Henley's Literary Monument.*

No writer could ask of the piety of his survivors a more substantial memorial than has been reared to Henley in the new edition of his works. But the *ære perennius* nobody can build out of a mere fulness of fair, clear pages: an artist has to rear his own monument. Meanwhile, it is pleasant that so rich a token should be laid like a wreath upon the memory of a strong man in his and our day. Henley's career did not go altogether as he had planned it. Years ago he wrote of himself (in a preface not included in this edition): "After spending the better part of my life in the pursuit of poetry, I found myself [about 1877] so utterly unmarketable that I had to confess myself beaten in art, and to addict myself to journalism for the next ten years." The implication is that he recognized prose art to be not within his province. And indeed it was not. He produced no prose comparable with his verse, though all of it was useful and much of it brilliant. However, his journalism was of the type which has produced and maintained the great English reviews. One of his most remarkable attributes was his extraordinary faculty of discovering and bringing out young or unrecognized talents. He was a great editor. But as we are now for the first time in possession of everything of his which is likely to be reprinted, as we see it all together and get its effect as a whole, the question we naturally ask ourselves is what he amounted to, not as a man but as a writer.

His prose occupies in this edition five of the seven volumes. The two volumes of "Views and Reviews" suggest, he says, "less a book than a mosaic of scraps and shreds recovered from the shot rubbish of some fourteen years of journalism." But it is a patchwork of exceedingly rich materials. These brief and flashing notes upon great writers and painters express a criticism personal and impressionistic, but full of life. Here, indeed, rather than in the two volumes of essays, we find the prose Henley whom we like to remember. For leisure seems to have had a queer effect of developing in him a tendency to truculence, above all a tendency to dwell with a sort of defiant gusto upon those aspects of greatness which the world as a whole is anxious to ignore.

Henley has been called a Pagan, perhaps believed himself to be one; but there is no such person in the modern world — or at least no such person is now articulate. We protest too much, and in the end prove ourselves to be mere inverted Puritans. Henley's hatred of cant and sentimentalism led him to extremes of utterance. His Introduction to the Centenary edition of Burns had not the obituary ring and lacked the dispassionateness fairly to be demanded under the conditions. That was not the place for a protest or a manifesto. The substance of his contention as to Burns's character is hardly to be seriously disputed; we have the poet's own frank evidence to go by. Nor do we suppose that Henley was unjust to the memory of Stevenson in the substance of his unguarded and greatly resented protest against Balfour's fancy picture. To cover his friend's memory with silver-gilt really seemed to him an act of treachery. But in his hasty attempt to set that friend before the world as a man human in his faults as well as in his virtues, he allowed himself to be offensive. He could not be calmly judicious, and often appeared cynical, because he could not bear the thought of appearing sentimental.

But this is not all. As you read over these two volumes of carefully considered essays, you are aware of a tendency to dwell upon sexual frailty which represents not merely a revulsion against prudery. He is not prurient, but he has that dangerous pride in his faculty of calling a spade a spade which ends in keeping one unnecessarily on the lookout for that useful but not ornamental object. He is very severe with Burns for his lewdness, but (although he resents Taine's label of Fielding as the "Good Buffalo" and pronounces him one of the best of men) declares that he has no doubt there was a Lady Bellaston in Fielding's own experience, and that "The Matthews and Bellaston episodes were profitable to Fielding: profitable and deemed in no sort reprehensible." It is hard enough to stomach the Lady Bellaston relation in connec- with Tom Jones: are we to be required to accept it of Fielding with this bland complacency, while in the same breath we call him, with Henley, "a humane, stately, and honourable gentleman"? Even so he dwells upon the fleshly failings of Smollett and of Hazlitt, — above all, of Balzac; so that in the end one wearies at the insistence with which this one harsh string is sounded. Henley's criticism has notes far sweeter and sounder, though it is his nature and intent to be robustious rather than agreeable. Get him away from his hobbies, absorb him in his theme and not in his effect, and you find yourself in the presence of a criticism sound as well as independent.

* The Works of W. E. Henley. In seven volumes. London: David Nutt.

The volume of plays, joint work of Henley and Stevenson, is disappointing to read, if one takes it up with the expectation of finding therein anything of real dramatic importance. "Beau Austin" is a finished comedy of eighteenth century manners. We can easily understand why it should have "acted well," but it is, after all, no more than a bit of pleasant artifice. The three other plays are meritorious studies in melodrama. "Deacon Brodie" is a sort of Dr. Jekyl reduced to the Adelphi convention; it would have a real and lively interest for the gallery. "Admiral Guinea" is less conventional, and therefore less acceptable as melodrama. "Macaire" the authors call a "melodramatic farce"; but it seems to be rather a piece of very light romantic comedy suddenly cut short by a shocking catastrophe. The sketch was successfully produced, but it is hard to see how any gallery can have put up with it.

In the end, our judgment of Henley's achievement rests upon his two volumes of poetry. For here is a true and fresh lyric note. He was one of the few veritable singers of his day, whether the burden of his song might be war, or love, or work, or the life of the street. His poems of the London hospital and the London highway have naturally been more highly praised for their originality, their modernity, — in short, their timely or journalistic quality. They are excellent poems in their class; but the poet's reputation will linger rather in the perfect lyrics of "Hawthorne and Lavender" or in the stout war-songs of "For England's Sake."

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