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Against the Pussyfoots

Steven Shapin

- *Notes on a Cellar-Book* by George Saintsbury, edited by Thomas Pinney [Buy this book](#)

George Saintsbury was in the taste business. By profession, he made judgments of taste on works of literature. He produced dozens of editions of the work of novelists and poets and more than 50 monographs, including *A History of Elizabethan Literature*, *A History of English Prosody*, *The English Novel*, *A History of the French Novel* and, self-referentially, books about books about books – *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day*, *A History of English Criticism*. In late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, he was the supreme arbiter of literary taste, the ‘king of critics’. He had established a reputation as an editor, reviewer and political journalist by the mid-1870s, before becoming regius professor of rhetoric and English literature at Edinburgh from 1895 to 1915. Yet even in the 1890s, rival critics thought his work ‘old-fashioned’, and none of his monographs is currently to be had in a properly published form (although some of his editions are in print). His style doesn’t suit our deconstructionist and contextualising times, and modern sensibilities are embarrassed by his critical confidence and his preciousness, projected in sentences as stuffed as a Victorian drawing-room:

For passionate sense of the good things of earth, and at the same time for mystical feeling of their insecurity, for exquisite style without the frigidity and the over-correctness which the more deliberate stylists frequently display, for a blending of nature and art that seems as if it must have been as simply instinctive in all as it certainly was in some, the poets of the Tribe of Ben, of the Tribe of Donne, who illustrated the period before Puritanism and Republicanism combined had changed England from merriment to sadness, stand alone in letters.

Only one of Saintsbury’s books is still read. It has never been out of print or out of favour: first editions are highly valued in the antiquarian book trade, and it alone has sustained Saintsbury’s reputation into the 21st century. It too is a book about a book, but the book it is about was written by Saintsbury himself; it was never published, and it was never meant to be read by anyone but himself.

In his mid-seventies, suffering from gout, rheumatism, failing eyesight and the falling-down dizziness of

Ménière's disease, Saintsbury had been for some time under doctors' orders to limit his alcohol intake, at first of port and then of claret and Burgundy. It was in these circumstances that he signed a contract with Macmillan (which had brought out most of his recent literary criticism) to publish a book commenting on a ledger he had kept for about three decades. This ledger – an ordinary exercise book – was used to organise his wine cellar and to memorialise what had passed through it and, subsequently, through him. The book about the ledger was an exercise in critical nostalgia. 'All alcoholic drinks, rightly used, are good for body and soul alike,' Saintsbury wrote. 'It is the unbroken testimony of all history that alcoholic liquors have been used by the strongest, wisest, handsomest, and in every way best races of all times.' But now he could no longer drink like the heroic toper he once had been. Where, indeed, were the wines of yesteryear? Where were their memories? And where were the stout-hearted, free-spirited drinkers in a world besieged by 'pussyfoots', Saintsbury's favourite term of abuse for American temperance campaigners and their British camp-followers? The instant success of *Notes on a Cellar-Book* on its appearance in 1920 took both author and publisher by surprise – a bittersweet exposure of their imperfect judgment of readers' tastes.

Saintsbury didn't much like contemporary literature or contemporary trends in criticism. Distancing himself from gestures at 'scientific' or 'impressionistic' criticism, he included in *Essays in English Literature 1780-1860* (1890) one of his rare attempts to spell out the critic's duty: the first task – 'the full and proper office of the critic' – was to judge, to 'class and value' literary works; the second was to give a 'tolerably instructed person' with no experience of the original a reliable idea of what it was like. Saintsbury knew how to do that with poetry, plays and novels, but there were few patterns then available for judging and describing wine.

Historically, the description of the taste and smell of wine had employed a limited vocabulary. One of the few 17th-century attempts listed only four possible tastes – 'sweet, acute, austere and milde' – though the medieval Italians could run to eight or nine. Most of the interest focused on their medicinal properties: did different wines encourage the production of urine or dissolve bladder stones? Were they suitable for those of a melancholic or phlegmatic temperament? Did they, as Shakespeare intimated, provoke the desire but take away the performance? The descriptive vocabulary became somewhat more ample in the 19th century, but it was really only in the middle third of the 20th century – after Saintsbury's death in 1933 – that there emerged the rich, even comically ornate, lexicon with which we are now familiar and which was probably elicited, first by embourgeoisement and, then, by the anxieties accompanying the democratisation of what had once been an aristocratic taste. 'Je

ne sais quoi' was good enough for the earl of Chesterfield, but it wasn't nearly clear enough for consumers who demanded that the incommunicable must be reliably described and, finally, quantified on a 100-point scale.

Among the founding fathers of this modern vocabulary were André Simon, Alexis Lichine and A.J. Liebling, whose *New Yorker* pieces included stuff like the following, about a modest southern French rosé: 'Tavel has a rose-cerise "robe", like a number of well-known racing silks, but its taste is not thin or acidulous, as that of most of its mimics is. The taste is warm but dry, like an enthusiasm held under restraint, and there is a tantalising suspicion of bitterness when the wine hits the top of the palate.' Christie's Michael Broadbent recently recalled the heyday of this style:

I do like a bit of pure poetry, my favourite author being the late and great André Simon. At the end of a lunch at the Hind's Head in Bray . . . his host asked Simon for his first reaction to the wines. He answered that . . . a 1926 Chablis reminded him of the 'grace of the silver willow'; the 1919 Montrachet 'of the stateliness of the Italian poplar'; the 1920 Cheval Blanc 'of the magnificence of the purple beech'; the 1870 Lafite 'of the majesty of the Royal Oak' . . . Mind you, the French have always been good at this sort of thing . . . A bit more down to earth were the late Louis Jadot's last words on the subject: 'There are four things to do when tasting a wine. First look at it and say "what a lovely colour." Then smell and say "what a beautiful bouquet." Thirdly, drink it and say "what a good wine." And lastly, look at your glass and remark, with pathos, "what a pity it is empty."' Surely preferable to tortured and over-the-top descriptions incorporating a (largely imagined) full panoply of fruits, spices, coffee and chocolate; 'gobs' (ugh) of decadent, mouthfilling heaven knows what . . . If you find you can't describe a wine, don't. Just sit back and enjoy it.

Notes on a Cellar-Book has become a cult object for those who want wine connoisseurship to be taken very seriously. At the same time, it is a magnificent Edwardian period piece, with a touch of the unintentionally camp about it. Saintsbury could happily describe an Elizabethan poem or an early 19th-century French novel, but he scarcely even tried to describe the bottles that had once rested in his cellar. The dominant present-day presumption is that you can tell someone who doesn't know a wine what it is like by referring to some more commonly recognisable smells and flavours (blackcurrants, gooseberries, vanilla), or through rather more allusive, but still referential, sources of sensation on the tongue or in the nose (fruitcake, beef, cat's pee, the perfume of a barnyard), or even by the use of predicates – austere, elegant, 'moreish' – that are not stably referential at all but which may do descriptive work if people know the liquids to which such words are routinely applied and can, by extension, form an idea of how an as yet untasted wine might

be similar.

But this wasn't a game Saintsbury was much interested in playing. Connoisseur that he was, he had a dim view of what he called 'wine slang'. 'These wine-lovers,' he wrote elsewhere, 'are curious in their phrase,' and in *Notes on a Cellar-Book* he sceptically marks out his occasional invocation of both innocuous and dubious wine cant with inverted commas: 'gun flint', 'dumb' and 'coarse', for instance. He does describe a great Hermitage as having a bouquet 'rather like that of the less sweet wallflower', but it's a gesture that stands out for its singularity, and the fact that this sort of thing happens so rarely in *Notes on a Cellar-Book* marks out the writer as belonging to a radically different taste-culture from the one that was coming into being towards the end of his life. Wine, for Saintsbury, is a literary liquid, not a chemical mixture. The tastes and smells of wines are not described, they are evoked – and evoked especially through dense references to the literary canon.

That is one reason to be grateful for Thomas Pinney's splendid new edition, which guides us meticulously through the dense thicket of Saintsbury's archly bookish allusiveness. How else could one possibly make sense of his passages on German wines? It helps to know who Ausonius was, and that he wrote a poem called *Mosella*, which was about his favourite German river; that the 'time of fritillaries' in Oxford is late April and that they flourish in Magdalen Meadow; that 'the interesting tenant of Amerongen' who liked German sparkling wine was the exiled Kaiser Wilhelm. To get maximum value out of these few pages, you should also be capable of recognising allusions to Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* and to the 'War Song of Dinas Vawr', a poem from Thomas Love Peacock's *The Misfortunes of Elphin*:

Ednyfed, king of Dyfed,
His head was borne before us;
His wine and beasts supplied our feasts,
And his overthrow, our chorus.

'The blackest purple of the Lusitanian grape', which is 'not so black as the tresses of Candiope's hair', is possibly (my guess) Saintsbury's complex allusion to Swift's imitation of Horace, Dryden's *Maiden-Queen*, and to the Roman province that now produces port. Of the 1888 and 1889 vintages of the Graves Château Smith Haut Lafitte: 'They were charming. Browning's "A Pretty Woman" is the poem that reminds me most of them.' Of Dutch gin (since Saintsbury's alcoholic tastes and cellar stores were catholic), it's necessary to know that Pantagruel and Panurge made a pilgrimage to 'Lantern-Land' to consult the 'Oracle of the Bottle'; and, in discoursing on champagne, it is handy to be aware that 'Sawedwardgeorgeearlylyttonbulwig' is a reference to Thackeray

poking fun at the preciousness of Bulwer-Lytton: ‘By the bye, Sir John what wemarkable good clawet this is; is it Lawose or Laff – ? . . . this clawet is weally nectaweous.’ And of Greek wines – which Saintsbury found ‘as a rule, insufferably beastly’ – you might want to retrieve the Latin description of the effects of a harsh wine (*ventris penetrabilia raspat*) by the 16th-century Italian poet Teofilo Folengo.

Saintsbury treated literary men as if they had privileged palates. Critical judgment of wine and words was not just fungible, it was substantially the same sort of thing. Kipling, Trollope and, especially, Thackeray were ransacked for wine judgments and further allusions. The 1858 clarets were glorious, as was the literature produced in that year, both signalled by, or, as Saintsbury suggested, caused by, the most brilliant comet of the 19th century, which came nearest the Earth during the French vintage. That year was, he wrote, an ‘*annus mirabilis*, in which some of the best wine of the century was made on the Douro, and in the Gironde, and on the Côte d’Or, and which seems to have exercised a very remarkable influence on the books and persons born in it.’ Called in witness was Thackeray’s *Lovel the Widower* of 1861: ‘Three years since, when the comet was blazing in the autumnal sky, I stood on the château steps of a great claret proprietor. “Borai-je de ton vin, O comète?” I said, addressing the luminary with the flaming tail. “Shall those generous bunches which you ripen yield their juices for me *morituro*?” It was a solemn thought . . . Which of us goes, which of us waits to drink those famous fifty-eights?’ (Thackeray died in 1863, before the wines of the comet were properly ready.)

The road linking texts and tastes can be travelled in either direction, and, while there’s nothing very novel about allusions to wine in literature and literary criticism, Saintsbury made a lot of them too. Of Barbey d’Aurevilly: ‘I like him when in “Un Dîner d’Athées” he makes one of them “swig off” a bumper of Picardan, the one wine in all my experience which I should consider fit *only* for an atheist. But a good novelist I cannot hold him.’ Of the good, but not great, in Elizabethan literature: ‘If we had not these poets, one particular savour, one particular form, of the poetical rapture would be lacking to the poetical expert; just as if what Herrick himself calls “the brave Burgundian wine” were not, no amount of claret and champagne could replace it.’ And of Sterne:

Of the good strong ale, and generous port, and subtly flavoured claret, and wisdom-giving amontillado, and inspiring champagne, and ineffable Burgundy of Fielding and Scott and Miss Austen and Dickens and Thackeray and other great novelists, one never can have too much. But Sterne is not a drink or a wine either of barley or grape – he is a liqueur – agreeable, but not perhaps exactly wholesome, artistic but certainly artificial.

Saintsbury ranked wines as well as evoked their flavours, but here he sometimes set aside his literary instructions to value goodness according to its genre and not to ignore the merely good in favour of the great. Writing of the Elizabethans, he was severe on

those who say that nobody but an enthusiast or a self-deceiver can read with real relish any Elizabethan dramatist but Shakespeare, and there are those who would have it that the incommunicable and uncommunicated charm of Shakespeare is to be found in Nabbes and Davenport, in Glapthorne and Chettle. They are equally wrong, but the second class are at any rate in a more saving way of wrongness.

True, some of Saintsbury's judgments were relative to type. The 1884 Haut-Brion was 'at least the equal of any claret I ever drank'; he accounted the 1878 Léoville Barton the best claret he'd had (and the only contrary opinion he could set against that was Trollope's, who rated the 1864 above it); he judged an 1881 Cockburn's 'the best rich [port] that I ever had'; and of the 1858 Romanée-Conti he wrote that it was 'impossible to conceive anything more perfect in its kind'. Yet at other moments he had no problems ignoring 'goodness of type' and some of his judgments had the character of absolutes. Saintsbury concluded of the 1851 Cockburn's that 'the Almighty might no doubt have caused a better wine to exist, but . . . he never did.' He had a wounding word for the merely good: these were 'beverage wines', though it's remarkable that those so judged included the Burgundies Corton and Pommard and any German wine at all. Chianti could, just, make it down the critic's throat, but all bourgeois clarets were – even more deeply insulting – 'simply Bolshevik'. Despite all that, Saintsbury often expressed the view that taste was necessarily relative, if only because it was irredeemably subjective. He knew the difference between great, good and average – in wine and in literature – and could reliably tell you which was which. But neither in literature nor in drink did he think he could cause you to share his taste if you were deficient in innate critical faculties. What could he say, for example, to anyone whose enjoyment of *The Tempest* was ruined by the antics of Trinculo and Caliban? 'It is impossible to prove to him by the methods of any Euclid . . . that he is wrong. The thing is essentially, if not wholly, a matter of taste.' Similarly, 'I am not aware of any method whereby I can prove that the most perfect claret is better than zoedone' – a popular Victorian patent beverage – 'in flavour . . . Again, it is a matter of taste.'

But Saintsbury had taste, and he even thought it might run in the family. *Notes on a Cellar-Book* relates a story about an ancient aunt who, having trouble with her eyes, took medical advice while staying with her nephew in London. The oculist recommended that, nothing being seriously wrong, she should drink Burgundy to improve

her vision. On successive days, Saintsbury gave her a very expensive and very grand Richebourg and the mere 'beverage wine' Pommard. He asked her which she preferred. It was the Richebourg, no matter the price: 'I think, my dear boy,' she told Saintsbury, 'the best always *is* the best.'

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