely blinking under his combed waves of hair, with eyes inscrutably dreaming."*

Perhaps some of you may not have seen an Angora cat. It has extraordinarily long silky hair, looking like a pair of whiskers and a beard. This is a pen-picture that makes you see the old man quite as plainly as the writer saw him.

The volume from which these extracts are taken, is a volume of which the title, Mr. Gosse tells us, may be spelled in two ways—"Critical Kit-Kats," or "Kit-Cats"; and it is in this volume that his methods and his style most resemble those of Sainte-Beuve. But another volume of nearly equal excellence is his "Questions at Issue"; and I should be inclined to accord only a slightly inferior place to his "Seventeenth Century Studies." In all these you will perceive that he has an astonishing power of making things seem alive. "Gossip in a Library" belongs rather to the severer form of the literary essay, and deals chiefly with the subject of curious and rare books; but you might obtain much pleasure from perusing it, even if the actual profit should prove small. A very splendid volume, both in relation to style and instruction, is the "Northern Studies," in which Mr. Gosse has condensed the best results of his Scandinavian scholarship. The book is unfortunately out of print for the moment; but I believe that a new edition is being prepared.

I have not anything good to say to you about the poetry of this great critic; but I must tell you that he did not

* *Ibid*, p. 103 *sq.*

write it with the idea of displaying himself as a great poet; it was written chiefly to exercise himself in the mastery of certain forms. And he has mastered them very successfully indeed, although one would wish rather that he had given the time to another volume of essays on literature. In my opinion he has carried the form of the essay to the highest point of perfection reached in the English language.

Professor Dowden is an equally remarkable figure, though differing widely from the other two. He was born in 1843. He must have had most extraordinary ability as a student, for at the age of only 24 he was appointed Professor of English literature in Trinity College, Dublin. He is still in that position; but he is also a lecturer, occasionally, at Cambridge University, at Oxford University, and at Edinburgh University, and he holds high degrees from those three universities as well as from his own. He was first made widely known by his "Life of Shelley,"—the same Life criticized by Matthew Arnold. Later on he became widely known as a student of Shakespeare. He has also produced a volume of poems of tolerable excellence, and two volumes of literary essays of very great excellence. His short history of French literature is one of the best ever made, though differing entirely in character from Professor Saintsbury's work on the same subject; and his work upon modern English literature is perhaps the most interesting of any to read, although it is very much condensed, and does not embrace nearly so many subjects as the work of Saintsbury.

Professor Dowden, in his later work at least, shows very strongly the influence of French models. He also is a disciple of Sainte-Beuve, though less successful than Mr. Gosse in imitating some of Sainte-Beuve's methods. But the study of the French masters has given to his style a great deal of the same colour and power observable in the work of Mr. Gosse. I do not think that he is so clever as Mr. Gosse in saying a great deal with a very few words. He does not appear to have Mr. Gosse's power of concentration; his sentences are much longer; and he writes much

more diffusely. But, this being said, it were often difficult to choose between them. Mr. Dowden has the poetical temperament to the same degree that Mr. Gosse has; and in point of style he is able to give us surprises of a like kind. Open his last volume of literary essays, and almost in the very beginning you will find a simile like this: "Whither is literature tending? . . . The science of spiritual meteorology has not yet found its Dalton or its Humboldt; the law of the tides of the soul has not yet been expressed in a formula."*

The man who writes this way we feel to be at heart both a poet and a thinker; and we are prepared to be delighted by him even when he touches upon metaphysical law or philosophical subjects. And the delight comes very soon. A little further on, he speaks of the power of the influence of a foreign literature to inspire our own, like the fusion of strange blood that gives new force to a weak or perishing race: "The shock of strangeness is inspiriting. Every great literary movement of modern Europe has been born from the wedlock of two peoples. So the great Elizabethan literature sprang from the love-making of England with Italy; the poetry of the early part of the nineteenth century from the ardour aroused in England by the opening promise of the French revolution."†

This is the way to write the philosophy of literature, so that we can be at once interested and taught, at once amused and instructed. There is a great deal in that little sentence; for it expresses a universal law, ruling the history not only of literature but of life, the law that governs not only the union of individuals, but the union also of intellectual elements. It reminds us also of the teaching of Sir Francis Galton, that men of genius chiefly come from families representing the union of different national elements. And it ought to interest us here, this law; for if there be universal truth in it, a new Japanese literature must eventually arise from the influence of Western literature, just as

* *New Studies in Literature*, p. 1. † *Ibid.* p. 19.

we see that, even now in Europe, the influence of Oriental literature, especially from India, is beginning to show itself, to exercise a new power in Western thought.

Mr. Dowden's essays are rich in sentences like these; and, as you might have divined from the above quotations, he has been a sincere student of modern science. I think we may call him a strong evolutionist. He is the only one of the three great critics who has boldly declared that the influence of men like Herbert Spencer will be of the greatest possible value to the literature of the coming age. It has been rather the fashion, both for French and English critics, to declare that science is killing poetry. Mr. Dowden thinks the exact opposite. He believes that science is even now putting new blood and strength into literature, and is preparing the way for grander forms both of prose and of poetry than were ever known before.

In this and in other ways I think Professor Dowden is more of a reformer, more broadminded, and more generous than either Mr. Gosse or Mr. Saintsbury. Mr. Saintsbury would certainly not hazard any strong opinion upon the possible influence in literature of the evolutional philosophy. Indeed, when he has spoken of it, he has always done so in the most cautious manner, and in the tone of one who thinks that nothing has yet been decided. In this respect he well represents English conservatism. Professor Gosse shows, through all his writings, that he is as much under the influence of the new philosophy as he is under the influence of Sainte-Beuve. But Professor Dowden, greatest by his many university honours, is the only one who has had such sympathy with the new thought, and such courage to express that sympathy, as to give us a thoughtful and splendid chapter upon the subject. He might also do much more for the new cause in literature, were it not that his time is very largely taken up with editing as well as with lecturing. But we should be grateful for what we get, in the case of men like these.

At the beginning of this essay I spoke of Mr. Stopford

Brooke, whom you all know of through his excellent primer of English literature. You know that a good primer is very much harder to write than a big history; even Huxley declared that it was the hardest thing for any intellectual man to undertake. The great point in a primer is, not so much to be simple and clear, but to choose. There must be not only immense compression, but amassing of only the most important facts bearing upon the subject, as that subject ought to be presented to young minds. And that little primer of literature was the best of its kind ever written; in the new edition it has increased value as an educational treasure. The man capable of writing it was not an ordinary scholar by any means, but a very extraordinary one. Mr. Brooke was known as a clergyman considerably before he became known in literature; he was famous for the eloquence and beauty of his sermons. People thought it an intellectual treat to go to the church in which he preached, just for the pleasure of hearing him. In his leisure moments he gave his time chiefly to the subject of Anglo-Saxon literature, and became an authority upon it—so that you can see he is a many-sided man. But I do not think that he can be called either a great critic or a great stylist; indeed, he has never taken the special pains necessary to become either. One quotation from his poetry will illustrate what I mean, a little song, showing both his excellences and his defects. It is taken from a dramatic composition entitled "Riquet of the Tuft."

Young Sir Guyon proudly said,
"Love shall never be my fate."
"None can say so but the dead,"
Shriek'd the witch wife at his gate.

"Go and dare my shadow'd dell,
Love will quell your happy mood."
Guyon, laughing his farewell,
Rode into the fairy wood.

There he met a maiden wild,
By a tree she stood alone;

When she looked at him and smil'd,
At a breath his heart was gone.

In her arms she twin'd him fast,
And, like wax within the flame,
Melted memory of the past,
Soul and body, name and fame.

This simple little ballad is quite a perfect thing thus far—everything that a weird song should be. But the last stanza spoils the whole composition:

Late at night the steed came back,
"Where's our good knight?" cried his men;
Far and wide they sought his track,
But Guyon no one saw again.

Commonplace phrasing, doggerel-verse, utter indifference to finish! A beautiful little composition destroyed by haste and indifference. Now there is something of the same haste observable in all the work of Mr. Brooke, except in perhaps that wonderful little primer, at which he really worked very carefully, and had the assistance or advice of Matthew Arnold and other eminent men. Everywhere you find a display of immense natural talent and great scholarship, but no sustained exquisiteness, no caution, and a great tendency to twist facts so as to adjust them to fit favourite theories. No few of these theories, about Anglo-Saxon literature, for example, have been proved to be utterly wrong; and they are wrong for exactly the same reason that the little song which I quoted to you was never properly finished. Again we find incapacity to mass and arrange facts systematically. In the first form of the great work upon early English literature, the student is utterly confused by the arbitrary arrangement of the whole thing, by tiresome and useless digression, by leaving one subject half finished in order to consider another, and then returning to the same subject again in a different chapter. In the subsequent and much condensed form of the work, a condensation exacted by the

good judgment of the publishers, there is a great improvement; but the new chapters upon Celtic literature and the ancient peoples of Britain, together with the chapters upon King Alfred, show the same faults as those which mark and mar the whole of the larger work. Therefore it would be impossible to consider Mr. Brooke as a trustworthy critic, or indeed as a critic at all. He is a poet, a scholar, a discoverer, a man who has done very much to stimulate the study of Anglo-Saxon literature; but he is not a critic.

There are of course quite a number of English scholars who are occasional critics and good ones — specialists like Professor Ker, for example. But these men are first of all philologists, and not professional critics, so that they are outside of our present consideration. We have only three great professional critics, recognized as such, to offset the fifteen or twenty master critics that France can boast of. And what I wanted you to observe from the beginning of this lecture has been the influence of French literature upon these three. They have been made by the study of French criticism; they have developed an entirely new art through the study of French criticism; and they have done more than any other men to turn the attention of Englishmen to the real superiority of French literature in certain departments. Another thing which they have done, and a very important thing it is, has been to create a new spirit of literary tolerance and generosity. Forty or fifty years ago English men-of-letters insisted, like Macaulay, on judging everything foreign from an English standpoint — from the standpoint of English ethics, English feelings, English habits and customs; and the result was narrowness and dryness of soul. To-day it is very different. Mr. Saintsbury, conservative in many things; Mr. Gosse, liberal in most things; and Mr. Dowden, liberal in all things—have united their forces to teach us how to look for beauty in itself, apart from all considerations of ethics and habits and prejudices. It was from the French that they learned this, the excellent teaching lately embodied so well in these little

sentences of Anatole France, *"Il ne faut pas demander la verité à la littérature; il faut demander la verité aux sciences."* That is to say, we must not ask truth from literature, in the sense of exactness of fact; such exactness it is the duty of science to give. The only real object of literature is beauty. But remember that beauty in itself also means truth of a larger kind than truth of fact; it means truth of feeling. And in all my lectures I have never failed, when I had the opportunity, to remind you that literature is not the art of writing books, but the art of expressing feeling —feeling, which means everything noble as well as everything common in human life. To-day these truths seem plain enough, but very few Englishmen could see them fifty years ago. It was the duty of the great critics to make them see it.

The great difference between French and other criticism until the present time has been not more in method than in charm. A good French review — a review, for example, by Jules Lemaître—delights like a good story, while it instructs in the best possible way. Not infrequently it happens that the review of a book is much more interesting than the book itself. On the other hand, German criticism, being especially scientific, is likely to be somewhat dry, and never can appeal to an equally large class of minds. English critics have perceived this educational value in the French method, and it is noteworthy that such a critic as Mr. Gosse, who has obtained distinction both as a German and a Scandinavian scholar, never allowed himself to be influenced by German methods of critical analysis. Now the literature of English criticism during the latter part of the present century, has been made almost entirely by French influence. In what other directions is the same influence to be seen?

In the beginning I said that I was going to speak of the general relation between French and contemporary English literature. We owe to French influence also something in poetry, and something in fiction, but not so much

as might be supposed. In poetry the French of to-day had little to teach Englishmen, for English poetry is much more developed than English prose. There are, however, marks of the great French romantic poets in the work of our own Victorian poets — in Swinburne a great deal, in Rossetti a little, in Tennyson scarcely anything. This is curious, that the poet of all who most influenced modern English is the one Englishman who had least to learn from the French. The forms of which English poetry is capable have almost been exhausted. Therefore the influence of French forms could not be much. What could be borrowed from French poetry would be feeling; and the poets who have borrowed from the French have been those who allowed certain influences to appear in their poetry not in accordance with real English feeling. Baudelaire and Gautier, who particularly helped Swinburne to colour his verse, were poets of sensation — sensation of a kind which English feeling usually rejects. We may say that the influence of French poetry upon English poetry has been very small during the Victorian poetry, and has been chiefly in the direction of increased colour and sensuous charm.

As for the novel, the French do not appear to have taught us anything. No great English novelist of the period has successfully attempted to write upon French models. Of course, the naturalistic school, the school of Zola and the others, had its message for English novel writers, and experiments were made, but none of them has been very successful. If we can speak of any French influence in this direction, it can only be the influence of theory—the theory of Realism. Moreover, it is remarkable that at the present time literary novels have almost ceased to be written by Englishmen. Take any French novel, noteworthy or not, and you will find that it is beautifully written; the style is always admirable. But although fifteen hundred new books are promised for the month of December — that is, next month—by English publishers, I doubt whether among them all will be one beautifully written novel. The novel is

multiplying; but it is also deteriorating. It would indeed be a very good thing if English writers of novels could be induced to imitate the workmanship of the French. The trouble is—money. Novel-writing in English has become a money-making business, and the public do not care about style. The last great writer of novels who had a style was Stevenson.

In another direction, however, French fiction is influencing English fiction—the direction of the Short Story. You may think it strange, but it is nevertheless true that until within very recent times the English reading public did not care for English short stories, and English publishers would not publish them. Yet the very same public would buy thousands of volumes of short stories in French, and read them with delight. Perhaps it was thought that only Frenchmen could write really great stories of this kind. The thought was altogether wrong. Perhaps no English writer living can write a short story quite as well as a Frenchman, except Rudyard Kipling. But there is now a growing demand for short stories, and many clever writers are trying to imitate the French in this way, even in the matter of style. But it is curious to observe how the change was brought about. French literature directly influenced, not English literature in this matter, but American. America first yielded to this influence; the work of Poe, Hawthorne, and later Bret Harte, considerably influenced by French writers, at last yielded fruit. An immense number of books of little stories were produced in America after 1860 or 1870; the best of these became popular in England; and then came the short stories of Stevenson and Kipling. Before that some English writers, like Dickens and Lytton, wrote wonderful short stories, but the public only read them because they were already familiar with the novels of the same authors. I remember a most beautiful little story called "A Bird of Passage" by J. Sheridan Le Fanu, published in England early in the seventies; it was ignored in England, but the American public were delighted with it.

Now we can fairly state that the English prejudice in favour of the novel, as against the short story, is breaking down, and that this again is due to French influence.

Thus we have evidence of French influence in criticism, a little in poetry, and a little in fiction. But in other departments of literature the English remain very much behind their neighbours. In the drama the French remain incomparably superior. Indeed, French plays are constantly being translated for English theatres; while no great English drama, of an actable kind, has appeared during the period. And there is yet another department of literature in which the French have much to teach the English—the Sketch, the essay of observation. In that we are still immeasurably behind.