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GEORGE SAINTSBURY

GEORGE SAINTSBURY was born on 23 October, 1845, at Southampton: he died at Bath on 28 January, 1933, and was brought for burial to the place of his birth. He had lived within twelve years of a century: like Dryden and like Dr Johnson, the builder-oak of the criticism of his time. As insular in one sense as the Venerable Bede (for though a great walker he was no traveller), he had like him the *potestas orbis terrarum*, at any rate of the lands the Romans knew. And like him too, 'in every generation he speaks familiarly'. There is no fashion so dead as that of the day before yesterday, and the yesterday between 1914 and 1918 was a gap that few men of seventy could bridge. But something in his integrity, the magnanimity and ripeness and obstinacy of his mind, his quick ironic concern for the new world about him, his awareness—in the phrase which he used to illumine the darkness of Swift—of 'the accepted hells beneath', his faith in a *civitas Dei* that honourable men might still inherit: these made his name a stronghold, an assurance that some things could not be shaken. 'That choleric and heavenly temper of thine', wrote Peter of Celle to John of Salisbury, 'is gayest in thine afflictions, puts forth leaves in the frost': and those who saw him in the Augustan twilight of the house of his last inhabiting, a solitary indomitable figure with straggling grey hair and black skull-cap, gaunt as Merlin and islanded in a fast-encroaching sea of books, came out from him with some understanding of Boethius' definition of eternity—'whatsoever comprehendeth and possesseth the whole fulness of life here and now, to which naught of the future is lacking, and from which naught of the past hath flowed away'. The miseries of old age and the slow

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

oncoming of death had no dominion over that free spirit.

It was his habit to commend Gibbon as one who could regard his subject from a vantage-ground of twenty centuries: but for himself, the centuries were not so much a vantage-ground, as a continuation of his own experience. He read, in Milton's phrase, 'as if alive in every age'. Whether the book before him is Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon* or Norman Douglas's *South Wind*, he speaks of it as its contemporary. It might seem impossible that a man of his extreme idiosyncrasy and vigorous prejudice should have been the most catholic critic of his time, most profoundly the 'Understander' whom Ben Jonson in preface after preface invoked in vain. Yet this High Churchman and High Tory refused to join the chorus of censure on the 'scrannel pipes' outburst in *Lycidas*: 'the supremacy of expression and phrase and verse remains—the discord and declension, even to those who find them such, are in the sentiment only'. The 'fits and squalls of moral darkness' in Hazlitt never overshadowed for him 'the abiding intellectual light', though it is plain that he becomes embarrassed by 'a kind of shabbiness' in Hazlitt's handling of his affairs: and he was the first to rehabilitate Leigh Hunt, in spite of all those shifts and meannesses against which, as a *Times* reviewer once put it, 'the King of critics might have roared a noble indignation'. 'The man could write': the neck-verse saved many a hanging. If it did not wholly save Sterne, it was because he offended in the one particular that turned Saintsbury's ink to vitriol. Not frank indecency: he could dismiss that in his beloved Rabelais as 'a time-deodorised dunghill by the roadside, not beautiful, but negligible'. But the snigger he could not away with: and if Sterne is damned, it is because a 'perfect literary artist' has crystallised the snigger in English prose.

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He had indeed to defend himself more than once for his catholicity,

Je voudrais boire tout le vin
 Et baiser tout le monde.

For the critic's baptism, he wrote, *manet oceanus*: and the Unpardonable Sin to him was 'enquiring of a work of art whether it has done, not what the artist meant it, but what the critic wanted it, to do. . . . The religion of literature is a sort of Pantheism: you never know when the presence of the Divine *may* show itself, though you must know where it has shown. And you must never forbid it to show itself, anyhow or anywhere'. Like his favourite Longinus, his final test was the literal *transport*, the taking of a man out of himself: and it might be with the resistless sweep of

All night the dreadless Angel, unpursu'd,
 or the jogging homeward trot to

The table-flap, the mutton-bone, and Mary.

In either instance, the man has done what he set out to do. 'Wordsworth can. . . write the most detestable doggerel and platitude. But when anyone who knows what poetry is reads—

Our noisy years seem moments in the being
 Of the eternal silence,

he sees that, quite independently of the meaning. . . there is one note added to the articulate music of the world. . . . He leaves Wordsworth, he goes straight into the middle of the eighteenth century, and he sees Thomson with his hands in his dressing-gown pockets biting at the peaches, and hears him between the mouthfuls murmuring—

So when the shepherd of the Hebrid Isles
 Placed far amid the melancholy main,

and there is another note, as different as possible in kind

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

and yet alike, struck for ever. . . . In this matter, as in all matters that are worth handling at all, we come of course *ad mysterium*. Why certain combinations of letters, sounds, cadences, should almost without the aid of meaning. . . produce this effect of poetry on men, no man can say. But they do.'

Saintsbury, said his critics, 'writ no language'. It was one of the many contradictions in him—contradictions that made his very existence extremely delightful to his friends—that he whose main preoccupation was form in verse or prose, and whose first essay, *Baudelaire*, preached his lifelong and unpopular doctrine of style before subject, should himself write like the scour of a river in spate, allusion tumbling on allusion, parenthesis rammed within parenthesis, reckless to reject the straws and faggots that his headlong thought swept up on its course. But this very unselfconsciousness, this possession of the man by the subject, had its rewards. The range of his style is enormous. There was an adroit and mischievous gravity, of which these chapters on Shakespeare are sufficient evidence: 'The uncertainty of the poet's birthday is one of the best known things about him'. . . . 'But the nature of commentators abhors a vacuum.' There was an extraordinary balance and epigraphic quality, seen at its height in the preface to his *Specimens of English Prose Style*, on the writers of the early eighteenth century: 'They were unrivalled in vigour, not easily to be beaten in sober grace, abundantly capable of wit, but as a rule they lacked magnificence. . . . Addison's renowned homilies on death and tombs and a future life have rather an unrivalled decency. . . than solemnity in the higher sense of the term'. Here, his style has itself this unrivalled decency: but on poetry, it can at times reach to magnificence. On Dryden: 'the inimitable ring which dis-

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[More information](#)

tinguishes his verse from all others—the ring as of a great bronze coin thrown down on marble’. On Shakespeare’s Sonnets, after a characteristically contemptuous handling of the theories, biographical and other, which account for them: ‘All these theories and others are possible: none is proved: and for the literary purpose, none is really important. What is important is that Shakespeare has here caught up the sum of love and uttered it as no poet has before or since, and that in so doing he carried poetry—that is to say, the passionate expression in verse of the sensual and intellectual facts of life—to a pitch which it had never previously reached in English, and which it has never outstepped since. The coast line of humanity must be wholly altered, the sea must change its nature, the moon must draw it in different ways, before that tide-mark is passed’. His own tide-mark is reached in his criticism of Donne: ‘But it is not here [in satire] that we find the true Donne: it was not this province of the universal monarchy of wit that he ruled with the most unshackled sway. The provinces that he did so rule were quite other: strange frontier regions, uttermost isles where sensuality, philosophy, and devotion meet...’. ‘Behind every image, every ostensible thought of his, there are vistas and backgrounds of other thoughts dimly vanishing, with glimmers in them here and there into the depths of the final enigmas of life and soul. Passion and meditation, the two avenues into this region of doubt and dread, are tried by Donne in the two sections respectively, and of each he has the key. Nor, as he walks in them with eager or solemn tread, are light and music wanting, the light the most unearthly that ever played about a poet’s head, the music not the least heavenly that he ever caught and transmitted to his readers.’

For Saintsbury, there was no poet, and hardly any

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

writer, like Donne. And the spiritual and sensual kinship between these two men, the poet and his first discoverer, had its counterpart in the circumstances of their lives. Both were of a high pride and in their youth of towering ambition, and both were checked and frustrated of what they had judged to be their vocation, courtly diplomacy for one, 'Academe' at Oxford for the other. Both were denied security and reputation through the best years of their manhood, and found in place of them a passion and mastery and exultancy in living that glows to the last twilight of their day: and in the end, when they had come to their strength without it, they had honour in all men's mouths. Saintsbury's five times repeated failure at Oxford to obtain a Fellowship cost him something more than the initial sharpness of humiliation—leisure for an absolute exactness of scholarship, even though it was more than made up for by his depth and range: moreover, a loss that touches mediaevalists more nearly, it cost us his *History of the English Scholastics*. But the losses were outweighed by the gains. He married young: he had Prospero's island of enchanted lawn at the beginning of his life instead of at the end, and all his years were transfigured by it: and he was supremely his own master. No fellowship could have cramped him into a Pattison or a Casaubon: but it might have cost us the absolute Saintsbury. He could hardly have read more than he did: and his reading might not have been so continuously shot through with the richness of living. Ironically enough, when at fifty he accepted the Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh, it cost us his *History of Wine*. Here again, there is a heavy credit side. The twenty years in Edinburgh are the years of the *opera Maiora*, the *Short History of English Literature*, the editing and part writing of the *Periods of European Literature*, the

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History of Criticism, the *History of Prosody*, the *History of English Prose Rhythm*. *The Peace of the Augustans* finished in Edinburgh, his *History of the French Novel*, begun in Edinburgh, finished in Bath, have the mellowness of his Indian summer: and its twilight was lit with the gay lanterns of the *Cellar Book*, and for good discourse, the small but weighty *Trivia* of the three *Scrap Books*.

The world fell in love with them: but the reader who knows these only, knows no more than the surface of his mind. 'Of mighty mould, part hero and part saint of learning, he knew, when time came, how to use harbour, inn, and evening hour: but *after* he had crossed ocean and climbed peak: and it is the traffics, discoveries, and ascents, that count—the vast and austere efforts of his manhood, not the ungirt pastimes and pleasantries of age. Posterity would lose without the *Scrap Books*, yes: but their value is that they are by the historian of Criticism and of Prosody.'¹

His last will and testament recorded his wish that no biography should be written of him, and no letter published. It was, and even his modesty must have known it, to deny himself a surer immortality than the scholar's, a life in men's minds that would have persisted when his vast learning had become a legend like that of Gerbert or of Scaliger. For as a letter-writer he ranks with Walpole and with Lamb, and his letters are to his graver works as the *Colloquies* of Erasmus to his studies in Lucian and Cicero: quintessential. But the refusal, in an age crazed for personal publicity, is a gesture so characteristic of him that it uplifts the heart. This is the man we knew: not the Johnsonian Saintsbury who loved to fold his legs and have

¹ A. Blythe Webster in the *University of Edinburgh Journal*, 1933.

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[More information](#)

his talk out: not the Meredithian Saintsbury, emerging from his cellar with a bearded Hermitage reverently and triumphantly bestowed: but the solitary scholar who was his own best company, 'Lord not only of Joyous Gard but also of Garde Douleureuse', reading, reading, reading through the small hours in the familiar chair with the two tall candlesticks behind it. And their light falls, not on his face, but on the open book.

H. W

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LIFE AND PLAYS

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