FONTENELLE, BERNARD LE BOVIER DE (1657-1757), French author, was born at Rouen, on the 11th of February 1657. He died in Paris, on the 9th of January 1757, having thus very nearly attained the age of 100 years. His father was an advocate settled in Rouen, his mother a sister of the two Corneille. He was educated at the college of the Jesuits in his native city, and distinguished himself by the extraordinary precocity and versatility of his talents. His teachers, who readily appreciated these, were anxious for him to join their [609] order, but his father had designed him for the bar, and an advocate accordingly he became; but, having lost the first cause which was entrusted to him, he soon abandoned law and gave himself wholly to literary pursuits. His attention was first directed to poetry; and more than once he competed for prizes of the French Academy, but never with success. He visited Paris from time to time and established intimate relations with the Abbé de Saint Pierre, the Abbé Vertot, and the mathematician Pierre Varignon. He witnessed, in 1680, the total failure of his tragedy Aspar. Fontenelle afterwards acknowledged the justice of the public verdict by burning his unfortunate drama. His opera of Thétis et Pélée, 1689, though highly praised by Voltaire, cannot be said to rise much above the others; and it may be regarded as significant that of all his dramatic works, not one has kept the stage. His Poésies pastorales (1688) have no greater claim to permanent repute, being characterized by stiffness and affectation; and the utmost that can be said for his poetry in general is that it displays much of the limae labor, great purity of diction and occasional felicity of expression.

His Lettres galantes du chevalier d’Her . . ., published anonymously in 1685, was an amusing collection of stories that immediately made its mark. In 1686 his famous allegory of Rome and Geneva, slightly disguised as the rival princesses Mreo and Eenegu, in the Relation de l’île de Bornéo, gave proof of his daring in religious matters. But it was by his Nouveaux Dialogues des morts (1683) that Fontenelle established a genuine claim to high literary rank;
and that claim was enhanced three years later by the appearance of the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686), a work which was among the very first to illustrate the possibility of being scientific without being either uninteresting or unintelligible to the ordinary reader. His object was to popularize among his countrymen the astronomical theories of Descartes; and it may well be doubted if that philosopher ever ranked a more ingenious or successful expositor among his disciples.

Hitherto Fontenelle had made his home in Rouen, but in 1687 he removed to Paris; and in the same year he published his *Histoire des oracles*, a book which made a considerable stir in theological and philosophical circles. It consisted of two essays, the first of which was designed to prove that oracles were not given by the supernatural agency of demons, and the second that they did not cease with the birth of Christ. It excited the suspicion of the Church, and a Jesuit, by name Baltus, published a ponderous refutation of it; but the peace-loving disposition of its author impelled him to leave his opponent unanswered. To the following year (1688) belongs his *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes*, in which he took the modern side in the controversy then raging; his *Doutes sur le système physique des causes occasionnelles* (against Malebranche) appeared shortly afterwards.

In 1691 he was received into the French Academy in spite of the determined efforts of the partisans of the ancients in this quarrel, especially of Racine and Boileau, who on four previous occasions had secured his rejection. He consequently was admitted a member both of the Academy of Inscriptions and of the Academy of Sciences; and in 1697 he became perpetual secretary to the latter body. This office he actually held for the long period of forty-two years; and it was in this official capacity that he wrote the *Histoire du renouvellement de l’Académie des Sciences* (Paris, 3 vols., 1708, 1717, 1722) containing extracts and analyses of the proceedings, and also the *éloges* of the members, written with great simplicity and delicacy. Perhaps the best known of his *éloges*, of which there are sixty-nine in all, is that of his uncle Pierre Corneille. This was first printed in the *Nouvelles de la republique des lettres* (January 1685) and, as *Vie de Corneille*, was included in all the editions of Fontenelle’s *Oeuvres*. The other important works of Fontenelle are his *Elements de la géométrie de l’infini* (1727) and his *Apologie des tourbillons* (1752).
Fontenelle forms a link between two very widely different periods of French literature, that of Corneille, Racine, and Boileau on the one hand, and that of Voltaire, D’Alembert and Diderot on the other. It is not in virtue of his great age alone that this can be said of him; he actually had much in common with the beaux esprits of the 17th century, as well as with the philosophes of the 18th. But it is to the latter rather than to the former period that he properly belongs.

He has no claim to be regarded as a genius; but, as Sainte-Beuve has said, he well deserves a place “dans la classe des esprits infiniment distingués”—distinguished, however, it ought to be added by intelligence rather than by intellect, and less by the power of saying much than by the power of saying a little well. In personal character he has sometimes been described as having been revoltingly heartless; and it is abundantly plain that he was singularly incapable of feeling strongly the more generous emotions—a misfortune, or a fault, which revealed itself in many ways. “Il faut avoir de l’âme pour avoir du goût.” But the cynical expressions of such a man are not to be taken too literally; and the mere fact that he lived and died in the esteem of many friends suffices to show that the theoretical selfishness which he sometimes professed cannot have been consistently and at all times carried into practice.

There have been several collective editions of Fontenelle’s works, the first being printed in 3 vols. at The Hague in 1728-1729. The best is that of Paris, in 8 vols. 8vo, 1790. Some of his separate works have been very frequently reprinted and also translated. The Pluralité des mondes was translated into modern Greek in 1794. Sainte-Beuve has an interesting essay on Fontenelle, with several useful references, in the Causeries du lundi, vol. iii. See also Villemain, Tableau de la littérature française au XVIIIe siècle; the Abbé Trublet, Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de M. de Fontenelle (1759); A. Laborde-Milaà, Fontenelle (1905), in the “Grands écrivains français” series; and L. Maigron, Fontenelle, l’homme, l’œuvre, l’influence (Paris, 1906).

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