

III.—ENGLISH LITERARY READING.

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IN a recent number of the *HOMILETIC REVIEW* * we discussed, in a brief and practical way, the interesting topic of "Religious Books and Reading," emphasizing the value of strictly devotional reading for specifically spiritual ends.

Our present purpose has to do with reading on the strictly secular side, and, as the title of the paper indicates, we will confine ourselves to English books as distinct from those of continental Europe, and to books that are confessedly literary, as distinct from those that are in any sense professional. Moreover, we shall deal exclusively with what may be called "helpful books" as distinct from those "harmful books" to which we called the attention of the readers of the *HOMILETIC* several years since,† and shall confine ourselves to the province of prose.

It may be said, at the outset, that the guiding principle in all reading, secular and religious, literary and technical, English and foreign, is this: The best works of the best authors. Men who are at all busy, such as our American pastors and preachers, are far too busy to spend any considerable time over second and third-rate authors, while, even of our most illustrious writers, it may be safely said that there are comparatively few with all of whose works it is necessary for the reader to be acquainted.

In the province of English fiction, for example, where such standard authors as Thackeray and Reade and George Eliot and Hawthorne have written, respectively, but relatively few novels, it may be perfectly practicable to compass the entire literary product of the authors; but it is worse than folly to apply such a principle to novelists so voluminous as Dickens and Bulwer and De Foe and Cooper. In the department of English miscellany this principle of choice is equally valid, under the guidance of which the intelligent reader will not feel himself obliged to peruse all the papers of the *Spectator* and *Rambler*, nor all the books of travel that Bayard Taylor has written. Such "Selections" as Arnold has given us from Addison, or Hill from Johnson, or Dobson from Steele, or Thurber from Macaulay, will answer the purpose better and leave us time for other duties.

So, in the province of biography and of history and of general literature this elective method must be applied, if, indeed, we hope to give to each department that claims our attention something like its due proportion of study. After one has read Professor Masson's "John Milton," or Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell's "Johnson," or Brown's "Bunyan," or Lockhart's "Scott," or Lodge's "Washington," there is no special need of further reading on the same topic save as time allows it for variety of view.

* July, 1893.

† March, 1888.