

TAINÉ'S ENGLISH LITERATURE.

WE hesitate to express perfect satisfaction at the appearance of an English version of M. Taine's massive essay.* On the one hand, the performance is no more than a proper compliment to a highly complimentary work; but, on the other, it involves so effective a violation of the spirit of that work and so rude a displacement of its stand-point, as to interfere with a just comprehension of it. M. Taine himself, however, stands sponsor in a short Preface, and the liberal reception of the two volumes seems to indicate that English readers are not sensible of having unduly lost by the transfer. The English version may fairly demand success on its own merits, being careful, exact, and spirited. It errs, we think, on the side of a too literal exactness, through which it frequently ceases to be idiomatic. "He tore from his vitals, . . ." for instance, "the idea which he had conceived," would render M. Taine's figure better than "he tore from his *entrails*." And it is surely in strong contradiction to the author's portrait of Lord Macaulay to translate his allusion to the great historian's *physionomie animée et pensante* by "an animated and pensive face." No one, we fancy, not even M. Taine, ever accused Lord Macaulay of being pensive.

M. Taine's work is a history of our literature only in a partial sense of the term. "Just as astronomy," he says, "is at bottom a problem in mechanics, and physiology a problem in chemistry, so history at bottom is a problem in psychology." His aim has been "to establish the psychology of a people." A happier title for his work, therefore, save for its amplitude, would be, "A Comparative Survey of the English Mind in the leading Works of its Literature." It is a picture of the English

intellect, with literary examples and allusions in evidence, and not a record of works nor an accumulation of facts. To philological or biographical research it makes no claim. In this direction it is altogether incomplete. Various important works are unmentioned, common tradition as to facts is implicitly accepted, and dates, references, and minor detail conspicuous by their absence. The work is wholly critical and pictorial, and involves no larger information than the perusal of a vast body of common documents. Its purpose is to discover in the strongest features of the strongest works the temper of the race and time; which involves a considerable neglect not only of works, but of features. But what is mainly to the point with the English reader (as it is of course excessively obvious in the English version) is that M. Taine writes from an avowedly foreign stand-point. The unit of comparison is throughout assumed to be the French mind. The author's undertaking strikes us, therefore, constantly as an *excursion*. It is not as if he and our English tongue were old friends, as if through a taste early formed and long indulged he had gradually been won to the pious project of paying his debt and embodying his impressions; but as if rather, on reaching his intellectual majority and coming into a handsome property of doctrine and dogma, he had cast about him for a field to conquer, a likely subject for experiment, and, measuring the vast capacity of our English record of expression, he had made a deliberate and immediate choice. We may fancy him declaring, too, that he would do the thing handsomely; devote five or six years to it, and spend five or six months in the country. He has performed his task with a vigor proportionate to this sturdy resolve; but in the nature of the case his treatment of the subject lacks that indefinable quality of spiritual ini-

* History of English Literature. By H. A. Taine. Translated by H. Van Laun. New York: Holt and Williams. 1871.

tiation which is the tardy consummate fruit of a wasteful, purposeless, passionate sympathy. His opinions are prompted, not by a sentiment, but by a design. He remains an interpreter of the English mind to the mind of another race; and only remotely, therefore,—only by allowance and assistance,—an interpreter of the English mind to itself. A greater fault than any of his special errors of judgment is a certain reduced, contracted, and limited air in the whole field. He has made his subject as definite as his method.

M. Taine is fairly well known by this time as a man with a method, the apostle of a theory,—the theory that “vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar,” and that art, literature, and conduct are the result of forces which differ from those of the physical world only in being less easily ascertainable. His three main factors—they have lately been reiterated to satiety—are the race, the medium, and the time. Between them they shape the phenomena of history. We have not the purpose of discussing this doctrine; it opens up a dispute as ancient as history itself,—the quarrel between the minds which cling to the supernatural and the minds which dismiss it. M. Taine’s originality is not in his holding of these principles, but in his lively disposition to apply them, or, rather, in the very temper and terms in which he applies them. No real observer but perceives that a group of works is more or less the product of a “situation,” and that as he himself is forever conscious of the attrition of infinite waves of circumstance, so the cause to which, by genius as by “fate,” he contributes, is a larger deposit in a more general current. Observers differ, first, as to whether there are elements in the deposit which cannot be found in the current; second, as to the variety and complexity of the elements; maintaining, on the one side, that fairly to enumerate them and establish their mutual relations the vision of science is as yet too dim; and, on the

other, that a complete analysis is at last decently possible, and with it a complete explanation. M. Taine is an observer of the latter class; in his own sole person indeed he almost includes it. He pays in his Preface a handsome tribute to the great service rendered by Sainte-Beuve to the new criticism. Now Sainte-Beuve is, to our sense, the better apostle of the two. In purpose the least doctrinal of critics, it was by his very horror of dogmas, moulds, and formulas, that he so effectively contributed to the science of literary interpretation. The truly devout patience with which he kept his final conclusion in abeyance until after an exhaustive survey of the facts, after perpetual returns and ever-deferred farewells to them, is his living testimony to the importance of the facts. Just as he could never reconcile himself to saying his last word on book or author, so he never pretended to have devised a method which should be a key to truth. The truth for M. Taine lies stored up, as one may say, in great lumps and blocks, to be released and detached by a few lively hammer-blows; while for Sainte-Beuve it was a diffused and imponderable essence, as vague as the carbon in the air which nourishes vegetation, and, like it, to be disengaged by patient chemistry. His only method was fairly to dissolve his attention in the sea of circumstance surrounding the object of his study, and we cannot but think his frank provisional empiricism more truly scientific than M. Taine’s premature philosophy. In fact, M. Taine plays fast and loose with his theory, and is mainly successful in so far as he is inconsequent to it. There is a constantly visible hiatus between his formula and his application of it. It serves as his badge and motto, but his best strokes are prompted by the independent personal impression. The larger conditions of his subject loom vaguely in the background, like a richly figured tapestry of good regulation pattern, gleaming here and there in the author’s fitful glance, and serving a picturesque purpose decidedly more

than a scientific one. This is especially noticeable in the early chapters of the present work, where the changes are rung to excess upon a note of rather slender strain,—the common “Gothic” properties of history and fiction,—Norse blood, gloomy climate, ferocious manners, considered as shaping forces. The same remark applies, we imagine, to the author's volumes on Italy, where a thin soil of historical evidence is often made to produce some most luxuriant flowers of deduction. The historical position is vague, light, and often insecure, and the author's passage from the general conditions to the particular case is apt to be a flying leap of fancy, which, though admirable writing, is rather imperfect science.

We of course lack space to discuss his work in its parts. His portrayal of authors and works is always an attempt to fix the leading or motive faculty, and through his neglect of familiar details and his amplification of the intellectual essence which is the object of his search, his figures often seem out of drawing to English eyes. He distorts the outline, confounds the light and shade, and alters the coloring. His judgments are sometimes very happy and sometimes very erroneous. He proposes some very wise amendments to critical tradition; in other cases he enforces the common verdict with admirable point and vigor. For Spenser, for instance, we doubt whether the case has ever been stated with a more sympathetic and penetrating eloquence. His errors and misjudgments arise partly from his being so thoroughly a stranger to what we may call the intellectual climate of our literature, and partly from his passionate desire to simplify his conception and reduce it to the limits, not merely of the distinctly knowable, but of the symmetrically and neatly presentable. The leading trait of his mind, and its great defect, is an inordinate haste to conclude, combined with a passion for a sort of largely pictorial and splendidly comprehensive expression. A glance at the list of his works will show how

actively he has kept terms with each of these tendencies. He is, to our sense, far from being a man of perceptions; the bent of his genius seems to be to generate ideas and images on two distinct lines. For ourselves, on the whole, we prefer his images. These are immensely rich and vivid, and on this side the author is a great artist. His constant effort is to reconcile and harmonize these two groups, and make them illumine and vivify each other. Where he succeeds his success is admirable, and the reader feels that he has rarely seen a truth so completely presented. Where he fails the violence of his diction only serves to emphasize the inadequacy of his conception. M. Taine's great strength is to be found close to his eminent fallibility as a critic,—in his magnificent power of eloquent and vivid statement and presentation. His style is admirable; we know of none that is at once more splendid and more definite, that has at once more structure and more color. Just as his natural preference is evidently for energy and vehemence in talent, his own movement is toward a sort of monstrous cumulative violence of expression; to clinch, to strike, to hit hard, to hit again, till the idea rings and resounds, to force color à l'outrance and make proportion massive, is his notion of complete utterance. This is productive of many effects splendid in themselves, but it is fatal to truth in so far as truth resides in fine shades and degrees.

In this intense constructive glow, M. Taine quite forgets his subject and his starting-point; the impetus of his rhetoric, the effort to complete his picture and reach forward to the strongest word and the largest phrase, altogether absorbs him. For ourselves, we confess that, as we read, we cease to hold him at all rigidly to his premises, and content ourselves with simply enjoying the superb movement of his imagination, thankful when it lights his topic at all truly, and mainly conscious of its radiance as color, heat, and force. Thus, while as a gallery of portraits

the work demands constant revision and correction, as a sort of enormous *tableau vivant*, ingeniously and artificially combined, it is extremely rich and various. A phrase of very frequent occurrence with M. Taine, and very wholesome in its frequency, is *la grande invention*; his own tendency is to practise it. In effort and inclination, however, he is nothing if not impartial; and there is something almost touching in the sympathetic breadth of his admiration for a tone of genius so foreign to French tradition as the great Scriptural inspiration of Bunyan and of Milton. To passionate vigor he always does justice. On the other hand, when he deals with a subject simply because it stands in his path, he is far less satisfactory. His estimate of Swift is a striking example of his tendency to overcharge his portrait and make a picture at all hazards. Swift was a bitter and incisive genius, but he had neither the volume nor the force implied in M. Taine's report of him. We might add a hundred instances of the fatally defective perception of "values," as the painters say, produced by the author's foreign standpoint. M. Taine expresses altogether the "Continental" view of Byron, between which and the English view there is much the same difference as between the estimate Byron courted and the estimate he feared. A hundred special points may be conceded; but few modern Englishmen are prepared to accept him, as a whole, as the consistently massive phenomenon described by M. Taine. Touching the later poets, the author is extremely incomplete and fallacious; he pretends, indeed, merely to sketch general tendencies. On Wordsworth, however, he has some pertinent remarks from that protesting man-of-the-world point of view to which the great frugal bard drives most Englishmen for desperate refuge, let alone an epigrammatic Frenchman. We are tempted to say that a Frenchman who should have twisted himself into a relish for Wordsworth would almost have forfeited our

respect. On Thackeray and Dickens he has two chapters of great suggestiveness to those who know the authors, but on the whole of excessively contracted outline. Of course, one cannot pronounce upon important literary figures, of whatever dimensions, without a certain work of elimination; but a valid charge against M. Taine is that, whereas your distinctly sensitive critic finds this process to be an effort, M. Taine has the air of finding it a relief. A compromise is perfectly legitimate so long as it is not offered as a synthesis.

With all abatements, and especially in spite of one most important abatement, M. Taine's work remains a very admirable performance. As a philosophical effort it is decidedly a failure; as the application of a theory it is ineffective; but it is a great literary achievement. The fruit of an extremely powerful, vivacious, and observant mind, it is rich in suggestive sidelights and forcible aids to opinion. With a great many errors of detail, as a broad expression of the general essence of the English genius it seems to us equally eloquent and just. M. Taine has felt this genius with an intensity and conceived it with a lucidity which, in themselves, form a great intellectual feat. Even under this head the work is not conclusive in the sense in which the author tenders it, but it is largely and vividly contributive, and we shall wait till we have done better ourselves before we judge it too harshly. It is, in other words, very entertaining provisional criticism and very perfect final art. It is, indeed, a more significant testimony to the French genius than to the English, and bears more directly upon the author's native literature than on our own. In its powerful, though arbitrary, unity of composition, in its sustained æsthetic temper, its brilliancy, variety, and symmetry, it is a really monumental accession to a literature which, whatever its limitations in the reach of its ideas, is a splendid series of masterly compositions.

H. James Jr.

THE BREWING OF SOMA.

THE fagots blazed, the caldron's smoke
 Up through the green wood curled ;
 "Bring honey from the hollow oak,
 Bring milky sap," the brewers spoke,
 In the childhood of the world.

And brewed they well or brewed they ill,
 The priests thrust in their rods,
 First tasted, and then drank their fill,
 And shouted, with one voice and will,
 "Behold the drink of gods !"

They drank, and lo ! in heart and brain
 A new, glad life began ;
 The gray of hair grew young again,
 The sick man laughed away his pain,
 The cripple leaped and ran.

"Drink, mortals, what the gods have sent,
 Forget your long annoy."
 So sang the priests. From tent to tent
 The Soma's sacred madness went,
 A storm of drunken joy.

Then knew each rapt inebriate
 A winged and glorious birth,
 Soared upward, with strange joy elate,
 Beat, with dazed head, Varuna's gate,
 And, sobered, sank to earth.

The land with Soma's praises rang ;
 On Gibon's banks of shade
 Its hymns the dusky maidens sang ;
 In joy of life or mortal pang
 All men to Soma prayed.

The morning twilight of the race
 Sends down these matin psalms ;
 And still with wondering eyes we trace
 The simple prayers to Soma's grace,
 That Vedic verse embalms.

As in that child-world's early year,
 Each after age has striven
 By music, incense, vigils drear,
 And trance, to bring the skies more near,
 Or lift men up to heaven ! —