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CRABTREE IN FRANCE 1791-1800
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With the memorable exception of Jones's oration *Crabtree and Science*, all our explorations have been in the field of English letters. To me falls the honour of pioneering in the field of French...

But a painful choice had to be made at the outset. Confronted with the long and eventful life of our poet, stretching, in terms of French history, from the age of Louis XV and Mme. de Pompadour, of Voltaire, Diderot and the beginnings of the *Encyclopédie*, through the devolution, the Empire, the Restoration, the reign of Louis-Philippe as far as the early years of the Second Empire, the mid career of Victor Hugo and the early career of Baudelaire, I had to opt between an attempt to trace the various journeys and sojourns of Crabtree in France during the seventy years between his first voyage across the Channel in 1783 and his death in 1854, and a piece of more detailed investigation into a limited period. My struggle was brief and decisive. It seemed to me that the traditions of our Foundation demanded that I refrain from mere anecdote and gossip in order to concentrate my efforts upon one small but scholarly piece of real research. I am convinced that all serious lovers of literature prefer depth to breadth, genuine evidence to hearsay, fact to conjecture. Nevertheless the attentive listener to my Oration may notice from time to time a hypothesis, an assumption based upon circumstantial rather than documentary evidence. But when circumstantial evidence is cumulative to the point of being overwhelming, it must be considered valid, even though a woman's honour, already somewhat tarnished, may lose a little more of its brightness.

A close study of earlier Orations enabled me to follow the gradual flowering of our poet from the little choirboy so dear to the curate of Chipping Sodbury, through the years of triumph and disaster culminating in his intempestive departure from the University of Oxford in 1773, the ten years of unspectacular growth and spiritual consolidation leading to the seven years of thralldom in the wine shipper's office at Orléans — years not without their poetic fruit, however, for out of them came the immortal *Ode to Claret* — and finally the unparalleled act of self immolation in the year 1791, when he relinquished all claims upon Annette Vallon and her unborn child that his friend William Wordsworth might find peace to his soul and body. Thereafter, silence until the false report in the *Morning Post* of the 3rd October 1800 of the poet's death in France.

There was the challenge. Joseph Crabtree disappears (or rather, until my researches, was thought to have disappeared) from history in 1791, but is still in France nine years later. Could I hope to find how this man had existed in Paris or elsewhere during the years of the Terror, the Directory and the Consulate to the very threshold of the Empire? Such knowledge, I felt convinced, might cast light upon the later thirties and early forties of this slow-maturing genius, and hence upon the genesis of some of the immortal poems of his full maturity — immortal, that is to say, to a handful of cognoscenti, but still, alas, awaiting the definitive edition promised by the Athlone Press.

I might have searched in vain had not curiosity — I blush to confess that it was a morbid and unhealthy curiosity — taken me last summer to the Château of Coppet, on the Lake of Geneva. This regrettably prurient voyeurism of mine filled me with a desire to see the actual site, the actual rooms and furniture occupied for so many years by Mme. de Staël, her friend the beautiful Mme. Récamier and their bevy of men friends, including Friedrich Schlegel, Bonstetten, Sismondi and Benjamin Constant, whose amorous adventures in this very place were distilled into the most perfect short novel in the French language, *Adolphe*. There came, of course, many visiting celebrities such as Byron and Chateaubriand to this house which, for some twenty years, was one of the intellectual meeting-places of the nations of Europe.

Why, then, gentlemen, should a Scholar be ashamed of what might to the vulgar seem prurient curiosity? Often Fate, in her inscrutable wisdom, leads us on from the apparently trivial and ridiculous to the weighty and sublime. Well, then, I went to Coppet to look at the bedrooms of Mme. de Staël and Mme. Récamier. When the visit was over, I fell into conversation with the *Gardien*. Upon this worthy man's discovering that, unlike the contents of a motor-coach recently poured out into the château, I not only understood French and could make myself understood in that language, but had already heard of Mme. de Staël and had actually read some of her works, his enthusiasm knew no bounds, and he offered to show me some curious and interesting documents not usually shown to tourists.

Gentlemen, it is not my intention to wander off along erotic bypaths, however attractive in themselves. But one

document arrested my attention. It was a French poem, in manuscript, signed Joseph de la Pommeraye 1796 and, in another hand almost certainly that of Germaine de Staël herself, the initials O.N. Seeing my excitement, the *Gardien* allowed me to copy out the poem. Here it is:

PASTORALE

La troupe sort; et chacun dans la plaine
S'en va tresser des guirlandes de fleurs.
Avec plus d'art mariant les couleurs,
Déjà Talcis avait fini la sienne,
Quand sa maîtresse, épiant le moment,
D'entre ses doigts l'arrache adroitement,
La jette au loin, sourit, et prend la fuite;
Puis en arrière elle tourne des yeux
Qui lui disaient: 'Viens donc à ma poursuite.'
Il la comprit, et n'en courait que mieux.
Mais un faux pas fit tomber la bergère,
Et du zéphyr le souffle téméraire
Vint dévoiler ce qu'on voile si bien.
On vit, Églé ! ... Mais non; l'on ne vit rien:
Car ton amant, réparant toutes choses,
Jeta sur toi des fleurs à pleines mains,
Et dans l'instant tous ces charmes divins
Furent cachés sous un monceau de roses.

O.N.

Joseph de la Pommeraye 1796

Something in these verses reminded me of the inimitable lilt of the songs of the Swan of Sodbury. Could it be? But no, I reflected, the Scholar must confine his work to demonstrable facts, or at least irresistible circumstantial evidence, and not let himself be carried away by mere emotional reactions. Besides, I reminded myself, is it not clearly stated in Sutherland that on the very eve of his tactful withdrawal in 1791 Crabtree:

with that manly English independence which always characterized him, had never troubled to learn French; he would have found himself not only a stranger in a country already rent by Revolution, but a stranger unable to speak the language of the country in which he was now destitute.

How could an Englishman, destitute and with no French, acquire in five short years such mastery of the language of Racine, Bossuet, Voltaire, Diderot?

Diderot! Once again, I beg you to note how apparently trivial and irrelevant things can be made to fall into place, nay, can be coerced into meaningfulness, by the determined researcher. Now Diderot died in 1784, but apart from some juvenilia, philosophical and critical works and, of course the *Encyclopédie*, his writings were not published in his lifetime. But with the fall of the *ancien régime* and the eclipse of the Church, many of Diderot's more daring and subversive works were published and received with rapturous enthusiasm, notably the two novels, *Jacques le Fataliste* and *La Religieuse*, both of which were the bookselling sensations of this very year 1796. *Jacques le Fataliste* — a long, rambling affair inspired by *Tristram Shandy* — contains an episode that can stand alone in much the same way as *Manon Lescaut* can be, and usually is, detached from *Les Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*. This episode of Madame de la Pommeraye is a powerful story of a scorned woman's revenge on her erstwhile lover. Clearly the author of this manuscript poem had taken his pseudonym from the heroine (or, to be more exact, the villainess) of the year's bestseller, and called himself Joseph de la Pommeraye. You may ask why this was not simply the man's real name. Since the publication of the Oration of Arthur Brown, such a naive theory is no longer admissible. We also read in Brown another vital clue: the light-hearted punning on his own name so characteristic of our poet.

Here, then, was the pointer: the poem might well be attributed to some French poet, some Gallic jackdaw decked in the peacock plumes of one not only too modest to lay claim to these sublime verses, but also capable of throwing readers off the scent by signing in some pseudonymous or humorously punning manner. It was at this point that the full significance of the signature Joseph de la Pommeraye struck me. I trust, gentlemen, that you will bear for a moment with what might seem to some of you a needlessly pedantic and pedagogical discussion of French proper names. I will be as brief as is compatible with clarity. The essential point is that Crabtree cannot be translated into French as a proper name. Other fruit-tree names are common enough: M. Pommier, M. Poirier, M. Prunier, yes. But the French for a crab tree is *un pommier sauvage*. And M. Pommier

Sauvage is as impossible in French as any compound fruit name would be in English. Mr. Peartree, Mr. Appletree, perhaps, but not Mr. Cox's Orange Pippin or Mr. Worcester Permain. On the other hand, M. de la Pommeraye is distinctive and memorable: it means 'an apple orchard' and so includes any kind of fruit, it sounds aristocratic, and in 1796 it had the advantage of a ready-made literary celebrity. Not unexpectedly I found that here was another example of jackdaws decking themselves in peacock's plumes, for this poem has been published among the works of a minor French poet, Parny. Moreover — and this should be a lesson to us all in caution and humility — even that most subtle and percipient of all critics, Sainte-Beuve, was deceived and included it in an edition of the works of Parny that he edited in 1862. I hope to prove this evening that this poem is the work of Joseph Crabtree.

But we must proceed cautiously. It is a far cry from a *rencontre* of this kind to a certainty. My discovery appears at first sight to raise new and even more baffling problems. How could one establish any connection between Joseph Crabtree and the Château de Coppet, Mme. de Staël and, above all, how could the indigent and Frenchless Crabtree of 1791 be the same person as the brilliant French poet of 1796?

As I pondered over this problem, determined to find a solution by fair means or foul, I saw clearly in my mind's eye the noble features of our poet. I do not allude to the picture reproduced in Spencer's *Iconography*, with its unhappy resemblance to *Palor irritans*, but to the serene visage of the Sutherland portrait. Could there be some secret hidden behind those passionate eyes? Something that might have appealed to Mme. de Staël, that shrewd judge of manflesh? Yes, the resemblance is clear. Talleyrand! Of course that was the connection. Talleyrand, who was born in 1754, and was thus an exact contemporary of Crabtree, had been the first lover of Mme. de Staël while he was still a priest, before the Revolution. This greatest of all political Vicars of Bray left France in 1791 for England and America, where he lay low and intrigued until it was safe to return to France some years later. Early in 1792 (I have this information from unpublished diaries the whereabouts of which I am not free to divulge) a half-dressed (top half) Englishman was discovered sheltering from the cold in the porch of Mme. de Staël's town house in the Rue du Bac, having been discovered in an embarrassing position by a jealous husband. It is said that this is the origin of the epithet *sans-culotte*, but we must not descend into mere conjecture.

Here then is the answer. It seems that he resembled Talleyrand closely in all respects, and not merely facially. For years he occupied a position in the household of the most brilliant conversationalist in Europe, whose conversation, when she was staying at Weimar, was so brilliant and so sustained that Goethe retired to bed alleging a serious cold and remained there until she had left the town. Crabtree's position in the household was ambiguous, it is true (there is an obscure reference to her English butler Joe, whom she brought in her train when she stayed at Juniper Hall, near Dorking, at the time of the wedding of the émigré General D'Arbly to Fanny Burney), but what is certain is that he must have repaid his hostess's kindness by comforting her in her lonely vigils during short and unavoidable recuperative absences of her gentlemen friends. It is to the eternal credit of Crabtree that in these unpropitious circumstances he assimilated such a mastery of the French tongue.

If, gentlemen, you will bear with another short digression upon French literature, I can now explain the mysterious initials O.N. in the unmistakable hand of Mme. de Staël on the MS I discovered. It furnishes an additional proof, if one were needed, of the identity of the French poet with the tutelary genius of our Foundation. O.N., in the hand of the writer of the immortal *Corinne*, can only refer to the hero of that novel, Oswald, Lord Nelvil. Oswald Nelvil, you will all of course remember, was the melancholy, splenetic but passionate and faithless noble British lord (he was of Scottish parentage, but that was local colour put in out of deference to the Ossian cult) who betrayed Corinne and broke her heart. Who but Crabtree could be the prototype of the sad, romantic Oswald? I appeal to you, gentlemen, as men of the world, how could Joseph Crabtree be other than sad and morose, for what virile yet sensitive man could enjoy the position of being, if I may use an expressive vulgarism, an occasional stand-in for a passionate mistress?

There may still be some sceptics in my audience. All this evidence, they may say, is circumstantial. I have saved the crowning revelation until the end. In a volume of *Erotica* I was fortunate enough to find recently in the Charing Cross Road, I found the following short poem signed J.C. 1848. Imagine my delighted surprise when I saw that it was none other than the French poem of 1796 done into English verse. Of course J.C. could stand for Julius Caesar or even other authors whom I need not name, but I venture to suggest that only our immortal bard, still green and still stretching forth his crabby limbs in vigorous old age, could have found such astonishingly eclectic poetic language. Like all the greatest geniuses, like Beethoven, he gathers up all that has gone before and looks forward with prophetic vision down the uncharted vistas of the future. Here as you will doubtless perceive, we have in striking and challenging juxtaposition the diction of Pope and Dryden and modern locutions and metaphors foretelling the age of the internal combustion engine and the telly:

Forth comes the troop; and issuing o'er the plain
Each into garlands fragrant blossoms binds.
Talcis, with subtler art assorted colours finds,
Long ere the rest he'd made his daisy-chain,
When lo! his girl-friend gets him unawares,
Snatches it deftly from him; off she tears,
Chucks it away and grins and does a flit,
Then o'er her shoulder glancing as she ran
Her eyes said clearly: 'Catch me if you can.'
Twiggling her meaning Talcis stepped on it.
Alas, some stumbling block capsized the maid:
The naughty zephyr before all displayed
What never should be seen by young men's eyes.
They saw, Églé! they saw your dainty prize!
No, no, they didn't, Talcis put things right;
Handfuls of blooms on your fair form he strewed,
And inches deep neath roses many hues
Hid from rude gaze the source of man's delight.

J.C. (In *Erotica Diversa*, published privately, London, 1848)

I do not wish to end my Oration on a sad, even tragic note, but there is, alas, an alternative interpretation. It might well be that our poet, brought low in the evening of his days by poverty and infirmity, found himself in the humiliating position of having to supply to the trade the kind of verses considered suitable for enclosure in packets of art anatomical studies. What more natural, if such were the pass to which advancing years and public neglect had reduced him, than that this survivor from a glorious past should re-write in another tongue a poem inspired by the sumptuous form of Germaine? And who but a supreme artist could have displayed such virtuosity, and produced, at the age of 94, a little jewel outshining the lustre of its already remarkable model?

Fellow members of the Crabtree Foundation: you will, I am convinced, have found my Oration tantalizingly brief. But alas, as our poet sang in the *Ode to Claret*: 'Time, gentlemen, time please!' Much remains to be discovered in this fascinating field of study. I would have liked to examine the suggestion put to me by Mr. Jeremy Warburg that Crabtree went from France to Algeria in 1799 and there wrote the poem beginning: 'Then up spoke the sheikh of Algiers'. I had even obtained a research grant from the University, but all such work has had to be postponed owing to the disturbed state of that unhappy country in recent months. It remains for me to express the hope, nay, the confident belief, that some younger and more vigorous scholar will seize the torch from my failing hand and dissipate the shadows of ignorance. I end with a little-known and seldom-quoted remark of a grossly overrated contemporary of Crabtree named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

Light! more light!