PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

It would doubtless be impossible for me to find a better or surer means of inviting the indulgence of English readers for the present Manual, than to offer it them for what it is: an application of the doctrine of Evolution to the history of a great literature. In this way the work is placed, as it were, under the auspices of the great name of Charles Darwin, and while it is not for me to decide whether the illustrious author of the "Origin of Species" ranks, as has been maintained, but little below or perhaps on a level with Sir Isaac Newton in the history of modern European ideas, it is certain that for some forty years past his influence is everywhere to be traced. I shall be happy if English readers see it to be at work in the present volume.

It is not, indeed, that I wholly accept the doctrine in question, and still less the consequences that have been deduced from it in
England itself, in Germany or in France. So far as I am in a position to judge, and I am not a man of science, Evolution is only an hypothesis; the variability of natural species, however probable it may be, is not what is called proven; and admitting selection to be one of its modes of operation or factors, there are assuredly many others. Still, as I myself have more than once remarked, the very serious objections that may be urged, it is said, against the hypothesis in the domain of natural history, lose much of their weight when the doctrine is applied to the history of literature or art, where it is a method as well as a doctrine. Even supposing that species do not vary, it would be an advantage to natural history to study them as if they did; and of all the classifications that have been suggested with a view to bringing home to us, I do not say the spectacle merely, but the movement of nature, the genealogical classification is by far the most convenient, the most probable, and above all the most in conformity with the greatest number of facts.

It is from the genealogical standpoint, then, that I have endeavoured to study in the history of French literature the perpetually changing succession of ideas, authors and works; and if there be any novelty in this Manual it is constituted by this attitude.

I am aware that serious objection is taken to
the employment of this method in history. To reply to many of the objections made would doubtless be beyond the scope of this short Preface, but among them is one graver, or apparently graver, than the others, and I must not pass it over entirely. What, it is said, is most interesting, or solely interesting perhaps, in the history of literature or art is the individual, Shakespeare or Molière, Milton or Bossuet, Pope or Boileau, Swift or Voltaire, Burke or Mirabeau, Tennyson or Lamartine, George Eliot or Honoré de Balzac; and I wholly share this opinion. Whether we study these writers in their works, or whether in their works it be they themselves that excite our preference, what interests us in them is what distinguishes them from all other writers, or what in them is irreducible and incommensurable. In their own line they resemble themselves alone, a characteristic that is the cause of their glory or renown. But is not this precisely the characteristic that no method is capable of dealing with? and if we treat the writers who possess it in conformity with the laws of the evolutionary hypothesis, is it not at the expense of the very originality that is their pre-eminent quality? Do we not rob them of their individuality by resolving it into its elements, and make away with their singularity when we decompose it? At first sight it seems that such
is the case, but Darwin had answered this objection in advance, while inasmuch as it can scarcely be said that he had the exigencies of the history of literature or art in view when framing his reply, we have the more right to regard it as convincing.

What, according to Darwin, is Natural Selection, and what are the conditions under which it operates? He has told us explicitly, and indeed it is the definition of this power that his disciples, in spite of his express declarations, have so often taken to be a psychological Entity. In a given species, among all of whose representatives the observer had hitherto detected none but almost insignificant differences, it is inevitable that there should at length appear a specimen better endowed than its fellows—a bull, for instance, with exceptional horns, or a horse of exceptional swiftness. Until this better endowed individual has appeared there is no variation, and in consequence no ground or adequate reason for the action of natural selection. Neither "need" as Lamarck believed, nor "environment" as Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire supposed, is sufficient. Something more is indispensable, and this something, for which Darwin expressly states he cannot account, is the appari-

tion of the profitable or useful variety; and it is precisely the fixation or consolidation of this variety that constitutes the principle of Evolution.
Let us now apply this theory to the history of literature or art. A given variety of literature, for instance, the English drama of the sixteenth century, or the French comedy of the seventeenth century, or the English novel of the eighteenth century is in process of development, slowly organising itself under the double influence of the interior and exterior "environment." The movement is slow and the differentiation almost insensible. Suddenly, and without its being possible to give the reason, a Shakespeare, a Molière, or a Richardson appears, and forthwith not only is the variety modified, but new species have come into being: psychological drama, the comedy of character, the novel of manners. The superior adaptability and power of survival of the new species are at once recognised and proved, indeed, in practice. It is in vain that the older species attempt to struggle: their fate is sealed in advance. The successors of Richardson, Molière, and Shakespeare copy these unattainable models until, their fecundity being exhausted—and by their fecundity I mean their aptitude for struggling with kindred and rival species—the imitation is changed into a routine which becomes a source of weakness, impoverishment and death for the species. I shall not easily be persuaded that this manner of considering the history of literature or art is calculated to detract from the originality
of great artists or great writers. On the contrary, as is doubtless perceived, it is precisely their individuality that is responsible for the constitution of new species, and in consequence for the evolution of literature and art.

Such, in my eyes, is the chief advantage of the application of the evolutionary doctrine or method to the history of literature or art. Other advantages could be enumerated, but this is the principal: the combination or conciliation of "hero worship," as understood by Emerson or Carlyle, with the doctrine of slowly operating influences and the action of contemporary circumstances.

This is the task I have attempted in the present Manual, in which those who are interested in the history of French literature will find, I trust, useful information, but the true object and primary intention of which has been to try what results are to be obtained in criticism from a method that has renewed all around us in the course of the last forty years. It will be for the reader to decide whether I have been successful. But if I should have failed, it is not the method but I myself, and I only, that is to blame; moreover, in laying down the principle, I shall have given the reader the means of checking and rectifying my work. "Neither Nature nor even God, it has been said, produce all their great works at a
stroke: a plan must be made before building is commenced, you must draw before you can paint,” and that this is the case is in absolute conformity with the very spirit of the evolutionary method. It is not in a day, nor even in a hundred years, or a thousand years, that one given species transforms or changes itself into another. Darwin was well aware of this truth, which he has repeated often enough! Similarly in history or criticism, time, a great deal of time, is necessary for a method to render all the services that may rightly be expected of it; while one of the worst errors it is possible to commit is to make the method responsible for the shortcomings of the author.

F. B.