

SCIENCE AND AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

A Study in Taine's Critical Method

Sholom J. Kahn

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
AESTHETICS



ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
AESTHETICS

Volume 4

SCIENCE AND AESTHETIC
JUDGMENT

This page intentionally left blank

SCIENCE AND AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

A Study in Taine's Critical Method

SHOLOM J. KAHN

First published in 1953 by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd

This edition first published in 2016

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1953 Sholom J. Kahn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-67507-0 (Set)

ISBN: 978-1-315-56086-1 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-67048-8 (Volume 4) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-67052-5 (Volume 4) (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-61761-9 (Volume 4) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

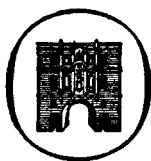
Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

SCIENCE
AND AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

A STUDY
IN TAINE'S CRITICAL METHOD

by
SHOLOM J. KAHN



ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL LTD
Broadway House, 68-74 Carter Lane
London

*First published in 1953
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
Broadway House, 68-74 Carter Lane
London E.C.4
Printed in Great Britain
by William Clover & Sons Ltd
London and Beccles*

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------|-----------------|
| Foreword | <i>page</i> vii |
| Preface | ix |

PART ONE

THE PROBLEM IN TAINE

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| i. Science Versus Criticism? | 3 |
| ii. Formation of a Method (1828-1852) | 13 |

PART TWO

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

| | |
|--|-----|
| iii. Analysis and Synthesis | 39 |
| iv. Critique of Abstraction | 47 |
| v. History and Psychology | 60 |
| vi. Nature and Conditions of Art | 74 |
| vii. Biological Conditions: Race and Geography | 86 |
| viii. Cultural Factors: Environment and Time | 102 |
| ix. The Psychological Core: Master Faculty | 114 |
| x. Problems of Analysis and Criticism | 124 |

PART THREE

SCIENCE AND AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| xi. Problems of Type Analysis | 145 |
| xii. From Analysis to Judgment | 162 |
| xiii. Critique of Aesthetic Judgment | 177 |

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| xiv. Our Heritage from Taine | <i>page</i> 195 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|

APPENDICES

| | |
|--|-----|
| A. Taine's Student Correspondence and Notebooks | 209 |
| B. The Question of Taine's 'Positivism' | 228 |
| C. Type Analysis in the Sciences | 231 |
| D. Bosanquet's Hegelian Analysis of 'The Concrete Universal' | 235 |
| E. Scales of Value in <i>The Ideal in Art</i> (diagrams) | 237 |
| F. Taine's Criteria Applied to Modern Abstract Art | 242 |
| G. Taine and the Naturalist Tradition | 244 |

BIBLIOGRAPHY

| | |
|--|-----|
| A. Selected Bibliography of Taine's Works, with Biographical Notes | 247 |
| B. Secondary Works Cited | 261 |
| Index | 269 |

FOREWORD

SOME authors fade away altogether; some date; some age; some remain indomitably alive. I could not tell to which category Hippolyte Taine should be consigned. He was part of my youth, that is to say of a world before two floods. Once his awe-struck rebellious child, I was afraid his figure, still so vivid in my mind, would turn to dust at the touch of younger hands. I read Sholom J. Kahn's thorough and sensitive study, first with misgivings, then with eagerness, and at the end with gratitude. He has not destroyed the Taine I revered, nor the Taine I combated. Training the light of a new generation upon a personality at the same time painfully definite and yet elusive, he has helped me recover my own past.

But this work is not intended for a wistful vanishing generation. It has its dramatic interest, and its lessons, for young men of today. The appeal of Taine is first of all historical: he is the perfect intellectual representative of his period. Sainte-Beuve was older, a repentant survivor of early romanticism; the blend of scholarship, aestheticism, sentiment, and irony in Renan remained unique. Taine is 'Second Empire' through and through; as much as the Exposition of 1867, the grand avenues hacked out by Haussmann, Garnier's Opera—and Hortense Schneider, for he too contributed to *La Vie Parisienne*.

History is not of the dead: history is 'the presence of the past'. Taine is with us still: not wholly for our good. With austere dignity, he expressed the materialistic philosophy which, today more than ever, is guiding the two giants of the modern world, the Soviet Union and the United States. Many of us still believe with him that 'vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar'; many are still asserting, in more confused terms, that culture is conditioned, and perhaps even determined, by 'race, environment, and time'; many are still attempting to catch the spirit of art in the coarse mesh of a 'realistic' doctrine. There is a Taine lurking in the heart of every critic.

We have much to learn from Taine, especially by wrestling with him. His logic, his lucidity—two rare forms of intellectual courage—his erudition, are a constant challenge. Taine cannot be shrugged away. I once compared him with an instrument at the same time robust and sensitive, but ‘untrue’: *un grand esprit faux*. I do not recant. But a sensitive instrument, once you have measured its aberration, can be used to good scientific purpose; it is a coarse instrument, even if roughly accurate, that is of little avail for searching and delicate work.

Back of Taine’s assertiveness, we can descry a depth of anguish and despair. Like Baudelaire and Flaubert, he belonged to a generation of wounded romanticists. Science—for he thought of himself as a scientist—was his refuge; his tower, not of ivory, but of grey steel. The fastness turned into a jail: he tried to be a Euclid, a Spinoza, a Darwin, and he was first of all a soul in prison. Without any compromise with romance or melodrama, Dr. Kahn gives us glimpses of the haggard face behind the bars.

This is a study that Taine himself would have enjoyed, for it is respectful and sympathetic as well as rigorous and fearless. A Tainean of nearly sixty years’ standing is proud to be its sponsor.

ALBERT GUÉRARD

Brandeis University

PREFACE

JUDGED in terms of sheer literary accomplishment and influence, the career of Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893), leader of the Naturalist movement in French criticism, should repay close attention. As recently as 1911, one of his American critics could write: ‘Taine nearly solved the problem of art and so of poetry.’ The author of the famous *History of English Literature*, *Lectures on Art*, *On Intelligence*, and *The Origins of Contemporary France*—as well as of justly popular travel books and essays on Balzac, La Fontaine, Livy, Saint-Simon, Racine, Stendhal, and a host of others—demands that we take his philosophy seriously, since it bore such opulent fruit. His ideas helped shape the novels of Zola, and the criticism of Brandes and Parrington, among many others; two generations of writers and scholars in Europe and America were more or less under his spell.

Yet our purpose in this study is not primarily historical. It derives, rather, from the fact that the critic today seems to be confronted with two incompatible goals. On the one hand, he is expected to be an analyst, both textual and historical: the greenest undergraduate is aware of the need for careful *explications des textes*; for recognition of mythical and symbolic significances, of levels of meaning, of ironic and other complexities of structure; and for knowledge of social and intellectual backgrounds. These are commonplaces of literary study in our universities, and they all point in the direction of scholarship which prides itself on the most scrupulous *objectivity*. On the other hand, the responsible, sensitive student of literature and the arts, now more than ever, finds it impossible to escape the need for *value judgments*. Greatness and mediocrity are ever with us, and the precariousness with which civilizations hang in the balance today makes possession of a soundly based, relatively stable, tradition in the humanities seem infinitely precious. Since survival itself is involved, the question of what should be preserved becomes increasingly urgent. Hence the turmoil in critical theory.

Typical among recent statements of the problem is Cleanth Brooks' essay on 'Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism', in *The Well Wrought Urn*. Without denying the relevance of historical study, Mr. Brooks complains that 'we have gone to school to the anthropologists and the cultural historians assiduously, and we have learned their lesson almost too well' (p. 197). He reviews the opinions of F. A. Pottle, Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransom, and others on the issue; and defends his own critical practice, in which 'the specific view taken in the particular poem, and . . . how the attitude of the poem was made to inform the poem' (p. 205) is the centre of interest, and in which 'the judgments are very frankly treated as if they were universal judgments' (p. 199). It is precisely because the issue of scientific analysis versus aesthetic and moral judgment is still so very much alive that we turn with such interest to the works of Taine.

Our present essay has a two-fold purpose: first, an exposition and discussion of Taine's theories, and some of his practice, as a critic of literature and art; and second, a more general consideration of the chief issues raised by his central problem and enterprise, namely, the attempt to approach the analysis and judgment of works of art historically, and thus to provide an objective basis for criticism.

Though this is not an attempt at a personal biography of Taine, the essential facts are included: Part One, by a detailed examination of his early ideas, as revealed especially in his student notebooks, attempts to demonstrate the unity of his intellectual development; and biographical notes to a 'Selected Bibliography' carry the story forward through 1871.

Since attention is restricted chiefly to Taine's writings on literature and art, the discussion ends, rather abruptly, with the Franco-Prussian war, about the time when he published his *Notes on England* in 1871, at the age of 43. Two more decades of important writings were to follow, but the monumental historical opus, entitled *The Origins of Contemporary France*, which absorbed his energies almost entirely during those years, raises a host of non-aesthetic issues with which we have not been concerned. However, as Ferdinand Brunetière and others have pointed out, this last period really witnessed the application of the same tools of analysis, formerly applied to works of art, to a new subject-matter: from a methodological point of view, very little, if any-

thing, was added. And the previous two decades, beginning with the *Essay on the Fables of La Fontaine* (1853) and continuing through the publication of his important psychological work *On Intelligence* in 1870, present us with a body of critical writing of rare quality and remarkable unity of plan and execution. As we shall see, *On Intelligence* was the logical culmination and expression of doctrines already contained in the *History of English Literature* (1863) and *Lectures on Art* (1865-1869), and, with the completion of that work, the essential story had been told: philosophically, what followed was anti-climax.

The critical exposition of Taine's theory of criticism is accomplished chiefly in Part Two: Analysis and Criticism, and in Chapter XII ('From Analysis to Judgment'). The reader who lacks an interest in metaphysical and logical issues may prefer to read Chapter II last. Discussion of the more general problem of the relations between science and aesthetic judgment has required consideration of the issues raised by the so-called 'new criticism' (Chapter X) and of the philosophic issues involved in 'type analysis' (Chapter XI); many readers will prefer to begin with these chapters. We have found that, despite Taine's limitations as a person, scientist, and philosopher, study of his critical writings provides an excellent introduction to most of the central problems of historical and comparative methods in the study of literature and art.

For guidance in the preparation of this study, I am especially indebted, among my teachers at Columbia University, to Professor Irwin Edman, whose courses in the Philosophy of Art and Criticism first suggested the topic; to Professor John H. Randall, Jr., in whose teaching I have found an example of clear and historically grounded thinking; to Professor James Gutmann, for his suggestions and unfailing personal encouragement; and to Professor Wilbur M. Frohock, Department of Romance Languages, whose knowledge of French literary criticism was put so generously at my disposal. I am conscious of having profited, at various stages in the writing, from suggestions and criticisms by the following: Professors Ernest Nagel, Susanne K. Langer, Horace L. Friess, Charles Frankel, and John R. Everett, Department of Philosophy; Professor Emery Neff, Department of English; and Professor Jean-Albert Bédé, Department of Romance Languages—at Columbia University; and to Dr. Ben-Ami Scharfstein, and Messrs. David Zesmer, Ralph Cohen, Alfred J.

Kahn, T. H. Fujimara, and Knut Behr. Professors Albert L. Guérard, Brandeis University, and René Wellek, Yale University, have also given me the benefit of their criticisms. I am grateful to Miss Evelyn Boyce, of the Columbia University Press, for helpful suggestions.

The Hebrew University

Jerusalem, 1952

PART ONE



THE PROBLEM IN TAINE

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER I

SCIENCE VERSUS CRITICISM?

Analysis Versus Judgment?

TAINE began his triple career as thinker, critic, and historian just about a century ago—yet he seems our contemporary. His grapplings with the problem of relating scientific analysis to aesthetic judgment are dramatized for us by an obvious fact of his biography. Thus, the *Lectures on Art*, which he delivered as Professor of Aesthetics and the History of Art in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, were written over a period of half a decade, and the two more strictly theoretical parts were separated by an interval of two years. The first in the series (*The Philosophy of Art*, based on lectures delivered during the winter of 1864) was an attempt at a *scientifically objective* statement ‘On the Nature of the Work of Art’, and ‘On the Production of the Work of Art’, and stressed opposition to dogmatism and the need for sympathy for all schools of art; but *The Ideal in Art* (based on lectures delivered during the winter of 1866) seemed to contradict these earlier lectures by stressing the need for *judgment* and setting up clearly defined scales of aesthetic value in terms of ‘The Degree of Importance of the Character’, ‘The Degree of Beneficence in the Character’, and ‘The Converging Degree of Effects’.

It is partly on the basis of the supposed harmony or conflict between these two sets of lectures that critics of Taine have described his philosophy either as a unique synthesis or as an unresolved dualism; the latter, usually unfavourable, charge appears as a claim for a radical change of heart around the year 1865, or as an accusation of logical contradiction, vacillation, or eclecticism.¹ Part of our task, therefore, must be to sketch the story of Taine’s intellectual development in so far as it relates to this issue (Chapter II).

However, the biographical question, though it has its own intrinsic interest, concerns us here only in so far as it throws light on the larger problem of the relations between science and criticism, between analysis and judgment. *If* Taine succeeded in combining the two processes, *how* did he do so, and what hints can we glean from his solution that may be applicable today? If he failed, what were the reasons? What specific categories did he attempt to apply? How do these need to be modified in the light of more recent knowledge? Like Taine, we are still under the spell of science, though somewhat more disenchanted. Perhaps those who cherish the humanities today may hope to find, in some of the answers to the above questions, a framework within which their own personal, aesthetic, and social values can be reconciled with the demands of scientific method.

The Problem in Our Century

Before plunging deeper into Taine, it should be useful and chastening to glance at the problem from a long-range historical perspective. It is surely no accident that so many during the last century (1850-1950) have stressed the relativism of standards and been wary of pronouncing critical judgments, since it has been a period of unprecedentedly rapid and profound changes, social, political, economic, technological, cultural, and intellectual.² The key-note of our century has been evolution and growth, and the feeling of rapidly accelerating development has tended to knock the props out from under conventional and traditional forms and criteria in literature and art. Our 'naturalistic temper'³ has been most fully embodied in that searching habit of mind characteristic of the scientist, who, even when he does reach conclusions, considers his judgments to be tentative hypotheses subject to change. These, and other, cultural factors have naturally led to multiplied 'isms' and critical schools.

So profoundly have these changes penetrated what Joseph Wood Krutch once called 'the modern temper' that the very nature and function of criticism—indeed, its very possibility—has been subject to much scrutiny. Still confronted by endless 'criticisms of criticism', of which this study must perforce be another, we seem now to have entered a final stage of disintegration, characterized by 'Criticism of Criticism of Criticism'⁴—and should be about ready to come back to our senses! A fairly recent attempt at synthesis, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, by

Theodore M. Greene, may prove helpful in this regard. He defines the three major aspects of criticism as the historical, the re-creative, and the judicial, each of which has been stressed by an important European school, the modern, romantic, and neo-classic in turn.⁵ What is so often forgotten in the heat of controversy is that every critic really worth his salt has *combined* awareness of traditions and careful reading with judgments of aesthetic worth. In truly great criticism (almost as rare as great poetry) these three functions are usually inextricably interwoven.

Nevertheless, even a cursory review of the history of criticism will reveal that the issue with which we are here concerned has been perennial. The historical or scientific approach, where it has been imaginatively used, may be seen as a more fully developed form of the romantic attempt at *re-creation of experience* by means of the work of art; thus, the science versus judgment problem has its ancestry in the Romantic versus Classic controversy of the early nineteenth century, in which the neo-classic, judicial type of criticism was under attack. And the history of that controversy, in turn, goes as far back as the ancient Greeks, via the intricate complexities of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.

In the nineteenth century, the conflict took the dual form of the individual versus society and of the natural versus the supernatural. We begin to find in the Romantic movement an emphasis on the individual's private experience and ego-drives which leads naturally to an interest in psychology and a relativism in values; at the same time, appearing as the obverse of the same medal, the individual is confronted with the problem of finding his proper relation to the social environment and turns to history for his answers. Man-and-his-World thus became the prime subjects of scientific study, and it was in this sense that the Naturalism which Taine represents was the spiritual child of Romanticism.⁶

Opposition to Naturalism, in the name of moral values, metaphysics, and religion, has never disappeared, but instead has been gaining momentum and influence in the last half-century. The process began early in France, in part as a result of the disillusion which followed her defeat by Prussian arms in 1870; it came to a head in the well-known 'Manifesto of the Five', written by former disciples of Zola who criticized his *La Terre* as 'a corner of nature seen through a morbid *sensorium*' (1887); and anti-Naturalism was the dominant mood of France during the last decade of the century. Its inception in America can be dated best, perhaps,

from the publication by Irving Babbitt in 1912 of his highly controversial work on *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*; World War I gave impetus to anti-Naturalism, spear-headed by T. S. Eliot's poetry (*The Waste Land*, 1922) and by his criticism.⁷ Norman Foerster summarized the aims of this movement as follows in 1930: 'The need of standards in life, in art, in criticism is more and more apparent, and naturalism has failed to provide standards. . . . Science gives us natural knowledge, not human objectives.'⁸ A second World War, together with its destructive prologue and aftermath, has further sharpened the critical controversy between the relativists and those who stress the need for standards. It is against this background that we must analyze and evaluate the works of Taine, 'easily the most eminent of those who have attempted to make criticism scientific.'⁹

Biographical and Historical Explanations

Though our concern is primarily with the philosophical issue, it may further broaden our perspective if we mention briefly some of the biographical explanations which have been given of the supposed dualism in Taine. Applying Taine's own classification, we find that such analyses tend to stress the conflicts either in their subject's personality ('race') or in his socio-historical environment ('milieu' and 'moment').

Typical of the psychological analyses is a penetrating essay by Émile Zola, Taine's contemporary and literary disciple.¹⁰ Describing him as one might a character in a novel, Zola noted that physically Taine was far from being big and forceful, unlike the writers and artists most admired in his criticism. On this basis, and on the internal evidence of Taine's style ('a strange fruit, with a peculiar flavour'),¹¹ Zola sensed a contradiction in Taine, between a would-be poet or artist and 'a dry and matter-of-fact man, a mathematician of thought, who creates a most singular effect when placed beside the lavish poet of whom I have just spoken.'¹²

Such an analysis would seem to be especially pertinent, in view of the fact that Taine thought of his own writings as so much 'applied psychology', but it is relevant here only in so far as it affected his practice as a critic. Obviously the critic's personality is involved in his judgments concerning the personalities of others, and, if the psychological method in criticism is valid at all, no critic can expect to escape its application to himself.¹³ More

serious than the argument *ad hominem*, however, would be the question, not of Taine's individual personality nor of the psychological method in general, but of Taine's particular position as a psychologist and of its specific relations to his theory of criticism. The latter questions will be given due consideration in a later connection (Chapter IX).

The socio-historical critics are equally suggestive, though they too lead us into issues not directly related to our central theme. From a twentieth-century perspective especially, which includes the facts of two World Wars and continuing struggle between East and West in Europe, it is easy to see why Taine was so keenly aware of the national issue. For him, France was situated intellectually, as well as geographically, at a point mid-way between the extremes of England and Germany. Thus, for Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, 'Taine assumes an intermediate position between realism and idealism, in accordance with his general attitude between empiricism and rationalism. He is a realist in principle, since he defines art as the imitation of nature; but he is also an idealist when he adds that the object of this imitation is to express the essence of things by means of their "essential characteristic"'.¹⁴ Taine's realism is accounted for by his interest in the English tradition, though it also had its roots in the French 'idéologues'¹⁵; his idealism drew him to German metaphysics, especially Hegel. Whether there remained in Taine 'an ineradicable taint of duality', or whether he succeeded, as he thought he had, in maintaining 'a Spinozian or Hegelian view of the universe' and thus bridging what he considered to be the gap between England and Germany, is an issue on which Lévy-Bruhl's judgment is not decisive.¹⁶

As has already been suggested, Taine's works mirror conflicts internal to France as well as those involved in her relations with her neighbours. Thus, Edmund Wilson, in a work concerned with the writing of history, treats Taine under the heading, 'Decline of the Revolutionary Tradition', and points out that 'there was little moral inspiration for Taine in the France of the Second Empire'.¹² Paul Janet, fairly typical of the semi-official, conservative philosophy under Louis-Napoleon, saw Taine as a positivist wearing the cloak of idealism and engaged in a fruitless attempt to reconcile Hegel and Condillac; his conclusion was that 'in this we find the very negation of all metaphysics, and, I believe I may add, also of all morality.'¹⁸

Writing under the Third Republic and then witnessing the anti-Naturalist reaction, Ferdinand Brunetière was more sympathetic in his judgment, though he too recognized the moral conflict. Himself a convert to Roman Catholicism (1900) who had been deeply influenced by Darwinian ideas, he claimed that Taine had 'employed forty years of uninterrupted labour . . . to reinstate in eclecticism the principle he had most bitterly derided . . . the principle, that is, of the subordination of criticism and history to morality'.¹⁹ Brunetière stressed the search for objective critical judgments in Taine's writings and saw his career as one of development rather than contradiction: '. . . he raised himself progressively to a viewpoint which was more general, higher, and more fruitful.'²⁰ Having sought his solutions in 'the experience of humanity' and steadily enlarged his horizon to include problems of psychology, literature, art, and social morality, Taine never quite returned to the God of his fathers²¹—as Brunetière would have had him do, and as so many were claiming they had, around the turn of the century.

Martha Wolfenstein narrows the socio-historic perspective even further to the specific facts of Taine's changing relations to his environment:

'Taine's philosophy of art revolves around one central problem, the problem of the relation of history to values. The question is whether we can reconcile a universal standard of value with the historical variations of art and taste. Taine began by asserting that it was not possible. . . . Taine could not, however, eliminate all considerations of value. Unacknowledged value-judgments forced their way into his historical studies. Eventually Taine recognized this fact, and confronted the task of formulating and justifying his implicit criteria. But the standard of value which he proceeded to elaborate remained uncoordinated with his earlier historical approach.'²²

According to this view, the turning point came around 1865: from 1852 to 1864, Taine was an historical relativist, presumably because during those years he was at odds with society and an outsider to academic circles; his recognition of the need for 'justifying his implicit criteria' began in 1865, after the success of his *History of English Literature* and his appointment to the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Though there may be some validity in this analysis, it exaggerates both the presumed contradiction and the

extent of the change, which was one of emphasis rather than basic philosophy or method.

These varied criticisms of Taine, which could easily be multiplied, have been chosen chiefly to illustrate the charges of dualism, since the general direction of the remainder of this study will be to underscore the unity of his thought. Their variety indicates not only that there is a very real problem, but also that Taine's achievement was both important and complex; otherwise he would long since have been relegated either to the dust heap or to a neat little pigeon-hole in the history of criticism. The extent to which his ideas have served as a call to critical battles *may* be indicative, further, not so much of confusions in Taine as of diversities among his critics: the positivists find him idealist, the idealists find him positivist, and both agree on his 'dualism'. Perhaps it was not Taine, but rather his critics and his decadent environment that were 'tragically torn'.

A Sketch of Taine's Solution

What are the essentials of Taine's attempt at a solution of the problem created by the conflict between science and criticism, whose nature and background have been thus briefly stated? A concise formulation of his scientific goal can be found in notes, written in 1858, for a work 'On Laws in History':

'In other terms, the two great researches are:

'(1) Given an action, seek the psychological state which is its antecedent;

'(2) Given a psychological state, seek the psychological and non-psychological conditions which are its antecedent.'²³

Included in the connotation of the term 'action', for Taine, were, of course, all the phenomena, 'systems', and 'groups' of facts, as he designates them elsewhere, which are mentioned in the 'Introduction' to the *History of English Literature*: religion, literature, music, art, and philosophy; the family and the state; science, statecraft, agriculture, and industry—in other words, culture, in the broadest, anthropological sense.

In his use of this complex stuff of history, Taine tried to strike a happy medium between the extreme positions of idealism and materialism and to maintain that non-reductive fullness of perspective which has been the goal of naturalists down the ages. Starting and ending in the spirit of Spinoza's proposition

(Proposition VII, Part II, of the *Ethics*) that 'The order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas,' it seemed natural to him that psychology, treated both as effect and as cause, should be his central concern, since he was applying scientific method to the 'moral sciences' or humanities.

The first of the two lines of research mentioned indicates the first step in Taine's studies of literature, art, or history: starting from the cultural, contextual facts (poems, paintings, philosophies, movements, institutions), he sought the psychological 'forces', the 'dominant faculties' of the men who had given them birth. This, in scientific dress, was a continuation of the Romantic critic's attempt at an imaginative recreation of the individual experience which brought forth the work of art ('seek the psychological state which is its antecedent').

The second line of research found its purest expression in Taine's psychological work (*On Intelligence*), which sought the causes of conscious states in their antecedent conditions, namely, the body and its nervous system. Its application to literary and artistic study took him far beyond the early Romantics into all the ramifications of the historical method and led to his familiar formula of 'la race, le milieu, et le moment', which we shall translate as 'race, environment, and time' ('the psychological and non-psychological conditions').

In terms of this framework, Taine insisted repeatedly that his entire enterprise was a kind of 'applied psychology'. The key to his critical practice was a version of the inductive method which stressed the importance of *abstraction*. Starting from particular facts, he tried to rise to a level of generalization concerning those facts which approximated the laws of science.

Finally, and this is central to the point at issue, since both lines of research revealed the essential causes of the works under consideration, they would also thereby reveal the relations of those works to the hierarchy of ideal values, which existed for Taine in reality. As we shall see, this was not a late accretion to his way of thinking, but an essential part of his philosophy and method from the start: the more fully a work of art embodied the nature of things, the more closely did it approach the ideal, and the greater was its value. For criticism, therefore, *the scientific search for causes and the desire for a standard of judgment were ultimately one*. The Romantic was fused with the Classical; scientific (psychological-historical) and judicial criticism met, as in the great example of Aristotle.

This study of Taine's method is divided into three main parts. The first, a sketch of the problem and Taine's intellectual development through 1852, his year as a teacher in the provinces, provides necessary background information and attempts to answer the question of the unity of his thought by probing its origins: most of the essentials of his system are found to have been present in his student notes, written before he reached the age of twenty-four.

The second part shifts from chronology to a logical exposition and critical discussion of the chief categories employed by Taine in his analyses (abstraction, history, psychology, and causation; race, environment, time, and master faculty) and concludes with a brief consideration of the problem of the relations between analysis and value judgments. This last, the central point at issue, is treated in some detail in Part Three, where it is seen to involve philosophic issues which have clustered around the problems of 'type' analysis. After an attempt is made at a functional understanding of this concept and at distinguishing its applications in the arts from those in the sciences, we conclude with a brief appraisal of Taine's strengths and weaknesses and of his permanent contributions to the philosophy and practice of criticism.

NOTES

¹ Thus, for Albert L. Guérard, Taine was 'tragically torn. French Rationalism, German Idealism, English Empiricism, the historical spirit that urged the acceptance of Christianity, the experimental method which suggested the agnostic attitude, all strove for his allegiance. He never was able to harmonize Descartes, Hegel, Bacon, Bossuet, Darwin. . . .' *Literature and Society*, p. 88.

² Consider Julian Huxley's summary of scientific developments: ' . . . during the last hundred years each decade has seen at least one major change—if we are to choose ten such, let us select photography, the theory of evolution, electro-magnetic theory with its application in the shape of electric light and power, the germ theory of disease, the cinema, radioactivity and the new theories of matter and energy, wireless and television, the internal combustion engine, chemical synthetics, and atomic fission.' *UNESCO: Its Purpose and Its Philosophy*, p. 9.

³ Irwin Edman's phrase, in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 139-152.

⁴ See an essay with that title by H. L. Mencken, in *Criticism in America, Its Function and Status*.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, Chapter XX, 'The Nature and Criteria of Criticism'.

⁶ There is general agreement on this historical point among critics in both camps. Representative of the Romantic-Naturalist point of view is Jacques

Barzun, *Romanticism and the Modern Ego*, pp. 138, 302-305; representative of the neo-humanist point of view is Norman Foerster, *Towards Standards: A Study of the Present Critical Movement in American Letters*, who carries the historical analysis back to the Renaissance (pp. 34, 36, 80).

⁷ Climaxed by Eliot's dramatic declaration that he was a royalist in politics, an Anglo-Catholic in religion, and a classicist in literature (1928, in *For Lancelot Andrews*).

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. ix.

⁹ Babbitt, *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*, p. 341.

¹⁰ 'M. H. Taine, Artiste.'

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223, S.J.K.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 205, S.J.K. See also Hilda Laura Norman, 'The Personality of Hippolyte Taine', which also stresses the contradictions in his character. On the other hand, K. de Schaepdryver's *Hippolyte Taine: Essai sur l'unité de sa pensée*, finds an overall unity in Taine's personality and ideas, 'a prodigious power of synthesis' [p. 163, S.J.K.].

¹³ See, for example, O. Petrovitch's excellent thesis, *H. Taine, Historien Littéraire du XVII^e siècle*, which attributes Taine's anti-classical taste 'to his temperament, to the spirit of his time, to Shakespeare, and above all to Stendhal . . .' [p. 55, S.J.K.]. Like Zola, Petrovitch found that 'Fortunately, beside the man with a system, there is in Taine also an artist with a lively sense of the beauties of literature, the latter correcting and completing the former; and it was by virtue of the latter that his works surpassed his method' [p. 83, S.J.K.].

¹⁴ *History of Modern Philosophy in France*, p. 430.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 432-434.

¹⁷ *To the Finland Station*, p. 51.

¹⁸ *La Crise philosophique*, p. 52, S.J.K.

¹⁹ *Manual of the History of French Literature*, p. 515.

²⁰ 'L'Œuvre Critique de Taine', p. 221, S.J.K.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-252.

²² 'The Social Background of Taine's Philosophy of Art', p. 332.

²³ Chevrillon, *Taine*, p. 407, S.J.K.

CHAPTER II

FORMATION OF A METHOD

(1828-1852)

Taine's First Two Decades

By the time Taine enrolled as a student in the Normal School (in November, 1848, at the age of twenty), the main patterns of his character and intellect were already visible. Absorbed in philosophy, aloof from the political events of that hectic year, he succeeded in formulating, during three years of intense study and intellectual activity, all the main outlines of a philosophy which he was to spend the rest of his life developing and demonstrating.¹

One of his professors, Étienne Vacherot, described him as follows in 1851, during his senior year:

'The most hard-working and distinguished student that I have known at the Normal School. Prodigious learning for his age. An ardour and avidity for knowledge the like of which I have never seen. A spirit remarkable for its rapidity of apprehension, for the finesse, subtlety, and force of its thought. However, he comprehends, understands, judges, and formulates too quickly. He is too fond of formulas and definitions, to which he too often sacrifices reality, without realizing it, to be sure, since he is perfectly sincere. Taine will be a very distinguished professor, but besides and above all a scholar of the first rank, if his health will permit him to complete a long career. He has a great sweetness of character and a very pleasant manner; his resolves are very firm, to the point where no one can influence his thinking. Moreover, he is not of this world. Spinoza's motto will be his: "Live in order to think." Conduct, behaviour excellent. As to morality, I believe this choice and exceptional nature to be a stranger to any other passion except that for the truth. This student is the first, by a great distance, in all the interviews and examinations.'²

This description remained true of Taine all his life: whatever unresolved contradictions and conflicts may have been in him were there from the beginning. As a student, he was already a *savant*, with the air of a disillusioned post-Romantic; this function and this mood were not changed, but rather reinforced, by his experiences during the latter half of the century, including the remarkable change of his interests which followed the Franco-Prussian War.³ When he wrote *La Fontaine*, in 1852, he was frightened by the future; when he wrote his posthumously published *Last Essays*, early in the *fin-de-siècle* decade, he was frightened by the present.⁴

Thus, though we can only afford them a rapid glance, it would be wrong to underestimate the influence on Taine's personality of his first two decades. He was born on 21 April, 1828, at Vouziers, Ardennes, into a respectable professional family of the provinces: his father, Jean Baptiste Antoine Taine, was a country lawyer who found time to cultivate the sciences and literature, having some reputation as a poet in that region; his mother, *née* Marie Virginie Bezanson, was a woman of culture, to whom he remained closely attached all her life.⁵ His great-grandfather, Pierre Taine, had been nicknamed 'the philosopher' by his neighbours; his maternal grandfather, Nicolas Bezanson, was a gifted student of philosophy, mathematics, and magnetism,⁶ and Hippolyte treasured his books and notes after he died in 1850.⁷ One of the mother's brothers, Alexandre Bezanson, who had lived in the United States for some years, taught his nephew the English language at an early age.⁸ From his early years in Ardennes, Taine seems to have retained a very strong feeling for nature, for mountains and forests, which is exhibited especially in his travel books.⁹

But Taine's childhood ended, painfully and abruptly, at the age of twelve, when his father died after a lingering illness. The impact of this event is evident in the first chapter of *Étienne Mayran*, an incomplete novel, largely autobiographical, which Taine started to write in 1861.¹⁰ Looking back, twenty years later, Taine headed the first chapter 'The Shock', and claimed that the hero of his story 'saw the least details of that day as if they were present, each one, with the colours of the objects, with the facial expressions of the people and their gestures'.¹¹ Writing to a friend in 1852, Taine said: 'Will is not lacking; I guess that it will never be lacking; but perhaps there is something shattered in

my mental system; that something is the feeling of trust.'¹² Undoubtedly it was his father's untimely death which first troubled his 'mental system'.

In the autumn of 1841, at the age of thirteen, Taine entered the Mathé *pension* (in Faubourg Saint-Honoré, a central district of Paris), which prepared students for Bourbon College; his mother, two sisters, and maternal grandfather came to live with him soon after. In 1842, he entered Bourbon College, where some of his life-long friendships were begun¹³; among others, there was a young Professor Adolphe Hatzfeld, under whom he studied rhetoric and philosophy, who befriended and guided him.¹⁴ It was at about the age of fifteen that Taine's philosophic reflections first began to take form, beginning with doubts concerning the Christian revelation.¹⁵ The autobiographical 'Introduction' which he wrote, during his senior year at college, for a short treatise 'On Human Destiny', describes this religious crisis.¹⁶

These are the important facts, chiefly external. A more lively internal picture of the young Taine's emotional life can be found in the fragmentary *Étienne Mayran*, already cited. What seem to be autobiographical details include, besides the death of his father, his trip to Paris; scenes from his life at boarding-school; his first lessons at the piano, the playing of which always remained one of his favourite recreations; a sketch of a rather remarkable history teacher, 'M. Sprengel'; and his first sensations of delight on reading Plato's dialogues. Above all, the reader senses, through Taine's attempt at a fictitious character, his strong sense of isolation and pride, in the face of what seemed like rejection by fate. In Paul Bourget's opinion, Taine never finished the story because 'He had a horror of making a spectacle of himself, quite simply.'¹⁷ This then was the sensitive, serious young man whose later writings were destined to lead one of the central intellectual movements of his age and our own.

A Student of Philosophy in Paris

It is altogether appropriate that a consideration of Taine's method in criticism should begin with its philosophical foundations, since he illustrates so well both the strengths and weaknesses of criticism resulting from the fusion of a consciously held philosophic position with sensitive and penetrating analyses and perceptions.¹⁸ To consider his critical *aperçus* in isolation from their