A New Treatment of English Literary History.*

The symmetrical and self-centred development of French thought has always been one of its most marked characteristics, and French literature has thereby been given a unity not presented, except for brief periods, by the literatures of other modern nations. There has been something almost Hellenic in its confident assumption that the final cause of the ideas of other peoples was to be found in its own adoption of those ideas, that through a Gallic remintage alone they might be given full currency and exchange value. This assumption, viewed from one side, is mere provincialism if not chauvinism; viewed from another, it expresses a deep artistic sense of the importance of preserving the national spirit from the dis-

* A Literary History of the English People. From the Origins to the Renaissance. By J. J. Jusserand. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

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integrating influence of alien ideals. The finest French thought, from the age of the Great Monarch to that which has witnessed the permanent triumph of the republican principle, has shown a strong instinct of self-preservation in this respect; it has not been wholly impervious to foreign influences, but it has welcomed them only upon condition of complete assimilation.

The most careless observer, however, cannot have failed to notice in the French thought of the past few years a significant change of attitude towards the foreigner. While by no means abandoning the old national ideal, the modern Frenchman lends a more willing ear than formerly to the words of his European neighbors; his interest in what they are doing and saying is no longer the mere polite curiosity of old, but has become genuine and absorbing; a catholicity of taste, almost to be described as eager, has replaced the old narrow indifference. The force of chauvinism, if still unspent in political and social affairs, has lost its power to resist the invasion of the educational, artistic, and literary ideals of the rest of Europe. The preaching of Taine and Renan is bearing fruit, both in its amplification by such of the younger men as M. Lavisse, M. Bourget, and the Vicomte de Vogüé, and in the widening outlook already gained by a large proportion of cultivated Frenchmen. Never has lesson been so taken to heart as that of Sedan, in witness whereof stands the great monument of the national educational system, erected within the past quarter century. Never, perhaps, has the innate artistic sense of a people won so complete a triumph over national or academic prejudice as in the recent enthusiastic acceptance of the music-dramas of Richard Wagner. In this case, the words of Tennyson,

> "We needs must love the highest when we see it,"

find a new application, in the highest degree creditable to the people in whose honor they are now recalled.

Noticeable among the manifestations of the increase of French interest in the achievements of other nations is the attention recently paid to English literature by a number of competent scholars. In this field the path was many years ago marked out by Taine, whose great history of our letters, in spite of its obvious faults and its *doctrinaire* method, remains the most important general treatment of the subject anywhere yet produced. Of late years the study of English literature has been taken very seriously by the French faculties of letters, and many important monographs upon special phases of the subject have been published. The modern French student of literature is no longer content, as formerly, with a few superficial notions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron, but is beginning to learn something about many others of our writers, from Chaucer to Tennyson, and to follow the lead of Taine in the study of tendencies and formative agencies in the growth of the English national spirit. The trend and the thoroughness of the new training are well exemplified by such books as M. Rabbe's study of Shelley, M. Chevrillon's study of Sydney Smith, and the twelve hundred pages of M. Angelier's study of Burns; by M. Beljame's work on English men of letters in the eighteenth century, and M. Jusserand's "Piers Plowman," "English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages," and "The English Novel in the Time of Shakespeare." Such works as these, honorable to the scholarship of any nation, are peculiarly gratifying to us of English speech, for their production seems to presage a closer linking together of the two modern literatures that have chiefly influenced the thought and the civilization of the world.

The works of M. Jusserand already mentioned have given to their author perhaps the foremost place among living French students of English literature, and prepared us in a way for the more ambitious and comprehensive book which has occasioned the present article. That book is called "A Literary History of the English People," and will, when completed, fill three large volumes. The one now published covers the period "From the Origins to the Renaissance," the second will carry the history on to Pope, and the third will bring it down to the present day. We are not at present called upon to pronounce final judgment upon an undertaking of which but a third is yet offered us, yet we cannot refrain from saying that, as the complete work will be comparable in dimensions with Taine's monumental history, it would seem, from the section now at hand, to give promise of being equally comparable in quality; that is, in scholarship, sympathy, discernment, and philosophical grasp.

The differentiation of M. Jusserand's work from the conventional history of literature may best be described in the author's words. "Diminishing somewhat in his book the part usually allowed to technicalities and æsthetic problems," he has increased "the part allotted to the people and to the nation." For a writer with this general object in view, "the ages

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during which the national thought expressed itself in languages which were not the national one, will not be allowed to remain blank, as if, for complete periods, the inhabitants of the island had ceased to think at all. The growing into shape of the people's genius will have to be studied with particular attention." The theory thus expressed is well illustrated by the present volume devoted to the origins; and so rich and suggestive a treatment of the Saxon, and especially the Norman period, is hardly to be found in the work of any other historian. We find here a more intimate association of the literature with customs, politics, and institutions than was given us even by Taine, and admiration of the author's scholarship is evoked by wellnigh every page. The Norman period, in particular, is made an integral part of our intellectual development, instead of being regarded as a period of alien influences, active for a time, but leaving slight impress upon our literature as a whole. In this field, the author makes large use of the immense riches of recent French philological scholarship, even quoting from review articles of the past few months. The continuity of English thought, as embodied in its literature, is a fundamental conception of this work, and the unconscious embodiments are given their full value.

"Philosophers and reformers must be questioned concerning the theories which they spread: and not without some purely literary advantage. Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke are the ancestors of many poets who have never read their works, but who have breathed an air impregnated with their thought. Dreamers will be followed, singers, tale-tellers, and preachers, wherever it pleases them to lead us: to the Walhalla of the north, to the green dales of Erin, to the Saxon church of Bradford-on-Avon, to Blackheath, to the 'Tabard' and the 'Mermaid,' to the 'Globe,' to 'Will's' coffee-house, among ruined fortresses, to cloud-reaching steeples, or along the furrow sown to good intent by Piers the honest Plowman."

A few words may be given to matters that have particularly attracted our attention during the examination of this volume, or matters that involve critical problems in their treatment. Mr. Grant Allen will thank the author for his insistence upon the Celtic element in our English race; on the other hand, the Scandinavian element in the race of the conquering Normans is minimized, unduly, we should say, when we come upon the statement that "they no longer had anything Scandinavian or Germanic about them." But M. Jusserand does not exaggerate the significance of the Conquest, or of the fact that after 1066, the inhabitants of England, "so used to invasions, were never again to see rise, from that day to this, the smoke of an enemy's camp." We might carp a little at this statement, but it remains essentially true. A characteristic as well as deeply interesting example of the author's scent for literary parallelisms is offered by this quotation from a twelfth century lyric:

"Il n'est mie jors, saverouze au cors gent,
Si m'ait amors, l'alouete nos ment,"

which was the way "in which, long before Shakespeare, the Juliets of the time of Henry II. said to their Romeos:

'It is not yet near day,
It was the nightingale and not the lark.'"

But not content with this, the author refers us still farther back, to a Chinese poem antedating the seventh century, where the same *motif* appears in this form: "It was not the cock, it was the hum of flies."

M. Jusserand's work is one to be readily quoted from, but our indulgence in that pleasant task is forbidden by the limitations of space. Having piloted us, as guide, philosopher, and friend, through the intricate channels of the formative period, the author at last reaches the open sea of Chaucer, with comparatively plain sailing ahead. The chapters on Chaucer and Langland are lovingly written, and no English historian has surpassed them in charm. A long chapter on the beginnings of the drama, and a short one on "The End of the Middle Ages," bring the volume to a close. The Eastern Empire has succumbed to the onslaughts of the Turk; classical scholars and manuscripts have started on their beneficent mission to the civilization of the West; the quickened life of the Renaissance is transforming Italy and France; the English people are on the eve of the great flowering period of their national genius; and we await the second instalment of M. Jusserand's work, confident that he will be equal to the demands made upon him by even "the spacious times of great Elizabeth."

It is not easy to do justice in a brief review to the manifold charms of this work. There is the charm of full knowledge and ripe judgment, the charm that comes from a treatment always fresh, however hackneyed the theme, the charm that comes from playing allusively about a subject and adorning it with illustrative material from the greatest variety of sources, and, finally, the charm of an English style which we hesitate in attributing to any mere translator. Either the author has rewritten his

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own book in English, or he has been singularly happy in the one to whom the preparation of the English text was entrusted. And those who entertain a chronic suspicion that graceful writing means superficiality of attainment and the lack of exact knowledge will be reassured by a glance at the footnotes, to which all the erudition has been relegated, and of which the most pedantic and industrious of German scholars would have no cause to be ashamed.

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