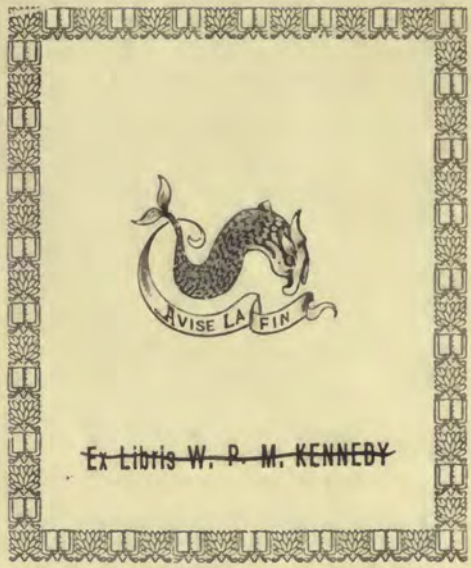

E J McCorkell

~~W.M. Kennedy~~

SELECT ESSAYS OF SAINTE-BEUVE

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OF

SAINTE-BEUVE

Chiefly Bearing on English Literature

TRANSLATED BY

A. J. BUTLER

LATE FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

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EDWARD ARNOLD

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

A GOOD many years ago the present translator ventured to speak a little disrespectfully of a remark of Sainte-Beuve's. When, therefore, in pursuance of a suggestion made by a well-known authority on English literature, who is also great in the councils of University Extension, he was asked to undertake the task of producing a translation of such of the eminent French critic's essays as might, it was thought, be of interest to many students of English literature, it seemed that the hand of Nemesis was at work. Nay, it was manifest in the very matter of the penalty. The remark referred to was part of a sentence in which it was said that to read Dante attentively almost inevitably meant wanting to translate him. Now, to read Sainte-Beuve attentively means inevitably wanting *not* to translate him. It may be true, as Bonstetten said, that in French you have to reject ten thoughts before coming to one which you can clothe properly; but when that one is clothed, how well its clothes fit! 'To read good French,' wrote a master of English once to the present writer, 'almost makes one despair of ever expressing one's self properly.' Still worse is

the case of him who has to express another man's thoughts in words which he is not allowed to select for himself. It is not so much that there is any difficulty in finding words for their words, though *esprit* is no doubt as bad as Mr. Courthope rightly holds Pope's *wit* to be. French has the strength of its weakness. Poor in words, it is forced to use those which it possesses with great precision ; and it is the dexterous arrangement of words in a sentence that forms the translator's pitfall—all the more insidious from the very fact that the equivalent words may often stand in just the same order in English without positive violation of grammar, though to the utter detriment of 'style,' and dilution or distortion of sense.

Still, it must be admitted that those who deemed the attempt worth making have the author's own judgement on their side. It is probably more universally true in France than in England that, as he says, works written in a foreign language are only really read when they have been translated : most of us can read French, though few of us can speak it. But even of the most fluent readers it can hardly be doubted that the vast majority will read yet more fluently and with less waste of power by friction, in their own language, especially when the object is rather to learn what a writer has to say, than how he says it.

That what the French critic has to say about English literature will be of interest to English readers, few will deny. A great poet, whom it might be impertinent to call a living case of the converse to the dictum that critics are those who have failed in literature, but who is certainly less great as a judge of other men, has

thought fit in a recently-published work to assail Sainte-Beuve rather bitterly. The only inference we can safely draw from his language is that Sainte-Beuve is dead; but on better evidence we have reason to fear that, as often happens, the man deserves less esteem than the work. So far, however, as concerns the work by which he is best known, the two great series, that is, of the *Causeries du Lundi* and the *Nouveaux Lundis*, we can safely subscribe to the opinions expressed by Mr. Matthew Arnold and Mr. Saintsbury.

The method is not less instructive than the manner is attractive. The critic tries to put himself at the author's point of view; he allows for the influence of surroundings or, in modern slang, 'environment'; he honestly practises his own maxim that a critic's business is to discover talent. Of course he is not infallible. Even in the few essays which the present volume contains some instances of weak criticism may be found. We may question, for instance, the accuracy of his view that the highest degree of sensitiveness to poetic emotion is only possible to those who are themselves poets—if by poets is meant, as the context would imply, persons endowed with the faculty of writing poetry. Undoubtedly little or no inference can be drawn from the power of expression to the capacity for feeling, but if there be any relation it is just as likely to be in the other direction. When the two are combined in a high measure we have a great poet.

As a critic, Sainte-Beuve seems to claim our gratitude especially on two grounds. One is his insistence on the value of form. If it was true in the years when he was writing about Pope and Gibbon, Milton and

Cowper, that form and workmanship, orderliness and restraint were no longer reckoned at their true value, surely, in these days of 'naturalism,' 'impressionism' and what not, the caution is no less needed. When promising young men of letters can satisfy themselves (and editors) by hurling at the public the contents of their notebooks, in which they appear, like the King in Wonderland, to have been trying whether *unimportant* or *important* sounds best in the sentence, and rising poets admit into their more serious stanzas such hideous coinages as *belletrist* and *scientist*, or the happily ephemeral slang of ''Arry,' we do feel that the 'bad time for Pope and Horace,' which the French critic foresaw, has arrived, and that literature, which they and their like tempered and polished, is for the moment once more seething in the melting-pot, with a good deal of scum on the surface of some of the best metal.

The other point for which we have to thank him is his testimony to the great truth that all criticism of art as distinct from craft must be subjective. Seldom do we find him saying, 'this is right;' 'this is wrong.' He lets us see his own preferences, and gives his reasons for them; but he knows that there are no 'invariable principles of poetry,' more than of any other art, and that of all arguments 'ad hominem,' one of the feeblest is, 'You receive pleasure from A, therefore you cannot receive pleasure from B'; or, as it is more often worded, 'A is good, therefore B must be bad.' Let us by all means call upon all people to accept the definitions of the φρόνιμος, but always with the understanding that by the φρόνιμος, in matters of æsthetic criticism,

we mean the man who agrees with us. In spite of the etymology of his name, what makes the successful critic is, as Pope saw, not so much the judicial faculty, as the power of expression; not so much original thought, as the gift of reading the current thought of his moderately-educated contemporaries. Let him use this power and this gift with urbanity and good temper, and though his work will not last like the great creative works, he will do service to his generation and make an honest living.

The essays that have been included in the present volume are mainly those dealing with English literature. Sainte-Beuve had English blood in his veins, which perhaps accounts for his appreciation of certain points in English poetry which do not as a rule appeal to Frenchmen; and also for his power of estimating in some measure its literary form. The fragment on Bonstetten and Gray is extracted from a long essay on the rather remarkable career of the former. It should be said that Sainte-Beuve's habit of giving quotations (translated into French) without references, has made the task of identifying them somewhat laborious. It is hoped, however, that with one or two trifling exceptions all appear as the authors wrote them. In addition to the essays on authors, two, 'Qu'est ce qu'un classique' and 'D'une tradition littéraire,' are given as generally applicable to all literature. They deal with the same subject, but from slightly different points of view.

Notes in square brackets (and perhaps one or two where the brackets have been forgotten) have been inserted by the translator.

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'M. Sainte-Beuve's writings are far less known among us than they deserve.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

SELECT ESSAYS OF SAINTE-BEUVE

WHAT IS A CLASSIC?

THIS is a delicate question, and one of which a good many different solutions might have been given at different periods and seasons. A clever man has this day propounded it to me, and even if I cannot solve it, I want at least to try to examine and discuss it before our readers, were it only to induce them to reply to it themselves, and if I can, to clear up their ideas and mine upon it. And why should not one occasionally venture to treat in criticism of some of those subjects which are not personal, in which not someone, but something is spoken of, and which our neighbours the English have so successfully made into a complete branch, under the modest title of Essays? It is true that, in order to treat of such subjects, which are always in a measure abstract and moral, one must speak in a calm atmosphere, be sure of one's own attention and that of others, and seize one of those quarters of an hour of silence, moderation, and leisure, which are seldom granted to our beloved France, and which her brilliant genius bears with impatience, even

when she is wishing to be good, and has given up making revolutions.

A classic, according to the usual definition, is an author of past times, already hallowed by general admiration, who is an authority in his own style. The word *classic*, taken in this sense, begins to appear among the Romans. With them the *classici*, properly so-called, were not all the citizens of the different classes, but only those of the highest class, who possessed, at least, an income of a certain fixed figure. All those who had a lower income were known by the appellation of *infra classem*, below *the* class properly so-called. For example, we find the word *classicus* used by Aulus Gellius and applied to writers: a writer of worth and mark is *classicus assiduusque scriptor*, a writer who counts, who has some possessions under the sun, and who is not confounded with the proletariat crowd. Such an expression presupposes an age sufficiently advanced for a criticism and classification, as it were, of literature to have come into existence.

For the moderns, the true and only classics were, in the first instance, naturally the ancients. The Greeks, who by rare good fortune had—a happy relief to their intellect—no other classics than themselves, were at first the sole classics of the Romans, who spent much trouble and ingenuity on imitating them. They in their turn, after the fine ages of their literature, after Cicero and Virgil, had their own classics, and they became almost exclusively the classics of the centuries which succeeded. The Middle Ages, which, though not as ignorant as might be thought of Latin antiquity, were wanting in the sense of proportion and taste, con-

fused the ranks and orders. Ovid was put on a better footing than Homer, and Boëthius appeared to be a classic at least equal to Plato. The 'new birth' of literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came to clear up this long confusion, and then only was admiration graduated. The real classic authors of the twofold antiquity stood out for the future on a luminous background, and formed two harmonious groups on their two eminences.

Meanwhile, modern literature had been born, and some of the more precocious members of it, like the Italian, already had their own fashion of antiquity. Dante had appeared, and his posterity had lost no time in saluting him as a classic. Italian poetry may have retreated greatly since then, but when she has desired, she has always recovered and always retained some impulse, some reverberation, from this high origin. It is of no slight importance for a poetry thus to take its point of departure, its classic source in a lofty place—rather, for example, to descend from a Dante than to issue laboriously from a Malherbe.

Modern Italy had her classics, and Spain had every right to believe she was also in possession of hers, when France still had hers to seek. Indeed, a few writers of talent endowed with originality and exceptional raciness, a few brilliant efforts isolated and without successors, shattered immediately and needing always to be begun afresh, do not suffice to confer upon a nation the solid and imposing basis of literary wealth. That idea of a *classic* implies in itself something which has sequence and solidity, which forms a whole and makes a tradition, something which has 'composition,' is

handed on to posterity and lasts. It was only after the brilliant years of Louis XIV. that the nation felt with a thrill of pride that this happiness had come to it. All voices then told it to Louis XIV. with flattery, exaggeration and emphasis, and yet with a certain perception of truth. Then appeared a singular and quaint inconsistency: the men who were most in love with the wonders of that age of Louis the Great, and who went so far as to sacrifice all the ancients to the moderns, those men, of whom Perrault was the chief, tended to exalt and consecrate those very men in whom they found the most ardent and contradictory adversaries. Boileau defended and supported the ancients with anger against Perrault, who cried up the moderns, that is to say Corneille, Molière, Pascal, and the eminent men of his century, including Boileau as one of the first. The good La Fontaine, when he took Doctor Huet's part in the quarrel, did not perceive that he himself, in spite of his oversight, was in his turn on the eve of waking up to find himself a classic.

An instance is the best definition: France possessed her century of Louis XIV., and could consider it at a little distance; she knew what it was to be classic better than by any reasoning. The eighteenth century, till its upheaval, added to this idea by a few fine works due to its four great men. Read Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV.*, Montesquieu's *La Grandeur et la Décadence des Romains*, Buffon's *Époques de Nature*, the *Vicaire Savoyard*, and the fine pages of meditations and descriptions of nature by Jean-Jacques, and say whether the eighteenth century in its memorable past has not known how to reconcile tradition with independ-

ence and liberty of development. But at the beginning of this century and under the Empire, in presence of the first attempts of a decidedly novel and somewhat daring literature, the idea of a classic among some refractory minds, influenced more by vexation than by severity, contracted and shrank strangely. The first Dictionary of the Academy (1694) simply defined a classic author as 'an ancient author, highly approved, who is an authority in the subject he treats of.' The Dictionary of the Academy of 1835 urges this definition much more closely, and makes it exact and even narrow instead of, as it was, somewhat vague. It defines classic authors as 'those who have become *models* in any language,' and, in the articles which follow, these expressions—*models*, *rules* established for composition and style, *strict rules* of the art to which you must *conform*, are continually recurring. This definition of the *classic* has evidently been made by our respectable precursors of the Academy, in presence and in sight of what was then called the *romantic*, that is to say, in sight of the enemy. It seems to me that the time ought now to have come to renounce these restricting and timid definitions and to widen their spirit.

A true classic, as I should like to hear it defined, is an author who has enriched the human mind, who has really augmented its treasures, who has made it take one more step forward, who has discovered some unequivocal moral truth, or has once more seized hold of some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and explored; who has rendered his thought, his observation, or his discovery under no

matter what form, but broad and large, refined, sensible, sane, and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in a style of his own which yet belongs to all the world, in a style which is new without neologisms, new and ancient, easily contemporaneous with every age.

Such a classic may have been revolutionary for a moment, or at least may have seemed to be, but he is not so; he has not, in the first instance, fallen upon everything around him; he has overthrown only what was in his way so as quickly to replace the balance in favour of order and beauty.

You can, if you will, set down some names under this definition, which I would purposely make grand and compendious, or in one word generous. I should place there first the Corneille of *Polyeucte*, of *Cinna*, or *Les Horaces*. I should place there Molière, the most complete and the richest genius we have had in French.

'Molière is so great,' said Goethe (that king of criticism), 'that he surprises us afresh every time we read him. He is a man who stands alone; his plays verge on the tragic, and no one has had the courage to imitate them. His *Avare*, where the vice destroys all affection between father and son, is one of the most sublime of works, and dramatic in the highest degree. Every action in a play for the stage must be important in itself and tend towards a still greater event. *Tartuffe* is a model in this respect. What a setting out of the subject is the first scene! Everything is highly significant from the beginning, and makes you anticipate something still more important. The outset of any similar play of Lessing's which may be cited is very fine; but that of *Tartuffe* is unique. It is the

greatest thing of the kind. . . . Every year I read a play of Molière's, just as from time to time I gaze at some engraving after the old Italian masters.'

I do not pretend to say that this definition of a classic which I have just given does not go somewhat beyond the idea one generally forms for oneself under that name. It is especially made to comprise conditions of order, wisdom, moderation, and reasonableness, which prevail over and contain all others. Having occasion to praise M. Royer-Collard, M. de Rémusat said: 'If he gets from our classics a pure taste, appropriate terms, variety of phrase, a careful attention in suiting expression to thought, to himself alone he owes the character which he gives to it all.' One sees here that the part allotted to classic qualities seems rather to depend on selection and nicety of meaning, to an ornate and restrained style, and that, too, is the general opinion. In this sense the classics, properly so called, would be writers of the second rank—correct, sensible, elegant, always clear, expressing themselves with a passion not devoid of nobility, and a power kept slightly in reserve. Marie-Joseph Chénier has traced the poetic spirit of these temperate and accomplished writers in these lines, where he shows himself their apt disciple:

> 'C'est le bon sens, la raison qui fait tout,
> Vertu, génie, esprit, talent et goût.
> Qu'est-ce vertu? raison mise en pratique;
> Talent? raison produite avec éclat;
> Esprit? raison qui finement s'exprime;
> Le goût n'est rien qu'un bon sens delicat;
> Et le génie est la raison sublime.'

In writing these lines he was evidently thinking of

Pope, Despréaux,* and Horace, the master of them all. The real essence of this theory, which makes imagination and even feeling subordinate to reason, and of which Scaliger, perhaps, struck the first note among modern writers, is, strictly speaking, the *Latin* theory, and this has also for a long time been the French theory. It has some truth in it if it is only used in the right place, if that word *reason* is not misused; but it is evident that it is misused, and that if reason, for instance, can be confused with poetic genius and their union results in a moral epistle, it cannot be the same thing as that genius which we find so varied and so diversely creative in expressing the passions of the drama or the epic. Where will you find reason in the fourth book of the Æneid, and in the ecstasies of Dido? Where will you find it in the madness of Phædra? Be this as it may, the spirit which has prompted this theory tends to place in the first rank of the classics those writers who have governed their inspiration rather than those who have given themselves more up to it, to place Virgil there more certainly than Homer, Racine more than Corneille. The masterpiece which this theory loves to quote, and which does indeed unite every condition of prudence, strength, progressive daring, moral elevation and greatness, is *Athalie*. In Turenne, in his last two campaigns, and Racine in *Athalie*, we have the great examples of what wise and prudent men can do when they come into possession of the full maturity of their genius, and enter upon their crowning exploits.

Buffon in his *Discourse on Style*, in which he insists on

* *I.e.*, Boileau.

that oneness of plan, arrangement, and execution which is the stamp of really classic work, has said: 'Every subject is one only; and *however spacious it may be it can be comprised in a single treatise.* Interruptions, pauses and sections should only be used when different subjects are treated of, or when, having to speak of great, complicated, or incongruous matters, the march of genius finds itself impeded by the multiplicity of the obstacles in its way and constrained by the requirements of the circumstances; otherwise a great number of divisions, far from making a work more solid, destroy its unity; the book seems clearer at first sight, but the author's intention remains obscure.' And he continues his criticism, having in his mind Montesquieu's *l'Esprit des Lois*, a book excellent at bottom, but all cut up into segments, into which the illustrious author, worn out before the end, could not breathe all his spirit, nor even to some extent arrange all his matter. Yet I find it hard to believe that Buffon was not thinking in the same place by way of contrast of Bossuet's *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, a subject, indeed, both vast and single, and which the great author has yet been able to comprise in one solitary treatise. Let anyone open the first edition of 1681, before the division into chapters which was introduced later, and which has passed from the margin into the text and cut it up; everything is there unfolded in one sequence and almost at one breath, and one would say that the orator has here done like the Nature of whom Buffon writes, that he *has worked on an eternal plan and has nowhere deviated from it*, so far does he seem to have penetrated into the intimacy of the counsels of Providence.

Athalie and the *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, such are the highest masterpieces which the strict classic theory can offer alike to its friends and its enemies. Yet in spite of all the admirable simplicity and majesty with which these unique productions are executed, we should like for the practical purposes of art to extend this idea a little, and to show that there is room for enlarging it without going so far as to relax it. Goethe, whom I like to quote on such a subject, says :

'I call all *healthy* work classic, all *unhealthy* work romantic. The poem of the "Nibelungen" is for me as classic as Homer; both are healthy and vigorous. It is not because they are new that the works of the day are romantic, but because they are weak, sickly or diseased. It is not because they are old that the works of past times are classic, but because they are energetic, fresh and well-liking. If we were to consider the romantic and the classic from these two points of view, we should soon all be agreed.'

And, indeed, I should like every free mind to travel round the world and give itself up to the contemplation of the different literatures in their primitive vigour and their infinite variety before marking down and fixing its ideas on this subject. What would such a mind see? first of all a Homer, the father of the classic world, but himself less certainly a single and very distinct individual than the vast and living expression of an active period and a semi-barbarous civilization. To make a classic properly so called of him, it has been necessary to attribute to him a design, a plan, literary intentions, qualities of criticism and urbanity as an afterthought, of which he would cer-

tainly never have dreamt in the overflowing development of his natural inspiration. And whom do we see beside him? imposing and venerable men of antiquity it is true, such as Æschylus or Sophocles, but all mutilated, and standing there only to represent to us the wreck of themselves, all that remains of many others doubtless as worthy as they to survive, who have perished for ever beneath the ill-treatment of the ages. This thought alone might teach a man of well-balanced mind not to look at literature as a whole, even classic literature, with too simple and too limited a view, and he may learn from it that that exact and well proportioned order which has had so much force since, has been introduced only artificially into our admiration of the past.

And how would it be when we enter the modern world? The greatest names we perceive at the outset of literature are those which most shock and disturb certain restricted ideas of the beautiful and the fitting which it has been thought desirable to convey in poetry. Is Shakespeare a classic, for instance? Yes, he is so to-day, for England and for the world; but in the time of Pope he was not. Pope and his friends were the only classics in the full sense; they seemed to become so indubitably the day after their death. To-day they are still classics and they deserve to be; but they are only in the second rank, and there they may be seen for ever, surpassed and kept in their place by him who has again his place on the topmost skyline.

I shall certainly not be the one to speak evil of Pope or of his excellent followers, especially when they are as sweet and natural as Goldsmith; next to the greatest,

these, between writers and poets, are perhaps the best fitted for imparting charm to life. One day, when Lord Bolingbroke was writing to Dr. Swift, Pope put a postscript to the letter, in which he said: 'I imagine that if we three were to spend even three years together, the result might be some advantage to our century.' No, we must never speak lightly of those who have had the right to say such things of themselves without boasting, and it would be much better to envy the favoured and fortunate ages when men of talent could suggest such unions, which were not then chimerical. These ages, whether we call them by the name of Louis XIV. or of Queen Anne, are the only really classic ages, using the word in its limited sense, the only ones which offer a propitious climate and shelter to perfected talent. We here, in our disconnected period, are but too well aware of it, when talents possibly equal to theirs have got lost and dissipated through the uncertain ties and hardships of the times. Anyway, let us apportion to each kind of greatness its due influence and superiority. The true master genius triumphs over those difficulties which wreck others; Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton knew how to attain to their supremacy and to produce their imperishable works in spite of obstacles, persecutions, and storms. The opinions of Byron about Pope have been the subject of much discussion, and an attempt has been made to explain that kind of contradiction which has led the singer of *Don Juan* and of *Childe Harold* to extol the purely classic school, and declare it to be the only good one, while he himself took so different a course. Goethe has once more said the right word

about this, when he remarks that Byron, so great in the outburst and spring of his poetry, yet feared Shakespeare, who is more capable than he of creating and putting life into his characters. He would have liked to deny him; he was irked by that unselfish superiority; he felt that he could never comfortably display himself beside him. He has never renounced Pope because he did not fear him; he well knew that Pope was a *wall* beside him.

If the school of Pope had kept the supremacy, and a kind of honorary empire over the past, as Byron wished, Byron would have been the first and only one of his kind; the erection of Pope as that wall hid Shakespeare's great form from sight, whereas, while Shakespeare reigns and dominates in all his height, Byron is only second.

We in France had no great classic before the era of Louis XIV.; we lacked Dantes and Shakespeares, those original authorities to which one returns sooner or later in the days of emancipation. We have had only, as it were, the rough drafts of great poets, such as Mathurin Régnier and Rabelais, without any ideal, without the passion and the gravity which give consecration. Montaigne was a sort of classic before his time, of the Horatian breed, but one who, for want of worthy surroundings, abandoned himself like a strayed child to all the libertine fancies of his pen and his humour. The result is that we have earned less than any other nation the right to claim loudly one day, through our author-ancestors, our literary liberties and charters, and that it has been a still greater difficulty to us to work out our freedom and remain classic. Yet, with

Molière and La Fontaine among our classics of the great era, there is sufficient cause for refusing no rights of legitimacy to any who will make the venture with knowledge.

The important thing now seems to me to be to preserve the notion and the cult, and at the same time to widen it. There is no recipe for making classics; this point must sooner or later be clearly recognised. To think that by imitating certain qualities of purity, of sobriety, of correctness and elegance, quite independently even of character and the divine spark, you will become a classic, is to think that after Racine the father there is room for Racine the son; an estimable and melancholy *rôle* which is the worst thing in poetry. Yet more: it is not a good thing to appear too quickly and right off, to one's contemporaries, as a pure classic; see how faint the colour looks at a distance of twenty-five years! How many there are of these precocious classics who do not last and are only ephemeral! You turn round one morning and are surprised to find them no longer standing behind you. They have only been there, in the gay phrase of Madame de Sévigné, as a breakfast for the sun. With regard to classics the most spontaneous are still the best and the greatest: ask those virile geniuses who are really born immortal and who flourish perpetually, whether it is not so. Apparently the least classic of the four poets of Louis XIV. was Molière; he was applauded then far more than he was esteemed; people enjoyed him without knowing his value. After him the least classic seemed to be La Fontaine; and see what came of it—for both of them—two centuries later. Far before Boileau, before even Racine, are they

not to-day unanimously recognised as the most fruitful writers, the richest as regards the characteristics of universal morality?

After all, we need really sacrifice nothing—depreciate nothing. The temple of taste, I quite believe, needs rebuilding; but in rebuilding it, it is merely a question of making it greater, and of letting it become the Pantheon of all the nobility of mankind—of all those who have had a notable and lasting share in increasing the sum of the pleasures and possessions of the mind. As for me, who would in no sense pretend (as is evident) to be the architect or director of such a temple, I will confine myself to expressing some wishes—competing for the specification, as it were. Above all, I would exclude no one worthy to enter, and I would give everyone the place due to him, from Shakespeare, the most unfettered of creative geniuses and unconsciously the greatest of the classics, to Andrieux, the very last of the classics in miniature. 'In my Father's house are many mansions.' Let that be no less true of the kingdom of the beautiful here than of the kingdom of heaven above. Homer always and everywhere would be the first in it, the most like a god; but behind him, like the attendant train of the three kings of the East, would follow those three grand poets, those three Homers long ignored by us, who also themselves have made grand and admirable epics, the Hindoo poets Valmiki and Vyasa, and the Persian Firdousi. In the realm of taste, it is a good thing to know, at least, that such men exist, and not to split up the human race. Having paid this homage to what it is sufficient to perceive and recognise, we would quit our own boundaries no

more, and we would divert our eyes with a thousand splendid or agreeable sights, and rejoice in a thousand various and surprising meetings; yet their apparent confusion would never be wanting in concord and harmony. The most ancient of sages and poets—those who have put human morality into maxims and have chanted it in plain-song—would converse with each other in rare suave speech, and would not be surprised to understand each other at the very first word. Solon, Hesiod, Theognis, Job, Solomon, and why not Confucius himself? would greet the most ingenious modern authors, La Rochefoucauld or La Bruyère, who would say to each other as they listened to them: 'They knew all that we know, and we have found nothing new by bringing experience up to date.' On the hill most in sight, with the most easy slopes, Virgil surrounded by Menander, Tibullus, Terence, Fénelon, would abandon himself with them to converse full of charm and a sacred enchantment; his gentle face would beam with radiance and the hue of modesty, as on that day when, entering the Roman theatre just as they had been reciting his verses, he saw the entire assembly rise in front of him by a simultaneous movement and pay him the same homage as to Augustus himself. Not far from him, and regretting to be separated from so dear a friend, Horace would preside in his turn (so far as a poet and sage so keen of wit can be said to preside) over the group of the poets of civic life and of those who have known how to talk as well as sing—Pope and Despréaux, the one grown less irritable and the other less censorious. That true poet, Montaigne, would be there with them, and his presence would

completely remove all appearance of a literary academy from this charming corner. La Fontaine would forget himself there, and, henceforth less flighty, would be content to remain. Voltaire would pass by, but he would not have the patience to stop, though at the same time delighting in it. On the same hill as Virgil, a little lower down, Xenophon would be seen with an unaffected look very little like a captain, but of a kind to make him rather resemble a priest of the Muses. He would gather around him the Attic minds of every language and of every country—Addison, Pellisson, Vauvenargues, all who feel the value of suave expression, exquisite simplicity, and a sweet, though not unadorned, carelessness. In the centre of the place three great men would often like to meet before the portico of the principal temple (for there would be several within the enclosure), and if those should be together, there would not be a fourth, however great, to whom it would occur to take part in their intercourse or their silence, so great would appear their beauty, their grand proportions, and that perfection of harmony which has only once been seen when first the world was young. Their three names have become the ideal of all art—Plato, Sophocles, and Demosthenes. And, moreover, having duly honoured these demigods, do you not see yonder a numerous and familiar crowd of excellent spirits, who always prefer to follow Cervantes, Molière—the practical painters from the life—those indulgent friends who are still the first of benefactors, who seize the whole man with laughter, pour out experience for him in mirth, and are aware of the powerful influence of rational, hearty, lawful joy? I will not here go on any longer with this

description, which would occupy a whole book if it were complete. Be sure that the Middle Ages and Dante would fill some of the sacred heights; Italy would wholly unfold herself like a garden at the feet of the singer of Paradise; Boccaccio and Aristotle would disport themselves there, and Tasso would find once more the orange groves of Sorrento. In short, the different nations would have each a special nook kept for it, but the authors would delight in coming out of it, and as they walk about they would recognise, where least they expect it, their brothers or their masters. Lucretius, for instance, would love to discuss with Milton the origin of the world and the disentanglement of chaos; but as they argue each after his manner, they will but agree about the divine representations of poetry and nature.

These are our classics; everybody's imagination can complete the sketch, and even choose his favourite group for himself. For there must be choice, and the first condition of taste when all has been surveyed is not to roam ceaselessly, but once for all to stay with a settled opinion. Nothing palls on the mind so much and is so injurious to taste as ceaseless roamings; the poetic spirit is not the Wandering Jew. Notwithstanding all this, my concluding advice when I speak of choosing and of forming an opinion is not to imitate even those who please us the most among our masters in the past. Let us be satisfied with feeling them, with interpreting them, with admiring them, and for ourselves, late comers that we are, let us try at least to be ourselves. Let us make our choice with our own

proper instincts. Let us have the sincerity and naturalness of our own thoughts, our own feelings—that always is possible. Let us add to it what is more difficult, a high aim, an impetus towards some lofty ideal; and while we speak our own language and submit to the conditions of the age in which we are placed, and from which we draw alike our strength and our failings, let us ask ourselves from time to time, while we lift our brow towards the hills and fasten our eyes on the group of revered beings: *What would they say of us?*

But why do we speak continually of being an author, of writing? An age, perchance, is coming when there will be no more writing. Happy are those who read and read again, who can obey their free inclinations in their reading! There comes a period in life when, our wanderings all finished and our experiences all acquired, there is no keener pleasure than to study and deepen the things we know, to relish what we taste, just as when you behold again and again the people you love; purest delight of the mature mind and taste. It is then that this word *classic* assumes its true meaning, and is defined by the irresistible and discerning choice of every man of taste. Taste has now been created, it is formed and defined; the right meaning is now achieved if we are to have it at all. There is no longer any time to try about, nor any wish to make further discoveries. You stand by your friends, by those who have been proved by a long connection. Old wine, old books, old friends. You say to yourself like Voltaire in those delightful lines:

'Jouissons, écrivons, vivons, mon cher Horace !

* * * * * *

'J'ai vécu plus que toi : mes vers dureront moins :
Mais, au bord du tombeau, je mettrai tous mes soins
À suivre les leçons de ta philosophie,
À mépriser la mort en savourant la vie,
À lire tes écrits pleins de grâce et de sens,
Comme on boit d'un vin vieux qui rajeunit les sens.'

Finally, be it Horace or another, whoever the author is that we prefer, and that gives us back our own thoughts in full richness and maturity, we shall at any rate beg from one of these good and ancient spirits a perpetual entertainment, an unwavering friendship which will never fail us, and that habitual impression of serenity and sweetness, which reconciles us, who so often need it, to mankind and to ourselves.

*OF A LITERARY TRADITION; AND IN WHAT SENSE THE TERM SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD.**

GENTLEMEN,—If, as I have been more than once informed, you are good enough to wish to see me open this course of lectures, for my own part, believe me, I was no less eager to find myself among you, fulfilling the honourable and highly-prized duty entrusted to me; to which I henceforth devote myself unreservedly. But, anxious as I am to attack the detailed study of our literature, and to undertake with you a review of the principal literary works of our most brilliant century, I ought to say a few words to you by way of introduction, relating both to the spirit which I mean to bring to that examination, and to that in which I have to ask that you will be kind enough to hear me. I have written a good deal in the last thirty years—that is, I have scattered myself about a good deal; so that before starting upon a course of instruction in the proper sense, and laying down certain rules and principles

* A lecture delivered at the opening of the session of the *École Normale*, April 12, 1858. Given, as the author tells us, to illustrate the difference between the duties of a professor and those of a critic. The business of the latter is to discover new talent; that of the former, to maintain a good tradition of taste.

which will at least indicate the general direction of my thought, I need to gather myself together, in order that there may be no misunderstanding between us, and that, as a consequence, my words may come before you with all the more freedom and confidence. You are the persons who will hereafter have as your special office and ministry to watch over the tradition, the transmission of classical and humane letters, to interpret them continually to each fresh generation of young persons; I, for my part, see myself charged, with a kindness which does me honour, and for which I give thanks where thanks are due, under the eyes of my friend the director,* and beside so many excellent masters, whose pupil one would like to have been, or to be about to be—I find myself, I say, charged with the duty of preparing you for these worthy and important functions. I find myself naturally led to discuss what especially strikes me in that career which we shall henceforth share, and that of which it most concerns us to make quite sure.

There is such a thing as tradition. In what sense must we understand it—in what sense is it our duty to maintain it?

There is a tradition; who would deny it? For us it exists all traced out. It is visible like those immense, magnificent avenues or roads which used to traverse the empire, ending at what was called pre-eminently the City.

Descendants as we are of the Romans, or, at any rate, adopted children of the Latin race—that race which was itself initiated by the Greeks into the cult of

* M. Nisard.

the beautiful—we have to embrace, to understand, never to desert the inheritance received from those illustrious masters and fathers, an inheritance which, from Homer down to the latest classic of yesterday (if there be a classic of yesterday*), forms the brightest and most solid portion of our intellectual capital. This tradition consists not solely in the collection of memorable works which we bring together in our libraries, and which we study—a large part of it has passed into our laws, into our institutions, into our manners, into the education which we unconsciously inherit, into our habits, and into all our fundamental conceptions. It consists in a certain principle of good sense and culture which, in the course of ages, has penetrated so as to modify it into the very character of our Gaulish nation, and which entered long ago into the very composition of our wits.

All that it concerns us on no account to lose, all that we must never allow anyone to damage, at least without making it known, and giving the alarm as in a common peril, is there.

I am not going to establish any comparison between two classes of things profoundly distinct and wholly unlike, but I am going to make my thought more obvious by means of a comparison.

M. de Chateaubriand, recalling some fine chapters of the *Esprit des Lois*, ended his *Génie du Christianisme* by setting himself this question: 'What would be the state of society to-day if Christianity had never appeared on the earth?' As may readily be supposed, answers

* And why not? For us the last of the classics was Chateaubriand.

crowded under his pen, and sprang forth from all sides.

A learned English author, Colonel Mure, in his *History of Greek Literature*, for his part sets himself this question: 'If the Greek nation had never existed, or if the works of its genius had been destroyed by the grandeur and predominance of Rome, would the races which now stand at the head of Europe have raised themselves higher in the scale of literary culture than did the other nations of antiquity before they had been touched by the breath of Hellas?' It is a grand and beautiful question, one of those which most set us thinking and musing.

Gentlemen, I have often mused, I have often asked myself, under all sorts of forms, and taking many special instances, putting myself at every point of view, what would have been the destiny of modern literature (to consider that point only) if the battle of Marathon had been lost, and Greece brought into subjection and slavery, crushed out of life before the age of Pericles; even at a date when she would have retained in her distant past the broad and incomparable beauty of her first great Ionian poets, but without the reflecting focus of Athens?

Let us never forget that Rome, by dint of her own energy and ability, had, when the second Punic war came to an end, already arrived at the most widely extended political power, and at the ripeness of a great state, without so far possessing anything like a literature properly so called or worthy of that name; she had to conquer Greece in order to be taken captive, in the person of her generals and her famous chiefs, in order to

be touched with that noble fire which was to redouble and to perpetuate her glory. How many nations and races, if we except that first Hellenic race so privileged above all others, so singularly endowed, are or have been in this respect more like the Romans—that is to say, have of themselves possessed in regard to poetry or literature nothing more than a primary, rudimentary, rustic development, in no way exceeding a first wild growth? That was sufficient for nomad peoples who had in front of them the green forest or the steppe with its spring blooms—something short, simple (or coarse), invented on the spur of the moment, formless and vague, quite close to the earth, or too near the clouds.

I hear them coming, it is true, I hear the Northern nations growing and forming themselves with their warlike or festive songs, their mythology, their legends; I do not deny that there is a poetical faculty up to a certain point universal in humanity. All the nations which have successively gone forth from the central point, the heart of Asia, are recognised to-day as brothers and sisters of the same family, and of a family which has an air of nobility stamped on its brow; but, in all this numerous family, one brow was chosen among all, one elected maiden, upon whom incomparable grace was poured forth, who received from her cradle the gift of song, of harmony, of measure, of perfection—Nausicaa, Helen, Antigone, Electra, Iphigenia, Venus in all her noble forms; and if we suppose this enchanting child of genius, this muse of a noble house, cut down and sacrificed before her time, is it not true that all mankind might have said, like a family when it has lost the daughter who was its joy and its

honour, 'the crown is fallen from our head'? If one could, with difficulty, collect all the wild crops, would they be worth one of her garlands? Would all the scattered plunder, all the small change of the others piled and heaped together, be equal in worth and weight to a single one of her golden talents?

I do not fix to one spot, I do not isolate that primary Hellenic beauty, and for that very reason I am not afraid to ascribe so much to it. You know as well as I that Rome, by herself, and if she had not been touched by the golden wand at the very moment when she was breaking it, was in danger of remaining for ever a mere power, lying with crushing weight on the world, whether as senate, camp, or legion. It was the buoyant soul of Greece which, passing into her, and mingling with the firm and judicious good sense of those politicians, those conquerors, produced in the second or third generation that assemblage of genius, of talents, of accomplishments, which makes up the fine Augustan age. Whether directly, or thenceforth by means of the Romans, that buoyant soul, that spark (for a spark is all that is wanted), that fiery or subtle germ of civilization, has never ceased to act at decisive epochs, to give life and be the signal for unexpected bursts of flower, for Renaissances. The very literature of chivalry which we see breaking forth, for the first time, in its precocious and brilliant development in the south of our own France, beside the Mediterranean, seems to have been brushed and caressed by some distant breath from ancient shores, which may have brought with it some invisible seed. Christian antiquity, imperfect from a literary point of view, but

morally in a high position, had not in those ages ceased to be at once an active vehicle and a fund of wealth. Would Dante have had the idea and the power to compose his monumental poem, belonging so completely to the Middle Ages, if he had not perceived what tradition, incomplete as it was, had transmitted to him, in the way of memories, reminiscences, or fertile illusions, and if he had not literally had Virgil for his guide, support, and half-fabulous patron? However that may be, Beatrice, and the inspiration whence she issued, were surely a new sentiment in the world, for our tradition is neither locked up nor exclusive; we are glad to recognise that delicate sentiment of love and courtesy which belongs to chivalry, to see in it yet another ornament added to mankind's crown, side by side with atticism and urbanity. But let us never separate ourselves from atticism, from urbanity, from the principle of good sense and good reason, which in it is combined with grace. What we must never lose sight of is the feeling of a certain standard of beauty suited to our race, to our education, to our civilization. Not to have the feeling for letters, meant to the ancients the same thing as not having the feeling of virtue, of glory, of grace, of beauty—in one word, of all that which is really divine upon earth; let that be still our watchword. There is no question here of distinguishing between the Greeks and the Latins. For us, their legacy and their benefactions are merged together. Doubtless *Græcia capta ferum* is at the bottom of everything, that is the starting-point. But the Roman force, the Roman arm, the Roman speech and practice, also pervade everywhere. That has been the great

instrument to propagate and cultivate. No doubt Isocrates, in his famous panegyric, said, quite rightly at his own date, just before Alexander: "Our city has left the rest of mankind so far behind it in thought and in eloquence, that its pupils have become the masters of others; she has done her business so well, that the name of Greek seems to be no longer the designation of a single race, but that of intelligence itself, and that we call people Greeks who share rather in our culture than in our nature.' With even more authority, Pericles said the same thing in that admirable panegyric of Athens which he introduced so magnificently into his funeral eulogy of the warriors who had died for their country. Never has there been a better description of that happy city where no chagrins, no jealousies, no rigid austerities offended the eye or mortified your neighbour's pleasure; where it was a joy merely to live, to breathe, to walk abroad, and where the mere beauty of buildings and public edifices, the beauty of daylight and a certain air of festivity, drove sadness far from the mind, where it was possible to love beauty with simplicity of life and philosophy without being effeminate; where wealth was used for a practical purpose and not for ostentation; where courage was not blind like that of the furious Mars, but enlightened and knowing its own reasons as befits the city of Minerva, the true Athens after the ideal of Pericles, his creation and his work, the school of Greece (*Ἑλλαδος Ἑλλας Αθῆναι**), such as he had made it during the long years of his personal supremacy and potent persuasion; for we have

* The author apparently intends to refer to the *τῆς Ἑλλαδος παίδευσιν* of Thucydides, II. 41.

in Pericles the most noble and brilliant type of the popular chief, the man who becomes dictator of a democracy by reason, eloquence, talent, and continual persuasion. In another very memorable discourse which Thucydides puts in his mouth, doubtless not without good cause, Pericles handles the Athenians as in later days he would have handled the Romans; he makes every effort to sustain and fortify them against the double trial of the war and the terrible plague; he lays himself out to breathe into those citizens of a great city, brought up in ways and sentiments worthy of it, courage to make head against the greatest disasters. Speaking to them even then as to a people that were kings, proving to them that from the moment they had once been such they could not recoil, but were condemned to remain so always or to exist no longer, no longer even to expect if they should fall the usual conditions of subject-cities, he enunciates for their use the most decided public and political maxims: 'to be hated, to be odious at the present time, such has been the lot of all those who have aspired to empire over others; but whoever incurs this odium for great causes takes the right side, and has no occasion to repent.' And in truth, if one could always hear the Pericles of Thucydides, that Demosthenes not in word only but in action, one would no longer allow the Romans to boast as they have done that they had added solidity to the delightful genius of the Greeks.

But the Athenians were only able to accomplish half his wish, and of this work which Pericles dreamed and more than dreamed, put before them, the work of constancy, of lasting energy, and of world-wide political

empire, it was the Romans who undertook the accomplishment in proportions of far other breadth, and not only by sea but by land.

While the Greeks, fallen, cut off from exercising public virtues, became with few exceptions more frivolous, more voluble, more sophistical, more sycophantic, more romancing than they had ever been, the conquerors seized that precious divine element—a portion of the Promethean fire—and animated with it their practical vigour and their solid good sense in a temperament which united vivacity and consistence. It matters little that it was only the picked men among the Romans who possessed that refinement and that delicacy, not the whole people as at Athens; posterity only knows the picked men. I shall, however, never admit that Rome, even that Rome of the people which we have since seen to be possessed of so fine and so keen powers of raillery, had not, from the moment when she had leisure and opportunity, acute wits simultaneously with the gift of agreeable and dulcet language.

This must have become established pretty nearly in the time of Cicero, both the word and the thing: *Favorem et urbanum*, says Quintilian, *Cicero nova credit.* By that time, accordingly, we get the other City, pre-eminently so-called, that in whose light Cicero wished that he might always live, so as to be the more sure of never growing rusty—the Rome of Catullus and Horace and onward to that of the younger Pliny. Such are our fatherlands.

After Trajan's days, when the hour of Roman decadence definitely struck, ecclesiastical literature, which was about to be born, did not enter as quickly or as

directly into the inheritance of literary beauty as Rome had done in its first contact with Greece. The torch was not passed from hand to hand. In Greece alone, by a singular good fortune, and a remnant of its birth-right privilege, that sacred literature, in the mouth of a Basil and a Chrysostom, recovered, without effort, copiousness and harmony, and almost the accents of Plato. But at Rome and in Africa the Latin of the early fathers was harsh, far-fetched, and laboured, even while the thought was original, excellent, and often sublime. Christian writers started from a principle too different, too contrary to external beauty, to be able to greet it at first sight, or when they met it to refrain from shocking it. But as ages went on, after revolutions and cycles laboriously accomplished, the stars came into conjunction again, and became favourable, harmony and supreme beauty were rediscovered; this blazes out and glows in the world of the Arts, in that kindly Rome of Raphael and Leo X.; in a less brilliant, but perhaps more estimable style, in the style of morality and of eloquent language, of sincere and convinced poetry, it reappeared in France in the reign of Louis XIV. There was a day when Biblical grandeur and Hellenic beauty met and were fused and mingled in spirit and in form with a lofty simplicity; and when we speak to-day of tradition, and of that which would have failed if it had been lacking, of what would have been missing in the most charming stories, in the most noble pictures of human memory, we have the right to say, in each case; by an equally incontestable title, there would have been no Homer or Xenophon, there would have been no Virgil, there would have been no *Athalie*.

But you will say that great men of letters have been produced entirely outside of this tradition. Name them. I know one only, and he is great enough, no doubt—Shakespeare. And in his case, are you quite sure that he is entirely outside? Had he not read Montaigne and Plutarch—those copious repertories, nay, rather those reserve hives of antiquity in which so much honey is stored? An admirable poet, and no doubt the most natural since Homer, though in such a different line, of him it has been written with perfect truth that he had so creative an imagination and that he paints so well and with such conspicuous energy all his characters—from heroes and kings, down to innkeepers and peasants—'that if human nature had been destroyed, and that if there remained no other monument of it than his works alone, other beings might know from his writings what man had been.' It is not to you I need say that this man, of all men so human, was not a savage nor a man of irregular life; that we must not confound him, because he has sometimes carried energy or subtlety to excess, or because he has given in either to the coarseness or the refinements of his own time, with eccentrics and madmen full of themselves, intoxicated with their own nature and their own works, 'drunk with their own wine.' If we could see him appear suddenly and walk in in person, I imagine him to myself (as an ingenious critic has shown us*) noble and human of countenance, having nothing about him of the bull, the boar, or even the lion; bearing in his physiognomy, like Molière, the most noble features of the species—those which speak

* Tieck.

most to the soul and the intellect; moderate, sensible in talk, and most often, whether through pity or indulgence, smiling and kind; for he has also created beings who ravish us with purity and kindness, and he dwells at the centre of human nature. Is it not to him that we must go to find the very most expressive word for rendering kindness—'the milk of human kindness'? a quality which it always seems to me essential that energetic talents should mingle with their force if they are not to fall into sternness or into insulting brutality; just as in the case of fine talents inclined to be too kindly I should require, to save them from insipidity, that there should be added a little of what Pliny and Lucian call pungency*—the salt of strength. Thus it is that talents become complete; and Shakespeare, in his own way, saving the faults of his time, was complete. You may reassure yourselves; great men in every line, and above all, I will say, in the intellectual order, have never been crazy or barbarous. If any writer appears to us in his conduct and in his whole personality to be violent, unreasonable, given to shocking good sense or the most natural proprieties, he may have talent, for talent, even great talent, is compatible with many perversities; but be sure he is not a writer of the first quality and of the highest mark among mankind. Homer sometimes nods, Corneille in conversation is heavy and nods, La Fontaine nods; they have their moments of absence, of forgetfulness; but the greater men are never permanently extravagant, ridiculous, grotesque, ostentatious, boastful, cynical, or unseemly. For my own part, however large the allowance I may make for natural varieties

* The *amaritudo* of the Latin author, δριμύτης of the Greek.

and singularities, I shall never fancy to myself the revered choir of the five or six great men of letters and of creative genius of whom humanity can boast, and who after all can only be the five or six leaders among the honourable folk of the universe, as a band or pack of crazy maniacs rushing each with his head down after their prey, on the chance of catching it. No, tradition tells us, and the consciousness of our own civilized nature tells us still more plainly, reason always must have, and definitely has, the first place even among these favourites, these elect of the imaginative power; or if she does not constantly keep the first place, but allows an access of high spirits to run its course, she is never far off, as she stands by smiling, awaiting an hour which is at hand—the moment of recovery. This is the literary religion to which we belong, even though surrounded by the most lively audacities, and to this we would always belong.

I, that am a critic, may be allowed to invoke the example of the greatest of critics, Goethe—him of whom we may say that he is not only tradition but that he is all traditions united. Which, from a literary point of view, predominates in him? The classical element. In him I can see the Greek temple even on the shores of Tauris. He wrote *Werther*, but it is *Werther* written by one who carries his Homer into the fields, and who will find him again even when his hero has lost him. It is thus that he has preserved his lordly serenity; no one dwells in the clouds less than he; he enlarges Parnassus, he makes stages in it, he peoples it at every station, at every summit, at every angle of its rocks; he makes it like, perhaps even too like, that pinnacled

rather than rounded hill, Montserrat in Catalonia, but he does not destroy it. Without that taste for Greece which chastens and tethers his universal indifference, or, if you prefer, his universal curiosity, Goethe might have lost himself in the indefinite, the indeterminate. So many summits are familiar to him, that if Olympus were not his summit by predilection, where would he go? or rather, where would he not go? he, the most open-minded of men, and the most advanced in the direction of the East? His transformations, his pilgrimages in the pursuit of the various forms of beauty, would have had no end, but he came back, he settled down, he knew the point of view from which to contemplate the universe that it might appear in its most beautiful light. As for himself, whenever we wish to form an image of the critical spirit at its highest pitch of intelligence, and of considered understanding, we figure him to ourselves as an attentive and watchful spectator, curious from afar off, on the look-out for every discovery, for all that goes by, for every sail on the horizon—but from the heights of his Sunium.

He it was, the author of *Werther* and of *Faust*, one who knew what he was talking about, who so justly said: 'By classic I understand sound, and by romantic, sickly.' But as the classic, and even the romantic, form part of tradition, if we are to consider it in its entire series, and in the full extent of the past, I must pause at this saying of Goethe's, and I should like, in your presence, to try to explain it to myself. Well, then, the classic, in its most general character and in its widest definition, comprises all literatures in a

healthy and happily-flourishing condition, literatures in full accord and in harmony with their period, with their social surroundings, with the principles and powers which direct society, satisfied with themselves. Let us be quite clear, I mean satisfied to belong to their nation, to their age, to the government under which they come to birth and flourish (joy of intellect, it has been said, is the mark of strength of intellect; that is no less true for literatures than for individuals), those literatures which are and feel themselves to be at home, in their proper road, not out of their proper class, not agitating, not having for their principle discomfort, which has never been a principle of beauty. I am not the person to speak evil of romantic literatures, I keep within the terms of Goethe and of historical explanation. People are not born when they wish to be, they cannot choose their moment for hatching out, they cannot, especially in youth, avoid the general currents which are passing in the air, and which blow dryness or moisture, fever or health; and there are similar currents for the soul. That feeling of fundamental contentment, in which there is, before all things, hope, into which discouragement does not enter, where you may say that there is a period before you which will outlast you, which is stronger than you, a period which will protect and judge, where you have a fine field for a career, for an honourable and glorious development in the full light of day—that is what gives the first foundation, upon which afterwards arise, like palaces and temples in regular order, harmoniously constructed and regular works.

When you live in a perpetual instability of public

affairs, when you see society change often before your eyes, you are tempted to disbelieve in literary immortality, and consequently to grant yourself every license. Now it falls to nobody's lot to give himself this feeling of security and of a steady and durable period, one must breathe it in with the air in the hours of youth. Romantic literatures, which are above all things matters of sudden assault and of adventure, have their merits, their exploits, their brilliantly played parts, but outside of established rules. They perch themselves astride of two or three periods, never getting fairly into the saddle on a single one, uneasy, inquiring, eccentric by nature, either much in advance or much in arrear, in other respects wilful and wandering.

Classical literature never complains, never groans, never feels ennui. Sometimes, in company with sorrow, and by way of sorrow, one may outstrip it, but beauty is more tranquil.

The classic, I repeat, possesses among its other characteristics that of loving its own country, its own times, of seeing nothing more desirable or more beautiful. It is legitimately for and of these. Its motto should be 'Activity with tranquillity.' That is true of the age of Pericles, of the age of Augustus, no less than of the reign of Louis XIV. Let us hear the great poets and the orators of those periods speak under their fair sky, as it were under their dome of blue, their hymns of praise still resound in our ears: they carried the art of applause very far. Romanticism, like Hamlet, has home-sickness, it seeks for what it has not, seeks it even beyond the clouds; it dreams, it sees in visions. In the nineteenth century it adores the

Middle Ages; in the eighteenth, it was already revolutionary with Rousseau. In Goethe's sense of the word, there are romanticists of various times. Chrysostom's young friend Stagirius, or Augustine in his youth, were of this kind, Renés before their time; sick men, but they were sick men who might be healed, and Christianity healed them by exorcising the demon. Hamlet, Werther, Childe Harold, the true Renés, are sick men of the kind who sing and suffer, who enjoy their malady—romantics more or less in a dilettante way; they are sick for sickness' sake.

Oh! if one day in our fair fatherland, in our capital which grows daily in magnificence, which is for us so fine a representative of the country, we felt ourselves happy, honestly happy of belonging to it; if, above all, young souls, touched by a kind inspiration, caught by that praiseworthy and salutary contentment which does not engender a childish pride, but only adds emulation to life, could feel themselves happy to live in an age, under a social system, which allows or favours all the finer developments of humanity; if they would not from the outset put themselves in an attitude of revolt, of opposition or fault-finding, of bitterness, of regrets or of hopes too late or premature; if they would consent to spread out and to direct all their powers in the wide field open before them, then the balance would be restored between talent and its surroundings, between men of parts and the social system; we should find ourselves again in unison, strife and moral sickness would cease, and literature would again of itself become classical, both in grandeur of line and in what is essential, its fundamental basis. It is not that people would have

more talent or more knowledge, but more order, more harmony, more proportion, a noble aim, and simpler means and more courage to arrive at it; we should perhaps begin again to have works that would last.

It is here no mission, no claim of ours to produce such; we have above all to preserve them. What is the best and surest manner of maintaining tradition? In the first place it is to possess it complete, not to concentrate and crowd it upon certain points too close together, not to exaggerate it here and overlook it there. There is no need to tell you these things, since the models are familiar and present to you, from the first beginnings, and in different literatures, and your minds are furnished with true standards of comparison in every kind. Others have set up the pillars on the foundation of yourselves, you have the patterns of true beauty. He who can see Plato, Sophocles, Demosthenes, face to face, is under no temptation to grant too much, even to the most illustrious of the moderns. That is the weak point of those who only possess one language and one literature. Frederick the Great granted everything to Voltaire, even to Voltaire as a poet, and adjudged to him all the crowns, merely because he had no sufficient standard of comparison. Through over-narrowing of tradition, through making it too cut and dried, many of those who at the beginning of this century claimed the exclusive title of classics, were, in the strife of that time, those who could least do so.

As each age renews itself, portions of recent tradition which are believed well based crumble into ruin after

a certain fashion, and the only result is, that the indestructible marble rock appears all the more in its true solidity.

In order to maintain tradition, it is not always sufficient to attach it firmly to its most lofty and most august monuments, it is necessary to verify it and to check it incessantly at the points nearest to us, even to rejuvenate it, and to keep it in perpetual relation with what is living. Here we touch a somewhat delicate question. It is no business of mine to introduce into the curriculum too recent names, to go out of my way to judge the works of the present day, to confuse functions and parts. A professor is not a critic. The critic, if he does his duty (and where are such critics at the present day?) is a sentinel always awake, always on the look-out; but he does not only cry 'Who goes there?' he gives help; far from resembling a pirate, or delighting in shipwrecks, he sometimes, like the coasting-pilot, goes to the help of those whom the tempest overtakes as they enter or leave port. The professor's obligations are smaller, or, I should say, different. He is bound to more reserve and more dignity. He must not go far from the sacred places which it is his part to show and to tend. Still, he cannot entirely escape all knowledge of novelties, of arrivals and approaches, announced with all pomp, of sails which are signalled from time to time on the horizon as those of invincible armadas. He must know them, at least the chief of them. He must have his opinion. In a word, he must keep his eye on the neighbouring shore, and never go to sleep.

To go to sleep on tradition is a danger with which

we are little threatened. We are no longer in the days when, if you were born in a capital, you never left it. We have seen classics who have grown feeble in the second generation, who have become sedentary and home-keeping. They have acted like the son of Charles V., of all emperors the most travelled, that Philip II. who never stirred from his Escurial. Nobody nowadays has any right to rest so quiet, even in the best established admirations. One thing or another is constantly moving as we watch it, and there open, as in our old cities, long, new vistas which change the most familiar views. Instruction is bound, whether it will or not, to take fresh bearings, to reconsider in these things. There are ways also in which it can renew itself, in which it can modify the manner in which it does service to taste, and defends tradition. I will take our seventeenth century for example.

Criticism and erudition are guided by the historical spirit, have devoted themselves for some years past to a great work which has its value, and the importance and undoubted utility of which I should be far from depreciating. There has come a taste for original sources. People have wished to make a closer acquaintance with everything by the aid of papers and documents at first hand, and, as far as possible, unpublished. In this way they have succeeded in penetrating the secret of many things and the most private opinions of many persons, to know in almost daily detail the grounds of their admiration for Henry IV., for Richelieu, for Louis XIV., to count up the hidden springs of their administration, and to follow all the movements of their foreign policy. Thanks to this publication of

diplomatic documents, that which formerly was possessed by only a few learned men, the private domain of Foncemagne or of Père Griffet, has been put at the disposal of everybody. State secrets of the past have ceased to exist. Nor have people limited themselves to the historical figures properly so called; they have chosen to go into the inner court, to the private fireside of men most eloquent either by pen or by word. Their papers have been examined, their autograph letters, the first editions of their works, the evidence of their surroundings, the journals of the secretaries who knew them best, and in this way notions have been formed of them somewhat different, and certainly more precise than could be obtained from the mere reading of their published works. People of taste in former times in their literary judgement of works were a little too indolent, too delicate, too much people of the world; they stopped at researches of the least difficulty, and shrank back as from thorns. Even the critics by profession, elegant as they might be, did not sufficiently inform themselves beforehand of everything which might give to their judgement perfect guarantees for exactitude and truth. We know a good deal more to-day than they did about many points in the subjects on which they touched. We have at hand all the resources that we can desire; without speaking of biography, bibliography, that entirely new branch once held to be not repaying, that science of books of which it has been said that it too often dispenses people from reading them, and which our genuine men of letters used formerly to leave to the Dutch critics, has become Parisian and fashionable, almost agreeable and

certainly easy. The most humble beginner, if he will only devote two or three mornings to it, can with little trouble know all that concerns the material part of the books and the personality of the author upon whom he is for the moment engaged. Those are the advantages, the benefit of it; but, on the other hand, the inconveniences of these new methods at a period when there is too little of the higher criticism to act the part of watcher and judge, have not been slow in showing themselves, and if I am not mistaken, we have them on every side full in our eyes.

Not a day passes without someone announcing a discovery; everyone wishes to make it his own, everyone boasts of it, and puffs his wares unchecked. Disproportionate importance and literary value are attributed to works hitherto unknown. People are proud of 'finds,' merely curious (when they are that), which cost no thought, no effort of the mind, but merely the trouble of going and picking them up. One would say that the era of the scholiasts and commentators was reopening and beginning anew; a man gets no less honour and consideration for this, nay, more, than if he had attempted a fine novel, a fine poem, or tried the ways of true invention, the lofty roads of thought. There has been a change in the level of public approbation, while at the same time the writer's own point of honour has been displaced, and his ambition has been perceptibly lowered. It is a very general and very pronounced misunderstanding which has mixed itself up with a useful thing. As for works which, having been produced conscientiously and modestly—we could quote examples of them—invite esteem, I see the moment at

hand when there will no longer be crowns enough for them.

Let us maintain the degrees of art, the stages of intelligence. Let us encourage all industrious research, but let us in everything leave the master's place to talent, to careful thought, to judgement, to reason, to taste. For example, I esteem highly those dissertations which we see produced every year on special subjects, in which the author often seeks to excavate somewhat further than had already been done, to add something to what people knew already. I draw instruction from them; you will write some yourselves before long, good ones I hope, even new ones. But must I admit that, when I see the titles which are far too complacently affixed to them, the promises, the public pledges of discovery, 'So-and-so from unpublished documents,' I a little distrust the taste and the perfect accuracy of the conclusions? I shall not advise you to put, but I should be just as glad if people would put, on the title-page once for all, 'So-and-so according to judicious ideas and views,' even were they ancient.

You must quite understand the extent of my hesitation. Far be it from me, I say again, to wish to diminish the esteem due to a fashion of research which has become general, and which under the slightly confused and dusty appearance of a big inventory is tending to renew, perhaps to freshen, in future days the surface of literary history, although I suspect that literature has less to gain from it than history may have. If time, the great devourer, makes the memory of many facts disappear and annihilates the true explanations of them with their witnesses, it is also in many respects the

great revealer. It raises from underground other unexpected witnesses, and discloses many secrets that could not have been hoped for. But having said this, and notwithstanding these supplementary inquiries which are always being opened, let us, if possible, preserve the light touch, the delicate and prompt impression of good taste; in presence of living works of the mind, let us dare to keep our judgement clear and alive also, sharply defined, unhampered, sure of itself even without documents to support it.

I am not afraid to vary my examples, my comparisons, and to choose those which will bring you most into touch with my thought. As you know, Thucydides collected notes to the composition of his fine, his severely simple, history for twenty years long. He must have written some sort of memoranda or detailed journals about all the events which he watched from the retirement of exile. Artist and historian, when he had once set to work he used them freely, taking or rejecting as it suited his plan or not, and then destroyed them or never thought of them again. I do not say that it would not be extremely interesting today to have those notes—if by chance they had been preserved—but I do say that in the system which would tend to prevail, which already does prevail, people would come to prefer them decidedly to the composition itself, to that history of the Peloponnesian war that is so perfect, so epic, or rather dramatic, and in which there is such an austere unity of action. People would come on the whole to prefer the materials to the work, the scaffolding to the monument. Thucydides' note-books rather than the statue of bronze which

Thucydides raised! You who are going to Athens, who go there day by day, you will resist to the best of your power this upsetting of the points of view, even in what belongs to modern times, and if in regard to these truth at any price (or what is taken for it), if curiosity decidedly wins the day over art, you will at least take care that the old method, and what has sprung from it, shall remain in honour, an object of worship and of study, present to the memory and to the meditation of those faithful intellects which can still be touched by the idea of beauty.

But although this disposition is admitted and recognised between us, although while we profit as best we may by the occasionally somewhat cumbrous instruments of modern criticism, we shall retain some of the customs, even some of the principles of the old criticism, assigning the first place in our admiration and our esteem to invention, composition, the art of writing; sensitive above all to the charm of wit, to lofty or subtle talent, you will not conclude from this that we shall necessarily, in regard to celebrated books and their writers, fall into a monotonous and universal frame of laudation. The best way not only of appreciating but of getting others to appreciate fine works is to have no predilection, to give one's self full liberty every time one reads them or speaks them, to forget, if possible, that one has possessed them for a long time, and to begin upon them again as if one had only to-day made their acquaintance. Thus steeped again in its source one's opinion, even if it may sometimes remain inferior to what one had previously formed, at any rate recovers life and freshness. The man of taste

even though he be not destined to teach and have his full leisure, ought for his own sake, it seems to me, to return every four or five years upon the best of his old admirations, to verify them, to put them to the question again as though they were new—that is to say, to re-awaken and refresh them even at the risk of seeing them now and then somewhat deranged; the important point is that they should be living. But have no anxiety about the result. All of those admirations which are well founded, if the reader himself in his inmost soul has not become in the interval less worthy to admire beauty, will all or nearly all gain and increase by this honest review; as we advance in life really beautiful things appear more and more beautiful proportionately to our greater opportunities of comparison.

We will try, then, not to admire more than we should, or otherwise than we should, not to give everything to one century, even to a great century, not to stake everything at once on a few great writers. In speaking of them we will try to concentrate our praise upon their principal merit; for even in the case of great authors there is one principal merit. It is only our contemporaries who have every merit, the most contradictory at the same time; with the ancients, and with the classics we shall be more sober, and this sobriety will itself be homage.

And in this matter I am cautioned to be circumspect when I remember how reserved in eulogy are all the greatest minds, the steadiest and loftiest intellects in different lines — Laplace, Lagrange, Napoleon — but also how they let their eulogies apply accurately to the principal point of a man's merits or talents. Then

it needs but one word to stamp him for ever; that word is fixed and engraved. I know that lower down, when one belongs to the mere majority of mankind, there is less need to count one's words or to be cautious in admiration; but even so one should know how to direct one's praises, and not let them go up like a rocket. Let us leave it to others to excite themselves with exaggerated imaginations which go to the head, and are near akin to a gentle intoxication. I know no more divine pleasure than a clear, distinct, and felt admiration.

In the case of an author I am not going to praise the art where the chief features are force and grandeur. If I praise the art in the *Provinciales* I shall, in the same Pascal, praise only the force and moral energy of the *Pensées;* I shall bow down before the grand, mighty, sublime language of Bossuet, certainly the most impetuous, the most copious, which has burst forth in the French tongue; but if it is a question of elegance and grace I shall keep the palm for Fénelon. When I come to speak of Boileau I shall only moderately praise the poetry or the thought of his satires, the thought even of his epistles. Still we shall very clearly see his rare merit as a poet in some epistles and in the *Lutrin.* But above all I shall display him to you as full of sense, of judgement, of honesty, of sound and piercing words spoken to the purpose, often with courage—a character armed with reason, and clad with honour, and for this reason, as much as for his talent, deserving all the authority which he exercised even within two paces of Louis XIV.

It may sometimes happen that in this number of

successive appreciations and judgements into which I shall put my best care our measures may differ a little, that there may be some cases in which you will find me less keen than you reckoned, and where you will admire more than I do certain qualities of our writers. I shall be happy in this as in other things to be outstripped by you. We shall have to make certain reciprocal concessions to each other. I have often remarked that when two good intellects pass totally different judgements on the same author we may safely wager that it is because they are not, in fact, fixing their thoughts, for the moment, on the same object, on the same works of the author in question, on the same passages of his works; that it is because they have not the whole of him before their eyes, that they are not, for the moment, taking him in entirely. A closer attention, a wider knowledge, will bring together differing judgements and restore them to harmony. But even in the regular graduated circle of lawful admiration a certain latitude must be allowed to the diversity of tastes, minds, and ages.

But I am forgetting. We shall have plenty of opportunities of together applying and verifying, in assiduous practice, the various observations which I am here laying before you, without overmuch order and method; the *Ars poetica* of our master, Horace, having long ago given us authority for this fashion of free discursiveness upon matters of taste. Be sure that if on this first occasion I have brought under your notice so many recommendations, so many critical remarks, if I have appeared to be giving you many pieces of advice which others have already given you much better, it has not

been without addressing much of it to myself first. You will do me a service, gentlemen, in the first place, by recalling them to me; and still further—and this is a salutary kindness which I expect of you—by daily offering me, from your knots of thoughtful and eager young men, the best and most living answer to what is too often the final word, the last barren result, of a life spent in isolation and too self-centred thought.

As time goes on you will make me believe that I can, for my part, be of some good to you, and with the generosity of your age you will repay me, in this feeling alone, far more than I shall be able to give you in intellectual direction, or in literary insight. If in one sense I bestow on you some of my experience, you will requite me, and in a more profitable manner, by the sight of your ardour for what is noble; you will accustom me to turn oftener and more willingly towards the future in your company; you will teach me again to hope.

LETTERS OF LORD CHESTERFIELD TO HIS SON.

In every age there have been essays intended to mould the *polite man*, the *well-bred man*, the *courtier* (in the days when people lived only for courts), the accomplished gentleman. In all these essays on knowledge of the world and good manners, if we reopen them again at a later period, we find, at the first glance, some features which are as completely gone as the fashions of our fathers and the cut of their coats; evidently the pattern has changed. Yet, if we consider well, we shall still find some advantage in studying these models which have been set before a previous generation, if the book has been written by an intelligent man who has known the real human being. The letters which Lord Chesterfield addressed to his son, and which contain a whole school of tact and knowledge of the world, have this interesting peculiarity, that he has not thought at all about setting up a model but has only wished privately to form an excellent pupil. They are confidential letters which have suddenly been brought to light, and have betrayed all the secrets and ingenious artifices of paternal solicitude. If in reading them at the present day one is struck by the excessive

importance attached to accidental and temporary peculiarities, to mere details of costume, one is no less struck by the permanent part, by that which depends upon human observation for all time; and this latter part is far more considerable than might be supposed from a first superficial glance. When he was discussing with the son whom he wished to form, about what is suitable to the well-bred man in society, Lord Chesterfield did not compose an essay *On Duty* like Cicero, but he has left some letters which by their mixture of accuracy and flippancy, by certain frivolous turns which join on imperceptibly to the serious graces, maintain tolerably well a man between the *Memoirs of Count Grammont* and *Télémaque*.

Before speaking of them in any fulness we must know a little of what Lord Chesterfield was. One of the most brilliant intellects of his time in England, and one of those who best know France, Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, was born in London, September 22, 1694, the same year as Voltaire. Sprung from an illustrious race he knew the worth of it, and wished to maintain its honour; yet it was difficult for him not to laugh at genealogical pretensions pressed too far. To guard himself once for all from this he had placed among the portraits of his ancestors two old faces of a man and a woman; under one was written '*Adam* Stanhope,' under the other '*Eve* Stanhope.' In this way, while he upheld honour, he made short work with fanciful pretensions.

His father did not concern himself at all with his education; he was put under the charge of his grandmother, Lady Halifax. He early felt the desire to excel

and be first in everything, that desire which, later on, he would have wished to arouse in his son's mind, and which, for good or for evil, is the secret of all greatness. As he had no advice given him in his first youth he made more than one mistake about the objects of his emulation, and acquired a false idea of honour. He confesses that, during a period of inexperience, he gave way to excess in wine and to other excesses to which he was not in truth naturally prone, but his vanity was flattered at hearing himself called a man of pleasure. Thus with regard to gambling, which he considered a necessary ingredient in the composition of a young man of quality, he plunged into it at first without ardour but afterwards could not draw back, and through it compromised his fortune for a long while. 'Take warning by my conduct,' he said to his son; 'choose your pleasures yourself, and do not allow them to be forced upon you.'

This desire to excel and be distinguished did not always go astray in that way, and he often made a right use of it; his earliest studies were the best. Sent to the University of Cambridge, he learnt everything that was taught there, civil law, philosophy; he followed the mathematical lectures of the blind scholar, Saunderson. He read Greek fluently, and gave an account of his progress in French to his former tutor, M. Jouneau, a French refugee pastor. Lord Chesterfield had learnt our language in his childhood from a Norman maid-servant who had been with him. The last time he came to Paris, in 1741, M. de Fontenelle, having noticed something of a Norman accent about his pronunciation, remarked on it to him, and asked him whether he had

not first learnt our language from a person from the Norman province; which indeed was the case.

After two years at the university he made his tour round the Continent, according to the custom of young lords in his country. He went to Holland, Italy, and France. He wrote from Paris to this same M. Jouneau, December 7, 1714:

'I shall not tell you my opinions about the French because I am often taken for one of them, and more than one Frenchman has paid me the greatest compliment which they think it possible to render anyone, namely: *Sir, you are just like ourselves.* I will only tell you that I am insolent, that I talk a great deal, very loud and with a lordly voice, that I sing and dance when I walk; and, in short, am madly extravagant in powder, feathers, white gloves, etc.'

We here perceive the mocking, satirical, and somewhat *insolent* spirit which makes its point in the first instance at our expense; later on he will do justice to our solid qualities.

He has described himself in the letters to his son the first day that he made his entrance into good society, as still quite covered with his Cambridge rust, shamefaced, awkward, silent, and at last, plucking up courage to say to a beautiful lady near whom he was, 'Madam, do you not think it is very hot to-day?' But Lord Chesterfield told his son that story so as not to discourage him, and to show him from what depths one can recover. He makes a display of his own personality to give him courage and the better to draw him to his own level. I should be very sorry to take him literally in this anecdote. If he was for a moment

confused in society it must have been a very short moment, and it was not apparent for long.

Queen Anne was just dead; Chesterfield hailed the accession of the House of Hanover, one of whose open champions he was to be. He had at first a seat in the House of Commons, and he began there on a good footing. Yet an apparently trivial circumstance kept him in check, it is said, and somewhat paralysed his eloquence. A member of the House, distinguished by no other superior talents, had that of imitating and mimicking to perfection the orators to whom he replied. Chesterfield feared ridicule, it was a weakness of his, and he kept silent on certain occasions more than he would have wished, for fear of giving an opening to the parodies of his colleague and opponent. He soon succeeded to his peerage, at the death of his father, and passed on to the House of Lords, whose setting was, perhaps, better suited to the grace, refinement, and suavity of his eloquence. Nevertheless he thought there was no comparison between the two scenes as to the importance of the debates and the political influence that could be acquired there.

'It is inconceivable,' he said later of Pitt, when that great orator consented to enter the Upper House under the title of Lord Chatham—'it is inconceivable that a man at the height of his power, at the very moment when his ambition had just obtained the most complete triumph, should have left the House which had procured him this power and which alone could ensure his retention of it, to retire into the hospital for incurables, the House of Lords.'

I have not here to estimate Lord Chesterfield's political career. Yet, if I ventured to hazard a general

opinion, I should say that his ambition was never completely satisfied in it, and that the brilliant distinctions with which his public life was filled concealed at bottom many disappointed wishes and the fall of many hopes. Twice he failed at the two critical points of his political life.

When young and in the first ardour of his ambition, he had early thrown all his weight on the side of the heir-apparent to the crown, who became George II.; he was one of those who, on the accession of this prince (1727), could most count on his favour and a share of power. But clever as he was, while wishing to turn towards the rising sun, he could not take his bearings with perfect exactness; he had freely paid court to the prince's mistress, thinking her influence certain, and he had neglected the lawful wife, the future queen, who yet alone had the real power. Queen Caroline never forgave him; it was the first check to Lord Chesterfield's political fortune, received at the age of thirty-three and in the full tide of his hopes. He was too hurried and took the wrong road. Robert Walpole, apparently less nimble and less active, had taken his measures and made his calculations better.

Thrown conspicuously among the opposition, especially after 1732, when he had to give up his offices at court, Lord Chesterfield worked with all his might for ten years to overthrow Walpole's ministry, which only fell in 1742. But even then power did not come to him, and he remained outside of the new combinations. And when two years later, in 1744, he had a place in the Government, first as Ambassador at The Hague and Viceroy of Ireland, then even as Secretary

of State and member of the Cabinet (1746-48), it was rather with a specious than an actual importance. In a word Lord Chesterfield, always a politician of consideration in his country, whether as one of the chiefs of the opposition or as a clever diplomatist, was never a governing minister nor even a very influential one.

In politics he certainly had that far-seeing eye and those glances into the future which go with width of mind, but doubtless he had far more of these qualities than of the persevering patience and practical everyday firmness which are so necessary to rulers. It would be true to say of him, as of La Rochefoucauld, that the special result of politics was to make an accomplished moralist out of an incomplete man of action.

In 1744, at the age of only fifty years, his political ambition seemed already partly exhausted; his health was sufficiently impaired for him to prefer looking for retirement. And, moreover, we now know the object of his secret ideal and his real ambition. Before his marriage he had had, about 1732, a natural son, to whom he was attached with extreme affection, by a French lady (Mme. du Bouchet), whom he had met in Holland. He wrote in all sincerity to this son: 'From the first day of your life the dearest object of my life has been to make you as perfect as the weakness of human nature will permit.' All his wishes, all his affection, all his worldly predilections, had turned towards the education of this son, and whether Viceroy of Ireland or Secretary of State in London, he found time to write him long detailed letters to guide him in the smallest undertakings, to perfect him in decorum and politeness.

The Chesterfield we specially like to study is then the man of intelligence and experience, who has only gone into affairs and tried all the parts of political and public life in order to know its slightest springs and give us the last word on the subject; the man who from his youth was the friend of Pope and Bolingbroke, to whom England owes the introduction of Montesquieu and Voltaire, the correspondent of Fontenelle and Mme. de Tencin, he whom the Academy of Inscriptions admitted among its members, who united the minds of the two nations, and who in more than one witty essay, but especially in his letters to his son, shows himself to us as a no less amiable than an accomplished moralist, one of the masters of life. It is the Rochefoucauld of England that we are studying.

Montesquieu, after the publication of the *Spirit of the Laws*, wrote to the Abbé de Guasco, who was then in England: 'Tell Lord Chesterfield that nothing flatters me so much as his approval, but that, as he is reading me for the third time, he will only be all the more competent to tell me what there is to correct and rectify in my work; his observation and criticism would teach me more than anything.' It was Chesterfield who, speaking one day to Montesquieu about the aptness of the French for revolutions, and their impatience of slow reforms, uttered this epigram, 'You French know how to make barricades, but you will never raise barriers.'

Lord Chesterfield certainly had a taste for Voltaire; he said with regard to the *Siècle de Louis XIV.*: 'Lord Bolingbroke taught me how to read history, Voltaire teaches me how to write it.' But at the same time,

with that practical common-sense which never forsakes the people on the other side of the channel, he felt and disapproved of Voltaire's imprudences. When already old and withdrawn completely from the world he wrote to a French lady:

'Your good authors are my principal resource, Voltaire especially charms me except for his impiety, with which he cannot help seasoning everything he writes, and which he would do better prudently to suppress, as, when all is said, we must not disturb the established order of things. Let everyone think as he pleases, or rather as he can, but let him not impart his ideas when they begin to be of such a nature as to be able to trouble the repose of society.'

What Chesterfield said here in 1768 he had already said more than twenty-five years previously in writing to the younger Crébillon, a curious confidant and correspondent in matters of morality. Voltaire was again in question on the subject of his tragedy of *Mahomet* and the plain speaking which it contains:

'What I cannot forgive him, and what is not excusable,' wrote Chesterfield to Crébillon, 'is all the trouble which he takes to propagate a doctrine as pernicious to civil society as it is contrary to the general religion of all nations. I very much doubt whether it is allowable for a man to write against the worship and faith of his country, even when he is honestly persuaded that it has errors, because of the trouble and disorder which he might cause there; but I am quite sure that he is in no kind of way allowed to attack the foundations of morality, and to break ties so necessary and too feeble already to uphold men in their duty.'

When Chesterfield spoke thus he was under no delusion as to Voltaire's great inconsistency. This inconsistency may be described in two words: it is that he, Voltaire, who was willing to look at mankind as mad-

men or children, and could never sufficiently laugh at them, should, at the same time, put loaded weapons into their hands without troubling himself as to how they might use them.

Lord Chesterfield himself, in the eyes of the Puritans of his country, has been accused, I must admit, of infringing morality in the letters addressed to his son. The severe Johnson who, by the way, was not impartial with regard to Chesterfield, and who thought he had reason to complain of him, said, when these letters were published, that 'they taught the morals of a courtesan and the manners of a dancing-master.' Such judgement is supremely unfair, and if Chesterfield, in the case in question, insists so much on grace of manner and agreeability at any price, it is because he has already provided for the more solid parts of education, and because his pupil is in no danger of erring on the side which makes man *respectable*, but rather on that which makes him *agreeable*. Though more than one passage in these letters might seem strange, as coming from a father to a son, the whole is animated by the true spirit of tenderness and wisdom. If Horace had had a son I imagine that he would not have spoken to him otherwise.

The letters begin with the A B C of education and instruction. Chesterfield teaches and condenses in French the first elements of mythology and history for his son. I do not regret that these first letters have been published; excellent advice is slipped into them from the first. Young Stanhope is not eight years old when his father prepares a little treatise on rhetoric adapted to his capacity, and tries to instil into him good language

and a distinguished manner of speaking. He specially recommends *attention* in all that he does, and he gives this word its full value. Attention alone, he says, can fix things in the memory, 'There is no surer sign in the world of a little weak mind than inattention; whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well, and nothing can be done well without attention.'

He repeats this maxim unceasingly, and he varies the application of it with the growth of his pupil as he gets more capable of understanding its whole extent. Pleasure or study, he wants everything that is done to be well done, to be done completely and at the right time, without allowing yourself to be distracted by another: 'When you read Horace pay attention to the justice of his thought, the elegance of his diction, and the beauty of his poetry, and do not be thinking of the *De Homine et Cive* of Puffendorf; and while you are reading Puffendorf do not think of Mme. de Saint-Germain, nor of Puffendorf when you are talking to Mme. de Saint-Germain.' But this free and strong disposal of the thought at the orders of the will only belongs to great, or very good, intellects.

M. Royer-Collard used to say 'that what was most wanting in our days was *respect* in the moral and *attention* in the intellectual order.' Lord Chesterfield with his lighter touch would have been capable of that saying. He had not been long in perceiving what was wanting to that child whom he wished to form and whom he had made the aim and business of his life: 'In the strict scrutiny which I have made into you, I have (thank God) hitherto not discovered any vice of the heart, or any peculiar weakness of the head; but I

have discovered laziness, inattention, and indifference, faults which are only pardonable to old men, who, in the decline of life, when health and spirits fail, have a claim to that sort of tranquillity. But a young man should be ambitious to shine and excel; like Cæsar, *Nil actum reputans dum quid superesset agendum!*' Now, it is just this sacred fire, this spark which makes Achilles, Alexander, or Cæsar, *being first in whatever you undertake*, this motto of great souls which is the motto of eminent men of every kind, that nature had, in the first instance, neglected to put into the honest but fundamentally mediocre soul of young Stanhope. 'You seem to want,' says his father, 'that *vivida vis animi* which spurs and excites most young men to please, to shine, to excel.' 'When I was of your age,' he says elsewhere, 'I should have been ashamed if any boy of that age had learned his book better or played at any play better than I did, and I would not have rested a moment till I had got before him.' All this little course of education by letters affords a kind of continuous dramatic interest; you can trace in it the efforts of a fine, distinguished, energetic nature such as Lord Chesterfield's was, grappling with a disposition naturally good but indolent, with a soft and not quickly responsive clay from which it will, at any price, extract an original, accomplished, admirable masterpiece, and out of which it only succeeds finally in making a kind of sufficiently praiseworthy copy. That which supports, I may almost say affects the reader in this struggle, where so much art is lavished and where the eternal advice returns perpetually the same under so many variations, is the true paternal affection which animates and

inspires the delicate and excellent master, now as patient as he is vivacious, stupendous in resources and skill, never discouraged, sowing elegances and graces untiringly on this ungrateful soil. Not that this son, who was the object of so much care and zeal, was in anything unworthy of his father. It has been said that no one could be more heavy, more sullen than he, and a harsh saying of Johnson's is quoted to this intent. These are caricatures which go beyond the truth. It seems, from fairer testimony, that Mr. Stanhope, without being a model of grace, had in reality all the appearance of a well-brought-up, polished, and decorous man. But do not we feel that it is this that was so hopeless? It would have been almost better to fail entirely and only to succeed in making an original in a contrary direction, whereas to have only managed with all this care and trouble to produce an insignificant and commonplace man of the world, one of those on whom the only judgement to be passed is to say there is nothing to say about them, was a reason for being really in despair and, if you were not a father, being sorry for your own work.

Lord Chesterfield had at first thought of France for *unstiffening* his son and giving him that suppleness which cannot be acquired later. One can see that he had thought of sending him there from childhood by some intimate letters to a lady at Paris who I think* was Mme. de Monconseil. He writes to this friend:

'I have a lad who is now thirteen years old. I will confess to you that he is not legitimate, but his mother is a person of good family,

* Since the publication of Lord Mahon's edition of the letters (London, 1847), which I had not seen when I wrote this, the surmise has become certainty.

who has been kinder to me than I deserved. As for the boy, I may not be impartial, but I find him lovable. He has a pretty face and much brightness, and is, I think, clever for his age. He speaks French perfectly, he knows a good deal of Latin and Greek, and he has ancient and modern history at his fingers' ends. He is now at school ; but as people here have no notion of forming the morals or manners of young persons, and these are, with few exceptions, clumsy and unpolished blockheads, such in short as you see when they come to Paris at the age of twenty or twenty-one, I do not wish my boy to stay here long enough to get warped in the wrong direction. Therefore, when he is fourteen, I propose to send him to Paris. As I have an unbounded love for the child, and am keen to make something good of him since I believe the stuff is there, my idea is to combine in his person what I have never so far found in one and the same person. I mean all that is best in the two nations.'

And he goes into detail about his plans and the means he intends to adopt: an English master every morning, a French tutor for the afternoon, with the help above all of good society and good company. The war which occurred between France and England deferred this plan of a Parisian education, and the young man only came out at Paris in 1751, at the age of nineteen, after having finished his tours in Switzerland, Germany and Italy.

Everything has been arranged by the most attentive of fathers for his success and welcome in this new scene. The young man lodges with M. de La Guérinière at the Academy; he pursues his studies in the morning and the rest of his time he is to devote to society. 'Pleasure is now the last branch of your education,' writes the indulgent father; 'it will soften and polish your manners; it will lead you to seek and at length to acquire the graces.' But he shows himself

exacting and uncompromising on this point. The *graces*, that is always what he comes back to, for without them every effort is in vain. 'If they do not come to you, ravish them,' he cries. He talks of them very calmly, as if it were not necessary to have them before you can know how to carry them off.

Three of his father's lady friends are specially entrusted to watch over and guide the young man at starting; they are nominally his *governesses*, Mme. de Monconseil, Lady Hervey, and Mme. Du Bocage. But these introducers seem only essential in the early days; afterwards the young man is to go, of his own accord, and to choose some fair guide on more intimate terms. Lord Chesterfield breaks the ice about this delicate matter of women: 'I will not address myself to you on this subject either in a religious, a moral, or a parental style. I will even lay aside my age, remember yours, and speak to you as one man of pleasure, if he had parts as well, would speak to another.' And he expresses his opinion accordingly, instigating the young man as much as he can towards *honourable arrangements* and refined pleasures, so as to turn him away from promiscuous and coarse habits. His principle is 'that an honourable arrangement well becomes a man of gallantry.' His entire morality in this matter may be summed up in this verse of Voltaire's:

'Il n'est jamais de mal en bonne compagnie.'

These are the places where the grave Johnson's modesty has hidden its face; ours is satisfied with smiling.

Seriousness and frivolity are intertwined every instant

in these letters. Marcel, the dancing-master, is often recommended, Montesquieu no less often. The Abbé de Guasco, a kind of *complaisant* of Montesquieu's, is a useful person to serve here and there to give introductions: 'Give the enclosed to the Abbé de Guasco, of whom you make good use, to go about with you, and see things. Between you and me, he has more knowledge than parts. *Mais un habile homme sçait tirer parti de tout;* and everybody is good for something. President Montesquieu is, in every sense, a most useful acquaintance. He has parts joined to great reading and knowledge of the world. *Puisez dans cette source tant que vous pourrez.*'

Of authors, those that Chesterfield recommends most at this time, and which most frequently are referred to in his counsels, are La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère. 'If you read in the morning some of La Rochefoucauld's maxims, consider them, examine them well, and compare them with the real characters you meet in the evening. Read La Bruyère in the morning and see in the evening whether his pictures are like.' But these excellent guides are themselves to have no further use than that of a geographical map. They would be useless and would even lead astray, just as a map might do if you expected it to give you a complete knowledge of towns and countries without personal observation and experience. It is better worth while to study one man than ten books. The world is a country which no man has ever known through descriptions; each of us has to traverse it in person if he would become initiated in it.

Here are a few maxims or observations which are worthy of the aforesaid masters of human ethics:

'The most material knowledge of all—I mean the knowledge of the world—is never to be acquired without great attention ; and I know many old people, who, though they have lived long in the world, are but children still as to their knowledge of it, from their levity and inattention.'

'Human nature is the same all over the world ; but its operations are so varied by education and habit, that one must see it in all its dresses in order to be intimately acquainted with it.'

'Almost all people are born with all the passions, to a certain degree ; but almost every man has a prevailing one, to which the others are subordinate. Search everyone for that ruling passion ; pry into the recesses of his heart, and observe the different workings of the same passion in different people. And when you have found out the prevailing passion of any man, remember never to trust him where that passion is concerned.'

'If you would particularly gain the affection and friendship of particular people, whether men or women, endeavour to find out their predominant excellency, if they have one, and their prevailing weakness, which everybody has ; and do justice to the one, and something more than justice to the other.'

'Women have, in general, but one object, which is their beauty ; upon which scarce any flattery is too gross for them to swallow.'*

'Women who are either indisputably beautiful or indisputably ugly are best flattered upon the score of their understandings.'

With regard to women again, if he sometimes seems very contemptuous, he makes them amends elsewhere, and especially does not allow his son to speak too much against them, whatever he may think himself :

'You seem to think, that from Eve downwards they have done a great deal of mischief. As for that lady, I give her up to you ; but since her time, history will inform you that men have done much more mischief in the world than women ; and to say the truth, I would not advise you to trust either more than is absolutely necessary. But this I will advise you to, which is, never to attack

* [So in the French. The edition of 1845 has 'follow.']

whole bodies of any kind. . . . Individuals forgive sometimes, but bodies and societies never do.'

In general, Chesterfield recommends circumspection to his son, and a kind of prudent neutrality, even with regard to the cheats and fools with which the world swarms: 'Next to their friendship, nothing is more dangerous than to have them for enemies.' It is not the morality of Cato or of Zeno, it is that of Alcibiades, Aristippus, or Atticus.

About religion, he says in reply to a few trenchant opinions which his son had expressed: 'Every man's reason is, and must be, his guide; and I may as well expect that every man should be of my size and complexion as that he should reason just as I do.' In all matters he recommends knowing and preferring the right and the good; but not setting up as the champion of it before and against all. Even in literature one must be able to tolerate other people's weaknesses. 'Let them enjoy in peace their errors of taste no less than those of religion.' How wide is the distance between wisdom such as this and the pungent trade of critic as we practise it!

Yet he does not recommend untruth; he is strict about that. This is his maxim: not to tell all, but never to tell lies. 'You may always observe,' he says, 'that the greatest fools are the greatest liars. For my own part, I judge of every man's truth by his degree of understanding.' One perceives that he easily mingles serious matters with agreeable ones. He is perpetually requiring from the wit something stable, yet free, sweetness of manner, with a foundation of energy.

Lord Chesterfield felt thoroughly the serious side of

France, and all that the eighteenth century contained, both fruitful and terrible. According to him, M. Duclos observes, and I think very justly, '*qu'il y a à présent en France une fermentation de la raison universelle qui tend à se développer.*' It is a safe prediction, he adds, that before the end of the century, the trades of king and priest will have lost more than half their value. The Revolution is clearly foretold by him as early as 1750.

First of all, he warns his son against the idea that Frenchmen are purely frivolous: 'The colder northern nations generally look upon France as a whistling, singing, dancing, frivolous nation. This notion is very far from being a true one, though many *petits maîtres*, by their behaviour, seem to justify it; but those very *petits maîtres*, when mellowed by age and experience, very often turn out very able men.'

In his opinion the ideal would be to unite the good qualities of the two nations; but in this mixture he still seems to lean towards the side of France: 'I have often said, and do think, that a Frenchman, who, with a fund of virtue, learning and good sense, has the manners and good breeding of his country, is the perfection of human nature.' He himself unites pretty well the advantages of both nations, yet with one feature which is his purely from his stock. He has imagination in his very wit. Hamilton himself has this distinguishing feature, and carries it into his French wit. Bacon, the great moralist, is almost a poet in expression. We cannot say so much of Lord Chesterfield, and yet there is more imagination in the sallies and expressions of his wit than one meets with in St. Evremond, and most of

our clever moralists. In this matter he takes after his friend Montesquieu.

If, without being strict, one can notice some points of a slightly tainted morality in these letters to his son, we must indicate by way of compensation some very serious and entirely admirable passages, when he speaks of the Cardinal de Retz, of Mazarin, of Bolingbroke, Marlborough, and many others. It is a rich book. You cannot read one page of it without having to remember some happy observation.

Lord Chesterfield intended this beloved son for diplomacy, and at first he found some difficulties in the way of his views on account of reasons due to the illegitimacy of his birth. To cut these objections short, he made his son enter Parliament; it was the most certain means of vanquishing the scruples of the Court.

In his maiden speech Mr. Stanhope hesitated for a moment and had recourse to his notes. He did not a second time undergo the ordeal of a public speech. He seems to have succeeded better in diplomacy, in those secondary positions where solid merit is sufficient. He filled the post of Envoy-Extraordinary at the Court of Dresden. But his health, always delicate, had deteriorated before its time, and his father had the grief of seeing him die before him, scarcely thirty-six years of age (1768).

At this period Lord Chesterfield lived completely alienated from society by his infirmities, the most distressing of which to him was complete deafness. Montesquieu, whose sight was failing, had said to him in other days, '*I know how to be blind.*' But he owned

himself that he could not say so much; he did not know how to be deaf. He wrote more about it to his friends, even to those in France: 'The exchange of letters,' he observed, 'is the conversation of deaf people, and the only bond of their society.' He found his last consolations in his pretty country house at Blackheath, to which also he had given the French name of *Babiole*. There he employed himself in gardening and cultivating his melons and pineapples; he liked to vegetate *in their company*.

'I have vegetated here all this year,' he wrote to a lady friend in France (September, 1753), 'without pleasures and without troubles; my age and my deafness forbid me the former; my philosophy, or perhaps my temperament (for one is often mistaken about this), insure me the latter. I always make the most I can out of the quiet amusements of gardening, walking, and reading, and meanwhile *I await death* without either wishing for it or fearing it.'

He undertook no long works, which he felt would be too much for him, but he sometimes sent agreeable essays to a modern periodical publication, the *World*. These essays well maintain his reputation for delicacy and suavity. Yet nothing comes up to the work which was no work for him, to those letters which he reckoned no one would read, and which now are the basis of his literary wealth.

His somewhat premature old age dragged on a long time. His wit played in a hundred ways on this sad theme; speaking of himself and of one of his friends, Lord Tyrawley, who was equally old and infirm, he said: 'It is now two years since Tyrawley and I died, but we did not want anyone to know it.' Voltaire, who, while he claimed to be always dying, had kept

much younger, wrote him this pretty letter, October 24, 1771, signed '*The sick old man of Ferney*':

'. . . . Enjoy an honourable and happy old age, after having passed through the trials of life. Enjoy your mind and preserve the health of your body. Of the five senses which we share you have only one failing, and Lord Huntingdon assures me that you have a good digestion, which is well worth a pair of ears. Perhaps I am the man to decide which is the most melancholy—to be deaf or blind, or not to digest; I can judge between these three conditions with a knowledge of the facts; but it is a long time since I dared to decide between trifles, far less between such important matters. I confine myself to believing that if you have sunshine in the beautiful house you have built, you will have some tolerable moments; it is all one can hope at our age. Cicero wrote a beautiful treatise on old age, but he did not prove his book by facts; his last years were very unhappy. You have lived longer and more happily than he. You have had to do neither with perpetual dictators nor wild triumvirs. Your lot has been, and still is, one of the most desirable in that great lottery where good tickets are so rare, and where the great lot of continual happiness has never yet been won by anyone. Your philosophy has never been disturbed by chimæras which have sometimes made a mess of pretty good brains. *You have never been in any sense either a quack or the dupe of quacks*, and I count that as a very uncommon merit; it contributes to the flicker of felicity which one may taste in this short life.'

Lord Chesterfield died March 24, 1773. In drawing attention to his course of social education, we have not thought it inappropriate to take lessons in tact and politeness, even in a democracy, and to receive them from a man whose name is so closely bound up with those of Montesquieu and Voltaire; who more than any of his fellow countrymen in his time evinced a singular predilection for our nation; who relished, perhaps almost unreasonably, our amiable qualities;

who perceived our serious qualities, and of whom one might say, as sufficient praise, that his is a French intellect, if he had not transported into the very sparkle and vivacity of his wit that something imaginative and strongly marked which leaves him with the stamp of his race.

WILLIAM COWPER.

I.

THE life of this poet, original, yet at the same time grave and charming, is of the most singular kind; outwardly quite simple, it is within strewn with shoals and rocks. The way by which he came to compose such moral and fascinating works is very indirect, very far removed from the ordinary course, and not one which he would have recommended to anyone else. We have at the present time all the information we require about him. Southey, poet and critic, published in 1835 an ample biography of Cowper at the beginning of an edition of his works; it is all being reprinted at the present time.* This edition of Cowper and biography by Southey, and further the edition prepared by the Rev. Mr. Grimshawe (1850) provide documents for a complete study. Or rather this study has already been made by Southey himself; but Cowper's Correspondence, which equals his poetic works in merit and thought, and which is even more natural and certainly more easy, affords matter for reading where everyone can choose his subject for reflection and his points of agreement. It is astonishing that no one has thought of translating

* [London: H. G. Bohn, 1854; in 8 vols.]

it, of extracting from it materials to form two volumes in French, which would be something quite new and afford innocent entertainment of the best kind.

William Cowper was born November 26, 1731, from a highly respectable family which had even produced illustrious members. His father was in orders, and rector of Berkhamstead when William entered the world there. His mother, Anne Donne, a lady of good family, died young in 1737, leaving two sons. William was then only six years old, but he preserved a vivid and deep memory of the first years of his childhood and of his mother's tenderness, all the more graven on his heart by the totally different rule to which he was subjected from the day of her death; he consecrated this memory more than fifty years later in some verses composed by him on receiving the portrait of his mother from a cousin (1790). As we read them, we find not only the affectionate emotion which would be in the heart of many sons at the contemplation of that which recalls happy years to them, but we also recognise there the specially pathetic, tenderly sensitive and sorrowful part of that nature of Cowper's, which required beyond everything the warmth and shelter of the domestic nest :—

'O that those lips had language ! Life has passed
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
Those lips are thine, thy own sweet smile I see,
The same that oft in childhood solaced me ;
Voice only fails, else how distinct they say,
" Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away !"
The meek intelligence of those dear eyes
(Blest be the art that can immortalize,
The art that baffles Time's tyrannic claim
To quench it !) here shines on me still the same.

Faithful remembrancer of one so dear,
O welcome guest, though unexpected here!
Who bidst me honour with an artless song,
Affectionate, a mother lost so long,
I will obey, not willingly alone,
But gladly, as the precept were her own;
And, while that face renews my filial grief,
Fancy shall weave a charm for my relief,
Shall steep me in Elysian reverie,
A momentary dream that thou art she.
My mother! when I learned that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?
Hovered thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun?
Perhaps thou gavest me, though unfelt, a kiss;
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss;
Ah, that maternal smile, it answers yes!
I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nursery window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu!
But was it such? It was. Where thou art gone
Adieus and farewells are a sound unknown.
May I but meet thee on that peaceful shore,
The parting word shall pass my lips no more!
Thy maidens, grieved themselves at my concern,
Oft gave me promise of thy quick return.
What ardently I wished I long believed,
And disappointed still, was still deceived;
By expectation every day beguiled,
Dupe of to-morrow even from a child.
Thus many a sad to-morrow came and went,
Till, all my stock of infant sorrows spent,
I learned at last submission to my lot,
But, though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot.
Where once we dwelt our name is heard no more,
Children not thine have trod my nursery floor;
And where the gardener Robin, day by day,
Drew me to school along the public way,

Delighted with my bauble coach, and wrapt
In scarlet mantle warm, and velvet capped,
'Tis now become a history little known,
That once we called the pastoral house our own.
Short-lived possession ! But the record fair,
That memory keeps of all thy kindness there,
Still outlives many a storm that has effaced
A thousand other themes less deeply traced.
Thy nightly visits to my chamber made
That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid ;
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
The biscuit, or confectionery plum ;
The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestowed
By thine own hand, till fresh they shone and glowed ;
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall,
Ne'er roughened by those cataracts and breaks,
That humour interposed too often makes ;
All this still legible in memory's page,
And still to be so to my latest age,
Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay
Such honours to thee as my numbers may ;
Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
Not scorned in heaven, though little noticed here.
Could Time, his flight reversed, restore the hours,
When, playing with thy vesture's tissued flowers,
The violet, the pink, and jessamine,
I pricked them into paper with a pin,
(And thou wast happier than myself the while,
Wouldst softly speak, and stroke my head, and smile,)
Could those few pleasant days again appear,
Might one wish bring them, would I wish them here ?
I would not trust my heart ; the dear delight
Seems so to be desired, perhaps I might.
But no ; what here we call our life is such,
So little to be loved, and thou so much,
That I should ill requite thee to constrain
Thy unbound spirit into bonds again.'

The death of his mother delivered the young child into the hands of strangers; his father, a worthy man, did not pay the attention he ought to have done to his delicate and timid boy. At a boarding-school, where Cowper was sent, he was the victim of the tyranny of one of his companions, older than himself, who seeing him so timid and sensitive, made him the object of his cruelty. A malady of the eyes interrupted his studies for a time; then he was put to Westminster School, where some distinguished fellow scholars, who became well known later, were his friends; he stayed there till he was eighteen years of age. As he subsequently expressed himself at every opportunity against the evils of a public school education, especially as it then was, people have tried to explain this opinion, which otherwise agrees well with his whole manner of feeling and fearing, by the circumstances of his early years. Yet to see him as he was at first, and as he must have been before the mishaps which darkened his thoughts, he must have had many hours of gaiety, joy, and the most delightful intercourse; he excelled in the games proper to his age, and especially cricket and football. When he left Westminster, he read with a lawyer, and spent three years with him; he says he never seriously did any work there, and lost all that time in laughing and playing practical jokes from morning till night with his fellow-student—the future Lord Chancellor Thurlow. The latter, with all his nonsense, failed not doubtless to prepare himself for the career of actual work where his talents soon found useful and illustrious employment. Cowper greatly reproached himself for the loss of these decisive years, which he

compared, in the language of agriculture, to seed-time; it is only with this cost that later on the sheaves are obtained: 'The colour of our whole life,' he thought, 'is generally such as the three or four first years in which we are our own masters make it. Then it is that we may be said to shape our own destiny, to treasure up for ourselves a series of future successes or disappointments.' When he left Mr. Chapman's chambers (that was the lawyer's name) he took rooms in the Temple, and while living there alone, he felt the first touches of the illness which in one form or another returned with cruel persistency at the different periods of his life. It was a condition of dejection, despair and terror, which left him a prey to the most sinister thoughts and to lugubrious imaginations. All pleasant studies became impossible to him, and his favourite subjects for reading brought him no relief. The religious idea then awoke in his soul; he approached God by prayer. Finding himself at Southampton, where the doctors had sent him for change of air and distraction, there was an hour, a moment when, walking in the neighbourhood with some friends one splendid morning, and having sat down on an eminence which commanded a view of the sea and the wooded shores of the coast, he suddenly felt as if a new sun had risen in the sky and lighted up his horizon: 'I felt the weight of all my misery taken off; my heart became light and joyful in a moment; I could have wept with transport had I been alone.' We may often notice in the case of conversions which have taken long to reach their final accomplishment, these precursory signs and first attempts, these first *sun-strokes* so to speak, of Grace. Cowper, then twenty-two

years old, took no account of what he judged later to have been a call and a warning; he soon attributed the improvement in his condition to the simple change of air and amusements of the place, and he returned to London to resume his life, which, though not licentious, was devoted to gay dissipation and varied frivolities.

He became a briefless barrister, and was very intimate with some of the men of letters of his age, and belonged to a club with them; he wrote verses and satirical moral essays which appeared in the papers and reviews of the day. These early productions of Cowper's have been collected carefully; even then we find them distinguished by a note of shrewdness, by sarcastic observation and the tendency to moralize which he was to develop later, but as yet there was no personal stamp, no originality.

Passion does not seem to have disturbed him much; he loved one of his first cousins, who returned his affection, but the young girl's father opposed the marriage, and Cowper does not seem to have suffered much. He continued to live this life without system and without apparent excess, an amateur literary man, agreeable to his own associates, fond of a joke, with a sharp and lively wit, seeming to have taken for his motto the poet's words: *Dilecto volo lascivire sodali*, in a word the most amiable of companions, when the great event happened which snatched him from society, plunged him into inexpressible woe, and gradually brought him through grievous trials to a state of renewed youth, and of maturity from which the productions of genius issued.

He had lost his father some years previously, and

was gradually dissipating his patrimony, when feeling the need of what is called a position, he had recourse to a friend, a relation with influence, who got him a nomination as clerk in the House of Lords. There were at the same time two of these clerkships vacant, one of which necessitated appearing and reading in public more than the other. After much perplexity, Cowper decided for the place of clerk of the journals, the less lucrative, but the one which he thought would not require him to appear in person. Anyhow, an opposition having sprung up in the House about his nomination, he saw that he should have to appear at the bar and undergo a kind of examination as to his fitness and capabilities. The very idea of it was enough to upset his whole machinery; he tried in vain to make an effort to prepare himself and get into the right frame of mind; he had undertaken something beyond his strength: 'They,' he said, 'whose spirits are formed like mine, to whom a public exhibition of themselves on any occasion is mortal poison, may have some idea of the horrors of my situation; others can have none.' Months were spent in this painful struggle and suspense, which he compared to that of a condemned man who sees the day of his execution drawing near. In this interval he tried various forms of suicide, and on the very morning when they came to fetch him to conduct him to his examination at Westminster, they found he had attempted the desperate act of strangling himself: he had to be carried off to an asylum. He was then thirty-two years old.

He had to go through many crises and moral trials before he arrived at a kind of cure, during more than

eighteen months' sojourn in this asylum of Dr. Cotton's at St. Albans (December, 1763—June, 1765). His faculties had returned with sufficient completeness by the end of the eighth month, after a visit which he received from his brother, the Rev. John Cowper, a learned and moderate churchman who had come from Cambridge to see him in July, 1764. Yet he was continually under an impression of terror and fright: this overwhelming impression only ceased suddenly one day when, reading the Scriptures, his eye rested on a verse of the third chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. He felt such consolation from it, and the insight of his faith became so full and luminous, that the doctor feared lest this abrupt transition from despair to joy should bring a fresh crisis in its turn. Cowper says admirably in one of his best poems:

> 'Man is a harp whose chords elude the sight,
> Each yielding harmony disposed aright;
> The screws reversed (a task which if He please
> God in a moment executes with ease),
> Ten thousand thousand strings at once go loose,
> Lost, till He tune them, all their power and use.'

Convalescence being maintained, Cowper resolved to change the whole tenor of his life, and giving up London—which he called the scene of his *abominations*, though it was rather that of his frivolities—for ever, he commissioned his brother to find him a country retreat in some little town not far from Cambridge. His brother took a lodging for him at Huntingdon, and Cowper went there in the month of June, 1765, with one servant who accompanied him. He lived there for several months almost alone, avoiding visits, eluding

neighbourly advances, and only wishing to hold intercourse, as he said, with his God in Jesus Christ. Poor wounded bird, he was trying to cower there, to repair himself little by little, to be healed of his wound in silence, and to calm his too protracted, too piercing terrors. So solitary a life would doubtless before long have produced a relapse into melancholy, if he had not had the idea, which he thought an inspiration from on high, of drawing nearer to a family whose acquaintance he had made a few months before. One morning, on coming out of church, young Unwin, the son of a clergyman in the place, an amiable young man of twenty-one, had approached Cowper, who was walking alone in a melancholy manner under a row of trees; he made some advances to him and invited himself to tea with him in the afternoon. As Cowper talked with this young man he recognised with inexpressible joy a soul nourished with the most lively conceptions of Christianity, as he himself imagined it; he was soon introduced into the family, and from that time a friendship began which decided the poet's whole life, and one may say all his faculties and talents.

The Unwin family consisted of the father, of Mrs. Unwin, who was seven years older than Cowper and became a kind of mother to him, of the son just mentioned, and of a daughter.

'The most agreeable people imaginable; quite sociable, and as free from the ceremonious civility of country gentlefolks as any I ever met with. They treat me more like a near relation than a stranger, and their house is always open to me. The old gentleman carries me to Cambridge in his chaise. He is a man of learning and good sense, and as simple as Parson Adams. His wife has a very uncommon understanding, has read much to excellent

purpose, and is more polite than a duchess. The son, who belongs to Cambridge, is a most amiable young man, and the daughter quite of a piece with the rest of the family. They see but little company, which suits me exactly : go when I will, I find a house full of peace and cordiality in all its parts, and I am sure to hear no scandal, but instead of it such discourse as we are all better for.'

Shy and easily frightened as he was, he had always prayed Heaven when he came away from St. Albans, that Providence might be pleased to procure for him this kind of support and assistance, a mother in short : ' How happy it is,' he cried, ' to believe with a steadfast assurance that our petitions are heard, even while we are making them !' and this intercourse seemed to him like the accomplishment and final touch which the Almighty would give to his spiritual cure and conversion. The intimacy growing soon more close, and the inward need more pressing, Cowper went to live with the Unwins, and from the first day was rather a permanent member of the family than a lodger. In a letter to a female relation he has described the way his days were arranged in the early times of this intercourse, and how life was spent there almost as if in a convent : breakfast between eight and nine ; from then till eleven reading of the Bible or of a sermon ; at eleven o'clock divine service, which took place twice every day. From twelve to three everybody went his own way, and had leisure for his own tastes and amusements ; he employed this interval either in reading in his room, or walking, or even riding or working in the garden. After dinner, which occurred at three o'clock, they went out in the garden if the weather permitted, and there he conversed on serious and Christian subjects with Mrs. Unwin and her son till tea-time. If it

rained or was too windy to go out, the conversation took place indoors, or else they sang a few hymns which Mrs. Unwin accompanied on the piano, and of each it was the heart that did its part the best in this little concert of souls. After tea they went out in earnest for a good walk. Mrs. Unwin was an excellent walker, and Cowper and she generally did four miles before coming home. In the short days the walk took place between noon and dinner. As to the evening, it was spent before and after supper as the morning had begun, with serious conversations and reading aloud, and it was concluded by a prayer in common. This half-monastic life went with inward joy and true cheerfulness; it was certainly the most in accordance with what was then needed to restore tone to Cowper's sensitive mind and so recently shaken senses.

A misfortune came across their path at the beginning of the second year. Mr. Unwin, the head of the family, was thrown from his horse and died. His widow was induced to change her abode; she decided on the pretty village of Olney, where the presence of Mr. Newton, a man revered by a select flock, attracted her. Cowper, whose fate could henceforth not be separated from Mrs. Unwin's, went accordingly to live with her at Olney in the autumn of 1767. It has been asked whether he had at no time any idea of marrying Mrs. Unwin now she was a widow; it seems that such an idea never presented itself to the heart or mind of either one or the other: he was for her only an elder son, and a sick man, all whose painful delicacy she understood, and to whose service and care she entirely devoted herself, now that she had become more

lonely; she was for him only the most tender and intelligent of mothers.

Cowper's malady still continued to take a religious form, and he often felt terrors which his friends did all they could to combat and cure, but which nevertheless their rigid doctrine of Predestination and Grace was too prone to foster. 'He is always formidable to me,' he said of God, 'save when I see Him disarmed of His sting, having sheathed it in the body of Christ Jesus.' These images of judgement and condemnation pursued him, therefore, and still controlled his thoughts, even when he thought he had conquered them. During the first years of this sojourn at Olney, Mr. Newton tried to occupy Cowper's imagination and to turn it into a still religious yet poetic vein by setting him to write some hymns for the little local community, in collaboration with him. These hymns, which were only completed and published in 1779, and without any mark except an initial to distinguish Cowper's own compositions in the collection, began to occupy his leisure as early as 1751. Here is one of the best known, in which it will be seen that he tries to combat and beat back his own terror, to reassure himself against his habitual fears:

'God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

* * * * *

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace ;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour ;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain :
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.'

A thought which naturally occurs in studying this religious malady of Cowper, is that it would have been good for him if he could have seen clearly and given himself some reassuring resting-place, between a God so powerful and so mysterious even in His mercy and His prostrate creature, either by means of a visible Church with authority and power, or by friendly intercessors such as the Virgin and saints are for pious souls; but, embarked as he was alone on that unfathomable ocean of tempests and Divine decrees, he was bewildered, in spite of himself, and adore as he might the tree of salvation, he could not believe, trembling and timid pilot that he was, that he was not doomed to an inevitable shipwreck.

The cure, which seemed progressing so favourably when he came to Olney, suddenly retrograded, and a fresh trouble shook his quick and incisive intellect to its foundations. The year 1773 was almost as fatal for Cowper as 1763 had been. Mrs. Unwin watched over him, drew him out of himself as much as she could, and surrounded his long and gradual convalescence, which

was the work of many seasons, with angelic attentions. In 1774 he was better, but incapable of any reading and of any of the distractions of society, and yet it was absolutely necessary he should have something to occupy him, but without straining his attention. It was then that he thought of taming young hares, while he spent a great part of the day in the garden.

'I undertook the care of three, which it is necessary that I should here distinguish by the names I gave them : Puss, Tiney, and Bess. Notwithstanding the two feminine appellations, I must inform you that they were all males. Immediately commencing carpenter, I built them houses to sleep in. . . . In the daytime they had the range of a hall, and at night retired each to his own bed, never intruding into that of another.

'Puss grew presently familiar, would leap into my lap, raise himself upon his hinder feet, and bite the hair from my temples. He would suffer me to take him up, and to carry him about in my arms, and has more than once fallen fast asleep upon my knee. He was ill three days, during which time I nursed him, kept him apart from his fellows that they might not molest him (for, like many other wild animals, they persecute one of their own species that is sick), and by constant care, and trying him with a variety of herbs, restored him to perfect health. No creature could be more grateful than my patient after his recovery, a sentiment which he most significantly expressed by licking my hand, first the back of it, then the palm, then every finger separately, then between all the fingers, as if anxious to leave no part of it unsaluted—a ceremony which he never performed but once again upon a similar occasion.

'Finding him extremely tractable, I made it my custom to carry him always after breakfast into the garden, where he hid himself generally under the leaves of a cucumber vine, sleeping or chewing the cud till evening ; in the leaves also of that vine he found a favourite repast. I had not long habituated him to this taste of liberty before he began to be impatient for the return of the time when he might enjoy it. He would invite me to the garden by

drumming upon my knee, and by a look of such expression as it was not possible to misinterpret. If this rhetoric did not immediately succeed, he would take the skirt of my coat between his teeth, and pull it with all his force. Thus Puss might be said to be perfectly tamed, the shyness of his nature was done away, and on the whole it was visible by many symptoms, which I have not room to enumerate, that he was happier in human society than when shut up with his natural companions.

'Not so Tiney; upon him the kindest treatment had not the least effect. He too was sick, and in his sickness had an equal share of my attention; but if, after his recovery, I took the liberty to stroke him, he would grunt, strike with his forefeet, spring forward and bite. He was, however, very entertaining in his way; even his surliness was matter of mirth, and in his play he preserved such an air of gravity, and performed his feats with such a solemnity of manner, that in him too I had an agreeable companion.

'Bess, who died soon after he was full-grown, and whose death was occasioned by his being turned into his box, which had been washed, while it was yet damp, was a hare of great humour and drollery. Puss was tamed by gentle usage; Tiney was not to be tamed at all; and Bess had a courage and confidence that made him tame from the beginning. I always admitted them into the parlour after supper, when, the carpet affording their feet a firm hold, they would frisk, and bound, and play a thousand gambols, in which Bess, being remarkably strong and fearless, was always superior to the rest, and proved himself the Vestris of the party.'

Of the three hares Puss is the one which Cowper has taken most pains to immortalize. He kept him for nearly twelve years, and celebrated him in one of the books of the *Task*, congratulating himself on having completely gained the creature's confidence and destroyed all fear in him.

> 'If I survive thee I will dig thy grave,
> And when I place thee in it, sighing say,
> I knew at least one hare that had a friend.'

In his papers a memorandum was found with the date and circumstances of the death of poor Puss.

He remarks in another place that

'It is no wonder that my intimate acquaintance with these specimens of the kind has taught me to hold the sportsman's amusement in abhorrence; he little knows what amiable creatures he persecutes, of what gratitude they are capable, how cheerful they are in their spirits, what enjoyment they have of life, and that, impressed as they seem with a peculiar dread of man, it is only because man gives them peculiar cause for it.'

Timid himself, and subject to fear, Cowper felt a natural attraction between these animals and himself; he applied the merciful and humane axiom of the poet to them—*non ignara mali*—and he would willingly also have said with the Eastern poet: 'Hurt not the ant who drags a grain of corn, for she has a life, and this sweet life is dear to her.'

During the six following years (1774-1780) Cowper's mind and his distracted faculties are collected and repaired little by little, till he imperceptibly succeeds to the possession of them in their full force and grace, and in finding for the first time (singular phenomenon!) all his poetic flower and fruit united with unhoped-for illumination, at the age of fifty.

The power of reading and the faculty of composition only came back to him little by little; manual occupations prevailed for a long time with him. Cowper says, 'Rousseau would have been charmed to have seen me so occupied, and would have exclaimed with rapture that he had found the Emile whom he had supposed to subsist only in his own idea.' The chisel and saw were his principal tools, and he made 'tables such as

they were, and joint-stools such as never were.' When talking gaily, later on, about the various occupations he invented at this time when he must at any cost escape from the inconvenience and dangers of doing nothing, he says:

'Many arts I have exercised with this view, for which Nature never designed me; though among them were some in which I arrived at considerable proficiency, by mere dint of the most heroic perseverance. There is not a squire in all this country who can boast of having made better squirrel-houses, hutches for rabbits, or bird-cages, than myself, and in the article of cabbage-nets I had no superior. I even had the hardiness to take in hand the pencil, and studied a whole year the art of drawing. Many figures were the fruit of my labours, which had, at least, the merit of being unparalleled by any production either of art or nature. But before the year was ended, I had occasion to wonder at the progress that may be made, in despite of natural deficiency, by dint alone of practice; for I actually produced three landscapes, which a lady thought worthy to be framed and glazed. I then judged it high time to exchange this occupation for another, lest, by any subsequent productions of inferior merit, I should forfeit the honour I had so fortunately acquired. But gardening was, of all employments, that in which I succeeded best; though even in this I did not attain perfection. I began with lettuces and cauliflowers; from them I proceeded to cucumbers; next to melons. I then purchased an orange-tree, to which, in due time, I added two or three myrtles. These served me day and night with employment during a whole severe winter. To defend them from the frost, in a situation that exposed them to its severity, cost me much ingenuity and much attendance. I contrived to give them a fire heat; and have waded night after night through the snow, with the bellows under my arm, just before going to bed, to give the latest possible puff to the embers, lest the frost should seize them before morning. Very minute beginnings have sometimes important consequences. From nursing two or three evergreens I became ambitious of a greenhouse and accordingly built one; which, verse excepted, afforded

me amusement for a longer time than any expedient of all the many to which I have fled for refuge from the misery of having nothing to do.'

Poetry began to have a share in him; he fell back upon it from time to time, but only when he had something special and more intense to express, which would have seemed exaggerated in prose; verses then seemed to him 'a suitable vehicle for the most vehement expressions my thoughts suggest to me.' He only set himself short subjects which referred to current events, sometimes to politics (for it was the time of the American war, and Cowper in many respects was an Englishman of the old type), but generally his verses were about the occurrences in his garden. He wrote Latin verses that showed a good deal of study, and generally little moral fables in English. Here is one for instance:

THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE GLOW-WORM.

'A Nightingale that all day long
Had cheered the village with his song,
Nor yet at eve his note suspended,
Nor yet when eventide was ended,
Began to feel, as well he might,
The keen demands of appetite;
When looking eagerly around,
He spied, far off upon the ground,
A something shining in the dark,
And knew the glow-worm by his spark;
So stooping down from hawthorn top,
He thought to put him in his crop;
The worm, aware of his intent,
Harangued him thus right eloquent:
"Did you admire my lamp," quoth he,
"As much as I your minstrelsy,

You would abhor to do me wrong,
As much as I to spoil your song ;
For 'twas the self-same power divine
Taught you to sing, and me to shine,
That you with music, I with light,
Might beautify and cheer the night."
The songster heard his short oration,
And warbling out his approbation,
Released him, as my story tells,
And found a supper somewhere else.
Hence jarring sectaries may learn,
Their real interest to discern :
That brother should not war with brother,
And worry and devour each other,
But sing and shine by sweet content,
Till life's poor transient night is spent,
Respecting in each other's case
The gifts of nature and of grace.
Those Christians best deserve the name,
Who studiously make peace their aim ;
Peace, both the duty and the prize
Of him that creeps and him that flies.'

At first he wrote verses only by way of amusement, as he made cages, cultivated flowers, drew the landscape, but still always with energy; he had moods for each of his tastes, and when one held him the others had to give way for a time. He enjoyed nothing by halves; he says, 'I never received a *little* pleasure from anything in my life; if I am delighted it is in the extreme.' He began, too, to write pretty, elaborate letters to some of his friends—elegant letters, ingenious yet natural. His mind, aroused and in some respects amended by so long a rest, tormented him by fits, and he did not know what to do with it. His physique, however, was not strong enough to bear a long strain, and he compares

the network of the fibres of his brain to a spider's web: 'when a long thought finds its way into them, it buzzes and twangs and bustles about at such a rate as seems to threaten the whole contexture.' But genius was growing stronger and feeling her wings: 'Alas!' he cried, the day when he sent that fable of the *Nightingale and the Glow-worm* to a friend, 'what can I do with my wit? I have not enough to do great things with, and these little things are so fugitive that while a man catches at the subject, he is only filling his hand with smoke. I must do with it as I do with my linnet: I keep him for the most part in a cage, but now and then set open the door, that he may whisk about the room a little, and then shut him up again. My whisking wit has produced the following. . . .' And that was the fable which he sent. Everywhere in his letters, in his verses of this period (1780) the most delicious gaiety appears in the middle of the serious parts. You catch yourself saying, What a bright nature, full of fun, full of charm, inquiring and open to all impressions when it is not gloomy! The spring causes him a kind of gentle intoxication; there is something of the squirrel about him in the mirth with which it inspires him. But the great and serious sides are sure to reappear; for this lovable being has a side that has been smitten with the thunderbolt.

WILLIAM COWPER.

II.

When Cowper was feeling better and stronger in his mind, he had begun a Correspondence with a small number of friends, and he carried it on without interruption for several years; it is by this especially that we get to know him and to penetrate into the mysteries of his sensitive mind. He writes first to Mr. Unwin, that pleasant son of the house who had become a minister in another place; he writes to Mr. Newton, who in 1779 had left Olney to become rector of the parish of St. Mary Woolnoth in London. From time to time, too, he has little letters for Joseph Hill, the only one that he has kept of his earliest friends and the school companions of his youth, reminding him of the time when in their walks, 'lying at full stretch upon the ruins of an old wall by the seaside, you amused yourself with Tasso's *Jerusalem* and the *Pastor Fido*.' In the retired life which he leads he has little to relate; he talks of himself, of his reading, which was slight at first, of the little accidents which hardly vary this quiet home. There were some painful and deep-seated wounds which were never completely healed in him; he avoids touching them, and reveals himself rather on

the bright, clever, affectionate, and merry side. There is one of these letters where he begins by saying he has *nothing to say*, and with this protest goes on to say very pretty and very sensible things; he gives the whole theory of familiar correspondence between friends, how one should write without stopping, one word pursuing the other, and let the pen run on without always thinking about it, just as the tongue goes when you talk, and the feet when you walk.

In the midst of a thousand graces there are a few oddities in these letters. Cowper's taste is rather bold and original than trustworthy. He is a refined man, but a refined man who has had such exceptional and sharp experiences, that he will venture to any extent when it is a question of expressing vividly his manner of being and thinking. He has some astonishing images, strange similes which he keeps up and draws out with a somewhat attenuated or long-winded refinement. He rejects none of those that take his fancy: thus in a letter to Mr. Newton we shall find him comparing the state of his mind to a plank under the plane; the first thoughts that come to him, the upper thoughts, are the *shavings*, etc. In these places he may appear subtle and far-fetched; but more generally the unexpectedness of his illustrations only adds another charm to their exactness. He has some of those deep-piercing ironies which belong to sad and timid natures endowed with a finer organization, and which the uncouthness or clumsiness of other people shocks without their having an idea of it. Here is a little mocking letter, quite perfect in the way it is turned, worthy indeed of the younger Pliny:

To the Rev. John Newton.

'OLNEY, *April* 16, 1780.

'Since I wrote my last we have had a visit from ——. I did not feel myself vehemently disposed to receive him with that complacence from which a stranger generally infers that he is welcome. By his manner, which was rather bold than easy, I judged that there was no occasion for it, and that it was a trifle which, if he did not meet with, neither would he feel the want of. He has the air of a travelled man, but not of a travelled gentleman; is quite delivered from that reserve which is so common an ingredient in the English character, yet does not open himself gently and gradually, as men of polite behaviour do, but bursts upon you all at once. He talks very loud, and when our poor little robins hear a great noise, they are immediately seized with an ambition to surpass it; the increase of their vociferation occasioned an increase of his, and his in return acted as a stimulus upon theirs; neither side entertained a thought of giving up the contest, which became continually more interesting to our ears during the whole visit. The birds, however, survived it, and so did we. They perhaps flatter themselves they gained a complete victory, but I believe Mr. —— could have killed them both in another hour.'

By the side of this pretty note we can place another letter written some years later (March, 1784), in which Cowper narrates the visit, or rather the irruption one day after dinner into his peaceful dwelling at Olney, of a candidate for Parliament, at the very hour when the hare *Puss* was frolicking in the drawing-room, and when he himself was winding wool between Mrs. Unwin and another friend, who were both knitting or netting. Candidates in England used to pay their visits with much noise, accompanied by friends, and with a band of children, and the populace at their heels: the house therefore was simply invaded. This tumultuous entry, the candidate's solicitations, the assurance given to Cowper,

who denies it as best he can, that he has *influence*, a *great deal of influence*, the hope that he will use it in the man's favour, who thanks him whether or no; the handshakings and embraces of the whole house, including the servant —all this little picture makes a most spicy page, and one that is usually quoted* when Cowper's Correspondence is discussed. But the ordinary thread of his letters is smoother, and spun out with slender details touched in with delicacy, and which would lose by being detached; part of the charm is in the sequence itself, and in the effect of the whole thing. In the same breath with a joking letter telling Mr. Newton about the escape and flight of his favourite hare, which one evening during supper breaks the lattice-work, takes its flight through the town, and is only caught after a whole Odyssey of adventures, we shall read a very grave letter full of very lofty sentiments to a lady of rank, one of his cousins,† whom he had not seen for several years, who had been very beautiful, and to whom high and serious thoughts were familiar. What impression has Time produced on her in this long interval? has he marked her in the face with his claws, or has he spared her and marked her with his *velvet paw* as he likes to do sometimes? Cowper writes to her:

'But though an enemy to the person, he is a friend to the mind, and you have found him so. Though even in this respect his treatment of us depends upon what he meets with at our hands. . . . It is well with them who, like you, can stand on tiptoe on the mountain-top of human life, look down with pleasure upon the

* As for instance by Jeffrey, in his article on Hayley's *Life of Cowper*, in the *Edinburgh Review* for June, 1804.

† Lady Hesketh.

valley they have passed, and sometimes stretch their wings in joyful hope of a happy flight into eternity.'

The charm of Cowper's Correspondence is in this succession of images, thoughts and shades which unfold themselves with varied vivacity, but pursue a calm and even tenor. You apprehend the true sources of his poetry, of the true poetry of the home and of private life, best in his letters: the affectionate rallying, the familiarity which despises nothing of any interest as too humble and too little, side by side with loftiness, or rather with depth. Let us not forget either the irony, the mischievousness, the fine and gentle mockery which appear in the letters I have quoted.

I have already said that a time came when Cowper felt that making cages, greenhouses, or drawings was no longer sufficient for him; he betook himself again to poetry, and to a poetry which had its birth in his very life, and the circumstances which surrounded him. They were short pieces, generally fables, in which his robins and goldfinches played a part, and brought in their always humane and sensible, though puritan, moral. He worked at these amusements of his leisure with a special care, and he was only satisfied when he had brought them to perfection: 'To touch and retouch,' he says somewhere, 'is, though some writers boast of negligence, and others would be ashamed to show their foul copies, the secret of almost all good writing, especially in verse.'* 'Whatever is short,' he says again, 'should be nervous, masculine, and compact. Little men are so, and little poems should be

* [Letter to Mr. Unwin, July 2, 1780.]

so.' But evidently he was still in search of subjects, and the new and curious form of this dawning talent did not know where to apply itself with sustained vigour. Here we find one point in common (a single one it is true) between Cowper and La Fontaine: like the latter, Cowper's genius needs to be aroused, maintained by friendship; he must have a guide, someone to point him out his subjects, as some beauty, a Bouillon or a La Sablière, almost always bespoke verses of La Fontaine. Nearly everything that Cowper did thus had a determining motive in some wish or desire of people who were dear to him; if he took part in the Olney Hymns it was at Mr. Newton's request; if he wrote his first collection of poems it was Mrs. Unwin who encouraged him and urged him to it; if he wrote his masterpiece, the *Task*, it was, as the name indicates, because Lady Austen, a new friend, set it for him and desired it.

The winter of 1780-1781 marks the time when Cowper betook himself decidedly to work and 'commenced author.' The spring offered too many distractions to allow of much contemplation; he preferred enjoying it with the bee and the bird; but in the winter evenings with his intelligent and silent friend, in that sweet domestic comfort he has so well described, with the kettle singing close to him, and his cup full of the beverage which 'cheers but not inebriates,' he applied himself for the first time to the treatment of fairly long themes in verse, quite serious and almost theological at first, showing by their very titles the ground of his thoughts: *The Progress of Error, Truth, Hope*, etc. He inserted and cleverly mingled some gayer passages of

rather amusing satire with them which he tried to adapt to the taste of society. I have already quoted and analyzed the poem *Retirement*,* the best and finest of this first collection of Cowper's poetry, and I shall not speak of it here. These first flowers of poetry are still winter flowers; this is a little too perceptible in the moral and austere complexion which is spread all over them, but it will not be the case with his second collection, or with his chief and charming poem.

Cowper's first volume appeared towards the beginning of 1782. It had little commercial success, and was only appreciated by friends. Franklin, to whom a friend sent it at Passy, where he then was, says, that he found in it 'something so new in the manner, so easy and yet so correct in the language, so clear in the expression, yet so concise, and so just in the sentiment,' that he read the whole with great pleasure (rare praise for verses, especially from one who had left off reading them), and he even read several pieces more than once. Such a suffrage was well-adapted to console Cowper for not having more like it. He had wanted to be useful and to give pleasure at the same time, so as better to inculcate his morals and advice upon the world; he had only half succeeded; he told himself that one day perhaps he would succeed better. The newspapers and Reviews of the day had not all spoken well of him. That redoubtable king or tyrant of criticism, Samuel Johnson, then at the end of his career, kept silence, and Cowper congratulated himself on it. This poetry was too new to be quite understood at first, and there were

* [In the Causerie entitled *De la Poésie de la Nature*, which immediately preceded these on Cowper.]

as yet not enough fresh open glades or living pictures to single out and captivate in it. Yet among the testimony of the critics, to which he paid but moderate attention, and was not very sensitive, there was one which the poet had set his heart on gaining, that of the *Monthly Review*, the best known of the literary papers of the time. This, however, was long in giving an opinion. Cowper wrote to a friend (June 12, 1782):

'What will that critical Rhadamanthus say, when my shivering genius shall appear before him? Still he keeps me in hot water, and I must wait another month for his award. Alas! when I wish for a favourable sentence from that quarter (to confess a weakness that I should not confess at all), I feel myself not a little influenced by a tender regard to my reputation here, even among my neighbours at Olney. Here are watchmakers, who themselves are wits, and who at present perhaps think me one. Here is a carpenter and a baker, and, not to mention others, here is your idol, Mr. Teedon, whose smile is fame. All these read the *Monthly Review*, and all these will set me down for a dunce, if those terrible critics show them the example. But oh! wherever else I am accounted dull, dear Mr. Griffith, let me pass for a genius at Olney!'

Some seasons of joy and sunshine were at last going to shine for Cowper; a brilliant sunbeam was going to enter his life. It is no longer by the fireside in winter, but in summer, in his green arbour, in his framework of jessamine and honeysuckle so often described, in his greenhouse, where one sees him seated with myrtles for blinds, that he was in future to compose his verse—serious still, but fresh, animated and brightened by an unexpected light. A charming fairy had crossed his shadow, and let herself into his life for a moment. One day when he was at the window he saw a lady, known to him and Mrs. Unwin, enter a shop opposite

with a stranger who was no other than this lady's own sister, lately come to the neighbourhood. There was something so attractive and so charming about her at first sight, that Cowper, timid as he was, immediately wished to know her. She was Lady Austen, the widow of a baronet. Scarcely had she been admitted to this select household than she received as much pleasure as she gave; she brought in what had hitherto been wanting there, novelty and fancy. This remarkable person was endowed with the most happy gifts; she was neither very young nor in the flower of her beauty; she had what is better, a power of attraction and fascination which depended on the transparency of her soul, a faculty of gratitude and of sensibility to every mark of kindness of which she was the object, at times moving her even to tears. Everything in her was expressed by a pure, innocent, tender vivacity. She was a *sympathetic* creature, and she might quite well in the present instance justify that maxim of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: 'There is in woman a cheerful gaiety which dispels man's sadness.'*

But if Lady Austen momentarily eclipses Mrs. Unwin, she does not efface her or ever diminish her influence. Let us not misapprehend her sterling qualities; the friend of Cowper for sixteen years already at this time (1781), she had been always the same in her care and tenderness; she had sacrificed her health in watching over his gloomy and funereal hours; in happier hours she had given him most judicious advice and good aims for his work. She was the personifica-

* [A similar sentiment, it will be remembered, was expressed by Captain Macheath some years before Bernardin de Saint-Pierre was born.]

tion of sense and judgement. In literary matters her taste was sound and true: 'She is a critic by nature and not by rule,' said Cowper, 'and has a perception of what is good or bad in composition that I never knew deceive her; insomuch that when two sorts of expression have pleaded equally for the precedence in my own esteem, and I have referred, as in such cases I always did, the decision of the point to her, I never knew her at a loss for a just one.' The whole time that Cowper was with these two women (for soon Lady Austen became their near neighbour, and they spent the day together), he had all that he required for his talent as poet, namely impulse and criticism. Southey says very judiciously: 'Had it not been for Mrs. Unwin, he would probably never have appeared in his own person as an author; had it not been for Lady Austen he would never have been a popular one.'

Let us hasten to add (for we are not attempting to sketch a biography, and we only desire to make the man and the poet known by his principal features), that as soon as Cowper perceived that Lady Austen's presence might after a time annoy Mrs. Unwin, and that the charming fairy brought into their ordinary intercourse an element of too keen sensitiveness or maybe of touchiness which might trouble their unanimity, he did not hesitate for an instant, and with no solemn struggle, without affectation, by a plain, irrevocable letter, he sacrificed the agreeable and the charming to the necessary, and tender imagination to the unswerving friendship.

But before that there were hours that stood out among a thousand, when, stimulated into confidence, he

enjoyed an unexpected youth at this belated age in this gay company, and his talent and his heart both at length opened out. So let us not always imagine Cowper wrapped up in that odd sort of nightcap that his portraits invariably represent him with. He tells us himself that now when he was past fifty he looked rather less than his age; he had kept his bright young man's look; he had not grown so much gray as bald, but a wisp of hair (as it is called), a well-placed wisp, filled the void and curled a little at his ear; in the afternoon with his bag and black ribbon he might look quite the gallant. One day in summer when it had rained, the following little scene took place between the ladies and him in the garden (*Mary* is Mrs. Unwin; *Anna* is Lady Austen):

'THE ROSE.

'The rose had been wash'd, just wash'd in a shower,
Which Mary to Anna convey'd;
The plentiful moisture encumber'd the flower,
And weigh'd down its beautiful head.

The cup was all fill'd, and the leaves were all wet,
And it seem'd to a fanciful view,
To weep for the buds it had left with regret
On the flourishing branch where it grew.

I hastily seized it, unfit as it was
For a nosegay, so dripping and drown'd,
And swinging it rudely, too rudely, alas!
I snapp'd it; it fell to the ground.

And such, I exclaim'd, is the pitiless part
Some act by the delicate mind,
Regardless of wringing and breaking a heart
Already to sorrow resign'd.

This elegant rose, had I shaken it less,
Might have bloom'd with its owner awhile ;
And the tear that is wiped with a little address,
May be follow'd perhaps by a smile.'

This exquisite little piece tells everything, Cowper's joy and pure emotion between these two women, their transitory and fragile union, and the rose which is broken by accident before one of them has finished offering it to the other.

The charm of poetry had entire possession of Cowper during these years (1782-1784). The composition and publication of his first volume had only animated him and put him in the mood ; he felt that it was only by writing, and by writing verses, that he could entirely escape from his melancholy. In his letters from this time onward we find constant allusions to the respite from the anxieties of life which the labour of poetical composition could afford. He expresses the same feeling in the *Task:*

'There is a pleasure in poetic pains
Which only poets know. The shifts and turns,
The expedients and inventions multiform
To which the mind resorts, in chase of terms
Though apt, yet coy, and difficult to win,
To arrest the fleeting images that fill
The mirror of the mind, and hold them fast,
And force them sit, till he has pencil'd off
A faithful likeness of the forms he views,
Then to dispose his copies with such art,
That each may find its most propitious light,
And shine by situation, hardly less
Than by the labour and the skill it cost,
Are occupations of the poet's mind
So pleasing, and that steal away the thought

With such address, from themes of sad import,
That lost in his own musings, happy man!
He feels the anxieties of life, denied
Their wonted entertainment, all retire.'

At this time when, striking a new vein of composition, he really came into full possession of his talent, and when as he said in a word the offshoot had become a tree (*fit surculus arbor*), Cowper recalled, with the pride of an author aware of his originality, the fact that he had read no English poet for *thirteen* years, and only one at all for *twenty* years, and that for that reason he was safe from that inclination to imitate which his solid candid taste held in abhorrence more than anything. 'Imitation, even of the best models, is my aversion,' he said; 'it is servile and mechanical, a trick that has enabled many to usurp the name of author, who could not have written at all if they had not written upon the pattern of somebody indeed original.' It is in this way that, while he created a style of his own in accordance with his thoughts, and a form in accordance with the subject, this sensitive and delicate invalid, at once keen and clever, has been one of the fathers of the revival of English poetry.

He was to become popular at a time and in the way he dreamt of least. One afternoon that Lady Austen noticed he was sadder than usual, and ready to fall back into his gloomy moods, she conceived the idea of telling him a very funny and comical nurse's story which she knew from childhood, to cheer him up, *The Diverting History of John Gilpin, showing how he went farther than he intended, and came safe home again.* Cowper listened, laughed a great deal, thought about it

all night, and the next morning he had made his ballad or elegy (he had a particular gift for ballads), which set the little audience at the breakfast-table laughing till they cried. He sent this trifle to his friend Mrs. Unwin, who had it printed in a magazine; the author's name was not known at first, and nobody cared much about it. The piece slept two or three years. But the next thing was that Henderson, a celebrated actor and Garrick's successor, who was giving lectures in public before the best society, having come across a number of the magazine containing *John Gilpin*, thought good to give a comic recital of it at one of his lectures. From that time it became fashionable and was all the vogue; nobody talked of anything but John Gilpin for some time; it was reprinted separately and thousands of copies were sold; fancy caricatures illustrated his adventure; and by the irony of fate Cowper, the moralist and severe poet who had aimed at reforming the world, suddenly found himself in the fashion and in favour in drawing-rooms for a freak which, except for greater innocency and perfect decency, might just as well have been some pleasant drollery, so to say a *Cadet Buteux*, or a *Monsieur et Madame Denis*, by Désaugiers.

John Gilpin is a good citizen, a 'linendraper bold' of Cheapside, esteemed by all, and 'a trainband captain eke was he of famous London town.' It is the day before the anniversary of his wedding-day, contracted just twenty years before. It is a question of having a little feast, and Mrs. Gilpin, although of 'frugal mind,' is the first to propose going to dine at Edmonton at the sign of the Bell. She will go in the

post-chaise with her sister and her 'sister's child,' herself and 'children three'; her husband is to follow behind on horseback. Gilpin replies to his wife's proposal:

'I do admire
Of womenkind but one,
And you are she, my dearest dear,
Therefore it shall be done.

I am a linendraper bold,
As all the world doth know,
And my good friend the calender
Will lend his horse to go.'

They agree also that they will take their own wine with them, because wine is dear that year.

'The morning came, the chaise was brought,
But yet was not allowed
To drive up to the door, lest all
Should say that she was proud.'

Then follow the accidents of the journey: at the moment when the post-chaise is starting, Gilpin, all ready to follow and even in the saddle, sees 'three customers come in'; customers are never refused, and he gets down to serve them. Then they tell him the wine has been forgotten and he takes charge of it, hanging the stone bottles by their handles to the leathern belt of the sword in which he does his parade exercise: a fine red cloak covers and hides all. Now at last he starts, and wishes to catch up the carriage by galloping. Now the great accidents begin: the horse goes faster than he ought, the stone bottles swing about, the horse runs away, hat, wig and cloak are carried away by the wind. The turnpike men, seeing

such a gallop, and the stone bottles swinging, think it is a race, and that he is a jockey carrying weight for a bet, and consequently all the gates on the road (there are numbers of them in England) are opened for him. But let us hear the ballad itself:

'The dogs did bark, the children scream'd,
Up flew the windows all,
And every soul cried out, "Well done!"
As loud as he could bawl.

Away went Gilpin—who but he;
His fame soon spread around—
He carries weight, he rides a race,
'Tis for a thousand pound.

And still as fast as he drew near,
'Twas wonderful to view
How in a trice the turnpike-men
Their gates wide open threw.

And now as he went bowing down
His reeking head full low,
The bottles twain behind his back
Were shatter'd at a blow.

Down ran the wine into the road
Most piteous to be seen,
Which made his horse's flanks to smoke
As they had basted been.

But still he seemed to carry weight,
With leathern girdle braced,
For all might see the bottle necks
Still dangling at his waist.

Thus all through merry Islington
These gambols he did play,
And till he came unto the Wash
Of Edmonton so gay.

* * * * *

At Edmonton his loving wife
From the balcóny spied
Her tender husband, wondering much
To see how he did ride.

"Stop, stop, John Gilpin! Here's the house"—
They all at once did cry;
"The dinner waits and we are tired:"
Said Gilpin—"So am I."

But yet his horse was not a whit
Inclined to tarry there,
For why? his owner had a house
Full ten miles off at Ware.

So like an arrow swift he flew
Shot by an archer strong,
So did he fly—which brings me to
The middle of my song.'

The return journey is not more fortunate; fresh ludicrous accidents bring a fresh race the opposite way, and Gilpin, still on horseback and still run away with, but merry and not too much upset, gets back to London without his dinner as he set out: thus his wedding-day is spent. All this should be seen in the original, with the humour that belongs to it—and indeed you cannot enjoy the full flavour of it unless you are of the soil.

I wanted only to give an idea of this very English, and for us very unexpected, side of Cowper's genius. Let us return to his serious side, the only one on which we can reach him. It may be imagined that when a few months after the wild success of *John Gilpin*, the publication of a touching, familiar, natural and lofty poem, *The Task*, was announced by the same author (1784), everybody wanted to read it. The

famous involuntary horseman had served as a herald to prepare the way for more delicate and severe work.

It was to Lady Austen again that Cowper owed its first idea and starting-point. One day when she was advising him to write blank verse, verse without rhyme, which is very agreeable to the genius of the English language, he replied that to do that he only wanted a subject. 'Oh,' she said to him, 'you can never be in want of a subject; you can write upon any; write upon this Sofa.'

The fairy had spoken, and Cowper set to work, giving his poem the title *The Task*. Only about a hundred lines of the first book refer to the Sofa, after which the author passes on to his favourite subjects, the country, nature, religion, and morals. In six books or cantos he goes over a series of the most varied subjects or views, without any definite composition, but with the unity of the one mind and one intention. Let us simply take the beginning of the first canto of the poem. This beginning, of which the Sofa is the text, is only very ingenious and elegant banter. The author indicates the origin of the poem:

> 'The theme though humble, yet august and proud
> The occasion, for the Fair commands the song.'

He recalls the time when the rude ancestors of the English, the Picts and Britons, reposed on the hard ground at the edge of torrents, their heads resting on the rock. The invention began, coarse and heavy in its infancy; they had three-legged stools, and the massive table which served for a seat: the immortal Alfred had no other throne, and from thence, sceptre

in hand, he administered justice to his 'infant realms.' The poet follows the different steps towards perfection, and shows at his leisure the tapestry with which the wooden seats of ancient days are soon clothed, 'tapestry richly wrought

> 'And woven close, or needlework sublime.
> There might ye see the piony spread wide,
> The full-blown rose, the shepherd and his lass,
> Lap-dog and lambkin with black staring eyes,
> And parrots with twin cherries in their beak.'

All these nothings are agreeably detailed and relieved with colours, as the Abbé Delille could do if wanted, or as some witty Jesuit would not fail to do, in Latin verses. I will pass rapidly over these prettinesses, the progress of the chair which the Indian cane has made more flexible, to which arms are added, and the perfect and comfortable curve is not given all at once even to these arms: in the arts of life nothing is discovered at the first attempt. You have here every degree of transition from the chair to the sofa, and from the double sofa or settee to the couch and the Sofa, that final throne of luxury and ease. The first hundred lines of the first book are in the most brilliant style of Chinese cabinet-work. But the real Cowper only re-appears and depicts himself entirely in the lines which immediately follow:

> 'Oh may I live exempted (while I live
> Guiltless of pamper'd appetite obscene)
> From pangs arthritic that infest the toe
> Of libertine excess. The SOFA suits
> The gouty limb, 'tis true; but gouty limb,
> Though on a SOFA, may I never feel:

For I have loved the rural walk through lanes
Of grassy swarth close cropt by nibbling sheep,
And skirted thick with intertexture firm
Of thorny boughs ; have loved the rural walk
O'er hills, through valleys, and by the river's brink,
E'er since a truant-boy I pass'd my bounds
To enjoy a ramble on the banks of Thames.
And still remember, nor without regret
Of hours that sorrow since has much endear'd ;
How oft, my slice of pocket store consumed,
Still hungering penniless and far from home,
I fed on scarlet hips and stony haws,
Or blushing crabs, or berries that emboss
The bramble, black as jet, or sloes austere.
Hard fare ! but such as boyish appetite
Disdains not, nor the palate undepraved
By culinary arts unsavoury deems.
No SOFA then awaited my return,
Nor SOFA then I needed. Youth repairs
His wasted spirits quickly, by long toil
Incurring short fatigue ; and though our years,
As life declines, speed rapidly away,
And not a year but pilfers as he goes
Some youthful grace that age would gladly keep,
A tooth or auburn lock, and by degrees
Their length and colour from the locks they spare ;
The elastic spring of an unwearied foot
That mounts the stile with ease, or leaps the fence,
That play of lungs inhaling and again
Respiring freely the fresh air, that makes
Swift pace or steep ascent no toil to me,
Mine have not pilfered yet ; nor yet impair'd
My relish of fair prospect : scenes that soothed
Or charm'd me young, no longer young, I find
Still soothing and of power to charm me still.
And witness, dear companion of my walks,
Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive
Fast lock'd in mine, with pleasure such as love

Confirm'd by long experience of thy worth
And well-tried virtues could alone inspire,—
Witness a joy that thou hast doubled long.
Thou knowest my praise of nature most sincere,
And that my raptures are not conjured up
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,
But genuine, and art partner of them all.
How oft upon yon eminence our pace
Has slacken'd to a pause, and we have borne
The ruffling wind scarce conscious that it blew,
While admiration feeding at the eye,
And still unsated, dwelt upon the scene—
Thence with what pleasure have we just discern'd.
The distant plough slow-moving, and beside
His labouring team, that swerve not from the track,
The sturdy swain diminish'd to a boy!
Here Ouse, slow winding through a level plain
Of spacious meads with cattle sprinkled o'er,
Conducts the eye along his sinuous course
Delighted. There, fast rooted in his bank,
Stand, never overlook'd, our favourite elms
That screen the herdsman's solitary hut;
While far beyond and overthwart the stream
That as with molten glass inlays the vale,
The sloping land recedes into the clouds;
Displaying on its varied side the grace
Of hedgerow beauties numberless, square tower,
Tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells
Just undulates upon the listening ear;
Groves, heaths, and smoking villages remote.
Scenes must be beautiful which daily view'd
Please daily, and whose novelty survives
Long knowledge and the scrutiny of years.'

There is here what is not always met with in Cowper, a general view, gradation, perspective. Compared with Thomson, he possesses the art of noticing particular features and the curious detail of things more than the

latter; his exactness is almost minute. It has been remarked that in his religious view-point, a little detail seems actually as important to him as a great object: all are equal in relation to God, who shines and reveals Himself as marvellously in one creature as in the others. But the result is also that Thomson describes with a wider view and as a painter who has a comprehending glance; Thomson has *masses*. Yet here, in this perfect description we have just read, Cowper has known how to reconcile the two kinds of qualities, the fineness and relief of each detail (I will even say brilliancy on one or two points), and the gradation and airy flight of perspective. This scene might be copied with a paint-brush.

I have more to say; I should like to notice the affinity of Cowper's circumstances with those of Pascal, his resemblances to natural contrasts with Rousseau, to speak a little of ourselves and our poetic attempts in the same line; in a word, to come back to France.

WILLIAM COWPER.

III.

ONCE more, I have no wish to depreciate the Abbé Delille.* He was too much beloved, too much relished, too much applauded by those who knew him, not to have possessed many graces and the spell of talent. In his poem *L'Homme des Champs*, in *Imagination* (more than in *Les Jardins*), there are certainly bits which deserved all the success they got when that kindly and active intellect was there to support them with his presence and his delivery, as he recited them to the audience for whom he had composed them. Even when we read them to-day they give pleasure; above all, they show how much the public taste has changed, and how much less often than formerly authors are called upon for the kind of verses which were called witty. Let us quit these useless comparisons. I will be content to suppose that my readers have a general and sufficient idea of the Abbé Delille's manner when he is happiest, and I will select rapidly from the *Task* the passages which point to other sources of inspiration in the English poet.

Cowper loved the country dearly; he loved it as a

* [This is in allusion to some remarks in the Causerie *De la Poésie de la Nature.*]

place to live in, to dwell in, never to grow tired of, at any age or in any season. In his first canto, after the walk with Mrs. Unwin which I have quoted, and that perfect description of the landscape, he does not stop at that. As a poet, he has written his piece; as a lover of nature, how much more has he to say! So, having finished his picture, he at once begins again. This time it is not in company with his friend, but alone, at a less fair season, when a feminine foot might not so easily extract itself from a bit of bad ground, that he makes his excursions to explore the country. He describes the whole lie of it for us; he strews his less restricted path with a thousand impressions, suggested either by the casual features of the rural ground, or by the sounds which he hears—he was highly sensitive to sounds—or by the varied colours of the trees, of which he distinguishes and specifies all the tints. We can perceive life-interest, a tender and deep-seated passion, under all these descriptions. One cannot call it his amusement; it is rather his enjoyment. In the course of his long walks after climbing hills, descending steep slopes, crossing brooks, swollen or shrunk, according to the season, he comes to some nobleman's park, across which he may find a short cut. He does not act like Rousseau, who doubtless would have avoided passing across it, and would rather have gone all the way round in the sun than have been in any way indebted to the rich and powerful. The lord of the fenced-in domain has given Cowper leave to cross it when he likes—has given him the key, in short. Cowper leaves the open country, enters the lofty avenues, and finds in them coolness and shade:

'Where now the blazing sun?
By short transition we have lost his glare,
And stepp'd at once into a cooler clime.
Ye fallen avenues! once more I mourn
Your fate unmerited, once more rejoice
That yet a remnant of your race survives.
How airy and how light the graceful arch,
Yet awful as the consecrated roof
Re-echoing pious anthems! while beneath
The chequer'd earth seems restless as a flood
Brush'd by the wind. So sportive is the light
Shot through the boughs, it dances as they dance,
Shadow and sunshine intermingling quick,
And darkening and enlightening, as the leaves
Play wanton, every moment, every spot.
And now, with nerves new-braced and spirits cheered,
We tread the wilderness, whose well-roll'd walks,
With curvature of slow and easy sweep—
Deception innocent—give ample space
To narrow bounds. The grove receives us next;
Between the upright shafts of whose tall elms
We may discern the thresher at his task.
Thump after thump resounds the constant flail,
That seems to swing uncertain, and yet falls
Full on the destined ear. Wide flies the chaff,
The rustling straw sends up a frequent mist
Of atoms sparkling in the noonday beam.
Come hither, ye that press your beds of down
And sleep not—see him sweating o'er his bread
Before he eats it. 'Tis the primal curse,
But soften'd into mercy; made the pledge
Of cheerful days, and nights without a groan.'

These lofty avenues; these mighty elms, and in the distance the atom sparkling in the sun! There you have all the variety, all the contrast of the picture. One of the older writers would, perhaps, have finished

upon this last touch and the image; but Cowper does not stay there. He introduces the thought natural to a son of Adam, of labour as a penalty and chastisement, but become a means, or a pledge, of redemption. Cowper is profoundly Christian; austerity, indeed, from the point of view of taste and moderation, predominates too much in him. He has a side almost Hebraic in its rigidity, its awe; and from his shrubbery, his study among the greenery, as he sees through the leaves the threshers at the farm, he at times has simultaneously a sudden view, a vision of Sinai.

Cowper is, moreover, a patriot and an excellent Englishman, not omitting the prejudices and prepossessions. To read him aright, and fully catch all his tones, as well as to explain the great success of his poem from its first appearance, we must recall the events of those years, the American War, with its issue humiliating for England, the passionate debates in Parliament, the triumphs won and crimes committed in India, the first efforts of Wilberforce for negro emancipation, the dissoluteness and disorder prevailing in the highest ranks of society, the misconduct of the Prince of Wales. As he composed the *Task*, Cowper watched all this from afar, seeing only the broad outlines, but full of eagerness and curiosity. "'Tis pleasant,' he says,

> 'Through the loop-holes of retreat
> To peep at such a world. To see the stir
> Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd.'

But he was too sensitive, too patriotic, too full of human and Christian feeling, to remain in this attitude of an amused spectator. Every instant he breaks out

into transports or outcries of grief, such as may nowadays seem on the verge of declamation, but which if rightly taken at the moment of their outburst were pieces of well-timed eloquence. Thus, the first book, which, as we saw, begins with those pretty, almost finikin ingenuities about the Sofa, ends with this tirade or harangue, in which patriotism combines with the rustic note:

'God made the country, and man made the town,
What wonder then, that health and virtue, gifts
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught
That life holds out to all, should most abound
And least be threatened in the fields and groves?
Possess ye therefore, ye who borne about
In chariots and sedans, know no fatigue
But that of idleness, and taste no scenes
But such as art contrives,—possess ye still
Your element; there only can ye shine,
There only minds like yours can do no harm.
Our groves were planted to console at noon
The pensive wanderer in their shades. At eve
The moonbeam sliding softly in between
The sleeping leaves, is all the light they wish,
Birds warbling all the music. We can spare
The splendour of your lamps, they but eclipse
Our softer satellite. Your songs confound
Our more harmonious notes. The thrush departs
Scared, and the offended nightingale is mute.
There is a public mischief in your mirth,
It plagues your country. Folly such as yours,
Graced with a sword, and worthier of a fan,
Has made, which enemies could ne'er have done,
Our arch of empire, steadfast but for you,
A mutilated structure, soon to fall.'

Who does not feel here the grief of the old-fashioned

Englishman, at the moment when North America, that magnificent region of British territory, is cutting itself loose?

The second book of the poem is entirely devoted to public misfortunes, or, rather, to the physical and natural calamities which burst upon the world in the year 1781-1783; terrible storms, earthquakes, first in Jamaica and the adjacent islands, later, in Sicily and elsewhere. Cowper, with his tendency to vivid imagination, saw in these not only Divine warnings and chastisements inflicted on the world, but also signs of the approaching end of the world and the Last Judgement. As a rule, the title of each book is suggested by its opening passage, or by the most conspicuous bit of description in it; thus, one is *The Garden*, one, *The Winter Evening*, another, *The Winter Morning Walk*, yet another, *Winter Walk at Noon*. But the second book is headed *The Timepiece*, though there is no reference in it to anything of the sort; it is a mystic, symbolical title, equivalent to 'The Signs of the Times.' We do not ask from the poet either the exact observation of physical science, or the methodical reasoning of philosophy. The opening of this book is admirable in its rhythm and its tenderness:

> 'Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
> Some boundless contiguity of shade,
> Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
> Of unsuccessful or successful war,
> Might never reach me more! My ear is pain'd,
> My soul is sick with every day's report
> Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.
> There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
> It does not feel for man. The natural bond

Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax
That falls asunder at the touch of fire.
He finds his fellow guilty of a skin
Not colour'd like his own.'

He continues to enumerate all his griefs and his sufferings as Englishman, Christian, and human being. The whole book, with its sombre moral tone, is like a series of outbursts, mystic, biblical, patriotic, human, brotherly. It is an objection to it that it more than once resembles a versified sermon; but it has a spirit, an ardour, quite sufficient to show how superior Cowper is to the ordinary run of descriptive and picturesque poets.

The third book, called *The Garden*, brings us back to more familiar, gentler scenes. In the very first page we find a charming invocation of domestic happiness. Doubtless Cowper enjoyed this but imperfectly; but with what a pious, what a chaste delicacy does he appreciate it!

'Domestic happiness, thou only bliss
Of Paradise that has survived the fall!
Though few now taste thee unimpair'd and pure,
Or tasting, long enjoy thee, too infirm
Or too incautious to preserve thy sweets
Unmix'd with drops of bitter, which neglect,
Or temper, sheds into thy crystal cup;
Thou art the nurse of virtue. In thine arms
She smiles, appearing, as in truth she is,
Heaven-born and destined to the skies again.
Thou art not known where Pleasure is adored,
That reeling goddess with the zoneless waist
And wandering eyes, still leaning on the arm
Of Novelty, her fickle frail support;
For thou art meek and constant, hating change,

> And finding in the calm of truth-tied love
> Joys that her stormy raptures never yield.
> Forsaking thee, what shipwreck have we made
> Of honour, dignity, and fair renown.'

This book, to justify its title, treats of flowers and the labours of gardening. 'Who loves a garden, loves a greenhouse too.' There are most minute precepts on the art of raising gourds; the poet speaks from his own experience, and like one who has put his hand to the spade and the spade into the ground. A sensation of happiness permeates these kindly yet learned descriptions, and shows Cowper in his most smiling aspect:

> 'Had I the choice of sublunary good,
> What could I wish, that I possess not here?
> Health, leisure, means to improve it, friendship, peace;
> No loose or wanton, though a wandering, muse,
> And constant occupation without care.
> Thus blest, I draw a picture of that bliss.'

It is, however, in Book IV., *The Winter Evening*, that he has succeeded best in depicting himself to us, set in his favourite frame, amid all the charm of an innocent, yet accomplished and refined society. The opening of this book is celebrated. The postman arrives with the letters. 'Hark! 'tis the twanging horn! o'er yonder bridge.' Careless himself, the messenger brings in his bag, which he throws carelessly down, joys or griefs, births or deaths, fortune or ruin, and departs, whistling as he goes. Pretty as they are, these finished pictures (of which one might find in Delille more than one counterpart no less full of spirit, though executed with a less certain touch) are not what please one most in Cowper. I prefer him when, after completing his enumeration of

all the matters of public or private news which lie jumbled up together in the postman's bag, he continues:

> 'Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
> Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
> And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn
> Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
> That cheer, but not inebriate, wait on each,
> So let us welcome peaceful evening in.'

In the occupations of the evening, which he is about to follow into their minutest details, and which he brings every moment before our eyes, he is mindful of Horace's: *O noctes cenæque Deum!* but he puts in his own originality and adds his own flame—a moral and religious sentiment which never deserts him, a flash of St. Paul and the Apostles; always with due appreciation of a comfort and an ease which the Apostles never knew. He is inexhaustible on this subject, this ever-renewed theme, the tranquil beatitude of the domestic hearth. He applies to it a thoroughly modern, thoroughly English, elegance of treatment which at times makes some half-page resemble a vignette by Westall in all its sparkling prettiness. Collins has an ode to Evening full of imagination and lofty fancy; Cowper, in the following passage, recalls Collins, with less of lyric power, and more that is orderly and familiar, but with a no less lively imaginative touch:

> 'Come evening once again, season of peace,
> Return, sweet evening, and continue long!
> Methinks I see thee in the streaky west,
> With matron-step slow-moving, while the night

Treads on thy sweeping train ; one hand employ'd
In letting fall the curtain of repose
On bird and beast, the other charged for man
With sweet oblivion of the cares of day :
Not sumptuously adorn'd, not needing aid
Like homely-featured night, of clustering gems,
A star or two just twinkling on thy brow
Suffices thee ; save that the moon is thine
No less than hers, not worn indeed on high
With ostentatious pageantry, but set
With modest grandeur in thy purple zone,
Resplendent less, but of an ampler round.
Come then, and thou shalt find thy votary calm,
Or make me so. Composure is thy gift.
And whether I devote thy gentle hours
To books, to music, or the poet's toil,
To weaving nets for bird-alluring fruit ;
Or twining silken threads round ivory reels,
When they command whom man was born to please,
I slight thee not, but make thee welcome still.'

One has to recognise that wit and talent have their different families, and, so to say, their different races. Cowper, though he was neither husband nor father, is the poet of the family, of the house, the well-ordered household, its purity, its gentle cheerfulness, of the shrubbery at the end of the garden, of the fireside. Stormy, audacious poets like Byron, lively worldlings like Thomas Moore or Hazlitt, naturally cared little for him. Byron, in a moment of ill-humour, called Cowper a 'coddled poet.' Moore laid down the principle that genius and domestic happiness are two antipathetic and mutually exclusive elements. Someone was inquiring one day of Wordsworth if it were necessarily so, and the stern poet of the Lakes answered : 'No man can claim indulgence for his transgressions on the score of his

sensibilities, but at the expense of his credit for intellectual powers. All men of *first* rare genius have been as distinguished for dignity, beauty, and propriety of moral conduct. . . . The man of genius ought to learn that the cause of his vices is, in fact, his deficiencies, and not, as he fondly imagines, his superfluities and superiorities.'*

I am sorry to have to recall that Montaigne was not of this opinion, but inclined to the side of irregularity. He quotes the sonnets of his friend Étienne de la Boétie, and decides that those which were composed for the mistress are worth more than those addressed to the lawful wife, which have a touch of 'I know not what marital chillness. And I am one of those whose opinion is, that Divine Poesy doth nowhere fadge so well, and so effectually applaudeth, as in a youthful, wanton, and unbridled subject.'† We have in France been only too mindful of this dictum of Montaigne's, and have let ourselves go after this wanton ideal.

To return to Cowper. We need not disguise from ourselves the fact that he might not perhaps have so succeeded in expressing to the life the poetry of these tranquil conditions, to which custom has rendered most people insensible, if he had not also had his strange inward storms and profound upheavals. The sixth book of the *Task* opens with a passage that is celebrated, and unquestionably charming:

* The sentiment is much the same as Homer's, when he makes Ulysses tell Nausicaa that nothing is better or nobler than when a man and a woman keep house, being of one mind one with another (Odyssey vi. 182-84).

† [*Essays*, Book I. Chap. xxviii. (Florio). 'Fadge'='fit.' The original has 'ne rid point ailleurs.']

'There is in souls a sympathy with sounds,
And as the mind is pitch'd the ear is pleased
With melting airs or martial, brisk or grave.
Some chord in unison with what we hear
Is touch'd within us, and the heart replies.
How soft the music of those village bells,
Falling at intervals upon the ear
In cadence sweet! now dying all away,
Now pealing loud again and louder still,
Clear and sonorous as the gale comes on.
With easy force it opens all the cells
Where memory slept. Wherever I have heard
A kindred melody, the scene recurs,
And with it all its pleasures and its pains.
Such comprehensive views the spirit takes,
That in a few short moments I retrace
(As in a map the voyager his course)
The windings of my way through many years.'

He proceeds in similar fashion, and by an insensible chain of association he arrives at the reminiscence of certain moving events in his past life. A direct allusion takes us back to the loss of his father, whose affection, under a certain outward severity, he reproaches himself with having never duly appreciated :

'Some friend is gone, perhaps his son's best friend,
A father, whose authority, in show
When most severe, and mustering all its force,
Was but the graver countenance of love.'

Then suddenly, without any other transition, he begins to draw that exquisite and memorable picture, which gives the book its title *The Winter Walk at Noon*. It is the last extract which I shall give from the *Task;* let us lose none of this painting, finished as a pearl, yet

so living and natural. The Flemish artists have found their match in poetry:

'The night was winter in his roughest mood;
The morning sharp and clear. But now at noon
Upon the southern side of the slant hills,
And where the woods fence off the northern blast,
The season smiles, resigning all its rage,
And has the warmth of May. The vault is blue
Without a cloud, and white without a speck
The dazzling splendour of the scene below.
Again the harmony comes o'er the vale,
And through the trees I view the embattled tower
Whence all the music. I again perceive
The soothing influence of the wafted strains,
And settle in soft musings as I tread
The walk, still verdant under oaks and elms,
Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.
The roof, though moveable through all its length
As the wind sways it, has yet well sufficed,
And, intercepting in their silent fall
The frequent flakes, has kept a path for me.
No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.
The redbreast warbles still, but is content
With slender notes and more than half suppress'd;
Pleased with his solitude, and flitting light
From spray to spray, where'er he rests he shakes
From many a twig the pendent drops of ice,
That tinkle in the wither'd leaves below.
Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,
Charms more than silence. Meditation here
May think down hours to moments. Here the heart
May give a useful lesson to the head,
And learning wiser grow without his books.
Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one,
Have ofttimes no connection. Knowledge dwells
In heads replete with thoughts of other men,
Wisdom in minds attentive to their own.

* * * * *

Knowledge is proud that he has learn'd so much ;
Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.
Books are not seldom talismans and spells,
By which the magic art of shrewder wits
Holds an unthinking multitude, enthrall'd.
Some to the fascination of a name
Surrender judgement, hoodwink'd. Some the style
Infatuates, and through labyrinths and wilds
Of error, leads them by a tune entranced.
While sloth seduces more, too weak to bear
The insupportable fatigue of thought,
And swallowing, therefore, without pause or choice,
The total grist unsifted, husks and all.
But trees and rivulets, whose rapid course
Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
And sheepwalks populous with bleating lambs,
And lanes in which the primrose ere her time
Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn root,
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
Not shy as in the world, and to be won
By slow solicitation, seize at once
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.'

Cowper lived fifteen years after the publication of the *Task*, not dying till April, 1800. But after that excellent poem he undertook no other original work of any length. Long ago he had been struck by the beauties of Homer, and, dissatisfied with the inaccuracies of Pope, he applied himself—once more at Lady Austen's instigation—to making a complete and faithful translation into blank verse of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The work occupied many long years. He was next engaged upon an edition of Milton, with an English translation of the Latin works ; but he was ill-suited to the duties of editor. About two years after the publication of the *Task* he left Olney, which had become less agreeable as

a place of residence. His kind cousin and friend in childhood, Lady Hesketh, with whom he had renewed acquaintance, and who was very well off, furnished a comfortable house for him and Mrs. Unwin at Weston, near Olney, one of the prettiest villages in England. She herself spent several months of every year there. His malady, which had only slept in a fashion during his cheerful hours, attacked him again in 1787. He again recovered, but dejection and melancholy became his constant and habitual condition after 1793. He had been smitten by the greatest disaster that could have befallen him; Mrs. Unwin, his domestic angel, was struck with paralysis. She outlived her own self for a while, but preceded him to the grave by four years. This latter part of Cowper's life is sad, humbling for the human intellect, and calculated to give cause for reflection to anyone who is tempted to think highly of himself. Still, he had up to the end affectionate friends and relatives, who took it by turns to be with him and competed for the honour of tending him and sheltering him in his last tedious sufferings.

Even through eclipse and shadow the flash of poetry and genius still gleamed from time to time. 'Man's mind,' he replied to one who regretted that he undertook no more original work, 'is not a fountain, but a cistern; and mine, God knows, is a broken cistern.' But he still found quick, if brief, inspirations, in which his heart welled up. In England everyone knows his piece addressed to Mrs. Unwin, then ill and infirm. It is called *To Mary;* and though I meant to quote no more, I cannot resist giving a few stanzas of this

tender, incomparable lament, written as it were with tears. In the first verse Cowper alludes to his great relapse into melancholy in the year 1773, his first after taking up his abode with Mrs. Unwin :

TO MARY.

'The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast ;
Ah, would that this might be the last !
My Mary !

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow ;
'Twas my distress that brought thee low,
My Mary !

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disused, and shine no more,
My Mary !

* * * * *

Thy indistinct expressions seem
Like language utter'd in a dream ;
Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme,
My Mary !

Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light,
My Mary !

* * * * *

Partakers of thy sad decline,
Thy hands their little force resign ;
Yet gently prest, press gently mine,
My Mary !

Such feebleness of limbs thou prov'st,
That now at every step thou mov'st,
Upheld by two, yet still thou lov'st,
My Mary !

And still to love, though prest with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,
My Mary !'

* * * * *

The most important piece which he composed in these later years, *Yardley Oak* (1791), is full of imagination no less powerful than lofty. It was suggested by an ancient oak which he had seen in his walks round Weston, and which was reputed to date from the Norman Conquest. The piece bears the stamp of his most vigorous manner, with all its merits and defects. The style is unequal, the thought involved, but there is a grandeur which reveals in one who is generally considered the poet of mediocrity, an energetic disciple of Milton.

Cowper's moral malady, of which I have spoken somewhat indefinitely, was of a special and extremely singular nature. He believed himself to be for ever cast out and reprobate; and he held this belief with a consistent and persistent obstinacy that amounted to mania. His disorder has no resemblance to Pascal's, who, though he might at times have visions and hallucinations, as a rule kept the state of his nerves in subjection to his intellect. It has been said that in his later years Pascal used to see an abyss yawning close by him; if this is correct, it was a mere physical sensation. It did not deceive him, and his intelligence rejected it.

Cowper did not see the open abyss; he saw himself, felt himself, to be fallen morally to the bottom of the abyss, without hope or succour. He seemed, amid all his meditations and spiritual soliloquies, always to hear a voice speaking from the depths of his nature, which cried, 'It is all over with thee; thou art lost.' Nothing could console him, nothing undeceive him on this point. In his better moments and happier intervals the voice became more distant or fainter; but he was never able to stifle it entirely, and in critical hours it became again threatening and ceaseless. He imagined himself to have committed some sin, I know not what, the only one that was unpardonable; and that this had separated his soul from God's side. To all Mr. Newton's observations and instances of cases more or less like his own, in which the patients had been completely restored to health, he would answer that his malady was somewhat different, that he was an exception. In this utter hopelessness for himself, seeing his name definitively struck out of the Book of Life, a religious Christian as he was, we can judge what must have been his anguish, his deadly depression. Nay, further, in the worst of his distress and spiritual destitution he judged himself unable and unworthy to pray. His soul was as though dead. It was from the depths of this habitual state of inward distress, as if to escape from himself, that he used to betake himself so keenly to those literary and poetical occupations wherein he found the charm of happiness, and has rendered it for us in such lively imagery. Never did anyone struggle with more constancy, more persistence, than he against an ever-present and no less persistent madness; one of the

fiercest tempests, as he says, which ever was let loose on a human soul or disordered the navigation of a Christian sailor. One of his last pieces, called *The Castaway*, describes a seaman who has fallen overboard during one of Anson's voyages; he struggles to swim after the vessel; his comrades vainly throw ropes to him, and the storm sweeps him away. In this Cowper sees a melancholy image of his own destiny.

We may perhaps better compare Cowper's malady with the vein of insanity which existed, during his later years, in the mind of Rousseau; in both cases it was compatible with proofs of an admirable talent. Just as Rousseau saw in himself the object of a universal conspiracy, so did Cowper imagine himself devoted to eternal reprobation. Indeed Cowper, who was also like Rousseau in the late development of his powers, speaks of him more than once, knowing of what he speaks. He had read him, at least his greater works; and about the time when he settled at Huntingdon near the Unwins, he wrote to his friend Joseph Hill: 'You remember Rousseau's description of an English morning; such are the mornings I spend with these good people.'* In another place Cowper is evidently thinking of Rousseau, though he does not mention him by name. In Book V. of the *Task*, when he has occasion to combat the arguments of the hardened Epicurean who openly abandons himself to the natural appetites, the bonds of the flesh, and avowedly enjoys the prospect of death as a sleep:

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* The allusion is to a phrase in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Part v., Letter iii.

'Haste now, philosopher, and set him free!
Charm the deaf serpent wisely. Make him hear
Of rectitude and fitness; moral truth
How lovely, and the moral sense how sure—
* * * * *
Spare not in such a cause. Spend all the powers
Of rant and rhapsody in virtue's praise,
* * * * *
And with poetic trappings grace thy prose,
Till it out-mantle all the pride of verse.
* * * * *
The still small voice is wanted. He must speak,
Whose word leaps forth at once to its effect,
Who calls for things that are not, and they come.'

It seems to me that in this passage Cowper is thinking of the *Savoyard Vicar's Profession of Faith*, and that he has touched it on the side where it—and Rousseau's eloquent apostles no less—is weak and defective. It lacks the 'still small voice' which can change the heart.

Rousseau is certainly the first French writer of the eighteenth century who felt and passionately preached that love of the country and of nature which Cowper in his tender fashion so fully shared. So far, we have no cause to envy our neighbour. Thus, when I expressed a regret* that France had not at that time a school of poetry like the English, and comparable to it, I was thinking not so much of the direct representation of nature considered in itself, a representation of which our more elevated prose presents such magnificent examples, as of the union with the poetry of nature of

* [See the opening of the 'Causerie' referred to above, p. 230.]

that dealing with the family and the domestic hearth. In Rousseau this union is essentially lacking, and that for reasons of many kinds painful to his admirers. He paints in broad and powerful colours, while living and dwelling among inward pollution. Moreover, there is about him an indelicacy, natural or acquired, which often violates that modesty which ranks first among the tutelary deities of the hearth. Further profound differences may be found between Rousseau and Cowper. The one aims at independence of others, affects to isolate himself and to be in a state of war, or divorce, as regards mankind, while the other on the contrary loves to be indebted to others, to those whom he loves, and to feel himself under obligation to them. Even when he is saying as hard things of London as did Rousseau of Paris, through his fervent anathemas we can see that he and his doctrines are sociable. Save in a few rare moments of misanthropy, he wishes his abode to be not too secluded, nor out of reach of the resources and advantages of society. Once upon a time in his walks round Olney, he comes, at the top of a steepish hill, upon a cottage hidden in a clump of trees. He calls it 'the peasant's nest,' and dreams of settling and living like a hermit there, enjoying his own poetic imaginations and undisturbed peace. But he soon observes that the situation is inconvenient, that everything is lacking to it, that it is hard to be alone. All things considered, he prefers his summer study, his greenhouse with its simple yet graceful comfort, and says to the wild, picturesque hut:

> 'Be still a pleasing object in my view,
> My visit still, but never my abode.'

Our own Bernardin de Saint-Pierre has often mingled lively pictures of domestic life and happiness with descriptions of nature; but, I know not why, our versified poetry in this respect remained in arrear. In our own days attempts have been made in this intimate, familiar and yet lofty style of art, which of all others demands careful detail and finish. These attempts, none of which equals the *Task* in excellence or in popularity, will require an attentive examination and a thoroughly worked-out chapter. Here I will only remark that in England private life is more shut in, more sheltered, better set in its whole frame, better adapted in its spirit to the general character of the race and the nation. Thus adorned and preserved, thus half-wrapped in its own mystery as the cottage in its roses, or the nest in its bush, it contributes all the more to that gentle poetic ardour which it inspires, and of which in all its purity we have just seen so many examples. That is all which I wish to say here; but I do not deny that, with differences enough to give talent scope for originality, we may by dint of application and good luck succeed in our turn in the same line.

GIBBON.

I.

In certain respects Gibbon is a French writer, and he has a right to have his place marked out in our eighteenth century. During his stay at Lausanne, when a youth of sixteen to twenty-one years, he taught himself so completely to think in French that his letters of that period, written in English, are those of a man who has ceased to be a master of his own language. The first essay that he published after his return later on to England, is written in French.* Urged by his call to be a historian, and still in search of his subject, he undertook, in company with his friend Deyverdun, a general history of the Swiss Republic, the same heroic theme as Johan von Müller was presently to handle, and had gone so far as to write the introduction in French. The illustrious historian, David Hume, had to recall him to his native tongue, in the words of Horace to those Romans who wrote in Greek,

'In silvam non ligna feras insanius.'

In the final years of his life, when he had returned to

* 'Essai sur l'Étude de la Litérature.'

live at Lausanne, he conversed habitually in French, and he expresses a fear that the later volumes of his history which were composed during this period may bear the marks of it. 'The constant custom,' says he, 'of speaking one language and writing in another may well have infused into my style some mixture of Gallicism.' If in the eyes of Britons of pure blood this may entail upon him some loss of credit, perhaps even some blame, in ours, at any rate, let it be a reason for concerning ourselves with him, and for doing him especial justice as an eminent author who has in part belonged to us.

When one speaks of Gibbon, even in France, one has an unfavourable impression to get over. He has spoken of Christianity in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of his first volume with an affectation of cold impartiality, which is very like secret hostility. Even looking at the thing from a simple historical point of view he lacks a certain delicacy of feeling, both in regard to the basis of the Christian idea, and in respect of the proprieties which he was bound to observe towards his own contemporaries. Gibbon judged others too much by himself, and also by the tone of the Paris of his time, so that he believed that the world had arrived at a complete state of indifference and scepticism. When he saw the scandal which his two chapters had caused, especially in England, among pious, timid or, as he would have called them, prudent people, he was sorry for it, and he admits that if it were to do again he would take more care; for Gibbon, though anything but a religious man, was still less a sectary or propagandist of infidelity. In his defence he confined himself

to what was strictly necessary, and avoided everything inflammatory. When, in the later years of his life, he was a witness of the French Revolution, it pleased him to give his complete adhesion to Burke's profession of faith: 'I admire,' said he, 'his eloquence, I approve his policy, I adore his chivalry, and can almost excuse his reverence for religious establishments.' He adds that he had sometimes thought of writing a dialogue of the dead, in which Lucian, Erasmus, and Voltaire would have confessed to each other, and recognised the danger of shaking old-established beliefs by bantering them in front of a blind multitude. All these recantations of Gibbon's are doubtless made exclusively from a political and social point of view, and even here his words contrive to be imbued with a secret contempt for what he does not believe. You must not ask of him any warmth or sympathy for sentiments or truths of this class: he judges religions after the manner of a Chinese literate.

Nor does he apparently import more warmth into the consideration of the political movements of mankind, or into his conception of history. Yet here his love of antiquity and his classical taste saved him from unfairness. He is charmed with the noble self-esteem and the generous struggles of Cicero. He nourishes himself unceasingly upon the talent and the works of 'this great author,' as he calls him, 'a whole library of good sense and of eloquence.' Essentially unfitted as he was for public speaking, Gibbon took part as a member of Parliament in the debates of his country, and, in the eight sessions which he passed there, he found, as he says, a school of civic prudence; the first

and most indispensable quality of a historian. There was a moment, amid the dangers of the Seven Years' War, when he became an Englishman once more at the call of Pitt. He commanded a company of militia, and seemed to kindle with a flash of patriotic enthusiasm. As a general rule, when he has his pen in hand, it is true to say that this sort of emotion and inspiration is foreign to him. His favourite ideas of government agree with those of Horace Walpole. Like him he prefers to fix his historical golden age in the marvellous period, the *Elysian era* of the time of the Antonines; 'in which the world saw an uninterrupted succession of five good monarchs.'* From Augustus to Trajan Gibbon found the form of empire to which his reason and the instinct of his mind most naturally drew him. In his first writing, the essay above mentioned, fifteen years before he published his great historic work, he already revealed his preference for that great continuous and pacific whole of the Roman Empire. He places it almost on a level with what Europe subsequently became. He further remarks in favour of that ancient state of the world, that countries, at the present day barbarous, were then enlightened and in the enjoyment of the benefits of civilization. 'At the time of Pliny, Ptolemy, and Galen,' he says, 'Europe was as much the abode of the sciences as it is now; but Greece, Asia, Syria, Egypt, Africa, countries teeming with wonders, were filled with eyes worthy to see them. All that vast body was united by peace, by laws, and by language. The African and the Briton, the Spaniard and the Arab, met in the

* Horace Walpole to Gibbon, February 14, 1776.

capital and taught each other mutually. Thirty of the first men in Rome, often themselves enlightened, always accompanied by persons who were so, left the capital every year to govern the provinces; and even if they were not themselves curious their authority smoothed the way for science.'

Without, perhaps, going as far as Montesquieu, who saw in Trajan 'the most accomplished prince of whom history has ever told us, possessing all the virtues without going into extremes in any, in short, the man most fitted to honour human nature, and to represent the Divine;' without, perhaps, pronouncing so gorgeously, and reserving his judgement of Trajan as a man of peace in view of his wars and his ambition of conquest. Gibbon was willing to place in that epoch his ideal of the highest grandeur of an empire and of the happiness of the human race. Starting from that age, which was crowned by the reigns of Antoninus and Marcus Aurelius, the decline begins, and Gibbon traces the history of it with exactness, but with regret, holding fast to all that delays it, revolting from all which hastens it—a fine history, in which the genius of order, of method, of good administration, predominates, a narrative invested with every steady, consistent and solid quality, until even in the successive and inevitable degradations, as we pass through the times of barbarism, it resembles a broad Roman highway.

Thus Gibbon, who had been present in the flesh during the period of the Chathams, favoured the period of the Trajans by taste and temperament, as well as by study. The more one considers his nature and his private life, the better can one understand this preference. Sprung

from a good old Kentish family, and having a Tory father and grandfather, he was born at Putney, in Surrey, the 27th of April, 1737. One of his first pleasurable feelings is of gratitude towards the goodness of Nature in having—while she might just as well have made him be born a slave, a savage, or a boor—placed his cradle in a free and civilized country, in an age of science and philosophy, and in a family of gentle birth, suitably endowed with the gifts of fortune. This moderate feeling of content will animate Gibbon's whole life, and will hold him at an equal distance between enchantment and despair, even in his brief passions. He was the eldest of five brothers who died in infancy, and of a sister who lived a little longer, and whom he knew well enough to regret her. He himself had a delicate constitution, which for a long time gave cause for anxiety; it seems that he was taken more care of by a maternal aunt full of affection and goodness, than by his somewhat indifferent mother. He drew from this aunt 'that early and irresistible love of reading, which he would not exchange,' he says, 'for the treasures of India.' At the age of seven he was put under the charge of a tutor, an excellent country parson named John Kirkby, about whom he has left some touching words. At nine years old he was sent to school at Kingston, but he did not gain much advantage there on account of the interruptions necessitated by his weak health. Eighteen months later he was recalled by the death of his mother; he profited little more from Westminster School, from which he was frequently absent taking the waters at Bath, or staying at a physician's house. During this period he read somewhat

at haphazard all the books which came into his hands and which took his fancy, already aroused by curiosity; this was especially the case with historical knowledge, and some critical instinct also urged him rather towards the original sources. When he was approaching his sixteenth year, Nature made an effort in his favour and employed her hidden forces; his nervous attacks disappeared, and he attained tolerably good health, with which he never took liberties.

His father decided to place him at Oxford, and entered him as a gentleman-commoner at Magdalen College. When casting a glance backwards and reviewing all this period of his early years, Gibbon takes care to point out that he left there nothing delightful, nothing even to regret: that the much vaunted golden age of the dawn of life did not exist for him, and that he *never knew the happiness of childhood.* I have already made this remark in Volney's case: that those who have missed this mother's care—this first pillow and flower of tender love, this mysterious and convincing charm of the earliest impressions, are more easily than others stripped of sentiment and religion.

Gibbon has left a description of the education which men received, or rather did not receive, at Oxford, in his time, which in the coldness of its irony is the most truculent satire. Oxford, like all rich institutions not under control, and which are their own masters, had fallen little by little into a thousand evils, which we are assured have since then been in part corrected or diminished. Gibbon declares that he acknowledges no obligation to the university of Oxford, and he talks of it, indeed, as a most ungrateful son. As the restraints of study

amounted to almost nothing, he continued the course of his own private studies during the vacation; and at that time he began to make attempts at a strange subject, one which was premature, both for him and all the men of his time, the *age of Sesostris;* he tried to reconcile by means, it must be admitted, of ingenious hypotheses the different systems of chronology. Before he had finished his work he was fitted to criticise the imperfections and gaps in it: 'The discovery of my own weakness,' he said, 'was the first sign of my taste.' But the great fact, the memorable event of Gibbon's sojourn at Oxford, is his temporary conversion to the Roman Catholic religion. He had loved discussions on religious matters from his childhood; he had a taste for argument and reasoning; he read books of theology and controversy—Middleton, above all, Bossuet, whom he declares to be the great master in this kind of contest. His conversion was begun by the Bishop of Meaux, in the *Exposition de la Doctrine Catholique*, and the *Histoire des Variations* finished it. 'I surely fell,' he said, 'by a noble hand.' This solitary conversion, *solely through books*, is very characteristic of Gibbon. Hardly did he feel he had achieved it, when he resolved to proclaim and make his profession of it: 'Youth,' he says, 'is sincere and impetuous, and a momentary glow of enthusiasm had raised me above all temporal considerations.'

The scandal may be imagined: an Oxford student perverted to Popery! Gibbon's father took steps promptly; he resolved to expatriate his son and send him abroad for a few years to Lausanne, to the house of a simple country minister, Pastor Pavilliard. There

it was that Gibbon, after seventeen months, finally rejected his new faith and returned to his former communion, owing far less to any outside suggestions than to fresh studies, fresh reasonings and arguments which he made up on purpose for his own use. So it was that, converted at Oxford to the Roman Catholic faith in June, 1753, at the age of sixteen years and two months, he recanted at Lausanne in December, 1754, at the age of seventeen years and eight months. It was exactly, to within a few years, what Bayle had done in his youth. In Gibbon's case it had all taken place in his brain, and in the lists of dialectic; one argument had brought him his new creed, the next took it away. He could say for his own satisfaction that he owed the one and the other change only to his solitary reading and meditations. Later, when he flattered himself he was strictly impartial and indifferent to all faiths, it is allowable to suppose that, even without admitting it to himself, he cherished a secret and chilling rancour against religious thought, as against an adversary who has once touched you and wounded you at a weak place in your armour.

M. Pavilliard has spoken of his astonishment at first during the discussions which he waged with his young guest, when he saw before him 'this little thin person with a large head, disputing and urging with the greatest ability the best arguments that have ever been used in defence of Popery.' As years went on, Gibbon became grotesquely fat and bulky; but the bony framework was as thin and fragile as possible in him. All the world knows the silhouette of him, the profile cut out in paper which stands as frontispiece to his

Memoirs, in which he is represented rubbing his pinch of snuff between his fingers. There is the portly round body borne on two slender legs, the little face almost lost between the high forehead and the double chin, the little nose almost obliterated by the prominent cheeks. We may add with Suard that his pronunciation of French was affected, and that he spoke in a falsetto tone, though with wonderful correctness, and like a book. From his youth, then, he was singular in face and figure, and he was in some degree aware of it. When relating his journey to Turin, and his presentation there at Court at the age of twenty-seven, he would complain of the unsociableness of the Piedmontese ladies, and say: 'The most sociable women whom I have met with are the king's daughters; I chatted for about a quarter of an hour with them, talked about Lausanne, and grew so very free and easy, that I drew my snuff-box, tapped it, took snuff twice (a crime never known before in the presence chamber), and continued my discourse in my usual attitude of my body bent forwards, and my forefinger stretched out.'* There is the man, the very same young man who was first the lover of Mlle. Curchod, the future Mme. Necker, and afterwards captain of Grenadiers.

I shall not dwell much on Gibbon's first and only love affair, a passion which was only natural at the moment, but which seen from afar may seem a joke.

* ['This attitude continued to be characteristic of Mr. Gibbon. The engraving in the frontispiece of the "Memoirs" is taken from the figure of Mr. Gibbon cut with scissors by Mrs. Brown thirty years after the date of this letter. The extraordinary talents of this lady have furnished as complete a likeness of Mr. Gibbon as to person, face, and manner, as can be conceived; yet it was done in his absence.'—LORD SHEFFIELD'S NOTE.]

During his stay at Lausanne, he saw Mlle. Curchod, the daughter of a neighbouring minister, handsome, learned and virtuous. He fell quite sincerely in love with her, obtained her acceptance of his suit, and did not despair of gaining his father's consent. But on returning to England, he met with a complete obstacle in the paternal will, and after a painful struggle resigned himself to his destiny. He 'sighed as a lover and obeyed as a son.'* Even when he is most in love, Gibbon retains the stamp of his essentially well-balanced nature. He accommodates himself to his misfortune without too much emotion; even in his hours of passion he is at bottom gentle and calm. The letters of love and of grief which he wrote to her for whose hand he had hoped end almost invariably with these words: 'I have the honour, Mademoiselle, to be, with feelings which form the despair of my life, your most humble and obedient servant.' In later days remembering this ill-starred love affair, he was far from experiencing any emotion of trouble or regret. He feels rather some pride mingled with surprise at having been capable once of so pure and so lofty a sentiment.

But during his stay of nearly five years at Lausanne, he acquired intellectual habits which decided his literary career, and which he was never to lose. Among the number of good or harmful results which he sets down, he reckons that of having ceased to be an Englishman, that is to say, an islander with the stamp of his nation on a corner of him, and cast in an indelible mould. This stamp was effaced in his case at that time, and never afterwards recovered more than

* See on this subject a letter of Rousseau to Moulton, June 4, 1763.

partially. For example, when he saw Voltaire, who was at Lausanne during these years, personally performing in tragedy, while admitting that his declamation was more emphatic than natural, Gibbon feels his taste for the French theatre strengthened, 'and this taste,' he confesses, 'has, perhaps, abated my idolatry for the gigantic genius of Shakespeare, which is inculcated from our childhood as the first duty of an Englishman.' On other points the advantages which Gibbon gained from his exile are less contestable. He went into the world, became accustomed to the society of ladies, and got rid of his original awkwardness. He extended his vision and the circle of his horizon. He re-educated himself with freedom and method, he broke himself into writing correctly, both in French and Latin, and while acquiring an equal facility for expressing himself in different languages, he did not so much lose originality of expression, for which indeed he appeared little adapted, as he acquired that elegance, lucidity and clearness which were to become his recognised merits. He steeped himself in the genius of Cicero and Xenophon; he set himself to read all the Latin classics methodically, dividing them by styles; he stopped at any difficulties of detail which presented themselves, whether philological or historical, and in endeavouring to solve them, he began thenceforward to correspond with various learned men—Crévier at Paris, Breitinger at Zurich, Gesner at Göttingen; he propounded to them his doubts or his ideas, and had the pleasure of seeing more than one of his conjectures accepted. We already know that he was fond of discussion and argument, we may add that

he was no quibbler, and that he always surrendered to an argument which seemed to him good. When he left Lausanne, April 11, 1758, at the age of twenty-one to return to England after an absence of nearly five years, he was a young man of the first distinction, and needed only to persevere in the way he had chosen.

On returning to his native country, and to his father, who had married again, he continued to the best of his ability his life of study, coupled with moderate daily exercise. Amid the dissipations of London he retained the healthy habits of Lausanne. He found, at first, difficulty enough in entering English society, less freely open and less ready to receive than that of Switzerland or of France. Gibbon needed all his reputation as an author to find his proper place in his own country. His sickly infancy, his foreign education, and his reserved character were a bad preparation for a man of the world; yet no Englishman was ever less disposed than he, even in the solitude of his youth, to ennui, to hypochondria, or to spleen. During the seasons which he passed at Buriton, his father's country house, he took as many hours as he could from social duties and neighbourly obligations. 'I never handled a gun, I seldom mounted a horse, and my philosophic walks were soon terminated by a shady bench where I was long detained by the sedentary amusement of reading or meditation.' The sentiment of rustic nature is quite familiar to Gibbon. There are two or three passages in his 'Memoirs' which offer occasion for reverie: for example, the passage which I have just quoted, all that page which gives us such a pretty picture of English life, of the composed, regular, studious English life.

There is another passage which he has the good taste to quote from his first teacher, John Kirkby, in which we see that excellent, though not wealthy, country curate walking on the sea-shore, 'one while viewing at large the agreeable prospect which surrounded me, another while admiring the vast variety of beautiful shells thrown upon the beach, some of the choicest of which I always picked up to divert my little ones on my return.' Lastly, one passage which is well-remembered and has been often quoted, is that in which Gibbon describes how, having just finished in his garden at Lausanne the closing lines of his great History, he laid down his pen, took a few turns in his acacia walk, gazed at the sky and the moon which was then in full beauty, and the fair lake in which she was reflected, and bade a melancholy farewell to the work which had been for so many years so faithful and agreeable a companion to him. But in all these passages it is always the student in Gibbon who has the taste for nature, and whether he is speaking in his own name, or thinking of his worthy tutor, he only allows rustic distractions to come in in the intervals of reading, when he has, so to say, his book open on the table. It is then that he permits himself to take a view of nature, and soberly enjoys the sentiment of it, which, however, was with him genuine and very sweet.

During this stay at Buriton he took command of his father's library, which, in the first instance, had been put together with great want of method. He carefully increased and enriched it, and by degrees formed a collection which was at once copious and well-selected, the base and foundation of his future works, and

destined henceforth to be the most secure enjoyment of his life, whether at home or abroad. It is delightful to see the pleasure—for him epoch-making—with which on the first opportunity he exchanged a twenty-pound note for a copy of the collected transactions of our Academy of Inscriptions. That Academy of Inscriptions and Literature was in truth Gibbon's intellectual father-land; he dwelt there in thought, he studied its original and solid works, produced with accurate scholarship, and at times in a readable form; he forms an estimate of his discoveries, 'and above all that which is hardly second to discoveries,' as he says, with genuine Attic wit, 'a modest and learned ignorance.' In the matter of books Gibbon is of the elder Pliny's opinion, namely, that there is none so bad that it has no good passage. About this time, as though he felt that he ought to begin his reconciliation with his native language, and to direct his course towards the mark whither his hidden talents summoned him, he again took to reading English authors, and especially the more recent; those, namely, who, having written since the Revolution of 1688, combined purity of diction with the spirit of reason and independence, such as Swift and Addison. When he comes to the historians it is fine to hear the reverence with which he speaks of Robertson and Hume, with whom he is one day to be joined. 'The perfect composition, the nervous language, the well-turned periods of Dr. Robertson inflamed me to the ambitious hope that I might one day walk in his footsteps. The calm philosophy, the careless inimitable beauties of his friend and rival, often forced me to close the volume with a mixed sensation

of delight and despair.' These words are quite those of a man of taste who appreciates Xenophon. It has been so often declared in recent years that David Hume has been outdone and superseded, that I am glad to recall a testimony so keenly felt and so delicately stated. The misfortune of modern historians, which the ancients escaped, is that new documents are perpetually turning up, and that the merits of form and of art are no longer reckoned at their due value. The last comers, though often no better, appear to be better armed at all points, and in this way stifle and crush their predecessors.

The little work that Gibbon published in French was composed as early as 1759, when he was but twenty-two years old. He printed it two years later, with a dedication in respectful terms to his father. Placing it under the auspices of an estimable man of letters, the son of a refugee, named Matz, who wrote an introductory letter to it, this *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* is only of interest to-day as evidence of the early maturity of Gibbon's reflection, and of his original tendencies. It is not easy reading, and is in places obscure. The sequence of ideas is sometimes hidden owing to over conciseness, and the young author's desire to work in, in a compressed form, the greater part of his notes. The French is that of one who has read a good deal of Montesquieu and is imitating him, correct but artificial. The author's principal aim is to vindicate classical literature and learning from the contemptuous tone with which d'Alembert had treated them. Gibbon piques himself on proving that, properly understood, learning is not a simple matter of memory, and that all the faculties of the mind cannot

but profit by the study of ancient literature. He demonstrates very plainly that the ancients may still be read, but are no longer studied, and he is sorry for it. He makes it clear that a genuine knowledge of antiquity is the result of very various and very detailed factors, without which one can only get a glimpse of the beauties of the great classics. 'The knowledge of antiquity is our true commentary, but what is yet more necessary is a certain spirit which results therefrom, a spirit which not only makes us know the facts, but which familiarizes us with them and makes us look upon them with the eyes of the ancients.' He cites some examples from the famous quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, proving how far intelligent people like Perrault, for want of that general and preliminary knowledge, have decided in the fashion of blind men about what they did not understand.

On the way we meet with some new views, in which we can trace the historian. According to Gibbon, the Georgics of Virgil were written for a great purpose under Augustus; with their charm is mingled a political and patriotic aim. It was a question of breaking in veteran soldiers, who had come into possession of land and had with their habits of license some difficulty in tying themselves down to the labours of peace and of attaching them to agriculture. 'What could be better adapted to the gentle policy of Augustus, than the employment of his friend's harmonious strains' (*his friend* is a somewhat youthful and a somewhat sentimental expression), 'in reconciling them to their new condition? So he advised him to compose that work.

'"Da facilem cursum atque audacibus annue cæptis."'

The idea, as may be seen, is ingenious, and even though no more than a conjecture, deserves an approving smile. In this view Virgil in his Georgics is something more than a poet; he rises to the functions of a civilizer, and goes back to the primitive part of an Orpheus by softening the fierceness of the brave. In passing he touches upon the works of Pouilly and Beaufort, who long before Niebuhr had raised questions about the first periods of Roman history, and strives to find an answer or a plausible explanation which may remove objections, and maintain the truth of tradition. 'It has been a pleasure,' says he, 'to defend a useful and interesting history.' The future expounder of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire here finds himself as it were instinctively defending and maintaining the origin and outset of the Roman system. In regard to the use which poets have a right to make of great historic personages (for Gibbon in this essay touches on everything), he knows quite well where to draw the line between the respect due to truth and the liberties permitted to genius. As he says, 'the characters of great men should be sacred, but poets may write their history, less as it was than as it ought to have been.' In considering matters which are more and more positive as he goes forward, and where he already has his foot on his own ground, his views are sound and his instances new. A presentiment of his true vocation is disclosed when, in speaking of Augustus and regretting that the variety of his subjects prevents him from making a complete study of him, he says, 'I regret that it does not allow me to give a thorough picture of that refined government, those chains which

men bore without feeling them, that prince lost in the crowd of citizens, that senate respected by its master.' Elsewhere he speaks of 'the tranquil administration of the laws, of those salutary decrees which, issuing from the study of one man or from a council of few members, go to spread happiness among an entire people.' The historian of the imperial era is obviously trying his strength, and is at the point to be born.

That which comes out especially in this essay, and which was to be the very spirit of Gibbon's method, is that one class of facts is never sacrificed to another, that no undue authority is allowed to a prominent accident, and that there is an equal abstention from a compilation which stitches together texts in succession, and an absolute system which slices them up at pleasure. 'The critical spirit is for ever comparing the weight of opposed probabilities, and drawing from them a combination which is its property.' 'It is only by putting things together that one can judge.' 'It does not follow that because two things exist together and appear to be intimately connected one owes its origin to the other.' Such are some of Gibbon's maxims; in a word, we find everywhere in this essay a foretaste of that critical spirit which was to be the exact opposite of Mably's rigid and slashing method.

The publication of the essay, which had more success in France than in England, was followed by a singular episode in Gibbon's life. He had gone to press chiefly in obedience to his father's wishes. As at that time some overtures for peace were going on, and he would have liked to enter the diplomatic career, he allowed himself to be persuaded that this public proof of his

talent would aid the efforts of his friends. But the war continued, and the patriotic sentiment stimulated by Pitt prevailing in England, a national militia was formed for defence in case of an invasion. The country gentlemen enrolled themselves in numbers; Gibbon and his father were among the most zealous in their county, and gave in their names without knowing exactly to what they were committing themselves. But this militia was a serious affair; it was persevered with, and had almost the consequences of a voluntary enlistment. The South Hampshire battalion formed a little corps of four hundred and seventy-six men, including officers, commanded by a lieutenant-colonel and a major, Gibbon's father. Gibbon himself with the rank of captain was first at the head of his own company and then of the Grenadier company; afterwards, in the absence of the two field officers, he found himself actually entrusted by his father with the duty of giving orders and drilling the battalion. The little corps did not remain confined to its own county; in the course of two years and a half it was encamped in many various places—at Winchester, on the coast of Dover, on Salisbury Plain. There were manœuvres morning and evening, they aspired to equal the regular troops, and in the general reviews they did not cut a bad figure; another year's training and they would be as good as the regulars. As Gibbon tells us this a flash of enthusiasm passes over his face; it is not without some secret satisfaction that he recalls those years of active service. He is not sorry when it comes to an end, but he is glad that it has happened. The chief benefit that he owed to the militia was the mingling

with men, getting a better knowledge of mankind in general, and of his compatriots in particular; the becoming once more an Englishman, which he had ceased to be, and of learning what a soldier is. He was to write the history of the most warlike of nations, and he had a practical knowledge of the details of the track. He had earned the right thereafter to talk about the Legion. 'The captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers,' says he, anticipating the reader's smile, 'has not been altogether useless to the historian of the Roman Empire.'

In him the man of letters never allows himself to be forgotten. We have a commonplace book of his reading during his leisure time in camp; a good number of the extracts are in French. He read all Homer, and mastered Greek thoroughly for the first time. He was always on the look-out for a historical subject, still distrusting his powers and feeling all the dignity of that branch of literature. 'The historian's is a fine part, but that of a chronicler, or a compiler of newspaper cuttings, is contemptible enough.' The crusade of Richard Cœur de Lion attracts him for a moment; but on reflection those barbarous ages, those motives so foreign to him, cannot fix his attention, and he feels as if he would be rather on the side of Saladin. The history of Swiss liberty, the history of the republic of Florence under the Medici tempt him by turns, and he even makes a little progress with the first. He depicts himself to the life, and without flattery, in his journal at the age of twenty-five (May, 1762): of honourable character, even virtuous, incapable of a base action, perhaps formed for generous actions, but proud,

stiff, having much to do before he could be agreeable in society, steadily taking pains with himself. Of wit, properly so called—wit with dash and spurt—he has none. His imagination is rather strong than amiable, his memory wide and retentive. Extent and penetration are the pre-eminent qualities of his understanding, but he lacks vivacity and has not yet acquired the exactitude at which he aims to make up for it. This is the very same man, who, judging himself in after-times at the age of fifty-four, almost at the limit of his career, still said of himself: 'The primitive soil has been considerably improved by cultivation, but one may ask if some flowers of illusion, some agreeable errors, have not been rooted up with those ill weeds which are called prejudices.' Culture, sequence, order, method—a fine, cold, delicate intellect, always exercised and sharpened—moderated and constant affections, but no sacred spark, no thunder peal—these are the traits which Gibbon shows us throughout, and from his earliest youth.

All that has been said above is merely extracted and condensed from his 'Memoirs.' I have only tried to reproduce them with somewhat fresher and more marked outlines after the fashion of the present time.

II.

As soon as he was free from his militia service, Gibbon obtained his father's leave to travel for some years. He saw Paris for the first time in January, 1763, Switzerland and Lausanne once more, and devoted an entire year to visiting Italy. On approaching Rome, the sight of it made his heart beat fast, and aroused an enthusiasm which he takes the trouble to note as unusual with him. After a sleepless night, he hastened first to the Forum. He passed several months in acquainting himself with those memorable spots. 'It was at Rome,' he says, 'on October 15, 1764, as I sat musing among the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.' But his plan was at first confined to the decline of the city itself rather than to that of the empire, and it was only subsequent meditation and reading that enlarged his plan and gave him his whole subject.

One can easily see that if an august and magnificent idea has the chief place in Gibbon's inspiration there is an epigrammatic intention beside it. He conceives the

ancient Roman system, he reveres and admires it; but he will not do justice to that not less marvellous system which succeeded to it in the course of centuries, that unbroken spiritual power of aged pontiffs, that policy which knew how to be by turns intrepid, imperial, and superb, and most often prudent; he will not enter into it. From time to time as his solemn History goes on, one will seem to hear coming back, as if by contrast, that vesper chant of the first day, that depreciatory impression which he will record below his breath.

For the general view of this History I cannot do better than shelter myself under the authority of a man who has studied it profoundly, who revised and annotated it in the French translation, who unites in short all the conditions required to make him a good judge. M. Guizot tells us that he passed successively through three phases of feeling in regard to Gibbon's work. After a first rapid perusal which allowed him to feel only the interest of a narrative always animated in spite of its length, always clear and limpid in spite of the variety of its subjects, or, as we may say, the quantity of its tributary streams, M. Guizot admits that when he came to examine it more closely on certain points there were some mistakes; he met with some blunders, whether in quotations or in facts; but above all, in places, certain views, certain general shades of partiality which had almost led him to form a severe opinion. Nevertheless, on a third complete and consecutive reading the first impression, corrected doubtless, but not destroyed by the second, came to the surface and prevailed, and M. Guizot declares that, subject to certain restrictions and persistent reserves, he continued

to appreciate in that vast and able work, 'the immensity of the research, the variety of the knowledge, the breadth of the light, and, above all, that truly philosophical accuracy of mind which judges the past as it would do the present,' and which through all extraordinary and unexpected forms of morals, customs and events, has the art of finding in all times the self-same men.

The first volume in quarto of Gibbon's History appeared in 1776, when the author had been member of Parliament for a year. This first volume was followed by five others, of which two appeared in 1781 and the last three in 1788. The work maintained itself to the end in public esteem and favour, but the first volume had the most fashionable success. The first edition was exhausted in a few days, the second and the third were scarcely enough to meet the demand, and it was twice pirated in Dublin; the book was on every table, almost on every dressing-table. Better still, the most important voices were united in adjudging to Gibbon the rank of a classic historian. We have the letters which Hume, already on his deathbed, Robertson, Ferguson, Horace Walpole wrote to him on the subject; all alike approve the work as a whole and the talent with which it is executed. Horace Walpole outdoes all the others in the liveliness of his sympathy and praise. Gibbon would have liked to have had M. Suard, who already had the right of translating Robertson, as his translator in France, but at first he had only Leclerc de Septchênes; it has since been known that the translation to which Septchênes put his name was partly the work of Louis XVI.

In this first volume the historian displayed and developed in the greatest detail the position and constitution of the empire under the Antonines. He carried his explanations back to the policy of Augustus, he depicted in general outlines the reigns and the minds of the five Emperors to whom mankind owed its last great century, the finest and perhaps the most happy of all those which history has recorded; then starting from Commodus he entered upon the unbroken course of his story. The first volume alone contained much matter of different kinds, reflexions remarkable for their arrangement and extent; rapid narratives: the cruelties and strange atrocities of Commodus, Caracalla, Heliogabalus; the useless virtues of Pertinax, Alexander Severus, Probus; the first great effort of the barbarians against the Empire, with a digression upon their manners; Diocletian's able and courageous defence, his new policy which, always keeping an eye on the frontiers, gradually detaches itself from Rome, and which, with a forecast of the act solemnly performed by Constantine, looks to transporting the seat of empire elsewhere; and finally the two chapters relating to the establishment of Christianity and its condition during those first centuries. There was thus an extreme variety of subjects which the author had brought together into one clever tissue, and rendered in a careful and studied style, the elegance of which sometimes reached the point of foppery. In the succeeding volumes the historian relaxed a little and developed more and more; he did not reject any branch of events and of facts which lay in his way over his immense field. His main line is as far as possible

Roman, afterwards Byzantine, but there comes a point when by dint of prolonging it he loses it. Think merely that this History which is in contact with Augustus, and actually begins with Trajan, does not end till the fourteenth century, with Rienzi's tribunitian parody and classical revival. Yet Gibbon treats successively and in detail of Goths, Lombards, Franks, Turks, Bulgarians, Croatians, Hungarians, Normans, and twenty races besides; it is the most comprehensive history ever seen. In proportion as the river grows smaller and goes on to lose itself in the sand, it keeps receiving some new and disastrous torrent which completes the destruction of its bank, but at the same time maintains it and feeds it a little longer. The calm and tranquil historian notes all this, accepts and measures it. In these accessory parts he will, as a matter of course, be some day surpassed by those who will make a special study of those devastating races, and will go back to their roots and sources in Asia. Where he remains original is in his setting out of the last great Roman or Byzantine reigns; when he speaks of Diocletian, Constantine, Theodosius; of heroic souls born after their time like Majorian, of Justinian and of Belisarius. Considered from this point of view, his history is like a fine long-continued retreat before swarms of enemies; there is no impetuosity, no fire, but there are tactics and order. He encamps, halts and deploys wherever he can.

I confine myself to rendering the impression which a continuous perusal makes on me, and extracting from it the essential quality of the author's talent and wit. I will say then also that in many cases Gibbon does not produce a perfect light; he stops short of the summit

where perhaps it shines. He is excellent at analyzing and bringing out the complicated parts of his subject, but he never brings them together under one swift glance or in one outflow of genius; it is all rather intelligent than elevated. Faithful to his humour, even in the processes of his intellect, he levels everything too much. May I make a joke which is suggested to me by himself? When he has the gout, it never takes him in fits, but treats him very much as it did Fontenelle: it follows a slow and regular course. Similarly, his History goes on uniformly with an even step, without fitfulness, without violence. If a great revolution takes place anywhere in the human soul he will not feel it, he will not call attention to it by lighting a beacon on his tower or sounding a stroke of his silver bell. That is the historical complaint which people have to make against him in regard to his explanation of Christianity. He does not understand that at that moment a wholly new moral view, a new virtue, was coming to birth. That regular, customary, indolent slavery which was the law of the old world and which Gibbon palliates as much as he can, appeared all of a sudden horrible to certain people, and little by little they inoculated nearly all with this horror. The easy tolerance which the ancients had for different opinions and religious beliefs, a tolerance which Gibbon makes so strong a point of displaying, was more than compensated by the slight regard in which people then so usually held human life. Something incomplete comes in even among the just notions which Gibbon enunciates on that subject.

In a word, if he has very well displayed and explained to us the nature of Cicero's, of Trajan's, of Pliny's

tolerance—a disposition doubtless humane, but still born of or accompanied by a profound indifference and a secret contempt for the objects of a worship which among the ancients was a matter of custom and exterior form, not of opinion or belief—he has not in the same degree comprehended the new feeling which faced and fought that tolerance, and was in the end to wear it out. Christianity has in fact, and there lies its innovation in morals, implanted in men a livelier and more absolute feeling for truth; it is a religion which takes possession of the whole being. One must, in order to be tolerant, invest oneself with something more, and then one is so in virtue of a principle quite different from that of the ancients, in virtue of charity. Why did not Gibbon, who did justice to the soul of the ancients, do as much for that of the Christians? Why, when he was wholly occupied with defending and justifying the ancient police administration of the Emperors and the methods of the Roman magistrate, did he overlook the introduction into the world and the establishment in men's hearts of a new heroism? He took warning by the effect of his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, and was in other respects very much more moderate and restrained in the remainder of his History. Robertson, who awaited with some dread his treatment of Julian's reign, congratulates him on having so well touched and characterized in this famous example that grotesque mixture of pagan fanaticism and philosophical fatuity, associated with the merits of a hero and a superior mind. In the portraits of Christians, even of the greatest during these ages, Gibbon is content to be never quite clear. He does not present

them on their greater sides, and, as a learned ecclesiastic of our days has remarked, 'his work swarms with equivocal portraits.' Gibbon dwelt with a surely malicious complacency on the wretched theological subtleties, on the infinite division of the sects which divided men's minds during the lower Empire, but he does not approach them in the fashion of Voltaire. Voltaire has a sarcastic laugh and outbreaks of his grin, Gibbon's laugh is composed and silent. He slips it in at the bottom of a note, as for instance that which ends what he says of St. Augustine; like Bayle, he delights, but always in a note, to quote certain passages of erudite and cold indecency, and he comments upon them with an elaborate elegance.

Irony, caustic reserve, comprehensive penetration, easy and natural explanation of many facts which, extraordinary as they seemed, he reduces to an appearance of simplicity, such are his qualities, and many of them go near to be faults. He more than once invokes Montesquieu. He says that at a certain period of his life he read the *Provinciales* every year, but he does not give the same stimulus as Montesquieu and Pascal; he never gives his reader's mind the unexpected impulse which awakens it, transports it, and excites it to discovery. He writes in his armchair and leaves you in yours while you read him; or if he gets up it is only to take two or three turns about his room, while he is arranging his phrase and settling his expression.

Mirabeau was not of this sort, it is well known, and I should not remark upon it if it had not happened that one day, out of patience at this coldness, he launched a vehement tirade against Gibbon and his History. This out-

break was not in the tribune, but in a letter. Mirabeau was in London in 1785, he was dining at the Marquis of Lansdowne's with several distinguished Englishmen, and by a curious misunderstanding he thought that he there saw and heard Gibbon in person, though Gibbon was at that time living in Switzerland. It does not matter whom he took for him, nor does it matter to know if the whole thing is not a little invention on his part; what is positive is his letter, which we have, and which was addressed to Samuel Romilly. Mirabeau inveighs against the person whom he supposes to be Gibbon, and against the discourse which he says he heard from his mouth. He asserts that he was on the point of answering him; he remembered in a moment his History, that elegant and cold History in which is drawn 'so odiously false a picture of the happiness of the world' during that crushing period of the Roman establishment. He adds, 'I have never been able to read his book without being astonished that it was written in English, and at each instant I was tempted to address Mr. Gibbon and say to him, "You an Englishman? not a bit of it." This admiration for an empire of more than two hundred millions of men, in which there is not a single man who has the right to call himself free, this effeminate philosophy which gives more praises to luxury and pleasure than to the virtues, this style always elegant, never energetic, proclaim at best the slave of an Elector of Hanover.' Evidently on that day Mirabeau felt a need to be the orator, and to give himself an adversary whom he might treat with invective. He imagined to himself that Gibbon was before him, and uttered his apostrophe. In any case he

has overshot the mark and has only been declamatory, and while displaying in turn his own defects he has merely proved to us how entirely the family of minds to which he belongs is opposed to that of Gibbon. It would not be fair, before quitting the History, if we were not to call attention to some places of a thoroughly literary character and of a happy wealth of matter, in which the author is quite free to apply his natural qualities, and to employ his talent. For example, a carefully written passage on the schools of Greek philosophy at the moment when the edict of Justinian suppressed them, and again, quite at the end of the work, to considerations on the Renaissance in Italy, on the arrival of the scholars from Constantinople, at the regret with which Petrarch received a Homer which he could not read in the original, and on the good luck of Boccaccio, more learned in this respect, and more favoured by fortune. These are fine chapters treated with a sort of predilection, and giving evidence to the very end of copious fertility. Far from ending abruptly, he well enjoys prolonging it. He finishes his long course almost as if it were a walk, and at the moment of putting down his pen, he halts to consider the final surroundings of his subject, and takes his rest in it. He has nothing like Montesquieu's panting cry on reaching the shore, but no more had he his dash, his discoveries of ideas in every direction, or his genius.

On his return to Italy, in October, 1765, Gibbon had passed through Paris. There he had found Mme. Necker, lately married, and she had given him a good welcome; but it was in 1777, after the publication of his first

volume, that he made his longest and most agreeable stay with us. It only depended on him to be quite the fashion there, as David Hume had been some time before. M. Necker was minister. Mme. Necker's house was for Gibbon like his own. His old friend had forgiven him everything, and Gibbon, who did not think himself so much to blame, enjoyed that social intimacy with a tranquil gratitude, without remorse and without surprise. During the six months that he stayed in Paris he made a conquest more difficult than had been that of Mme. Necker. He earned the goodwill of Mme. du Deffand, susceptible as she was when a bore was concerned, and she found his conversation charming and easy. That is the general effect of the impression he made on her, for there were days when it varied in degree. Here is a little consecutive report which gives the measure and the degree of Gibbon's amiability during this stay in Paris. I take it from Mme. du Deffand's letters to Horace Walpole:

May 18, 1777.—'I am very well pleased with Mr. Gibbon during the week that he has been here. I have seen him almost every day. He converses easily, and speaks French very well. I hope that he will be a great resource to me.'

May 27.—'I have not answered you about Mr. Gibbon. I was wrong. I think he has much intelligence. His conversation is easy and full of matter. He pleases me much, all the more so that he does not embarrass me.'

June 8.—'I am getting more and more at my ease with Mr. Gibbon. He is indeed a man of intelligence, and takes every tone easily. He is here just as French as M. de Choiseul, de Beauvau, and the rest. I flatter myself that he likes me. We sup together almost every day.'

At this point there is a slight movement downwards

—a slight impression of weariness, which from the reading of the book has almost passed to the author:

August 10.—'I will whisper in your ear that I do not at all like Mr. Gibbon's work. It is declamatory, oratorical. That is the tone of our fine wits. There is nothing but ornament, decoration, tinsel, and no bottom. I am only in the middle of the first volume of a translation, which is a third of the quarto, at the death of Pertinax. I dropped this reading without difficulty, and it cost me a little effort to resume it. I find the author amiable enough; but he has, if I am not mistaken, a great ambition to be celebrated. He solicits with undisguised efforts the favour of all our clever men, and it seems to me that he is sometimes mistaken as to the verdicts which he gets. In conversation he wishes to shine, and to take what he believes to be our tone, and there he succeeds pretty well. He is kind and well-mannered, and I believe him to be a good fellow. I should be very glad to have more acquaintances like him, for, all things considered, he is superior to most of the people with whom I live.'

Even when he is below par, Gibbon still keeps his position in Mme. du Deffand's mind. It is a good sign, for she is a severe judge. On certain points concerning him she does not vary:

September 21.—'Mr. Gibbon has the greatest success here. People are fighting for him. He behaves very well; and without, I think, having as much wit as the late Mr. Hume, he does not fall into the same absurdities.'

Lastly, in the following passage, written by Mme. du Deffand just after he had taken leave of her, we have her very exact, very judicious conclusion, and the final word:

October 26.—'As for Gibbon, he is a very reasonable man, who has plenty of conversation, infinite learning—you would add, perhaps, infinite wit, and perhaps you would be right. I have not

made up my mind on that head. He makes too much of our approbation, and he has too much desire to gain it. It has always been on the tip of my tongue to say to him—Do not disturb yourself—you deserve the honour of being a Frenchman. In my own private case, I have all sorts of grounds for being pleased with him, and it is quite true that I am very sorry at his departure.'

There was a success, and it represents to us in summary Gibbon's success in Paris. In the House of Commons, of which he was a member, Gibbon got nothing so flattering. He never spoke. He had entered Parliament with very positive views, of which he makes no disguise. 'You have not forgotten,' he wrote some years later to a Swiss friend,* 'that I entered Parliament without patriotism, without ambition, and that my views were entirely limited to the comfortable and respectable place of a Lord of Trade.' At the worst, if he did not get a place, the House of Commons seemed to him an agreeable kind of coffee-house, an instructive club, a good school for the historian. The great and stormy discussions on America were at their height; Gibbon supported the policy of the Government with his vote, and once with his pen. He belonged to Lord North's faithful mute battalion. In the 'Life of Fox' we find a lively anecdote and some satirical verses on Gibbon's versatility—on his Parliamentary decline and fall. There is no versatility about a man who expresses himself as we have just seen him doing; he is a Ministerialist born, and if he finds himself thrown for an instant into opposition, it is only, so to say, by physical force. Gibbon got the post of Lord Commissioner of Trade, to which he

* [To Deyverdun, May 20, 1783.]

aspired, and kept it for three years (1779—1782), with a salary of £750 a year; but on the abolition of the Board of Trade, finding himself straitened in income, he began to think of leaving the public life, to which he was so ill-adapted, of recovering his independence, and retiring to Switzerland to complete his History. He wrote to consult his old friend, Deyverdun, at Lausanne, sounding him on the subject, in order to see if, as two old bachelors, they might not fill out their unmated lives by wedding them together.

Deyverdun kindled at once, and answers him on June 10, 1783, by a sketch of a happy life, the very thing to tempt. He knows his friend well; he wishes to withdraw him from a political existence not suited to him, in which his real nature must inevitably have been injured. 'Remember, my dear friend,' he says, 'that I was sorry to see you enter Parliament, and I think that I was only too true a prophet. I am sure that that career has caused you more deprivation than enjoyment—more pain than pleasure. I have always thought, since I have known you, that your destiny was to make your life happy through the pleasures of the study and of society; that any other step was a departure from the way of happiness, and that nothing but the combined qualities of man of letters and agreeable man of society could earn for you fame, honour, pleasure, and a continuance of enjoyment.' Then he shows him, as through a glass, a pretty house just outside Lausanne, opening on the road down to Ouchy—eleven rooms, large and small, facing east and south, a terrace, a trellis, the famous alley or covered acacia walk, all the features of grounds pleasantly diversified to the eye, the wealth of

an 'English' garden, and an orchard; above all, the view of the lake, and the mountains of Savoy opposite. Gibbon was entrapped. He had a good deal of trouble in breaking his London engagements, and cutting loose from his friends, especially from one who was dear to him, Lord Sheffield. He overcame these, however, arrived at Lausanne, and, after a few small and inevitable preliminary mishaps, soon found himself master of himself, his whole time, his studies, his friendship, and of an earthly paradise.

Here it was that he wrote the later volumes of his History, and enjoyed his escape from those public contests in which he was only an often-wearied looker-on, or an actor without distinction and without solid merit. There are some charming letters to this effect from him to his friend, Lord Sheffield, still in the thick of the fight; most often rallying him pleasantly, pitying him for being always in that pandemonium, the House of Commons. There are some letters which, in their opening, might be those of Atticus (if we had them) to Cicero. Thus:

'LAUSANNE,
'*November* 14, 1783.

'Last Tuesday, November 11, after plaguing* and vexing yourself all the morning about some business of your fertile creation, you went to the House of Commons, and passed the afternoon, the evening, and perhaps the night, without sleep or food, stifled in a close room by the heated respiration of six hundred politicians, inflamed by party and passion, and tired of the repetition of dull nonsense which in that illustrious assembly so far outweighs the

* [Ste-Beuve renders 'après avoir bien pesté'; not quite the same thing.]

proportion of reason and eloquence. On the same day, after a studious morning, a friendly dinner, and a cheerful assembly of both sexes, I retired to rest at eleven o'clock, satisfied with the past day, and certain that the next would afford me the return of the same quiet and rational enjoyments. *Which has the better bargain?*'

As it was, each was taking his own line, and Gibbon had no intolerance about ways of being happy; he knew that every nature has its own. Lord Sheffield, given up by preference to the active life of public affairs, was in some repects more difficult of the two to satisfy; he required the resources of a world which Gibbon could do very well without. 'You are,' writes Gibbon in May, 1784, just after Sheffield had lost his election—'You are in search of knowledge, and you are not content with your company, unless you can derive from them information or extraordinary amusement. For my part, I like to draw information from books, and I am satisfied with polite attention and easy manners.' Earlier in the same letter he had said: 'If this repulse should teach you to renounce all connection with king and ministers, and patriots and parties, and Parliaments, for all of which you are by many degrees too honest, I should exclaim with Teague,* of respectable memory, "By my shoul, dear joy, you have *gained* a loss."'

He takes further pleasure in demonstrating to his friend that his corner of Switzerland is not so destitute of good society and conversation as people at a distance might think. He writes, on October 22, 1784:

* [Or, as we should now say, Paddy. It has puzzled the French critic, who writes T*****.]

'A few weeks ago, as I was walking on our terrace with M. Tistso, the celebrated physician, M. Mercier, the author of the *Tableau de Paris*, the Abbé Raynal, Monsieur, Madame, and Mademoiselle Necker, the Abbé de Bourbon, natural son to Lewis XV., the hereditary Prince of Brunswick, Prince Henry of Prussia, and a dozen counts, barons, and extraordinary persons, among whom was a natural son of the Emperor of Russia—— Are you satisfied with this list?'

As for the town itself, after having seen it in all seasons, in its coquettish hours of glorious springtime, no less than in those of isolation and winter retirement, Gibbon declares that his taste for it has never weakened. He says so in charming phrases such as his correspondence is everywhere strewn with:

'Of my situation here I have little new to say, except a very comfortable and singular truth, that my passion for my wife or mistress (Fanny Lausanne), is not palled by satiety and possession of two years. I have seen her in all seasons, and in all humours, and though she is not without faults they are infinitely overbalanced by her good qualities. Her face is not handsome, but her person and everything about her has admirable grace and beauty.'—(*Letter of September* 5, 1785.)

And he goes on following up his metaphor, dandling it even a little too long. In spite of this little touch of affectation, the whole correspondence never ceases to have a gentle, yet sufficiently keen, charm. Even merriment finds its way in.

Gibbon was, indeed, not formed for serious love-affairs, but he was essentially fitted for the intercourse of friendship, and he experienced all its moods. On his return from a journey which he made to England in 1788, with a view to the publication of his final volumes, he found his friend Deyverdun ill. He was attacked by fits of

apoplexy which soon carried him off,* and it took Gibbon a long time to recover his satisfaction in the charming abode for ever widowed of his friend. Every spot, every walk, every bench recalled pleasant hours spent in converse with him who was no more. 'Since the loss of poor Deyverdun,' he exclaims in a letter of May, 1790, 'I am *alone;* and even in Paradise solitude is painful to a social mind.' About this time he had serious thoughts of marriage, or, at least, of adopting one of his younger relatives—Miss Charlotte Porter, his first cousin, if I mistake not. 'How happy should I think myself,' he wrote to this young lady's mother, 'if I had a daughter of her age and disposition, who, in a short time, would be qualified to govern my family, and to be my companion and comfort in the decline of life!' He recognised when it was too late that, 'as we descend into the vale of years, our infirmities require some domestic female society.' But Mme. Necker, to whom he did not fear to disclose his sorrows, and in whom, towards the end, he found his last, as she had been his first, friend of her sex, said to him: 'Be sure that you do not form one of those late attachments; the only marriage which can afford happiness in mature life is one which was contracted in youth. It is then alone that union is perfect, that there is an exchange of tastes, a response of sentiments, a community of ideas, a mutual moulding of the intellectual faculties: the whole life is doubled, and the whole life is a prolongation of youth.'

Failing this impossible happiness, Mme. Necker sometimes tried to suggest to him other sources of

* July, 1789.

consolation, and the sovereign remedy against isolation of the affections. She made him promise to read her husband's work on the 'Importance of Religious Opinions,' and took the same occasion of saying some kind and delicate words, which Gibbon, at least, did not repel, on the subject of Christianity and the unseen world.

The French Revolution, the first developments of which had sent so many exiles from France to the shores of the Lake of Geneva, was the subject that pre-occupied Gibbon during his last years. He, who was astonished by so few things in history, was astonished by this. He judged it from the very first without any illusions, nor did this require any considerable retracing of his steps. He was essentially a Conservative, and had never had any taste for tribunes or innovators.* At any rate, the Revolution produced upon him the somewhat strange effect, which was yet, when one thinks of it, natural enough, of restoring, or rather giving him a little of that patriotism, of which, up till then, he had possessed so small a share. When he saw the excesses which were dishonouring a cause that might have been so fine—when he considered the boundless field of anarchy and of adventure upon which men were blindly setting out, he came back to love for that English Constitution towards which he had always been lukewarm enough: he felt a new pride in what he called the good sense of his country, and in her consciousness of the

* Remembering, apropos of this, his historic attack on Christianity, he said in justification and explanation of it: 'The early Church, which I have handled with some freedom, was itself in its own day an innovation; and I was attached to the old Pagan establishment.'

advantages which she enjoyed. He writes to Lord Sheffield in August, 1790:

'The French spread so many lies about the sentiments of the English nation, that I wish the most considerable men of all parties and descriptions would join in some public act, declaring themselves satisfied, and resolved to support our present Constitution. Such a declaration would have a wonderful effect in Europe; and were I thought worthy, I myself would be proud to subscribe it. I have a great mind to send you something of a sketch, such as all thinking men might adopt.'

He returns more than once warmly to this idea. It is curious to see Gibbon becoming as ardent as Burke, and raising his hand for the Ark of the Constitution like Fox or Macaulay.*

This man, who, with all his habitual moderation and fairness, was far from being cold-blooded, died partly a victim to his zeal in friendship. In the spring of 1793, he heard that his friend, Lord Sheffield's wife, had just died. He did not hesitate to hasten to him, starting for England by way of Germany, a journey which he had for some time been putting off, and which present circumstances and the declaration of war rendered then more difficult. His ailments increased, and after a few months' stay in his native land, he died there on January 16, 1794, aged nearly fifty-seven. His friend, Lord Sheffield, has raised the most worthy and most durable monument to him by the publication of his letters. We can guess from them that Gibbon's conversation was, in truth, superior both in interest and in charm to his writings, and that in him the profound and

* See, for instance, the considerations which conclude the first portion of Mr. Macaulay's fine *History of England*.

accomplished man of letters was never divorced from the most agreeable man of society.* Some of the latest letters, indeed, have an accent of emotion that one would not expect. That which he wrote to Lord Sheffield at the first news of his sorrow, and just as he was starting to join his friend, is beautiful and touching; one would almost say that a flash of religion had passed over it. Another letter, written some days later, and with an increasing sense of anxiety for the bereaved family, ends with these words: 'Adieu! If there be any invisible guardians, may they watch over you and yours. Adieu!' Thus the social, and even the moral, character of the man gains by being viewed in this combination of relations, and presents itself under a fresh light. That is the evidence given by the most refined and most worthy of respect among his contemporaries when the letters were published. Those too, of to-day, who have by reading them lived, were it but, like myself, for a fortnight, in that discreet and polished intimacy, will understand that Gibbon, without belonging to the class of geniuses, without even being of those who have the talent to stir men or rouse their enthusiasm, has had his faithful admirers and his affectionate pilgrims. Byron wrote from Ouchy, near Lausanne, to his publisher, Murray, on June 27, 1816:

'I am thus far (kept by stress of weather) on my way back to Diodati (near Geneva), from a voyage in my boat round the lake;

* [Lord Sheffield says it in so many words: 'Those who have enjoyed the society of Mr. Gibbon will agree with me, that his conversation was still more captivating than his writings. Perhaps no man ever divided time more fairly between literary labour and social enjoyment.']

and I enclose you a sprig of *Gibbon's acacia*, and some rose-leaves from his garden, which, with part of his house, I have just seen. You will find honourable mention, in his Life, made of this "acacia," when he walked out in the night of concluding his History. The garden and summer-house, where he composed, are neglected, and the last utterly decayed; but they still show it as his "cabinet," and seem perfectly aware of his memory.'

*GROTE'S HISTORY OF GREECE.**

GREAT works written in a foreign language are only really read when they have been translated. Learned men do without translations and despise them; they read the originals, and if they were candid most of them would confess that they refer to them even more than they read them. But a long, unbroken, complete course of reading is only possible to the greater number of even educated people when it is easy, and one of the causes which have most delayed the introduction among us of fundamental ideas from abroad has been the slowness of translations and importations. A useful and capacious library will shortly supply this want, this intellectual demand. The *Librairie Internationale* has undertaken to give us a collection of all the great foreign contemporary historians. We already have, or we shall have very soon, in whole or in part, Buckle's *History of Civilization in England*, the *History of the Fourteenth Century*, by Gervinus, Prescott's *History of Philip II.*, the *Revolution of the Low Countries in the Sixteenth Century*, by Motley, Mommsen's *Roman History* (a different translation to that which is being published concurrently in

* Translated by M. de Sadous.

France); finally we shall be able to read this *History of Greece*, by Mr. Grote, one of the foreign associates of the French Institute, whose work is among the monumental creations of our time. Some contemporary critics, M. Mérimeé and M. Léo Joubert, gave some time ago, in our principal reviews, selections from it which have whetted the appetite of all cultivated minds.

M. de Sadous, the translator to whom this great work has been confided, is a learned professor, an Oriental scholar who has translated some fragments of the *Mahâbhârata* from the Sanskrit, and to whom we owe a translation of Weber's *History of Indian Literature*. It was important that Mr. Grote's work, lined as it is with learned notes and escorted, so to say, at every step by original texts, should reach us under the charge of a translator familiar with the Greek language; and for every Indian scholar, initiated into Sanskrit, Greek is only a comparatively easy development, and like a collateral branch derived from his former high linguistic studies.

That which characterizes Mr. Grote's work in the highest degree, in the first volume which I have been studying, is a straightforward good sense and good judgement which, free from all preconceived ideas and traditional superstition, examines, balances, and discusses, asserting nothing which does not seem probable or possible. Where he doubts he says so, and because there is uncertainty everywhere in this origin of Greek history, which begins in mythology, he offers us neither explanation nor interpretation; he confines himself to laying before us each mythical story, fully and with

its variations, just as the Greeks related it amongst themselves.

His treatment in these first volumes of his history is absolutely novel, and, in my opinion, the only one that is satisfactory. I still remember the impression I invariably felt in my childhood at the outset of all these histories of Greece, when I opened them at random, an impression of uncertainty, doubt, disappointment, the absence of any sure indication and of any firm ground amid these clouds and gilded mists. What truth is there at the bottom of all these heroic legends about Inachus and Io, Danaë and the Danaïdes, Perseus, Hercules, Prometheus, Jason and Medea? How much that is fabulous or non-fabulous is there in the expedition of the Argonauts, in the misfortunes and atrocities of the house of Peleus, in the Cretan legend of Minos and the Minotaur, Ariadne and Theseus, in the Theban legend of Laïus and Œdipus? Is there an historical basis to them? Is it not merely in some cases, as has been recently maintained about Laïus and Œdipus, an astronomical legend, a solar myth sprung from the same source as the most ancient Vedas? These are obscure questions, doubtless without a solution, in which learning and ingenuity can vie with one another *ad infinitum*, and even make conjectures with every kind of industry and skill, but in which precise and clear minds, those who 'take evidence for their law,' the minds of the type of Locke, of the family of Gibbon and Hallam, will find no sound ground nor place to set their feet. Mr. Grote has taken his side firmly: in his eyes those times, and the stories of every kind which filled them, had nothing to do with history; he

has been satisfied with setting them out in detail as the earliest authors have handed them down. He has been right, in my opinion, to take his own line in this matter, and he has set a tardy example by which all the other historians, worthy of the name, should have begun. It is all very well to say that it is strange if real positive facts are not concealed beneath these fables, that there is never all that smoke without fire, that it is almost impossible there should not have been some nautical expedition which has given a pretext for the story of the Argonauts, that certainly some great expedition of the Greeks on the coast of Asia has given rise to the legend of Troy; if the general fact is granted will the cause of history proper be any the more forwarded? I should like to know, supposing we had lost all certain testimony about Charlemagne and were reduced to the romances of chivalry, to the *Chansons de Geste* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in order to reconstruct him and his period, where would be the star and compass for getting our bearings? Should we succeed, even with the most sagacious spirit of divination, in disentangling anything reasonable and really worthy of history amid these disfigured narratives twenty times transformed and distorted? Mr. Grote has been the first to feel the difficulty in its full extent, and he has accepted it completely and entirely. He has read all the Greeks, yet he confines himself to representing and summing up for us all the different versions in which *Græcia mendax* delighted; embroidering again and again at her pleasure over those earliest periods in which fable shows itself inextricably mixed with a few intangible

traces of truth. He must be heard for himself when he justifies the method he has pursued and very cleverly lays bare his thought to us:

'The times which I thus set apart from the region of history are discernible only through a different atmosphere—that of epic poetry and legend. To confound together these disparate matters is, in my judgement, essentially unphilosophical. I describe the earlier times by themselves, as conceived by the faith and feeling of the first Greeks, and known only through their legends—without presuming to measure how much or how little of historical matter these legends may contain. If the reader blame me for not assisting him to determine this—if he ask me why I do not undraw the curtain and disclose the picture—I reply in the words of the painter Zeuxis, when the same question was addressed to him, on exhibiting his masterpiece of imitative art: "The curtain *is* the picture." What we now read as poetry and legend, was once accredited history, and the only genuine history which the first Greeks could conceive or relish of their past times; the curtain conceals nothing behind, and cannot by any ingenuity be withdrawn. I undertake only to show it as it stands—not to efface, still less to re-paint it.'

These fine words of an excellent and great intellect, who can employ an image and figure worthy of Bacon, are sufficient to show how little Mr. Grote is a mere positivist about history, and how, though so scrupulous in examining and admitting evidence, he is by no means exclusive in that matter, nor insensible to those undefined glimpses which, even if they are never to be probed or verified, are, none the less, the necessary horizon of history at its dawn and rising.

Applying his method to the greatest event of those mythical and heroic ages, the Trojan war, Mr. Grote encounters in this aspect the Homeric poems, the *Iliad*

and the *Odyssey*, and he reaches conclusions which have pleased me much by their moderation and plausibility, and have seemed to me to bring a certain repose, a conciliatory mediation, into what one may call the state of trouble and divisions in which the last Homeric battles, waged for more than fifty years among the learned men beyond the Rhine, have been fain to leave us in France.

In this case, as elsewhere, in all that concerns the distant and misty ages where all historical landmarks are wanting, Mr. Grote has not concerned himself to seek for any solid kernel which might exist under the brilliant fiction. According to him the only certainly true part of a poetic legend is the colour, and even this local colour, this true account of society and morals, is not that of the heroes and times represented; it only belongs to the age of the poet who relates and sings. It is thus that our ancient *Chansons de Geste* where Charlemagne and Alexander figure, teach us nothing about the heroes themselves or the state of society in their time, and they would be only misleading if one consulted them with a view to such information; but they do represent for us with simple truth the manners of the feudal age when the troubadours set to work upon those ancient outlines and went on with them for the benefit of their contemporaries. In the same way the customs described in the Homeric process tell us nothing absolutely certain about the manners of society at the time of the siege of Troy, if there really was such a siege; they only belong to the age of Homer himself, and in that sense they are perfectly true.

What, then, is the age of Homer? What was the

method of those who sang in it and charmed the most heroic of peoples as they emerged from infancy? Who really was Homer, and what originally were the poems attributed to him and which, after having formed 'the dignity and charm of their legendary period' have become the honour and the very heritage of the human race? These are all questions which Mr. Grote has taken up without any bias for or against; which he has treated afresh with a full knowledge of the subject and as a real critic, only giving himself out modestly as a faithful and discreet narrator. It is a pleasure to see in his hands the boldness and incomparable originality of German criticism tempered and corrected by the practical English spirit.

Let us here recall the exact terms of the question as it was put seventy years ago by the writing of Wolf, called simply *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (Introduction to Homer).

One of the most learned of French scholars, but one who had even more erudition than judgement, d'Ansse de Villoison, discovered in 1781, in the library of St. Mark's at Venice, and published in 1788, a text of the *Iliad*, with a tremendous apparatus of grammatical explanatory notes which initiated the learned reader into all the domestic labours, and, so to speak, into the kitchens of the Alexandrian critics; you took part in their differences, their doubts as to the authenticity of such or such a line; you were introduced into the very study and laboratory of Aristarchus. This learned Villoison, who had published the Venice manuscript, thought he had only brought one treasure more, and that the richest of all, into the temple consecrated to

old Homer; in reality he had brought an arsenal, a fire-ship, a bomb—a whole army of assailants emerged from this edition as from the wooden horse. As for him, he would never believe his eyes, and he died in his classic blindness, maintaining that such a sacrilege, such a monstrous absurdity as that of the men who denied Homer, did not even deserve to be confuted.*

Whatever opinion one finally comes to on this great case, Wolf is more than an ingenious and clever man of learning; he is one of those men endowed with the critical faculty that Germany is wont to produce, and who, with their first fresh and deep intuition, create a science and found a study. He gave a fresh start, as soon as he undertook it, to the whole study of Homer. This preface of 280 pages was a revolution (1795).

No doubt before Wolf more than one doubt had arisen about the origin and the first form of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, about the unity both of the composition and the author, as applied to long poems come from such a distance and handed down through the obscurity of ages; but these had only been hints, words dropped in passing, whims of clever men of no authority, such as the Abbé d'Aubignac, some sagacious and penetrating phrase of Bentley, some philosophical idea of Vico. Wolf was the first who gave its full value to the question, gave himself up to a methodical demonstration by confining it within

* Villoison was a mine of knowledge, but he had a somewhat undigesting appetite for rubbish. It seems, moreover, that he was a great chatterbox—what they call a mill of words. Mr. Fox, who saw him during his journey in France, in 1802, wrote to a friend about his volubility. He is said to have died of a liver complaint caused by over-eating and drinking.

narrow limits, and laid a regular siege to the fortress. While apparently only proposing as his object to compile a good text of Homer, he had been led on to asking himself from a historical point of view what such long-sustained poems as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could have been, and even *if they really could have existed and stood in a complete form*, at a time when writing did not exist, where nothing could be fixed or committed to papyrus or anything else; when, therefore, songs alone floated on the lips and in the memories of men, at the good pleasure of *improvisatori* and bards, and in presence of eager listeners who could only hear them in parts. What would have been the use of great poems arranged and connected when there was no public to demand them or capable of appreciating them as such? What would have been the good of a plan, of a general scheme, of a far-sighted conception to a shifting audience satisfied with varied and disjointed episodes, with touching rhapsodies not subordinated among themselves? What would have been the good, even had it been possible, of putting a ship of the line on the stocks whilst navigation was in its infancy? Why go and build it high on the land when there are no means of launching it, and when even the sea-dock where it could be tried is wanting? Equally repaying would it be to take the trouble to make beforehand a complete comedy or tragedy when there are neither actors to put it on the boards nor an amphitheatre to hold the spectators!

It follows from this, according to Wolf, that Homer's poems as they existed originally in the primitive Homeric state were and ought to be as different as

possible from the poems of an Apollonius of Rhodes, of a Virgil, of a Milton, of any other epic poet destined to be read; that they floated separately, like living members, in a creative atmosphere impregnated with germs of poetry; but that in the form in which we have them and read them to-day, they date only from the time of Solon, or rather of Pisistratus, when the permeating atmosphere being at an end, and the art of writing having come into use, the need was felt of gathering up these public treasures, this inheritance from legendary times; of making to some extent a complete inventory of it, and supplying it with order and connection before it had run the risk of being lost or dispersed. The connecting epic link which since then we have seen and admired in it would only date from that time.

The hypothesis of Wolf, which restored truth to all that belonged to the general Homeric atmosphere, to the inspiration which had animated the bards, and to the wholly poetic credulity of the listeners, was carried to excess when it denied, however, for the whole duration of the pre-historic period, the possibility of the composition of the poems, and the probable predominance of two or three superior spirits who must have taken hold of current materials to make from them real works. Ingenious and learned disciples of Wolf pushed to extremes the consequences of this negative system, and declared they had left no corner of refuge for the ancient faith. Yet private opinion, though in great straits and driven as it were from position to position, still held out; there were animated protests from an opposite point of view

which were in favour of a certain pre-existing unity. Learning, in search for some points of support, found them. Certain worthy adversaries of Wolf, with Ottfried Müller at their head, won back some ground and held the field valiantly. And in this way a Homeric war was waged then and for several years in Germany, of which we in France were too inattentive, too disinterested spectators.

What occurred then has often been seen: our educated men, our professors in the time of the Empire and of the Restoration, even our academicians were hardly aware of these learned debates. For one Guigniant, for one Viguier, for one Cousin, who in their youth and ardour went exploring, the larger number held the received opinion and continued to live as good and loyal rhetoricians and humanists. They had the Homeric faith, they believed in tradition, they did not examine the evidence. It seemed to them at first sight as absurd to say there is an *Iliad* without a Homer as to say there is a world without a Creator and without a God. We in France had a Homer deism, whilst in Germany they had got to a plurality of Homers, or to an infinity of Homerides, to polytheism or pantheism in this matter. Our type of intellect, aided by a certain indolence, held out.

Sainte Croix was the first who at the mere announcement of Wolf's system, and before he even knew him well, hastened to denounce the paradox, and he said as early as 1797:

'One has only to hearken to and obey one's own imagination, without any effort of mind, to be firmly convinced that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both issued from the head of Homer, as com-

plete as Minerva from the brain of Jupiter. The contrary opinion is truly an outrage to the memory of Homer, who thereby is worse treated than was the body of Hector in the plains of Troy.'

This was our French creed. We stopped short there for five-and-twenty years at this kind of religious horror. Boissonade's witty saying has often been quoted. When he published his edition of Homer (1823), not consenting to admit Wolf's arguments yet not feeling himself strong enough to combat them, he entrenched himself behind Aristophanes, and said with I forget who in the comedy: 'No, you will not persuade me, even when you have persuaded me.' He thus withdrew his ball from the game. All the same this little joke concealed a secret reason. There was something true in this inward feeling, this resistance of the literary conscience. Goethe himself was not a stranger to it. He had at first given in fully to Wolf's theory, he was wedded to it; then on reflection he detached himself from it, and said in one of those epigrams which on his lips are as the smile and flower of a deep thought:

'HOMER HIMSELF AGAIN.

'Acute as you are, you emancipated us from all reverence, and in full freedom we recognised that the *Iliad* is nothing but patchwork.

'May our desertion give offence to no man! Youth has power to kindle us, till we would rather think of him as a whole, joyously feel him a whole.'[10]

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* Scharfsinnig habt ihr, wie ihr seid, von aller Verehrung uns befreit, und wir behunnten überfrei, dass Ilius nur ein Flickwerk sei.
Mäg' unser Abfall niemand Kränken! denn Jugend weiss uns zu entzünden, dass wir Ihn lieber als Ganzes denken, als Ganzes freudig Ihn empfinden.

He said again, but in prose this time, and with an effort to account to himself for this involuntary reaction, this *to-and-fro* in his impressions:

'Among the books which employed me in 1820, I will mention Wolf's *Prolegomena*. I took it up again. The works of this man, with whom I was on intimate terms, had for a long time thrown light on my path. By studying this work I reflected back upon myself, and I observed the working of my thoughts. I noticed in myself a continuous *systole* and *diastole*. I was accustomed to consider each of Homer's poems as a whole, and there I saw them separated and dispersed; and while my mind agreed with this idea, a traditional feeling brought everything on a sudden back to a single point—a certain acquiescence which all really poetic productions inspire in us, made me pass over with indulgence the gaps, the contradiction and the faults which were pointed out to me.'

But was it only a delusion and an acquiescence of the will, as Goethe seems to think? Having myself formerly experienced a similar impression at more than one reading of Homer at a time when I had leisure to attend to those noble studies, in which alas, I have only been able to dabble, I was agreeably surprised at finding that Mr. Grote reconciled these different points of view, and presented a combined solution which reasonably answers all demands.

Mr. Grote quite allows with Wolf that Homer's poems neither were nor could have been put into writing during a long lapse of time, which hardly can have been less than two or three centuries; but this absence of anything written is not a sufficient objection for not admitting that there were long, very long poems: that is the whole difficulty. The fidelity of a practised memory is extreme; it is difficult to assign

limits to it, and when there is any need to remember one does remember. Even in our days and in our classical ages, we have some remains, some *vestiges* of these extraordinary memories, and that without it being necessary. One knows, for instance, that Piron composed all his tragedies by heart, and that he repeated them from memory to the actors. The same with Casimir Delavigne: that poet, exact, scholarly, unhomeric as he was, composed by heart, reconstructed whole scenes from memory, and they even say that he thus carried away with him an almost finished tragedy when he died. One of our generals, a disciple both of Xenophon and Virgil, M. de Fezensac, has such a memory that he repeated at a bivouac in Russia to the officers of his regiment a sermon of Massillon's, which he had remembered from childhood; and one day when he was relating this anecdote in a drawing-room and was asked whether he could still repeat it, he declared that he still knew it by heart. They immediately fetched the volume of Massillon out of the library, and the learned warrior began to recite this harmonious but somewhat ornate prose without making a mistake. And even now if Molière had not been printed would he not live on intact, and would he not have been handed down for two hundred years in the memory of the actors of the Comédie-Française? A time there was, we can imagine, when repetition finding itself the only method of publication was marvellously durable in extent and fidelity, and there is nothing improbable in allowing that there may have existed from that time long poems, which have been handed down and preserved.

The *Odyssey* for example—to begin like Mr. Grote with the least complicated case and the one which is open to least objections—the *Odyssey* is manifestly a poem which is based and always must have been based on, and held together from the beginning by, a series of adventures directed toward one common point; which is the return of Ulysses, his recognition by his own people, and his victory over the suitors. The contradictions, the slight discrepancies which are pointed out in it are not among those which would be incompatible with unity of authorship. Some parts of the Odyssey must no doubt have been recited separately, but if you give several days running to one bard, or if you suppose (what took place at public feasts and assemblies) a succession of bards who followed one another and relieved each other for recitation, there is nothing to prevent one imagining that even without any writing the *Odyssey* may have been handed down entire, in complete integrity, except perhaps an unconnected episode here, and a passage or scene there, which may have slipped in as an after-thought: but the first cementing, the crystallization, so to speak, of the poem must date from the legendary period, from the creative and inspired age, from the very epoch of the bards.

If this is the case with the *Odyssey*, why not also with the *Iliad?* Here, however, the difficulties are greater, and the objections have more force. Mr. Grote recognises this: but nevertheless he refuses to believe that the structure of the *Iliad* as we have it dates only from the time of Pisistratus, and is due to a kind of literary and grammatical Commission of the period. The intervention of Pisistratus presupposes on

the contrary a certain existing and recognised aggregation, whose principal features were familiar to the Greek public, although in practice a good number of the bards might often depart from it. It was precisely these corruptions which it became urgent to rectify by going back to a primary and general type; there was no question before this Commission of constructing an *Iliad* for the first time, which would have been a very audacious innovation, but simply of uniting the 'disjointed limbs of a sacred Homer,' the allied portions of a previously existing poem.

Even before Pisistratus, Solon, thinking a good deal about these immense poetic riches floating in the air and about their preservation, so dear to a Greek heart, had laid down a settled order of recitation for the bards of the *Iliad*, for the feast of the Panathenæa. He not only ordered them to recite the epics in their natural sequence without omission or alteration, but he established a prompter or censorial authority to ensure obedience to his orders; which implies the existence of a regular whole or aggregation generally recognised and revered, and also the existence of certain manuscripts.

In spite of all, the *Iliad*, not read as Ronsard read it, in three days, with the heat and interest which is attached to any more or less consecutive reading, but examined and read again with hostile eyes, with critical eyes armed with the microscope, shows many contradictions, in fact incongruities, things entirely beside the mark, excrescences and patches more or less cleverly adapted. The setting out of the plan does not seem to have been produced as in the case of the

Odyssey at one heat or one stroke. The wrath of Achilles, which is announced at the outset as the subject of it, seems to be forgotten and laid aside after Book II.; it is only recalled with difficulty and as a salve to the conscience in the subsequent books, it is only seriously presented to the mind in the course of Book VIII., and reappears in Book IX. merely to disappear once more in the canto which follows, and it only resumes in an uninterrupted manner from Book XI. to the end. The five books which follow the catalogue of ships belong to the Trojan war proper; and one would say there had originally been an *Iliad* and an *Achilleid* quite distinct, which were united later and melted into a single, more comprehensive poem.

The *Achilleid*, which can be traced and followed up in the first song, in the eighth, the ninth, and, starting from the eleventh, up to the end, scarcely lent itself to separate episodes or rhapsodies; the action hurries on. The *Iliad*, on the contrary, composed of special scenes and exploits, of fights and duels between the principal heroes, offers 'a splendid picture of the Trojan war in general,' and corresponds exactly with the more extensive title under which the poem has become immortal. The fatal consequences of the wrath of Achilles do not appear before the end of Book VIII., and are only declared at the moment that the Trojans, favoured by Jupiter, seize the victory decidedly. Book IX., which shows Agamemnon resigned to yield everything to Achilles, nevertheless seems premature and anticipates the catastrophe too soon; it comes without preparation; it looks like a later addition which they did not wish to leave out, 'and which harmonizes in no sense

with that grand sequence of the *Achilleid* which flows from the eleventh to the twenty-second book.' Mr. Grote draws our attention to the fact that there are in the eleventh and following books several passages which, strictly speaking, are contrary to the chief event of that eleventh book, in which one has been a witness to the deep humiliation, the full and complete repentance of Agamemnon. The Achilles of the latter cantos does not seem to bear in mind those offers of redress which have been made to him, but seems to be still expecting them. In short, and to prolong no farther a detail of discussion which is out of place here, it seems to Mr. Grote that everything would be explained if one could admit that a Homer or a Homerid, taking possession of the fragmentary epics before the *Iliad* and of an embryonic or elementary *Achilleid*, has fused, rehandled, and enlarged the two subjects, has brought them into relation one with another, and has produced an intense, poetic, inspired work, whence has issued the poem much as we have it now, excepting always three or four songs which are obviously in the way, or evidently useless, and of which one takes small count; all the rest belongs to a sufficiently single and master thought. The real author of the *Iliad* would be the poet of this thought, this genius of a Homerid.

Although Mr. Grote sees no reason for placing the *Odyssey* necessarily at a later date, and giving it a more recent moral colour, it is probably the work of another Homer, no less a maker and a man of genius.

And all this (this is the essential point) took place before Solon, before Pisistratus, before the age of the writers, from time immemorial, in that legendary

creative and spontaneous period when the Muse dictated her songs to her favoured ones before an agitated, credulous, passionate, simple audience, without any criticism, without any standard except its own curiosity and pleasure. It has been possible in these latter times to distinguish various stages in this period, by analogy with other better known legendary epochs; there was probably first the age of narrative songs of slight extent, what was called *epos:* the age of epic poetry followed, in which these simpler songs were gone over again, handled afresh, and carried new inspiration into wider, and by this time learned compositions.

The genius of Homer is not so divided and separate as has been said: it is doubtless a vast and exuberant poetic spirit, but suited also for a set order, and still preserving at this second stage that freshness of observation and that vivacity of detail which constitute the charm of the *ballad*, of the *saga*, of the primitive *epos*. 'There is nothing in the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad* in which the *modern* spirit can be detected, when this term is applied to the age of Pisistratus,' and the name of Homer has every right to be attached personally to this first great work of epic composition.

A corporation of bards, a whole brotherhood founded in the Ionian island of Chios, soon made the patronymic and sacred name of the whole family of the Homerides out of this name of the great blind man: every great creation and even every indifferent production* that

* For instance, the *Hymns* attributable to Homer, several of which go back to a great antiquity. They have just been the subject of a learned study, and a real critical examination on the part of one of the young representatives of the French school—*Des Hymnes homériques*, par M. H. Hignard, Docteur ès Lettres.'

issued from his breast, and was propagated by its members with a filial piety, excluded all else for them and was placed under the generic and semi-divine name of Homer: all other personality had disappeared. There was the school, the house, the temple of Homer. The authenticity of the text was religiously preserved and guaranteed there.

Old Homer, thanks to these explanations and compromises to good sense, to sentiment and to science, we have not entirely lost thee; thou hast not perished, thou hast only been eclipsed and somewhat shorn. O noble demi-god! we have found thee again at last in part. It is true that the single Homer, the simple individual Homer similar to an early Milton has ceased to be possible: since Wolf, since Lachmann, those Strausses of Homeric lore, there is no way of retrieving all: at least we have left instead a Homer in two or three persons, in two or three spirits. Nature is no miser; there are happy and fruitful ages favoured by her where general currents of poetry prevail in the air. Even if we keep to the distinctly literary periods, what might we not observe about the neighbour-geniuses almost simultaneous or closely succeeding one another, about the kindred geniuses whom one might call blood-relations; in classical Greece, around Pericles, Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides; in the Italy of the Renaissance Pulci, Boiardo, Berni, Ariosto; they follow one after another like stroke upon stroke in a series; 'tis who will outbid the other. In our days has not the genius of Walter Scott straightway called up the brother spirit of a Fenimore Cooper? These are some analogies. All the more reason is there for this obser-

vation in the full heroic and legendary circle and the full Homeric vein. I imagine that according to Mr. Grote there must have been to begin with a primary Homer of the *Achilleid*, another Homer of a first and restricted *Iliad;* then came a greater and more ample Homer, the real one, embracing them both and enclosing them with his powerful waves like the Ocean stream; then there was yet another Homer more gentle, more peaceful, slower, more like the setting sun of which Longinus speaks, the Homer of the *Odyssey*. And from far, at our present distance and at that of Solon or Pisistratus, these two great Homers made but one and the same luminary, one single star: it has taken modern instruments to reduce them to their component parts, to discover that what appeared simple from afar, and which still seems so to the naked eye, is only a conjunction, a meeting of two heavenly bodies, a double star.

There would still be much to say about these first volumes of Mr. Grote's, about his Lycurgus and his Solon. I shall perhaps return to it another day.*

* [If he did, the essay does not seem to have been republished.]

BONSTETTEN AND GRAY.

* * * * *

HAVING vainly tried to acclimatize his son to Berne, Treasurer Bonstetten allowed him to go to the university of Leyden in Holland, but with the express condition that he was not to study philosophy there. He was afraid that the habit of introspection might injure his observation of external facts; but Bonstetten was sufficiently wide awake to embrace both points of view. He observed Holland very well, and yet he found it tedious. Being of a communicative nature he needed movement and response around him. He obtained permission from his father to visit England, and there at any rate he was to find a world to his liking, one of his intellectual homes. He was twenty-four years old, of pleasing appearance and good birth; he spoke English with ease and even liked to write it: 'For this language,' he said, 'lends itself to everything, whereas in French you always have to reject ten thoughts before coming across one that you can clothe properly.' He immediately made some close friendships, saw the best society, was presented at Court, and, what interests us more, was admitted at Cambridge to intimacy with the charming poet Gray.

'I have never,' he said, 'seen anyone who gave one the idea of a perfect gentleman so much as Gray.' We have an account by Bonstetten of those months of sojourn at Cambridge. He amused himself in contrasting Gray's melancholy disposition with the serenity of soul of his other friend, the German poet Matthisson, whom later on he had as a guest at his country-house at Nyon during the time when he was prefect. I think I shall be excused for giving a verbatim transcript of this page, which is as pleasant as it is little known :

'Eighteen years before my stay at Nyon, I had spent some months at Cambridge with the celebrated poet Gray, in almost as close an intimacy as I had with Matthisson, but with this difference, that Gray was thirty years older, and Matthisson sixteen years younger than I was. My lightheartedness and my love for English poetry, which I read with Gray, had, as it were, subjugated him to such a degree that the great difference in our ages was no longer felt by us. At Cambridge I lodged in a coffee-house close to Pembroke Hall ; Gray lived then buried in a sort of cloister still tenanted by the fifteenth century. The town of Cambridge with its solitary colleges was nothing but an assembly of conventual establishments, where mathematics and a few sciences had taken the form and the costume of the theology of the Middle Ages. Beautiful monasteries, with long, silent corridors, recluses in black gowns, young lords turned into monks with square caps, everywhere recollections of monks beside the glory of Newton. No honest woman comes to cheer the life of these bookworms in human shape. Learning sometimes prospered in this desert of the heart. Thus I saw Cambridge in 1769. What a contrast between Gray's life at Cambridge and Matthisson's at Nyon! When Gray condemned himself to live at Cambridge, he forgot that the poetic genius languishes where the heart is dry.

'The poetic genius of Gray was so much extinguished in his dark mansion at Cambridge, that the recollection of his poems was odious to him. He never allowed me to speak of them.

When I quoted a few of his lines to him, he held his tongue like an obstinate child. I sometimes said to him : " *Will you answer me?*" But no word came out of his mouth. I saw him every evening from five o'clock to midnight. We read Shakespeare, whom he adored,* Dryden, Pope, Milton, etc., and our conversations, like all those of friendship, never reached the bottom of our thoughts. I told Gray about my life and my country, but the whole of his life was closed to me; he never spoke to me about himself. For Gray, an impassable gulf lay between his present and his past; when I wanted to approach it dark clouds came to hide it. I believe that Gray *had never been in love*—that was the key to the riddle; from this had resulted a poverty of heart, contrasting with his ardent and deep imagination, which, instead of being the happiness of his life, was the torment of it. Gray had cheerfulness in his mind and melancholy in his disposition. But this melancholy is only the unsatisfied longing of a sensitive nature. With Gray it came from the quality of his ardent soul relegated to the arctic pole of Cambridge.'

I do not know whether Bonstetten guessed rightly, and whether the secret of Gray's melancholy was this

* In a letter written at the same time [January 6, 1770], Bonstetten gave the following account of his studies to a friend : 'I am in a hurry from morning till evening. At 8 o'clock I am roused by a young square Cap [a student], with whom I follow Satan through Chaos and Night [reading Milton]. He explained me, in Greek and Latin, the *sweet, reluctant, amorous Delays* of our Grandmother Eve. We finish our travels in a copious breakfeast of muffins and tea. Then appear Shakespair and old Linneus Gray worked a good deal at botany and Linneus, strugling together as two ghost would do for a damned Soul. Sometimes the one get the better, sometimes the other. Mr. Gray is so good as to show me Macbeth, and all witches, Beldams, Ghosts and Spirits, whose language I never could have understood without his Interpretation. I am endeavouring now to dress all those people in a french dress, which is a very hard labour. . . . I should think not, indeed. It is now nearly a hundred years that they have tried, without success, to suit these geniuses of a braver language than ours, and to give them a French dress. They have not dared till recently to exhibit them in such fashion : Chateaubriand was the first who set the example with Milton—with many faults and shortcomings, but in the right way.'

want of love; I should rather look for it in the barrenness of a poetic gift so distinguished, so rare, yet so niggard. Far better do I understand with this interpretation the obstinate moody silence of some profound poets who have reached a certain age and run dry, this still loving rancour towards what one has loved so much and which will never return, this sorrow of a soul bereft of poetry and which will not be comforted—Gray and Uhland!

We have as a counterpart to Bonstetten's story, Gray's own testimony on this young friend, a living testimony given during his stay. Gray added as a postscript to a letter of Bonstetten's,* written from Cambridge, January 6, 1770, to his friend Nicholls, who had brought about their acquaintance: 'I never saw such a boy: our breed is not made on this model. He is busy from morning to night; has no other amusement, than that of changing one study for another, likes nobody that he sees here, and yet wishes to stay longer, though he has passed a whole fortnight with us already. His letter has had no correction whatever, and is prettier by half than English.' But if Bonstetten gave Gray a great deal of pleasure by his vivacity, he gave him at least as much uneasiness. The poet does not explain himself very clearly about this; if Bonstetten believed in some mystery to account for Gray's sadness, he in turn seems to have sought with some anxiety the secret of Bonstetten's oddness. He was, said Gray, the most extraordinary person he had ever met. The lovable Bernese had quite bewitched him, and Gray could talk of nothing else. He remains mysterious on one point,

* The same that is quoted in the preceding note.

and dares not trust himself to a letter. He seems to have feared that so much agitation of ideas might end by upsetting his mind. Just when his young friend was starting for France he writes to their common friend Nicholls: 'My solitary evenings hung much lighter on my hands, before I knew him. This is your fault! Pray let the next you send me be halt and blind, dull, unapprehensive, and wrong headed. For this (as Lady Constance says) *Was never such a gracious creature born!* And yet—but no matter! burn my letter. . . . You will think I have caught madness from him (for he is certainly mad), and perhaps you will be right.' The last time there is anything about Bonstetten in a letter of Gray's (May 3, 1771), there is a very legitimate feeling of uneasiness; Bonstetten had then returned to his "hell," Berne:

'Three days ago I had so strange a letter from B. I hardly know how to give you any account of it, and desire you would not speak of it to anybody. That he has been *le plus malheureux des hommes*, that he is *décidé à* quitter son pays, that is, to pass the next winter in England: that he cannot bear *la morgue* de l'aristocratic *et l'orgueil armé* des loix; in short, strong expressions of uneasiness and much confusion of mind, so as to talk of *un pistolet et du courage*, and all that without a shadow of a reason assigned. He is either disordered in his intellect (which is too possible) or has done some strange thing, that has exasperated his whole family and friends at home, which (I'm afraid) is at least equally possible. I am quite at a loss about it. You will see and know more; but by all means curb these vagaries and wandering imaginations, if there be any room for counsels. . . .'

Let us hasten to say that this Wertherian Bonstetten goes far beyond the natural usual Bonstetten, the one who will last, flourish, and be

fresh to the end, and who, after being such a seductive young man, appeared to all so agreeable an old man. With regard to the Bonstetten whom Gray has just shown us in all his impetuosity and charm, and whom he fears even while he delights in him, let us picture him to ourselves as Zschokke described him many years after, 'his figure a little below the middle height but strongly built, betraying by the grace and nobleness of his manners that he is accustomed to a select society, the face full of expression, fresh, almost feminine, colouring, a high philosophic brow, eyes full of a smiling sweetness, the very thing to engage you; in one word, such that, having once seen him, one never forgot him.'*

* Bonstetten lived to be the friend of Mlle. de Klustine, who was afterwards, as Mme. de Circourt, the close friend of Cavour. He died in 1832, aged eighty-seven.

M. TAINE'S HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

I.

I HAVE allowed myself to be dragged, towed, as it were, into talking of this important book. The truth is, that in spite of my desire to do it every justice, I felt that I was incompetent to criticise it pertinently, and with full knowledge of the subject; to examine it and grasp it in fit measure throughout its various parts. However, after frequent and repeated castings of my sounding-line, I will say what I have gathered with most certainty or most probability. Taking everything into account it is a great book; and one which, even if it should not attain more than a quarter of its purpose, carries the matter a step forward, and will not leave things where it found them. It is the most daring attempt that has yet been made in this branch of literary history, and we cannot be astonished that it should have aroused so many objections, so much resistance, among prejudiced minds accustomed to earlier ways of looking at things. You cannot dislodge old methods, old routines, in a single day. The author might, perhaps, have reduced the number of his

opponents if he had given his book its true title: A history of the English race and its civilization in the light of its literature; in which case all fair-minded readers would, for the most part, have needed only to approve and to admire the cogency and ingenuity of his demonstration. Literature is, in fact, to M. Taine only an apparatus, more delicate and more sensitive than another, for measuring all the steps and variations of the same civilization, for grasping all the characteristics, all the qualities, all the shades of national thought. But when he approaches the history of literary works, and their authors, straight from the front, his downright scientific method has frightened timid people, and set them trembling. The rhetoricians have fallen back in disorder to the rear of the philosophers, self-styled; and these have for greater security rallied under the guns* of orthodoxy. They have all seen in the author's method some threat or other aimed at morality, at free-will, at human responsibility, and they have been shrieking aloud.

Yet there can be no doubt that, whatever may be a man's will to act, or think, or (as we are here talking about literature) write, he is more or less closely dependent on the race from which he springs, and which has supplied the basis of his nature; that he is no less dependent on the surroundings of the society and civilization in which he has been nurtured and formed, and also upon the moment, that is, the hazard of circumstances and events which occur day by day in the course of his life. So true is this that the admission of it slips from us all involuntarily in

* [In the original, *canon;* a just untranslateable pun.]

our philosophic and rational moments, or through the effect of simple good sense. Lamennais, fiery, subjective, obstinate, as he was, believing as he did that the individual will is all-sufficing, could not refrain from writing once: 'The further I go, the more I marvel to see how dependent are our deepest-rooted opinions upon the age in which we have lived, the society into which we have been born, and a thousand equally ephemeral circumstances. Think only what our own would have been if we had come into the world ten centuries sooner, or in the present century, but at Teheran, Benares, or Tahiti.' It is so evident that to contradict it would seem ridiculous indeed. Hippocrates in his immortal treatise *Concerning Air, Water, and Locality*, has drawn in broad strokes this influence of climate and surroundings on national and individual character. Montesquieu* has imitated and followed him, but flies too high, like a philosopher who is neither a physician by profession, nor enough of a naturalist.

Now, M. Taine has only tried to study methodically these deep-reaching differences, brought about by race, surroundings, moments, in the composition of wits, the form and direction of talents. But, it will be said, his success is inadequate; it is all very well for him to give a wonderful description of the race in its general traits, its fundamental features; all very well to trace and set out in all the relief of his powerful colouring the character of time's revolutions and the moral atmosphere prevailing at certain historic seasons; all very well to disentangle adroitly the complication of public events and private adventures in which some person's life is

* [Aristotle, too, follows him. Politics, vii. 1327 B.]

involved as in a system of cog-wheels. But still something eludes him, that something which most vivifies the man, to which it is due that out of twenty, or a hundred, or a thousand men, subject, as it would appear, to almost precisely the same conditions internal and external, no two are alike, while among them all there is one only who combines excellence with originality.* In short, he has not touched the very spark of genius in its essence, nor does he show it to us in its analysis: he has only laid out before us, drawn out thread by thread, fibre by fibre, cell by cell, the fabric, the organism, the parenchyma—call it what you will—in which that soul, that life, that spark, when once it has entered in, plays, goes freely (or as it were freely) through its changes, and wins its triumphs.

Is not this a fair statement of the objection? Do you not recognise the argument of the sagest opponents? Well, what does it prove? Just that the problem is difficult; insoluble, perhaps, with ultimate precision. But, I ask in turn, is it nothing to set the problem as our author does it, to grapple so closely with it, to close it in on every side, to reduce it to its only final and simplest expression, to allow us better to weigh and reckon all its data? After making all allowances, and giving their full share to general or special elements, and to circumstances, there still remain around men of talent sufficient room and space

* A similar objection seems to have occurred to Theophrastus, who opens his *Characters* (or rather the dedicatory preface) with the remark: 'I have often wondered, and shall never cease wondering, how it happens that whereas all Greece lies in the same climate, and all Greeks are similarly brought up, we do not all of us order our ways alike.'

to allow them full liberty of moving and turning round. Moreover, were the circle drawn round each a very narrow one, every man of talent, every genius, through the very fact of his being in some degree a magician and an enchanter, has a secret belonging only to himself for working prodigies and bringing miracles to pass within that circle. Even if M. Taine has too much the appearance of neglecting this power, I do not see that he contests or denies it; he limits it, and by limiting it he allows us in many cases to define it better than had been done. Of a certainty, whatever they may say who would gladly have rested content with the former state of vagueness, M. Taine will have given a great impetus to literary analysis; and whoever shall study after him some great foreign writer, will not set about it in the way that he would have done, nor so lightly as he would have done the day before M. Taine's book appeared.

I should like to be able to apply M. Taine's own method to himself, in order to present and explain him to the best of my power to my readers.

He was born at Vouziers in the Ardennes, in 1828. And here, at the very outset, I could wish I were like him, a painter, a landscape-painter, to be able to describe the Ardennes and all the lasting and deep impressions of childhood which he may have owed to that great forest-country. Did those Ardennes, mighty and vast, that great surviving fragment of the ancient primitive forest, those wooded hills and valleys incessantly recurring, where you go down hill only to go up again, as though lost in the uniformity of their

folds; those grand, desolate, melancholy prospects full of majestic vigour, did they in truth do their part in filling, in furnishing from the first the imagination of the serious child? What is certain is, that in his talent we come across masses a little too solid, trains of thought a little too close and unbroken, of which even the brilliance and magnificence do not save us from fatigue. We admire that sturdy vegetation, that verdant, inexhaustible sap, the marrow of a generous soil; but we could wish for a few more openings and clearings in his rich Ardennes.

His family surroundings were simple, moral, affectionate; of a modest and wholesome standard of cultivation. His grandfather was sub-prefect at Rocroi in 1814-15 under the first Restoration. His father, an attorney by profession, was a student by predilection; he was his son's first tutor, and taught him Latin. An uncle returned from America taught him English when quite a child, sitting on his knee. His father died at the age of forty-one, he himself being but twelve. His mother, who was his father's cousin, is a person of remarkable kindness, and the sole object of her son's affection. There are two married sisters. This man, of so bold a spirit as a thinker, so firm and unflinching as a teacher, appears in the domestic circle as the gentlest and tenderest soul living.

In 1842 he came to Paris with his mother, and studied as a day-scholar at the Collège Bourbon, entering in the third class. In his competition he won the first prize in rhetoric, and two second prizes in philosophy. He entered the École Normale in 1848, the first man of his year, which was also that of Edmond

About. Prévost-Paradol was one year junior, Weiss one year senior. The three names followed close upon each other; for a moment they met in the three years' course of study which the school embraces. M. Taine alone could relate all that he and his friends found means of packing into those three years. In those days students enjoyed great freedom in the arrangement and the details of their work, so that M. Taine with his extraordinary facility did five or six weeks' tasks in one, and the remaining time could thus be devoted to private work and reading. He read all that is to be read in philosophy from Thales to Schelling; in theology and patristic study from Hermas to St. Augustin. So absorbing, so devouring a course produced its natural effect on young and vigorous brains. They lived in a state of perpetual excitement and eager discussion. That nothing might be lacking in the way of contrast and antagonism, there were among the pupils some fervent Catholics who have since entered the Oratory; so there was a daily struggle, a first dispute, a hurly-burly of politics, æsthetics, philosophy, of the most furious kind. The tutors, broad-minded or very easy-going men, allowed all these emulous or rival intellects to course unchecked in their presence, and set no obstacle, no veto, in the way of the controversies. Besides M. Dubois, of the Lower Loire, the head and administrator of the school, there were M. Vacherot, more specially director of studies, and MM. Havet, Jules Simon, Géruzez, Berger, head-lecturers.* These gentlemen, agreeably to their title, gave few lessons properly so-

* *Maîtres de Conférences.*

called, but they made the students give them, and subsequently criticised; they really did *confer*. The head-lecturer attended the pupils' lesson as arbiter or umpire. One professor, a friend of mine,* with his half-closed eyes and his shrewd smile, a man of semi-*Gaulois* taste, contrived to be at the same time easily indolent and yet stimulating withal. What we know of more than one of those pupils, since famous, may give some idea of the piquant and lively effect of those veritable tournaments. Imagine Edmond About giving a lesson on the policy of Bossuet before sincere Catholics who smarted under it, but took their revenge when their turn to talk came at the next lecture. M. Taine had to give a lesson among others on Bossuet's mysticism. The professor, after hearing all the pleadings, got off with giving a summary of the discussion, like the presiding judge in Court.

It will easily be believed that the summary determined nothing; the tumult of opinions persisted. Among those youthful heads, so learned, so intoxicated with their own ideas, so well equipped with words, it was inevitable that there should be plenty of intolerance and overweening pride; they called each other bad names, but there was no hatred. The recreations, demanding as they did movement and exuberant physical powers, put everything right, and sometimes of an evening they would all dance together while one played the violoncello or another the flute.

In short, they were good, inestimable years; and it will be imagined that all who passed through them have preserved the stamp of them on their minds, and

* M. Géruzez.

gratitude in their hearts. The advantages of such a gymnasium of learning, such a seed-ground for the intellect, are beyond what one can express. This is the judgement which must be formed of it by those especially who have gone without this privileged form of higher culture, this incomparable training, those who as ordinary warriors have entered into the battle without having been fed on lion's marrow and bathed in Styx. Besides the merits and the excellences, there are some obvious disadvantages, which are perceived in a moment. You cannot with impunity be trained amid the cries of the school; as Boileau said, the taste for hyperbole is acquired there. In the life which I have described, people inevitably contracted a touch of violence, of intellectual pride, over-reliance on books, on what is written, over-confidence in the pen and what comes from it. If they knew the ancients well, they also paid too much deference to certain modern authors, whose importance was exaggerated when they were viewed from afar and through grated windows; works combining with their wit and talent a large share of pretentiousness and small quackeries were taken too seriously and literally; the reader imported into them his own honesty, earnestness, depth of thought. Even at this day, after all these years, something of the kind remains even in their maturer judgements.

Small disadvantages, these! The benefits far outweighed them, and we know how strong, how brilliant were the picked men that came out of that fertile, turbulent, eminently French education. None of them, after gaining his freedom, has remained more faithful to it than M. Taine; none does more honour to the

severity of his early training. When he left the school in 1851, changes great no doubt, but such as had become necessary, were taking place; and as usually happens, the passage was from one extreme to another; reaction was in full swing. A worthy director of the school, M. Michelle, was engaged in putting down, in extinguishing with all the cold that was in him, every spark of fervour, all the conflagrations which had been kindled within by the touch of the breath from without upon the fuel of intelligent minds. The method of pushing a man on, and letting him have his head, had been carried too far; now the line was to deaden everything to their hearts' content. Straightway the brilliant young generation was scattered. Edmond About, with better judgement, went off to Greece, and continued a course full of animation, of breadth, and of a vanity no less amusing than instructive. Many went into provincial schools; others sent in their resignation. The only favour that M. Taine, after innumerable interventions on his behalf, could obtain was to be sent first to Nevers, where he remained for four months, as a substitute in philosophy, then to Poitiers, where he remained another four months, as a substitute in rhetoric.

We pass over the dulness, the discomforts, the little vexations. On his return to Paris, when he was reckoning on a third-class teacher's place in the provinces, surely no excessive ambition, he found himself appointed to a temporary mastership of the sixth class at Besançon. He did not go, and begged to be put on the unattached list. One might ask if it is worth while to train and board young giants at a great

cost, when you are going to set them not to split oaks, but to tie faggots. M. Taine then preferred to remain at Paris as a student; and what a student! He set to work at mathematics and science, especially physiology. During his stay at Nevers he had thought out a whole new psychology, an exact and profoundly-reasoned description of the faculties of man and the forms of thought. He soon understood that it is not possible to be a real psychological philosopher without knowing on one side the language of mathematics, that most flexible, most penetrating of all forms of logic, and on the other, natural history, the common basis of all life; a twofold source of knowledge which was lacking to all the half-philosophers, in other respects so distinguished, of the eclectic school. He set to work then, for a period of three years, upon mathematical analysis (though he did not carry it as far as he would have liked), and followed diligently the courses of the medical school, combining them with those of the museum. At this tough job he became what he is above all things and fundamentally, a *savant*, a man who has a general conception, and an exact, categorical, concatenated system; which he applies to everything, and which guides him in his most distant excursions into literature. Everything with him starts from and is attached to a primary action; nothing is allowed to chance, to fancy, nor, as with us triflers, to mere amenity.

His thesis on La Fontaine in 1853 attracted much attention. The form, the substance, all was original to the point of apparent singularity. He has since retouched it, and brought it much nearer to perfection,

thereby showing how docile he is to criticism, at all events to such as concerns the form, and does not touch too much the basis and essence of the thoughts. About the same time he prepared for the Academy his work on Livy, which was crowned in 1855. He suffered from overwork, and had to make a tour in the Pyrenees. It was on this occasion that he wrote that *Voyage* which Doré illustrated, in which he showed himself a word-painter of the first rank. Since then he has entirely rewritten and recast the *Voyage*, as he did his thesis on La Fontaine. This man, who when one reads him one would think so dogmatic, is the kindest, most amiable, most tolerant man in all the relations of life, even of the literary life, the one of all authors who takes direct and point-blank contradiction the best; I mean honest and not captious contradiction.

From that time on he began to write in reviews and journals. An article on the philosophy of Jean Reynaud, entitled *Ciel et Terre*, marked his start in the *Revue des Deux Mondes;* in the *Revue de l'Instruction Publique* he made his beginning with an article on La Bruyère; in the *Journal des Débats* with three articles on 'St. Simon.'

He had established himself everywhere. He does not in any way modify his manner according to the place or the surroundings; it is almost indifferent to him whether he writes here or there; it is the same philosophy and different applications of it, different aspects of the same thought, fragments of the same whole which he ever distributes. He judges himself admirably with a charming modesty, and what I am

about to say sums up his own thoughts almost as much as mine.

Belonging as he does to a generation formed by solitude, by books, by science, he has not like us, who are weaker but more crossed, more mixed, received a consecutive tradition. That generation had to refind everything, to begin everything afresh on their own account; they missed that unfelt habit of comparisons, of conciliatory combinations, of acquisition by meeting and by social relations; shades and qualifications did not enter into their first manner; they are abrupt and crude. Their thoughts emerged from their brain one day full armed like Minerva, and, like her, by dint of an axe stroke. Still M. Taine obtained some share of that contemporary information which puts things straight or cuts them short from M. Guizot, whom he was fortunate enough to see betimes, and also from M. Dubois; but this has not been sufficiently frequent or habitual with him. He belongs to a generation which did not waste enough time in going into society, floating about and listening. If he has asked questions, as he is fond of doing, it has been in a hurried fashion with a definite purpose, and towards an end in order to correspond to the thought which he already had in his mind. He has chatted, he has discussed with friends of his own age, with artists, with doctors. In long conversations of two he has exchanged an infinite number of views on the basis of things, on the problems which seize and take possession of young and lofty intellects. He has not seen enough of actual men belonging to different generations, different schools, opposite principles; above all, he has

not taken account of the relation or of the distance which exists between books or ideas and living people, including authors first of all. That is not done in one day or in a few meetings, but by degrees and as it were by chance. Often the decisive word which exhibits to us a man's nature, which judges and defines it, is not dropped until the tenth or twentieth meeting.

To compensate for this, learning, the country, solitary nature have acted powerfully upon him, and he has owed to them his most contrary, most lively sensations. When he used to come out of that intellectual furnace of the École Normale and return to his own Ardennes in the autumn, what an abrupt, profound and renovating impression he must have received, what a bath of open air and wild healthiness! He has often expressed the soul and the genius of such natural landscapes with colours that have a savour rough but refreshing. From the complete point of view of ethics and of experience, what seems above all to have been lacking to those deserving and austere lives, which by its absence has somewhat disturbed their balance, was that society which is of all the most pleasant, that which causes the greatest loss of time in the most agreeable manner, the society of women; that sort of more or less romantic ideal which we caress in a lazy fashion, and which repays us in a thousand unconscious graces. These laborious, eloquent and eager devourers of books were never in a position to cultivate betimes that art of pleasing and making one's way which teaches more than one secret useful in the practice and the philosophy of life. By this abstinence they at least saved themselves from becoming, as others have

done, enervated and shattered in their tender years. Not for them, as for men of earlier generations, did a great, an integral part of their days pass in barren regrets, in vague desires of anticipation, in the melancholy and languor which follows pleasure. Their active brain-power remained entire. They had at the outset a great weight to lift; they put themselves wholly into it and succeeded; the weight once lifted, they might believe their heart to be grown old, themselves weary; the bloom of youth was fled, the ply was taken; it was the ply of strength and virile austerity, and was purchased at some sacrifice.

When, after reading M. Taine, one has the pleasure of making his personal acquaintance, one finds a special charm in him which distinguishes him from all the studious, thoughtful young stoics; with all his precocious ripeness he has succeeded in combining a real spotlessness of heart, a certain moral innocence which he has preserved. He suggests to me an image quite contrary to that of the poet who speaks of 'a fruit ripe already upon a young and tender stalk.' Here we have a tender and delicate flower on a somewhat rugged branch.

[The remainder of this section is of little interest to English readers, and is therefore here omitted.]

M. TAINE'S HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

II.

THE *History of English Literature* is a book which holds together from end to end. It was conceived, constructed, executed without a break; the first and last chapters correspond. Saxon barbarism, or semi-civilization, crossed with Norman ability and shrewdness, the whole shut up and packed in its island, and, as the author has so well shown us, worked, ground, kneaded, and ripened for centuries, reappears in the sequel in the condition of the strongest, most solid, most sensible, best behaved, best ballasted, most positive, and most poetical of free nations. All the great monuments of literature, all the works of any significance which indicate the different stages and the progress of that civilization, have been examined and described by him in the interval from the first barbarous biblical singer, the harper Cædmon, down to Lord Byron.

Until after the Norman Conquest and the epoch in which the new language was formed we have only abrupt and fragmentary indications. The conquest of England by the Normans in 1066 was the latest in

date of the great territorial invasions which everywhere preceded the Middle Age; and when it took place, the Middle Age had already begun everywhere else. The English language, and consequently the literature which it was to bring forth, thus found itself belated in regard to the other literatures of the Continent, especially the French. From this it got its first inspiration, its first impregnation, and it was only with time that it acquired its right blend, its own flavour. Chaucer, the earliest of English poets and storytellers, is a disciple of the *trouvères* and the writers of *fabliaux;* yet in his setting and his fashion he adds to them something that is quite his own. He possesses already what was one day to be called humour and a great natural vivacity of description; he has been happily compared to a sparkling morning in a forward spring.

What we notice from an early period in the oldest of our neighbour's productions is the way in which the Saxon character offers a firm resistance in the matter of language and literature, just as it did on behalf of its political constitution; it preserves its tastes, its traditions, its tone, its vocabulary, underlying its surface brilliancy. M. Taine compares the Robin Hood ballads with our *fabliaux*, and contrasts them with productions of French origin, clearly bringing out the difference between the two intellects, between the two races, which were in no way blended by the Norman Conquest.

'What is it that amuses the people in France? The *fabliaux*, the cunning tricks of Reynard, his dodges for making a fool of his lord Ysengrim, for taking his wife, swindling him out of his dinner, getting him a thrashing at the hands of someone else without danger to himself; in a word, the triumph of clever poverty over

stupid power. The popular hero is even at this date the shifty, rollicking, gay plebeian, who will later on develop into Panurge and Figaro.'

In place of all this—of these practical jokes which have so ancient an origin—these knaveries of a Villon, or a Patelin, which move our rustics, our populace to such laughter, what is it that delights the English populace, and makes them inattentive to everything, even the sermon? It is the jolly forest outlaw, the king of poachers, Robin Hood; the stout-hearted gossip, who is never gayer or in better spirits for sword or staff play than when the coppice is bright and the grass is high.

'Robin Hood is the national hero; in the first place a Saxon, and in arms against constituted authority, "against bishops and archbishops"; generous, moreover, giving a poor ruined knight clothes, a horse, and a sword to go and redeem his land pledged to a grasping abbot; withal sympathetic and kind towards the poor folk, ordering his people to do no harm to yeomen or labourers; but above all, enterprising, bold, proud, ready to draw his bow under the eyes of the sheriff and in his despite, and prompt at blows, whether to pocket or return them.'

Everywhere, from end to end of M. Taine's book, there breathes the spirit of whatever is robust, solid, saucy, gay, racy, honest, upright in that country, even amid violence and the excess of power. That is true, and we shall find it true in England from the days of Robin Hood to Lord Chatham or Junius; and even when the days of elegance and fine drawing-room manners arrive in the eighteenth century, and we have our bouts of conversation and witty sayings with them, our most renowned wits, our Nivernais, our Boufflers, will seem to them very thin, very flat, limp, and insipid, beside

their merry roysterers with their flashing sallies, their 'high spirits.' If you doubt, ask that fair-minded judge who knew society so well in both countries: I mean Horace Walpole.

Pope, for whom my taste is stronger than M. Taine's, because I do not study him simply from the point of view of his nation, marked the various epochs of English poetry by four names—four bright beacons: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Dryden. Between Spenser and Milton we have to place Shakespeare at the head of his mighty constellation of dramatists. Pope himself would deserve to give its name to a sixth epoch, and the seventh, or modern period, acclaims Byron as the first, among so many others, by right of brilliancy and strong flight. But we no longer write the history of poetry and literature by means of individual names: the brilliant individual, the genius, is only the standard-bearer and spokesman, the gatherer up of all the feelings and thoughts which float and circulate vaguely around him. I shall not say with a poet, and a most original poet of our own day, 'What is a great poet? A passage through which the wind blows.' No; the poet is not so simple a thing as that; he is not a resultant, nor even a mere focussing reflector; he has a mirror of his own, his own unique and individual monad. He has his plexus, his organ, through which everything that passes is transformed, and which, in sending it forth, combines and creates; but the poet creates only with that which he has received. At this point, as I think, I once more fall into entire agreement with M. Taine.

His book has in its composition the merit of especially throwing light upon the most difficult and most arduous

portions of the study of English literature—its distant, earlier periods. The Renaissance is admirably treated. In England this followed other lines than with us; it did not put an end abruptly to the Middle Ages. It did not produce a 'topsy-turvy,' a destructive inundation in art, poetry, the drama; it formed a rich, solid foundation, here as elsewhere offering a stout resistance. This it overlaid in places, combining and mingling with it. M. Taine makes us understand, and by the affectionate and enraptured manner in which he speaks of them, almost love, the first movers and heroes of the English literary Renaissance: in prose, Philip Sidney, a D'Urfé who preceded our own; in poetry, Spenser, the poet of fairy-land, whom he admires beyond all. In his manner of describing and depicting Spenser, he seems to be swimming in a wide lake, or floating like a swan in its element. In truth, he loves strength, even in grace; he has no dislike for redundancy and excess. He might astonish Englishmen themselves by the vigour of his impression, which has a resolute confidence in its own reading. M. Taine has the courage of his own judgements to the full. He eludes nothing; he troubles himself about nothing but his object. He betakes himself directly to the author whom he is reading, with all the strength of his intelligence, and gets from him a clear and firm impression, at first hand, by direct inspection; from this he draws a conclusion flowing fresh from its source, bubbling up and running over. This leads him in certain cases to go outside of established judgements, to quash some which usage has consecrated, or to introduce some that are new, at the risk of surprising and shocking.

Little does he care; he goes straight on his road, and takes no heed. He abases or exalts, according as he feels; he will think poorly of Butler for his much-lauded *Hudibras*; he will glorify the fanatic Bunyan for his *Pilgrim's Progress*. When I say 'glorify,' I go too far; he describes him and his work, but he describes both in such sort that his words produce a picture capable of bringing the impression of them home to you, of touching you to the quick.

In picturesque description or analysis his close, compressed style, progressing in regular steps, in ordered rank and file, with quickly following strokes, with phrases, which recur again and again, as it were short, sharply etched lines, has caused a critic of the old school to say that he seemed to hear the hail falling and leaping hard and thick on the roof:

'Tam multa in tectis crepitans salit horrida grando.'

This style ultimately produces on the mind a certain inevitable impression which sometimes acts on the nerves. This is a point at which the man of knowledge and energy has to beware lest he distress the men of taste.

I know the doctrine of excess, of so-called legitimate exaggeration, even of the monstrous, regarded as a mark of genius, is the order of the day. I ask to have nothing to do with it, save with all reserves; I prefer to live on this side of it, and my old literary habits have made me retain the need of not overtiring myself, and even the desire to take pleasure in what I admire.

As for him, force and greatness suit him, and he clings to them with obvious satisfaction. He has ex-

cellently reproduced for us the English theatre of the sixteenth century: the tumultuous stage and audience, mingled, made for each other; that constellation of vigorous dramatists, among whom Shakespeare was but the greatest, which includes Marlowe, Massinger, Ford, Webster, and others. They have formed the object of recent studies among us, and a laudable emulation in literary work,* but they have nowhere been so energetically explained and rendered as by M. Taine. He sets them again, as if alive, on their feet, in full working. The translations which are incorporated in his text are the very essence of the originals—the flesh and blood of their dramas.

I leave to specialists in the subject his detailed explanation of Shakespeare's genius and of that which he recognises as Shakespeare's master-faculty—'imagination or pure passion.' For my own part, I confess that expositions of this sort about great men of genius, taken *a priori* as absolute types and symbols, not exactly overwrought, but generalized more and more, and idealized, as it were, till they are above their own work, strong and great as it may be in itself—these considerations, dear to the higher criticism of our times, remain, in my view, necessarily conjectural. They are eternal problems which remain open to competition—to which people from time to time recur, and over which each in turn breaks a lance. It is well, indeed, that every critic who comes to close quarters with one of these masters of genius and tries to get a grasp of him

* The allusion is to M. A. Mézières' *Prédécesseurs et Contemporains de Shakespeare* (Charpentier, 1863), and M. E. Lafond's translation of Ben Jonson and others (Hetzel, 1863).

should say with all boldness what he has to say—should, in judging, judge himself, and that every explanation should go forth and be spread abroad. To say the truth, these are not so much explanations as exercitations, but it is, at any rate for the coming race, the noblest and most generous of disputes, a perpetual tournament around the great minds.

The prose writers of the Renaissance, of whom Bacon is the most celebrated, though others have recently come back into favour and acquired a rich accession of renown, find their due place in M. Taine's book and show out well from their setting. Robert Burton, author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Thomas Browne, a man of no less quaint learning, an encyclopædic and yet poetic inquirer, are outlined for us in such a manner as to ensure them a place in our memory. The last-named, Browne, while in certain of his views he is modern and stimulating, has his relapses into a fine melancholy and a profound scepticism over the wrecks of the past.*

'But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the pyramids? Herostratus lives that burnt the temple of Diana; he is almost lost that built it. Time hath spared the epitaph of Adrian's horse, confounded that of himself. . . .

'But all was vanity, feeding the wind and folly. The Egyptian mummies, which Cambyses or Time hath spared, Avarice now consumeth. Mummy is become merchandize, Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams. . . .

'The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the register of God, and not in the record of man.

* [*Urn Burial*, ch. v.]

Twenty-seven names make up the first story before the Flood, and the recorded names ever since contain not one living century.'

A memorable thought, and one which we must repeat, even in presence of Science and her lawful pride, as she wins back the past in fragments, but in fragments only. Yes; even yesterday, as I came away from reading M. Rougé's interesting and instructive report on Egyptian antiquities, on a few more names snatched from oblivion, I could not refrain from repeating those words to myself. What blanks in truth there are—out of all proportion to what we know or ever shall know; what immense, irreparable gaps!

O, Chance, Chance! if we will be honest, we shall never assign a large enough share to thee; we shall never strike the knife deep enough into every philosophy of history!

The finest poetical genius of England and the most difficult to explain—Milton—has been estimated and unfolded by M. Taine as he has never, to my knowledge, been until now. He appears just at his proper moment, and after a well-marked picture of the Christian Renaissance, that puritanism of which he is the sweet and graceful flower and the sublime, if slightly quaint, crown. His moral complexity, his unity—the contradictions which he gathers up and co-ordinates in himself, the steady balance of his soul and his genius—all is depicted, analyzed, reproduced in more than a hundred pages, which, in thought as well as in tone, are most beautiful and quite up to the level of their subject. I extract some typical touches:

'Vast learning, close logic, and passion with grandeur—these form his capital. He has a clear mind and a limited imagination.

He is alike incapable of perturbation and of variation. He conceives the highest of ideal beauties, but under one form only. He was not born for the drama but for the ode. He does not create souls, but he constructs trains of reasoning and feels emotions. Emotion and reasoning, all the forces and all the actions of his soul, are gathered and ranged under one solitary sentiment, that of the sublime ; and the broad stream of lyric poetry flows forth from him impetuous, coherent, splendid as a sheet of gold. . . .

'He was brought up on the reading of Spenser, Drayton, Shakespeare, Beaumont, of all the most brilliant poets ; and the golden flood of the preceding age, though impoverished all around him, and slackened in himself, spread out like a lake where it came to a halt in his heart. . . .

'When still quite young, on leaving Cambridge, his bent was toward the magnificent and grandiose ; he wanted a great rolling verse, an ample and sonorous strophe, long periods of fourteen or twenty-four lines. He did not study things face to face and on the ground, like a mortal, but from above, like the archangels. . . . It was not *life* that he felt, like the master of the Renaissance, but *grandeur*, after the fashion of Æschylus and the Hebrew prophets ; men of masculine and lyric genius like his own, who, nurtured like him in religious emotions and unbroken enthusiasm, displayed, like him, a priestly pomp and majesty. To embody a feeling like this imagination and poetry, which addresses itself to the eye only, were not enough ; there needed also sounds and that deeper poetry which, purged of all bodily representations, reaches the soul. He was a musician and an artist ; his hymns march with the unhasting pace of a recitative and the gravity of a declamation. . . .

'He makes us understand the saying of his master, Plato, that virtuous melodies teach virtue.'

And one phrase more: 'Milton's landscapes are a school of virtue.'

Milton's virtue could adapt itself to Cromwell. You ask, How? I will try to answer. The truth is, that Cromwell was not, either at first or at all, what we

have grown accustomed to see through the eyes of Bossuet, or following those notions of monarchical reaction which we reserve for our neighbours even when we have got rid of them for ourselves. Cromwell was for long the bulwark of all that was energetic, virtuous, religious, upright, fundamentally English in the nation.

Milton, though from afar he looks to us isolated, was not the only one of the poetic crew who celebrated him; and if we look closely we shall see further that, if by reason of the stormy times there was no constellation around Milton as around Shakespeare, there were, nevertheless, other vigorous poets, his competitors and his rivals.

There exists an Ode of Andrew Marvell* belonging to the same movement of Christian and patriotic revival. It is in the form, almost in the rhythm, of the odes in which Horace celebrates the return of Augustus after some victory. Its subject is the return of Cromwell from his expedition to Ireland in that memorable year 1649; it predicts the exploits of the coming year, and shows us Cromwell hasting to accomplish his destiny, though still submissive to the laws. Never did the fire of enthusiasm for the commonweal or the grand, yet terrible, emotions inspired by these revolutionary saviours, these men of sword and steel, find accents more resonant or more true. They flow in hurrying waves from a sincere heart:

* It long remained unknown among the English themselves. It will be found on p. 50 of a charming little book, *The Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*, collected by Mr. F. T. Palgrave. This little collection is indeed a treasury of poetry, both strong and sweet.

'Tis madness to resist or blame
The face of angry heaven's flame ;
And if we would speak true,
Much to the man is due

Who from his private gardens, where
He lived, reserved and austere
(As if his highest plot
To plant the bergamot),

Could by industrious valour climb
To ruin the great work of time,
And cast the kingdoms old
Into another mould.'

Here one feels how meagre a covering is the classical imitation for English sincerity and frankness of tone—how these, as it were, pierce and crack their Horatian wrappings.

The poet compares Cromwell, still humble, as he affirms, and proud only of obeying the Republic and the Commons, to the generous bird of prey, docile to the falconer and staining the air with blood for him alone :

'So when the falcon high
Falls heavy from the sky,
She, having killed, no more does search,
But on the next green bough to perch,
Where, when he first does lure,
The falconer has her sure.'

Thus is the Commonwealth sure of its Cromwell.

Compare with this ode the generous and fervent sonnet which Milton addressed to Cromwell about the same time :

'Cromwell, our chief of men, who, through a cloud,
Not of war only but detractions rude,
Guided by faith and matchless fortitude,

To peace and truth thy glorious way hast ploughed ;
And on the neck of crownèd Fortune proud
Hast reared God's trophies and His work pursued.
* * * * * *
New foes arise,
Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains ;
Help us to save free conscience from the paw
Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw.'

The sentiment is the same as in Marvell—more heroic and martial in him, more purely Christian in Milton. Cromwell, I repeat, was in truth the bulwark and buckler of all men of conscience and unenslaved faith.

You cannot judge a man of this kind upon incidentals. He is among the most complicated and complete examples of his type, perhaps the most complete, most squarely based that has ever lived. Chateaubriand says of him that he had in him a priest, a tyrant, and a hero; but he adds: 'He ruined the institutions which came in his way or which he wished to replant, as Michael Angelo broke the marble under his chisel.' Cromwell did not break the character of the nation—he kneaded it; he cemented and consolidated it. They owed him something better than a code or than legislation: he founded a policy; he prepared the elements for a glorious and definitive revolution in 1688, and he alone rendered possible the orderly triumph, when the hour came, of the patriots of that epoch. More than any king of that realm did the Lord Protector contribute to make the haughty character of the nation pass into its foreign policy, to make it what it so long boasted of being—the arbiter and moderator of the tempest, the sovereign of the seas.

Celsa sedet Æolus arce. He defied the world, not as king-slayer, but as Englishman. His sombre character, whether in gloom or coarse gaiety—the tint of the fanatic or visionary which he put on, which covers the solid kernel and hides from superficial eyes the sanest and best-balanced common-sense—all this puts him apart from those heroic figures which are of a kind to attract the French genius. All the more radically is he in agreement with the genius of his own race; he is like an energetic incarnation of it. No one is embedded more profoundly in the mosaic of English greatness. I have said enough and too much of him for the moment, but Milton is my excuse; Milton was his poet.

After Milton, Dryden, the many-sided, the prolific, the flexible, the unequal, the man of transition and half-and-half, the first in date of the classics, but still broad and mighty. He has not much cause to complain of M. Taine. The critic makes us understand well that mixed laborious life—that talent which, like the life, goes somewhat at random, but is ample, abundant, imaginative, vivified by a vigorous sap, nourished and watered by a copious vein of poetry.

It is rather the great poet of the next age, the classic in all his correctness and concise elegance—Pope—who has grounds for dissatisfaction; and as one must, under pain of being monotonous, vary praise with a little fault-finding, I am going to allow myself to contradict M. Taine a little on this point.

It is not indeed his elegance and politeness which displease M. Taine in Pope's person and talent. No man has better than himself appreciated Addison, the

prime type of English urbanity, so far as urbanity there is; he forms an excellent judgement of Addison, and his moderate, discreet, moral, well-mannered style, the *quid deceat* which he was the first to teach his compatriots. He does full justice to the various personages so well sketched in the *Spectator*, and always so English in physiognomy. But when Pope is in question, M. Taine does not make the effort which a historian of literature should on occasion exercise upon and against himself, and it is with a marked disfavour and dislike that he introduces to us the poet who was long esteemed the first of his nation, whom Byron saluted as still holding that rank.

Nothing is easier than to caricature Pope; but nothing is more unfair than to take great wits exclusively by way of their defects, or upon the petty and weak sides of their nature. Ought we to see in Pope at the first view no more than 'a dwarf four feet high, crooked, hump-backed, lean, valetudinarian, one who, when he grew up, seemed hardly capable of living'? Is it seemly to begin by abusing his bodily infirmities to the detriment of his charming wit, and to say, 'He cannot get up of himself; a woman has to dress him; his legs are so thin that he must have three pairs of stockings, one over another; then his body must be laced up in canvas stays, that he may hold himself straight, and a flannel waistcoat must be put on over all'? I am not one who would blame a critic for telling us even in detail something of his author's constitution; his good or bad health, which surely have an influence on his tone and his talent; but the fact is, that Pope did not write with his muscles,

and employed only his unalloyed wit. In the description which I have quoted in an abridged form, I am shocked only by the words chosen, and by the rough, discourteous way in which he is treated; a way which tends to make him ridiculous in the reader's mind. Let us leave this style to those writers who care only to amuse, or to abandon themselves recklessly to their antipathies. If one had known Horace, I imagine it would be possible to make some kind of caricature of him, for he was short of stature, and in his later days of very full habit. Once more—let us come back to the truth, to that literary truth which never forgets humanity, and comports with a certain sympathy for all that deserves it. If we can be just towards the ex-tinker Bunyan, who in his fanatical visions shows force and imagination, do not let us, on the other hand, crush that charming, witty creature, that quintessence of soul, that drop of keen wit wrapped in cotton-wool, Pope. Let us not treat him roughly, but as we take his hand to seat him in our consulting — perhaps operating—chair, let us do nothing to make him cry out, were he yet living. In literature, I should like always to proportion our method to our subject, and to surround with quite special precautions him who invites and deserves them.

The natural history of Pope is very simple. Delicate persons are said to be unhappy, and he was delicate twice over; delicate of intellect, delicate and infirm of body, he was doubly irritable. But what grace, what taste, what quickness to feel, what accuracy and perfection in expressing!

It is true that he was precocious. Is that a crime?

Endowed in early childhood with a sweet expression, and above all with a sweet voice, he was called 'the little nightingale.' His first teachers were of small account; he educated himself. At twelve years he learned Latin and Greek simultaneously, almost without a tutor; at fifteen he resolved to go to London, in order to learn French and Italian sufficiently to read the authors. His family, retired tradespeople, and by religion Roman Catholic, were at this time living at a place in Windsor Forest. This fancy of his was treated as a strange whim, seeing that his health did not at that moment allow him to go from home. But he persevered and accomplished his purpose; he thus learnt almost everything for himself, wandering among the authors as he liked, making his own grammars, and delighting to translate in verse the finest passages which he came across in Greek or Latin poets. By sixteen, he says, his taste was as much formed as it ever became.

In all this I see nothing ridiculous, nothing that does not do honour to that young and prolific intellect. If there is such a thing as the literary temperament, no one ever possessed it drawn in sharper characters or more clearly defined than Pope. Generally, people become classicists by the facts of their training and education; he was, so to say, called to it, and became so by a natural and original bent. With the poets, he read also the critics, and prepared to say his word after them. He had an early taste for Homer, and read him in the original; among the Latins he liked Statius next to Virgil. At that time he preferred Tasso to Ariosto, a preference which he always retained.

Owing to his position as a papist, he was not educated at the University, and could not follow the common road or the ordinary methods of study. But his precocity as an author brought him at an early age into contact with poets and persons of renown. He did no more than see Dryden, who died in 1701, just before Pope completed his thirteenth year. But the wonderful child had, from reading him, formed so lofty and so cherished an idea of him, that he prevailed on some friends to take him to the coffee-house which Dryden frequented, and returned overjoyed at having seen him. He could say with Ovid, *Virgilium vidi tantum*. He never spoke of that illustrious predecessor without complete reverence, and repudiating all notion of rivalry. 'I learnt versification,' he says, 'wholly from Dryden's works; who . . . would probably have brought it to its perfection, had not he been unhappily obliged to write so often in haste.' Pope had that characteristic mark of literary natures, the faithful adoration of genius.

If he had too keen a dislike for dull authors and bad poets, he had all the more admiration for the good and great. He combined the qualities of Boileau and Malherbe; it was a bold importation, and something quite new transplanted on to a free soil. Exposed as he was to many perils in his childhood, and more than once in danger of death from accidents, or in consequence of his naturally frail constitution, touching instances have been preserved of his tender and lasting gratitude towards those who had shown interest in him or had aided in preserving him. Whatever may be said about his critical irritability, and the regrettable

excesses into which it led him, he had a humane soul, formed for friendship. Certain facts which were brought to light after his death, in the attempt to blacken him, have since been explained to his credit,* and, taken as a whole, his work speaks for him.

Following the advice given him betimes by a friend, the poet and critic Walsh, whose acquaintance he made when he was about fifteen,† he said to himself that after all that had been done in poetry, only one road to excellence was left for him. 'Walsh used to tell me that . . . though we had several great poets, we never had any one great poet that was correct, and he desired me to make that my study and aim.' Pope followed this advice, and his whole life of fifty-six years was devoted to this study; to this noble aim, which he was able to attain and fulfil.

Can we reproach or blame him for the pains which he took to this end, to make himself capable, with his weak health, of this difficult and immortal task? Yes, he was attentive to everything, even in conversation; ay, when a happy, delicate, or striking thought or expression came before him or entered his mind, he was in a hurry to gather it in! Always striving after improvement and excellence, he built it up bit by bit, and never voluntarily suffered the abstraction of a single fragment. He wore himself out in the work. He rose at night if necessary, and as he could not wait on himself, he made his attendants rise, even in winter, to write down some thought which he feared to lose, and which would have escaped him when he awoke again, for many of our thoughts,

[* See, for instance, Mr. Courthope's *Life*, pp. 346, 397.]
[† Really seventeen, *i.e.*, in 1705.]

of our best thoughts, are often drowned and swallowed up for ever between two sleeps, as effectually as ever the Egyptians in the Red Sea. I am quite ready to smile at these excessive pains—at this febrile and parsimonious carefulness; but let us smile indulgently, as befits minds humanized by the practice of letters, who have themselves known the sweet madness. Let us not have two weights and two measures. I would say to M. Taine: You admire Balzac; you quote him more than once; you like to bring him in among these English authors, even when he has no business there. I take him, then, as an instance familiar to you. I remember some interesting revelations which I heard one day about his extraordinary absence of mind and his egotism when engaged as an author in composing. How often did he turn up in the middle of the night at the bedside of the sleeping Jules Sandeau, who was then living in the same house, and rouse him pitilessly, with a start, to show and read to him what he had just produced, all smoking hot! He had turned life inside out; for him the reality was the dream.

Perhaps we think this fine, from the point of view of inspiration and dash; at all events, it is original, and shows a singular and powerful faculty of shifting one's position, which we must admire. Well, when we leave the creative class, with its blind and, in this instance, somewhat smoky creations, and deign to enter the serene and temperate sphere of moral ideas, accurate and lucid thoughts, lofty or subtle reflections which form the proper object, and, as Montaigne would say, the quarry of philosophers and sages, let us not be too severe on this painstaking and amiable Pope for having so care-

fully listened to the voice of his own peculiar demon and genius—for having lent an ear to the purely abstract and spiritual inspirations which arise in the solitude of the study or in the conversation of two persons strolling in some garden-walk of Tibur or Tusculum, when the mind, remaining all the while calm, feels itself stimulated by the emulation or gentle contradiction of a friend. Let us not be scandalized if he himself, with a sort of ingenuous haste to initiate us into his constant absorption in letters, makes some confidence like the following:

'When Swift and I were in the country for some time together, I happened one day to be saying, "That if a man was to take notice of the reflections that came into his mind on a sudden as he was walking in the fields, or sauntering in his study, there might be several of them perhaps as good as his most deliberate thoughts." On this hint we both agreed to write down all the volunteer reflections that should thus come into our heads, all the time we stayed there. We did so, and this was what afterwards furnished out the maxims published in our miscellanies. Those at the end of one volume are mine; and those in the other, Dr. Swift's.'

These are ingenious pastimes—the games played by men of wit and letters. We are, no doubt, a long way from Shakespeare, even from Milton; but I see nothing in this to give so much scope for ridicule, and in a history of literature, the literary part, properly so-called, even when it suggests something a little self-conscious and artificial, has a right, it would seem, to find both place and grace. If we come to that, it was just thus that the younger Pliny and Tacitus, finding themselves together at the villa on the Lake of Como or in that house at Laurentum, of which we have so good a description, might for weeks together have

jousted and tilted over philosophy and ethics. The great era of inspiration is past, but the age of calm and of decadence admits yet of abundant pleasures, and even, as Tacitus and Swift have shown, of genuine eloquence.

I have yet one thing more to say, which I think may be of use, respecting Pope. That name, which represents ethical poetry—poetry correct and ornate in all its finish, all its charm of diction—is, as may well be imagined, a pretext and a favourable opportunity for me to maintain a view, which to-day is threatened and unduly depreciated, after having had too much deference paid to it. The historical manner of looking at things has invaded letters at all points; it now dominates all study, presides over all reading. I do not combat M. Taine's book on this account; it is rather a supplement which I ask him to give with some cautions for the future. This book of original and audacious criticism has sprung up like a tree in the open, throwing out all its branches in the direction and to the benefit of the Anglo-Saxon sap. From this point of view, Pope's poetry must assuredly look like an aborted branch: it is the least Anglo-Saxon of all English poetry. But that is no reason for cutting it off as it stands.

In general, I will say, let us combine our forces, not oppose them, and let us destroy nothing. By force of talent you invite us, you compel us to march towards the grand, the strong, the difficult, towards which, without you, we should not have progressed so far; but do not suppress our customary, our pleasant points of view—our Windsor landscapes and our Twickenham gardens. Let us exalt ourselves on the

side of the high valleys, the high lands, but let us also keep our cheerful estates!

In one word, let us not justify that pessimist who said to me no longer ago than yesterday: 'The moment is not good for Pope, and it is beginning to be bad for Horace.'

M. TAINE'S HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

III.

It must be well understood that when I lay deliberate stress, supporting it by instances, on the merits of Pope, I am only indirectly finding fault with M. Taine. He has, in fact, recognised all the merits, all the distinctive features of that fine talent, and one might even borrow phrases from him to define them; but his attitude towards Pope is not what it has been towards the other great poets whom he has come across up to this point. He does not take pleasure in replacing him among his surroundings; he rather depreciates and belittles him on the whole, and if he is forced to recognise a good quality in him, he does not throw his best light upon it.

I press this point, then, because the danger to-day lies in the direction of sacrificing those whom I will call the restrained writers or poets. For a long time they held the advantage, and all the honours; one had to plead for Shakespeare, for Milton, for Dante, even for Homer. There was no occasion to plead for Virgil, Horace, Boileau, Racine, Voltaire, Pope, Tasso; they

were allowed and recognised by all. Now the cause has been entirely won for the former, and things are completely reversed; the greatest, the primary, reign and triumph; even those who are second to them in invention, but yet are simple and original in thought and expression. Regnier, Lucretius, are restored to their proper rank, while it is the restrained, cultivated, polished, the classics of former days, whom there is a tendency to class in a lower order, a disposition, if care be not taken, to treat a little disrespectfully; relatively speaking, a certain degree of disdain and contempt is going near to fall upon them. It seems to me that there is room enough to contain all, without sacrificing any; and that while we render full homage and unstinted reverence to those great human forces, which resemble the powers of nature, and like them break forth in a fashion somewhat rude and uncouth, we should not cease to honour those other more restrained powers, which express themselves in a manner less akin to an explosion, and are clad in elegance and gentleness.

The day that a critic appears possessing the deep historical and vital feeling for literature which M. Taine possesses, capable, like him, of pushing his roots downward to the very sources, and in the other direction spreading open boughs to the sun, but who, at the same time, will not put in the background—I should rather say, will continue to respect and inhale the scent of that sober, delicately-perfumed flower which is Pope's, Boileau's, Fontanes'—on that day the perfect critic will be found; the reconciliation of the two schools will be effected. But I am asking for an impossibility; it is easy to see that this is a dream.

Pope, meanwhile, remains a true poet; and under all his physical defects one of the most refined and beautifully organized men of letters whom the world has yet seen. It is difficult, I know, to deal with him at the present day, without meeting many objections. To begin with, he translated Homer, travestied him, say some; and thereupon they crush him with a comparison to La Motte.* You may take two or three passages of the original text, and give yourself the honour of an easy victory. Observe that you are sure beforehand of gaining this victory, for whatever it is worth, over each and every translator of Homer. In justice, we ought to begin by saying that Pope had a perfect feeling and admiration for Homer; that his preface is excellent criticism for his day, and still good to read in ours; that he has comprehended admirably the grandeur, the invention, the fertility of the original, that mighty primeval universality from which every subsequent class of poetry has taken its rise. As for his method of translation in rhyming verses and the way in which he has executed it, it is of supreme elegance, and that in itself is a kind of unfaithfulness. Rhyme has led him into those oppositions, those balanced antitheses within the turn of measured phrases, which are his own strong point, but contrary to the broad Homeric manner, to that full natural river, with all its waves flowing, continuous, spreading, sonorous. Nor, so far as that goes, does it seem that William Cowper, with his blank verse, akin to Milton's somewhat elaborated rhythm,

* [Antoine Houdar de la Motte (1672-1731) produced an abridged translation of the *Iliad* in twelve books, prefaced by an essay in which he sought to prove that Homer was an overrated poet.]

has, in his turn, succeeded any better in rendering, not the continuity, but the rapidity of the Homeric flow.*

The truth is, that a verse translation of Homer is impossible. It is therefore natural enough that Bentley should have said, on seeing Pope's *Iliad*, 'You must not call that Homer.' None the less is Pope's work a marvellous performance in itself, and the man who executed it deserves to be spoken of, even in this connection, with all respect and a fair share of eulogy. Pope may have shown himself too artificial in translating Homer; but what was not artificial was the sincere emotion with which he read him. He said one day to a friend: 'I always was particularly struck with that passage in Homer where he makes Priam's grief for the loss of Hector break out into anger against his attendants and sons; and could never read it without weeping for the distress of that unfortunate old prince.'† The narrator adds, 'He read it then, and was interrupted by his tears.'

No example can show better than his how active a faculty is that of emotional, delicate criticism. Those who have nothing to show for it cannot feel and perceive in this fashion. There is a story that when Shelley first heard *Christabel* recited, a certain magnificent and dreadful passage caused him to swoon with terror. In that swoon was the whole of *Alastor*. Pope,

* I borrow these judgements from one of the most subtle and accurate of English critics. See Mr. Matthew Arnold's *Lectures on Translating Homer;* the final word on Pope's translation will be found there.

† [Spence, from whom the other anecdotes of Pope are taken. The passage is *Iliad* ii., 239, *sqq.*]

no less sensitive in his own way, could not reach the end of that passage in the *Iliad* without bursting into tears. No man can be a critic to this point without being a poet.*

He gave a good proof of this in the *Essay on Criticism*, composed at the age of twenty-one, but kept in his desk for several years. To my thinking, it is quite as good as the *Epistle to the Pisones*, which we call Horace's *Art of Poetry*, or as Boileau. Speaking of Boileau, are we to accept that extraordinary verdict of a clever man, that contemptuous opinion for which M. Taine, by quoting it, makes himself responsible, and which he does not shrink from endorsing as he goes along: 'There are two kinds of verse in Boileau; the more numerous might be those of a good fourth-form boy, the less numerous those of a good pupil in the rhetoric class'? The clever man who speaks thus — it is M. Guillaume Guizot — does not feel the poetry of Boileau. I will go further, he cannot feel any poet *quâ* poet. I can understand a refusal to make the craftsmanship everything in poetry, but I cannot at all understand, when an art is in question, the refusal to take the art into consideration at all, and the depreciation to this extent of those perfect workmen who excel therein. The shortest way would be to suppress at one stroke all versified poetry; if not, speak with respect of those who have possessed the secret of versification. Boileau was of that small number, and Pope no less. How many judicious and subtle remarks, containing

* I avail myself here of an interesting work which I have just received, Mr. Edward Dowden's *Considerations on the Critical Spirit in Literature.*

eternal truths, do I gather as I read him! With what terseness, conciseness, elegance, are they expressed, and once for all! I will point out a few:

'In Poets, as true Genius is but rare,
True Taste as seldom is the Critic's share;
Both must alike from heav'n derive their light,
These born to judge, as well as those to write.
* * * * *
Some have at first for Wits, then Poets past,
Turned Critics next, and prov'd plain fools at last.'

Here is an answer in advance to those artists eaten up with pride and vanity, impatient of any remarks, such as we have known; who mix up everything, and have only one definition to give of a critic: 'What is a critic? An incapable person who has failed to be an artist.' For every overweening artist this definition of the critic had only too much interest; and the result during many years was complete licence, a kind of debauch of talent.

Speaking of Homer and his relation to Virgil, Pope fixed the true line, the right road for classical talent, which loves to abide by traditional order:

'Be Homer's works your study and delight,
Read them by day and meditate by night;
Thence form your judgment, thence your notions bring,
And trace the Muses upwards to their spring.
Still with itself compared, his text peruse,
Or let your comment be the Mantuan Muse.
When first young Maro sung of kings and war,
E'er warning Phœbus touched his trembling ears,
Perhaps he seemed above the Critic's law,
And but from Nature's fountains scorned to draw;
But when t' examine every part he came,
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same.'

Surely the poetry of the second period, the period of polish and smoothness, has never been better expressed and exemplified. The poet-critic attributes even a little too much to Homer, when in connection with his subject he recollects, in order to refute, a *dictum* of Horace, and says that where we see a fault or a want of care, there is, perhaps, only an artistic stratagem :

> 'Nor is it Homer nods, but we that dream.'

Pope has, in many passages full of a noble fire, defined and traced out the fine part which the true critic should play :

> 'A perfect Judge will read each work of wit
> With the same spirit that its author writ,
> Survey the *Whole*, nor seek slight faults to find
> Where nature moves, and rapture warms the mind ;
> Nor lose, for that malignant dull delight,
> The gen'rous pleasure to be charmed with wit.'

Or take this fine portrait, ideal of its kind, which every professional critic ought to frame and hang up in his study :

> 'But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,
> Still pleas'd to teach, and yet not proud to know?
> Unbias'd, or by favour, or by spite ;
> Not dully prepossess'd, or blindly right ;
> Tho' learned, well-bred ; and tho' well-bred, sincere ;
> Modestly bold, and humanly severe :
> Who to a friend his faults can freely show,
> And gladly praise the merit of a foe?
> Blest with a taste exact, yet unconfin'd ;
> A knowledge both of books and human-kind ;
> Gen'rous converse ; a soul exempt from pride ;
> And love to praise, with reason on his side?'

To be a good and perfect critic, as Pope knew well, it is not enough to cultivate and extend the intelligence, the mind must also be purged of every bad passion, of every equivocal sentiment; the heart must be kept sound and honest.

No man can be so keenly, so delicately sensitive to beauty, without being terribly shocked by evil and ugliness. Exquisite enjoyment must be paid for. The man whose heart is as open, as sensitive to beauties as was Pope's, even to the point of being moved to tears by them, is equally sensitive to faults, to the point of annoyance and irritation. He who most keenly enjoys the perfume of the rose will be the first to be offended by evil odours. There has thus, perhaps, been no one who has felt and suffered from literary folly in so high a degree as Pope. But what was he to do in presence of bad authors, such as in our own day we no longer dare to call simply fools, and who in truth have a sufficient tincture of the universal cleverness to save them from being more than half-fools? Pope, who, like so many moralists, does not always follow his own maxims, has given us in his *Essay* some excellent precepts on this subject. He tells us that the better course is often to withhold criticism, to let the fool have his fling, and expatiate at his ease:

> 'Tis best sometimes your censure to restrain,
> And charitably let the dull be vain:
> Your silence there is better than your spite,
> For who can rail so long as they can write?'

A warning to us, the impatient and susceptible, when we pause to attack one of those insipid, self-contented,

inexhaustible scribes, whom we have no wish even to name.

Pope sums up for us his whole theory, which is that of Virgil, of Racine, of Raphael, of all those who in matters of art are not for realism, for frankness at any price, even that of crudity, for force at any price, even that of violence:

> 'True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
> What oft' was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;
> Something, whose truth convinc'd at sight we find,
> That gives us back the image of the mind.'

He is in favour of selection, not of excess; even excess of wit or talent.

> 'For works may have more wit than does 'em good,
> As bodies perish through excess of blood.'*

Pope's economy of words is not less remarkable than the elegance of his versification. Of him, as of Malherbe, it may be said:

> 'He showed what power well-ordered words possess.'

But he has over Malherbe, as over Boileau, the advantage of writing in a language very rich in monosyllables. By his fashion of using these little words he shows himself very English in style; and I think I may, without going too far, say that his vocabulary, though

* It is curious to see how we now stand in regard to Pope and in opposition to his theory of poetry. Men of powerful talent have not hesitated to rank exaggeration as a virtue. Balzac would not allow that Pascal had a right to look for balance or a mean between contrary extremes, in the minds of great men; and only the other day a disciple of Balzac was trouncing Vauvenargues for saying that faculties were not enough, one should know how to economize them.

containing more abstract terms than is usual with other poets, is based on the best and purest vernacular. He knew well, moreover, that this attempt at regularity, this exact codification of taste, was a new thing unpractised and long unheard-of among his own people. 'In France,' he tells us:

> 'The rules a nation born to serve obeys,
> And *Boileau* still in right of *Horace* sways.
> But we, brave *Britons!* foreign laws despis'd,
> And kept unconquer'd, and unciviliz'd,
> Fierce for the liberties of wit, and bold,
> We still defy'd the *Romans*, as of old.'

This had at any rate been true, quite recently, until Dryden came. He ends modestly by saying that his Muse will be:

> 'Content, if thence th' unlearn'd their wants may view,
> The learn'd reflect on what before they knew:'

a sentiment that has been rendered in a single excellent Latin verse, which might be taken for Horace:

> 'Indocti discant, et ament meminisse periti.'

In this *Essay* of poetic and critic art, I have passed over certain charming models of versification and imitative poetry which the poet has so well coupled with his teaching, that the precept bears the example with it. Among them is a celebrated passage, perhaps the most perfect of its style in modern poetry. Addison quotes it approvingly in No. 253 of the *Spectator*.

> 'Tis not enough, no harshness gives offence,
> The sound must seem an echo to the sense.
> Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
> And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;

But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line, too, labours, and the words move slow ;
Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main.'

Such bits, it will be easily understood, are untranslatable. When Delille, with all his ability, imitating this passage in the fourth book of his *Homme des Champs*, gives us :

' Peignez en vers légers l'amant léger de Flore ;
Qu'un doux raisseau murmure en vers plus doux encore. . . .'

he misses at the outset the precision and restraint which makes Pope say simply 'Zephyr,' and not 'Flora's lover.' Pope must no more be confounded with Delille, than Gresset with Dorat. It is as with wines, there is 'bouquet' *and* 'bouquet.' The bouquet is a small thing in itself, but to the taste it is everything.

As may well be supposed, I have no intention of going all through Pope's principal works. What I wish to remark, following Campbell, is that if he is not a universal poet in that sense of the term which most strikes us at the present day, he is none the less truly a poet, even though he belongs to a less stormy, less passionate, less dazzling order, and employs an ornate, accurate, and pure style. In range of ideas he is far superior to Boileau, no less than in taste for the picturesque ; but some have found the same faults in him as we ourselves, with all the first impertinence of beginners, once charged against Boileau. A poet, who

thought it his duty to edit Pope, or at any rate wrote a preface to him, the Rev. W. L. Bowles, one of the precursors of the romantic movement in England, has picked many quarrels with his author, and cast many shortcomings in his teeth.

'No one,' he says, 'can stand pre-eminent as a great poet unless he has not only a heart susceptible of the most pathetic or most exalted feelings of Nature, but an eye attentive to, and familiar with, every external appearance that she may exhibit, in every change of season, every variation of light and shade, every rock, every tree, every leaf, in her solitary places. He who has not an eye to observe these, and who cannot with a glance distinguish every diversity of every hue in the variety of her beauties, must so far be deficient in one of the essential qualities of a poet.'

Pope is assuredly not without a sense of the picturesque; he had a feeling for nature: he loved it and described it in his *Windsor Forest*. Condemned by his health to a sedentary life and unable to travel to the grander scenes, he had the taste for rural nature as it displayed itself, smiling and fresh, around him; he even drew and painted landscapes. For a year and a half he took lessons from his friend Jervas; and when asked one day, 'Which gives you the most pleasure, poetry or painting?' he replied: 'I really can't well say; both of them are extremely pleasing.' Still there is no doubt that he was far from fulfilling the detailed programme which Bowles sets out for the poet, or the picturesque conditions which he requires. Wordsworth alone, since his day, has been equal to that. Bowles himself composed some charming sonnets in this line, of great variety; and he did not observe that he was erecting his own taste and personal gift

into a general law and theory. As often happens, he took himself for a type.

Let us confound neither styles nor natures, nor demand from one organization the fruits of another. Let us apply to Pope that equitable precept of his own:

> 'In ev'ry work regard the writer's End,
> Since none can compass more than they intend.'

Though a friend of Bolingbroke and Swift, Pope does not follow their philosophy or their bold speculations to the end. When versifying Bolingbroke's ideas in combination with those of Leibnitz, he does not go beyond the limits of a benevolent and intelligent deism. The *Essay on Man*, as it came forth from his thought and from his hand, in its honourable moderation, its incompleteness, its ornate gravity, has long been a possession of French literature, and is familiar to us by Fontanes' translation and the fine preface which he has put to it. How many accurate definitions, how many proverbs in verse have been taken from it! But it is not my favourite among Pope's works. Where he is at his best, with full originality and without leaving what was his true field of observation, is in the Moral Epistle. M. Taine has rightly called special attention to that in which he treats of men's characters and the ruling passion.* Pope has therein, after the manner of La Bruyère, but with the added difficulty, no less than charm, of rhyme, constantly packed the maximum of thought into the minimum of space. This is the principle of his method.

The Epistle in question shows us, by a string of

* The *Epistle to Lord Cobham.*

examples or aptly chosen remarks, that whoever would thoroughly know a single man, an individual, is liable to be deceived at all points: to mistake appearance, habits, opinions, language, even actions, which often are directly contrary to the motive of them. There is only one thing which never deceives; it is, when you can seize it, the secret spring in each case, the ruling and dominant passion, when such exists in him. Then indeed you have the key to everything. And in a series of examples he shows us each man remaining as he grows older more and more faithful to this secret informing force, which survives everything, and drops the mask as years go on, which is the last thing to become extinct in us, and which, as it were, sets its seal on our last breath.

> 'Time, that on all things lays his lenient hand,
> Yet tames not this; it sticks to our last sand.
> Consistent in our follies and our sins,
> Here honest Nature ends as she begins.'

Pope's political views were cool and indifferent enough, but above all, respectable and eminently literary. Thrown much with party-men, Tories and Whigs, and on intimate terms with the former, he did not take up any subject of debate very keenly. He has expressed his teaching in the famous lines:

> 'For forms of government let fools contest;
> Whate'er is best administer'd, is best.

Thus in later days we shall find the sceptic Hume, with allusion to Claudian's lines:

> 'Nunquam libertas gratior exstat
> Quam sub rege pio,'

observing that 'the best of republics is after all a good prince.' Pope spoke of Cromwell as an illustrious criminal 'damn'd to everlasting fame.' The sphere of ideas in which he lived pleasantly, in his grotto and on his hill, is the exact opposite of the region of bright and burning light in which Milton dwelt solitary, like a prophet on the high places. But the historian of literature, an indefatigable traveller, always open to the most diverse entertainment, takes the great and distinguished men of past times as they present themselves to him, each in his own home; he knows that there is more than one climate, more than one abode for great and noble intellects.

Pope was undoubtedly the poet of his day, of a brilliant and well-balanced era, of a memorable period when English society, without abjuring itself as under Charles II., entered into a regulated intercourse with the Continent, and opened its door in respect both of form and ideas, to an exchange at once advantageous and dignified. Pope is what has been called an enlightened spirit. He was made for select friendships, and they did not fail him. We can see in his works what care and what elegance he imported into his epistolary correspondence; he adapted the turn and the tone of his letters to those to whom he addressed them. His correspondence does not appear to me to have as yet been collected and edited as it deserves.* If he was a man intimate with the great, he had nothing about him of the 'public character.' Somewhere or other he applies to himself a phrase of Seneca, about men of

* [This want has now been supplied by Messrs. Elwin and Courthope's great edition of Pope's Works (London: Murray).]

extreme timidity: 'Tam umbratiles sunt ut putent in turbido esse quicquid in luce est.' There are some persons who love a life in the shade so much as to deem that to be in the light or in the cloud is all one.* He adds, that some men, like some pictures, are better adapted to remain in a corner than to be shown in full daylight. Among those he reckoned himself. Charming as he was in private conversation, he could no more have faced public speaking than M. de la Rochefoucauld. He felt himself incapable, he said, of reciting before a dozen friends (if it had been so arranged beforehand) what he could have recited admirably to the same number taken three by three. When called as witness in a famous case, he could not utter the few words which he had to say, without catching himself up two or three times. But in private life he was gracefulness and accuracy itself. His judgements on authors, his remarks on all subjects, particularly on literary matters, are exquisitely correct. Of Chaucer, Spenser, Cowley, Milton, even Shakespeare, he talks enchantingly, and touches each to the quick with impartial taste. To appreciate Pope as he was in intimate discourse, one must read Spence's *Anecdotes*.

In all this my wish has only been to show that it was possible to speak of Pope with friendship and sympathy; but before taking a fitting leave of M. Taine, I must add a few further remarks and reflections.

The third volume calls for, and makes us wish for, a

* [The passage is from Seneca, Ep. 3; but all the editions I have seen give the opening words, 'Quidam adeo in latebras refugerunt.' Nor can I trace Pope's alleged quotation of it.—TRANSLATOR.]

fourth.* Modern English Literature, the literature of the nineteenth century, does not in fact occupy as much space as it has the right to demand. Even some parts of the eighteenth might have claimed further development. Though very fair in what he says about the chief poetical names which come in his way, the critic, taken up with the unity of his plans, seems in too great a hurry to arrive at the conclusion. Gray, the melancholy, the delicate, so original a poet, is smothered; nor is there more connection between Gray and Lamartine than between a pearl and a lake. Collins is lumped with ten others; he was worth the trouble of discrimination. Goldsmith's poetry similarly deserved a brief visit in its home, for the sake of his village of Auburn. If the Scot, Robert Burns, has been vigorously estimated and worthily classed, it seems to me that William Cowper does not get a sufficient and proportionate share in the revival of natural taste, of real poetic expression. The Lakists, also, are too tightly packed. Walter Scott is treated with severity, and not at all in accordance with our recollections. M. Taine does not give him the rank which is his due as a romance writer. Generally speaking, what is lacking in this final part is proportion. The philosophic critic, having brought all his forces to bear on the difficult parts—on the high levels, as we may say—descends rather too rapidly those pleasant slopes, rich as they yet are in happy undulations and recesses. He disdains to halt on them, forgetting that for us French readers they would have been the most accessible regions, bringing us by a series

* This has now appeared.

of interesting stages continuously closer to our own point of view. This fault, if the author likes, is easily reparable. In any case, M. Taine's work, in its original integrity, will last as one of the most original works of our time.

Lastly,* I cannot quit a work of this kind, and an author of this merit, without saying something about an academical incident which has made some stir. This book, it is well to recall, after being submitted to a Commission and read by each of its members, was at once, and unanimously, considered by them worthy of one of the prizes which it is the special duty of the French Academy to award. Observe that the prize in question, by the terms of the founder's will, involves no conditions save those of learning and talent. This proposal—voted, I repeat, unanimously by its own Commission—the Academy, assembled in large number, thought fit, after a long debate, to reject; basing its decision on certain principles of philosophic orthodoxy which seemed to it to be infringed and violated by the author's system. I am not unduly astonished by this decision, in which distinguished colleagues, sailing under all kinds of flags, concurred. Eclectics, Voltairians, Gallicans, some simply Catholics, united all together in one coalition—the majority, too, declaring that they had not read the work—considered themselves nevertheless authorized, nay, compelled in conscience to reject it on the mere statement of the objections. I

* [The remarks which follow have no direct bearing on English literature. They are, however, retained, as an interesting presentation, from within, of an aspect of academies which was overlooked by Mr. Arnold in his well-known essay.]

was detained by my work, and prevented from taking part in the discussion. If I had been able to be present, far from disavowing M. Taine, though but in part, as some even of his most able defenders seemed to do, I would have taken him as he brings himself before us, and endeavoured to present and enforce (less in his interest than in that of the distinguished assembly) one single consideration which I think is worth pondering.

There is still a moral advance to be made in our nineteenth century, which claims to be a century of tolerance, but is yet only halfway to it. Think of the time when a dominant religion forbade all dogmatic and philosophic dissent; when every heretic or schismatic or misbeliever was crushed. Even after toleration was extended, more or less, to the different Christian communions, there were still Jews to go on reviling, to annoy whenever you met them, to damage as you pleased in public esteem. In the last century, a hundred years ago, it was still legally a crime, a blot, a ground for antipathies, to be a deist, like Rousseau in *Émile*, or Marmontel in *Bélisaire*—I am coupling opinions, not talents. At the present day, deism, Mosaism, are accepted well enough, and saluted respectfully when met with. There remains the accusation of Spinozism; at this everyone crosses himself or hides his face. Is it not almost time, gentlemen of enlightenment, leaders of intelligence, to make one effort more, and set us all an example? Yes, there exists in truth a class, small enough in numbers, of steady, sober philosophers, living plainly, avoiding intrigue, occupied like Woepcke, who died lately, and of whom M. Taine

talked to us the other day,* in the sole and scrupulous search after truth in old books, in the thankless study of texts, in difficult experiments; men who, devoting themselves to the cultivation of their understanding, and weaned from all other passions, attend to the general laws of the world and the universe, and because in this universe nature is no less living than history, attend of necessity to the task of listening to her, and studying the thought and soul of the world in those regions where she manifests herself to them; men who are stoics at heart, who seek to practise the Good, to act and think as well and as accurately as they can, even without the attraction of a future individual reward, but satisfied and happy to feel themselves at one with themselves, in accord and in harmony with the general order, as Marcus Aurelius, the divine expressed it in his own day, and as Spinoza too felt it. These men, I ask you, quite apart from any special creed, any philosophic profession of faith, is it fair to brand them at the outset with an odious appellation, and in virtue of this cast them out, or at most tolerate them only as those are tolerated and amnestied whose errors and faults are admitted? Have they not earned their place with us, their corner in the sun? Have they not a right, generous philosophers of the eclectic school, whom for perfect moral disinterestedness and greatness of soul I like to compare with them, to be treated at least on the same footing with yourselves, and

* *Journal des Débats*, May 14, 1864. [Franz Woepcke, a German settled in Paris, was an eminent mathematician and student of the history of mathematics. He died in 1864, aged 38.]

honoured equally with your school for the purity of their teaching, for the uprightness of their intentions, and for the innocence of their lives? There is the final step of progress worthy of the nineteenth century which I would fain see accomplished.

THE END.

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