

HI PPOLYTE TAINÉ HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE (1863-1864)

Taine, Hippolyte. "From History of English Literature." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. Fort Worth: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 609-620.

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting the growing *historicism* and *expressivism* of the nineteenth century, Taine's thesis is that literature is a "transcript of contemporary manners, a type of a certain kind of mind" (609) and that one can "retrace, from the monuments of literature, the style of man's feelings and thoughts for centuries back" (609). This view of literature is the product, he argues, of a new conception of history which has recently "undergone a complete change: in its subject matter, its system, its machinery, the appreciation of laws and causes" (609).

Taine argues that the goal of criticism is biographical, that is, to uncover the man behind the work. Literature is

but a mould, like a fossil shell, an imprint, like one of those shapes embossed in stone by an animal which lived and perished. Under the shell there was an animal, and behind the document there was a man. Why do you study the shell, except to represent to yourself the animal? So do you study the document only in order to know the man. The shell and the document are lifeless wrecks, valuable only as a clue to the entire and living existence. We must reach back to this existence, endeavour to recreate it. It is a mistake to study the document, as if it were isolated. . . . Nothing exists except through some individual man; it is this individual man with whom we must become acquainted. . . . [G]enuine history is brought into existence only when the historian begins to unravel, across the lapse of time, the living man, toiling, impassioned, entrenched in his customs, with his voice and features, his gestures and dress, distinct and complete as he from whom we have just parted in the street. . . Let us endeavour, then, to annihilate as far as possible this great interval of time, which prevents us from seeing man with our eyes. (609)

The goal in studying literature (which is an "abstract thing" [610]) is to discover the man responsible for it, the man who "acts, the man corporeal and visible, who eats, walks, fights, labours" (610).

The same goal is true of studying history: we must strive to "see men in their workshops, in their offices, in their fields, with their sky and earth, their houses, their dress, cultivations, meals" (610). Our greatest care should be devoted to supplying the "want of present, personal, direct, and sensible observation which we can no longer practice; for it is the only means of knowing men. Let us make the past present: in order to judge a thing, it must be before us; there is no experience in respect of what is absent" (610). Taine argues that a "book of observations is no psychology" (612) because the "search for causes must come after the collection of facts" (612). In other words, it is the "man invisible" (610) that is hidden behind the "visible man" (610) which is the objective in both anthropology (the study of human culture) and history (the study of the past): the words which enter your ears, the gestures, the motions of his head, the clothes he wears, visible acts and deeds of every kind, are expressions merely; somewhat is revealed beneath them, and that is a soul. An inner man is concealed beneath the outer man, the second does but reveal the first. You look at his house, furniture, dress; and that in order to discover in

them the mark of his habits and tastes, the degree of his refinement or rusticity, his extravagance or his economy, his stupidity or his cunning. You listen to his conversation, and you note the inflections of his voice, the changes in his attitudes; and this in order to judge of his intensity, his self-forgetfulness or his gaiety, his energy or his constraint. You consider his writings, his artistic productions, his business transactions or political ventures; and that in order to measure the scope and limits of his intelligence, his inventiveness, his coolness to find out the order, the description, the general force of his ideas, the mode in which he thinks and resolves. All these externals are but avenues converging to a centre; you enter them simply in order to reach that centre; and that centre is the genuine man, I mean that mass of faculties and feelings which are produced by the inner man. (610-611)

Every "action which we see" (611) derives from an "infinite association of reasonings, emotions, sensations new and old, which have served to bring it to light" (611). This "underworld" (611) is the "new subject matter, proper to the historian" (611) and, needless to say, the critic.

Taine argues that it is the critic's goal, as much as the historian's, to seek the man behind the artefact, to

lay bare, under every detail of architecture, every stroke in a picture, every phrase in a writing, the special sensation whence detail, stroke, or phrase had issue; he is present at the drama which was enacted in the soul of the artist or writer; the choice of a word, the brevity or length of a sentence, the nature of a metaphor, the accent of a verse, the development of an argument – everything is a symbol to him; while his eyes read the text, his soul and mind pursue the continuous development and the ever changing succession of the emotions and conceptions out of which the text has sprung: in short, he unveils a psychology. (611)

Taine stresses that it is no matter

if the causes be physical or moral, they all have their causes; there is a cause for ambition, for courage, for truth, as there is for digestion, for muscular movement, for animal heat. Vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar; and every complex phenomenon has its springs from other more simple phenomena on which it hangs. (612)

Every human artefact, and not just literature, can be explained in this way. For example, the rather mournful religious music of the Protestant church, he argues, is an artefact that derives from the "general idea of the true, external worship which man owes to God" (612). This in turn "comes from another more general cause, the idea of human conduct . . . by which man is kept face to face with God" (612). This is itself derived in turn from a "third still more general idea, that of moral perfection" (612) embodied in our conception of God. This is the "master idea, which consists in erecting duty into an absolute king of human life, and in prostrating all ideals before a moral model" (612).

It is at this point, Taine argues, that we reach the "root of man; for to explain this conception it is necessary to consider race itself" (612) which is, in this case, that of the Anglo-Saxon. It is the "structure of his character and intelligence, his general processes of thought and feeling" (612) which is responsible for this ideal of behaviour. Here, the search for causes is at an end:

we have arrived at a primitive disposition, at a trait proper to all sensations, to all the conceptions of a century or a race. . . . Here lie the grand causes for they are universal and permanent causes, present at every moment and

in every case. . . . In such a manner . . . the general structure of things and the grand features of events, are their work; and religions, philosophies, poetries, industries, the framework of society and of families, are in fact only the imprints stamped by their seal. (612)

There is, in short, a "system in human sentiments and ideas" (612) which has for its "motive power certain general traits, certain marks of the intellect and the heart common to men of one race, age, or country" (612).

To some degree, at least, all humans have certain basic features in common with each other. In history, "civilisations, however, diverse, are derived from certain simple spiritual forms" (612) which are explained by a "primitive psychological element" (612). To comprehend the "historical varieties" (612), it is necessary first to consider the nature of the "human soul generally, with its two or three fundamental faculties" (612). It is in this "compendium" (612) that one will perceive the "principal forms" (612) which humanity can take, that is, the "limits of the outline in which civilisations . . . are constrained to exist" (612). The fundamental feature common to all humans consists in the capacity for conscious thought, those "[i]mages or representations of things" (612) derived from "looking upon a tree, an animal, any sensible object" (612). Consciousness can be either "speculative or practical, according as the representations resolve themselves into a general conception or an active resolution" (612-613). In this, Taine argues, "we have the whole of man in an abridgment; and in this limited circle human diversities meet" (613). It is important to realise here that Taine does not believe that there is a pre-given or transcendental essence uniting human beings. The only natural thing that unites us is the physiological capacity for consciousness.

However, influenced (by his own admission) by Herder, Taine is at pains to point out that hitherto it was widely but wrongly believed that all humans everywhere and at all times were alike (the existence of a so-called universal human nature):

They thought men of every race and century were all but identical; the Greek, the barbarian, the Hindu, the man of the Restoration, and the man of the eighteenth century, as if they had been turned out of a common mould; and all in conformity to a certain conception, which served for the whole human race. They knew man, but not men; they had not penetrated to the soul; they had not seen the infinite diversity and marvellous complexity of souls; they did not know that the moral constitution of a people or an age is as particular and as distinct as the physical structure of a family of plants or an order of animals. Nowadays history, like zoology, has found its own anatomy. (611)

In other words, the consciousness of humans is also shaped by environmental factors which function to differentiate humans from each other. The proof of this may be found in the effect which events like emigration or conquest has had on specific nations: the

race emigrates, like the Aryan, and the change of climate has altered . . . the whole economy, intelligence, and organisation of society. The people has been conquered, like the Saxon nation, and a new political structure has been imposed on its customs, capacities, and inclinations which it had not. (613)

In every case, the "mechanism of history is the same" (613): one "continually finds, as the original mainspring, some very general disposition of mind and soul, innate and appended by nature to the race, or acquired and produced by circumstance acting upon the race" (613).

Taine argues that there are three determinants which shape human identity: "the race, the surroundings, and the epoch" (613), that is, biology, society / environment, and

the period of history in question. "What we call the *race* are the innate and hereditary dispositions which man brings with him" (613-614) and derived from "marked differences in the temperament and structure of the body" (614). These "vary with various peoples" (614). There is a "natural variety of men" (614) but "amidst the vast deviations" (614) one can always recognise the underlying racial characteristics of a particular group, Taine argues:

a race, like the old Aryans, scattered from the Ganges as far as the Hebrides, settled in every clime, spread over every grade of civilisation, transformed by thirty centuries of revolutions, nevertheless manifests in its tongues, religions, literatures, philosophies, the community of blood and of intellect which to this day binds its offshoots together. Different as they are, their parentage is not obliterated; barbarism, culture and grafting, differences of sky and soil, fortunes good and bad, have laboured in vain: the great marks of the original model have remained, and we find again the two or three marks of the primitive lineaments of the primitive imprint underneath the secondary imprints which time has stamped above them. (614)

The "primordial marks" (614) of race demonstrate, Taine argues, an "extraordinary tenacity" (614) and "immovable steadfastness" (614) because race is something "anterior to history" (614).

The second major determinant upon human identity is what Taine terms the 'surroundings' (that is, the physical and social environment in which one lives). Man, he writes, is not alone in the world:

nature surrounds him, and his fellow men surround him; accidental and secondary tendencies come to place themselves on his primitive tendencies, and physical or social circumstances confirm or disturb the character committed to their charge. In course of time character has had its effect. (614)

As soon as an animal begins to exist, Taine argues, he must come to terms with his surroundings:

it breathes after a new fashion, renews itself, is differently affected according to the new changes in air, food, temperature. Different climate and situation bring it various needs, and consequently a different course of actions; and this, again, a different set of habits, and still again, a different set of aptitudes and instincts. Man, forced to accommodate himself to circumstances, contracts a temperament and a character corresponding to them. (614)

The "regulating instincts and faculties implanted in a race" (615), that is, the "mood of intelligence in which it thinks and acts at the present time" (615), are inevitably "moulded and modelled" (615) by the action of "persistent and gigantic pressures" (615) external to men. This is why, Taine argues, the "profound differences which are manifest between the German races on the one side, and the Greek and Latin on the other arise for the most part from the difference between the countries in which they are settled" (614).

The third important determinant of human identity is history (what he calls the 'epoch'). "Beside the permanent impulse [race] and the given surroundings [locale], there is the acquired momentum [history]" (615):

When the national character and the surrounding circumstances operate, it is not upon a *tabula rasa*, but on a ground on which marks are already impressed. According as one takes the ground at one moment or another, the imprint is different; and this is the cause that the total effect is different.

(615)

Like Herder, Taine compares humans to plants: “[s]o it is with people as it is with a plant; the same sap, under the same temperature, and in the same soil, produces, at different steps of its progressive development, different formations, buds, flowers, fruits, seed vessels” (615). Humans, in short, are fashioned by the times in which they live.

In every epoch (which he defines as “one of those wide intervals which embrace one or more centuries” [615]), a “certain dominant idea has held sway” (615), a “certain ideal model of man” (615). This ideal “uniting its effect with those of national genius and surrounding circumstances, imposes on each new creation its bent and direction” (615). This idea is “displayed over the whole field of action and thought; and after covering the world with its works, . . . it has faded, it has died away, and lo, a new idea springs up, destined to a like domination, and the like number of creations” (615). Taine is at pains to stress that there is an intellectual history which links the various ideas which predominate at different times. Like a plant, the “one which follows has always the first for its condition, and grows from its death” (615). This is especially true of the arts and the history of the arts and literature: “the one artist is the precursor, the other the successor; the first has no model, the second has; the first sees objects face to face, the second sees them through the first” (615). The “great historical currents are formed after this law” (615).

Taine then turns his attention to “how these causes, when applied to a nation or an age, produce their results” (616). He uses yet another natural analogy to this end:

As a rivulet falling from a height spreads its streams, according to the depth of the descent, stage after stage, until it reaches the lowest level of the soil, so the disposition of intellect soul impressed upon a people by race, circumstance, or epoch, spreads in different proportions and by regular descents, down the diverse orders of facts which make up its civilisation. If we arrange the map of a country, starting from a watershed, we find that below this common point the streams are divided into five or six principal basins, and so on, until the whole country with its thousand details is included in the ramifications of this network. So, if we arrange the psychological map of the events and sensations of a human civilisation, we find . . . five or six well-defined provinces--religion, art, philosophy, the state, the family, the industries; then in each of these provinces natural departments; and in each of these smaller territories, until we arrive at the numberless details of life such as may be observed within and around us every day. (617)

Taine offers an organicist conception of civilisation: it

forms a body, and its parts are connected with each other like the parts of an organic body. As in an animal, instincts, teeth, limbs, osseous structure, muscular envelope, are mutually contracted, so that a change in one produces a corresponding change in the rest, and a clever naturalist can by a process of reasoning reconstruct out of a few fragments almost the whole body. Even so in a civilisation, religion, philosophy, the organisation of the family, literature, the arts, make up a system in which every local change induces a general change, so that an experienced historian, studying some particular part of it, sees it in advance and half precedes the character of the rest. (617)

Taine is particularly interested in the effect of all this on religion, art, and philosophy, the “chief works of human intelligence” (616). At the core of each of these disciplines, there is a “common element, the conception of the world and its principles” (617). Arguing that

philosophy is "but a conception of nature and its primordial causes, under the form of abstractions and formularies" (616), Taine defines art as a "kind of philosophy made sensible" (617).

In summary, with regard to literature, Taine argues that each work reveals the "psychology of a soul, frequently of an age, now and then of a race" (619). From this point of view, a "great poem, a fine novel, the fine confessions of a superior man, are more instructive than a heap of historians with their histories" (619). A literary work is a wonderful window on history which historians would do well not to ignore. The most important sentiments which literature can represent concern the "mode of being of a whole nation and a whole age" (619).

Last but not least, Taine hints at the principles of canon formation which he favours: the more a work offers insight into the matrix which spawned it, the "higher its place in literature" (619) and, thus, the more worthy of being studied. Through the study of literature, "one may construct a moral history, and advance toward the knowledge of the psychological laws from which events spring" (619).

Taine concludes his introduction by referring to the fact that in the chapters which follow, he has undertaken to write a literary history of the English. His goal in so doing is to "examine the two most powerful moving springs of human transformation, natural bent and constraining force" (620):

I have endeavoured to define the primary springs, to exhibit their gradual effects, to explain how they have ended bringing to light great political, religious, and literary works, and by developing the recondite mechanism whereby the Saxon barbarian has been transformed into the Englishman of today. (620)

Taine's materialist model of human identity, his biographical approach to literary criticism and, last but not least, his model of literary history predicated on the communal, racial and national identity linking a group of writers remain three of the most influential, not least in the Caribbean.