

A Quarter-Century of English Literature

1880-1905

By

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QUARTER of a century is something less than a full generation, but it is a period of time sufficient to bring about, in most of the great departments of human activity, a fairly complete shifting of actors, and scenes, and interests. This statement particularly holds if we apply it to the history of English and American literature during the past twenty-five years, in illustration whereof a few facts may be presented. Beginning with the year 1881, our common literature entered upon a period of severe losses, and the landmarks of the earlier age disappeared from view with startling rapidity. While the decade just preceding had witnessed the death (to mention only names of considerable significance) of Bul-

wer, Mill, and Kingsley in England, and of Bryant and Taylor in America, the decade following plunged us into mourning, in England for Carlyle, George Eliot, Darwin, Rossetti, Reade, Arnold, and Browning; and in America for Lanier, Emerson, and Longfellow. A few years later, this necrology of genius was extended to include the names of Tennyson, Morris, Newman, Ruskin, Christina Rossetti, Huxley, Symonds, Pater, Whittier, Whitman, Holmes, and Lowell. Other names as important as some of these might be added to the list, but enough have been mentioned to show how nearly, upon this checker-board of nights and days, the spirit who plans the moves had put 'back into the closet the major pieces of the game before the nineteenth century reached its close.

Let us look at these facts in another light, at the same time making some sort of rude effort to classify them. At the close of 1880, the six great poets who had long made illustrious the Victorian age of English song were all living and all vocal. Within sixteen years, five of the six had passed away, leaving Mr. Swinburne the sole surviving representative of that great period. Less than this number of years had sufficed to extinguish the entire constellation of our greater American poets, not one of their fellowship being left us to

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keep the torch alight. With George Eliot there died the last of the great English novelists, for it could not be soberly urged that she has found a true successor. Two novelists of unquestionably distinguished achievement—Mr. Thomas Hardy and Sir George Meredith—still live to remind us of the great age of English fiction, but their following is an esoteric cult in comparison with the wide acclaim accorded to Dickens and Thackeray. The twentieth century, moreover, finds us as bereft of prophets as of novelists and poets. The wisest of our time must seem but minor prophets when we contrast their utterances with the burning eloquence of Carlyle and Ruskin, or even with the persuasive accents of Arnold and Newman. Truly, the living word as it comes to the ears of our youth of to-day is but a feeble and ineffectual stimulus to noble thought and action, in comparison with the call that rang in the ears of the rising generation a quarter of a century ago.

It should be fairly evident, then, from this brief survey, that the English-speaking people are no longer living in a creative age, that their literary lot is now cast in such a critical or Alexandrine period as usually supervenes when a great creative impulse is spent. This is by no means the same as saying that we have fallen upon

evil days. On the contrary, such a season of stock-taking, of self-examination, of reaction from exuberance, has distinct advantages of its own. It is the inheritor of all that is great and splendid in the past, and it is in a position to classify, to balance, to weigh, to digest, and to view in the right perspective its accumulated possessions. It is by no means a stagnant age: it is rather a singularly active one; it misses only the sharp stimulus that comes from direct association with the great masters. This influence, thus removed from the vital plane, becomes purely spiritual, but remains nevertheless potent in the shaping of ideals. Meanwhile (to speak more particularly of our own age), literary activity is greater than ever before. There is a wider diffusion of culture than in any time past, there are more people who are capable of writing fairly good books, and there is a larger intelligent public devoted to the reading, not only of the contemporary product, but also of the books that have come down to us from our ancestors. And the level of average excellence reached by our present-day literary craftsmen is truly surprising. If we do not ascend with them into the highest heaven of invention, we may at least, when in their company, pursue an agreeable course upon the uplands, where the air is pure and bracing, and whence

we may have frequent glimpses of the sunlit peaks.

Is it so sure, we may sometimes ask, our sense of gratitude aroused by the vital truth and the appealing idealism of the new book, fresh from the writer's heart, to which our own is so readily responsive,—is it so sure that this book is of the inferior imitative or secondary type, that it may not itself come to be reckoned among the classics, and held up to the admiration of our descendants as a rebuke of their own feeble efforts at expression? May it not be that the dead hand weighs more heavily upon our judgment than it should, and prevents us from doing justice to the work of our contemporaries? Has it not always been the fashion to decry one's own age and exalt the past, until the whirligig of time has brought in its revenges, and clothed the figures misunderstood of their fellows with the vesture of the immortals? These are searching questions, and no one may quite dare to give them a blunt negative; yet if the light that is in him reveals his own age as one of decline or decadence, the critic may in honesty do no more than write what he sees, under possible future correction at the hands of some clearer-sighted successor. He will be the first to allow that every age has its own oracles, and that, however dubious or confused their utter-

ance, they must not go altogether unheeded because of too blind a faith in the oracles of the past.

Let us consider, by way of emphasizing the contrast between the last quarter-century and the period preceding it, a few of the most important reputations achieved since 1880. There is Walter Pater, to begin with, known at that time only by a single volume of essays. During the score of years that made up his working lifetime, his philosophical temper and his delicate skill in æsthetic analysis made a deep impression upon the finer spirits among his contemporaries, and his influence was one to be reckoned with. Probably there never was a book that took its place more promptly and unquestionably among the classics of our literature than "Marius the Epicurean"; and its successors, although they never equaled that performance, were of rare and precious quality. And yet, as an enduring influence, Pater's work may not be seriously ranked with that of either Arnold or Ruskin, to name the two men with whom comparison is most natural. Our attention is next invited by Robert Louis Stevenson, that winsome personality who bore with such fortitude the sorrows of illness and of exile, who faced adversity with so brave a front, and who so made the best of a bad case as almost to con-

vince us that he had small need of sympathy. His fame, like Pater's, was almost wholly achieved during the last two decades of the century, and it was a fame that brought with it more personal affection than has perhaps been lavished upon any other English author since Lamb. But his literary product, varied and charming as it is, may hardly be viewed save of eyes dimmed by friendship, as resting upon the highest plane. With the work of Lamb and Scott for touchstones, we must admit that "*Virginibus Puerisque*" and "*Kidnapped*" are books of secondary rank. A pathetic possibility of greatness, rather than greatness itself, must be the substance of an impartial estimate of the fruits of Stevenson's endeavor.

These two, Pater and Stevenson, seem to be the two stars of largest magnitude that have, since 1880, emerged from the mists of the horizon, described their arcs, and set. A few other stars, still visible in the English firmament, are those of Mr. Kipling, Mr. Watson, Mr. Phillips, Mr. Hewlett, and Mr. Lang. Mr. Kipling's star is a variable, and, when flashing out at its brightest, has attracted world-wide attention. But when we look dispassionately at his entire miscellaneous product, it is impossible to classify much of it as literature of the higher sort, or any of it

with the works of the masters. As a novelist he has failed, and as a writer of short stories, while he has done many striking things, the same sort of things had been done before by Bret Harte, and probably better done. Then he has given us the "Jungle Books" (more nearly works of genius than any of the others) and the poems. With the fine cadences of "Recessional" and "The Flag of England" echoing in our ears, it would doubtless be unfair to characterize the whole of his verse, in Professor Peck's witty phrase, as "rag-time poetry," but that phrase comes dangerously near the truth in its applicability to the greater part of the Kipling product. And most of the pieces, by virtue of which his poetical popularity with the multitude has been won, bear little or no relation to poetry in the proper sense of the word. Mr. Kipling's ideals, moreover, as voiced in both verse and prose, are ethically open to serious question.

Mr. Lang may perhaps be taken as the most typical writer of our critical age. His versatility is remarkable, his cleverness is something diabolical, and he has withal the gift of graceful expression and the indefinable quality of charm. He does nothing that he does not well, and yet he does most kinds of things,—poetry, fiction, essays, history, philology, and folk-lore.

For many years he has brightened the ways of literature, and we owe him a deep debt of gratitude. But he will hardly be found in the pantheon fifty years hence. Mr. Hewlett has given us the most delightful interpretations imaginable of Italian life and character; he has also explored to happy effect the thickets of mediæval romance; we admire and cherish him, but we know at the same time that he is far from being one of the immortals. Mr. Watson has dedicated himself to poetry in a very serious sense, and impressed us anew with the sacred mission of the singer. He has even survived the injudicious trumpetings with which his fame was threatened by over-zealous champions, and may read his title fairly clear, but it is not the title of a Tennyson or a Wordsworth, and those who would persuade us to that view are the ones who do him the most wrong. Mr. Phillips has also been hailed as a new great poet, and suffered thereby, for the graceful retelling of a few famous old-world tales is a very different thing from the exercise of the creative imagination. The English writers thus far mentioned may suffice for the present contention, which is simply that the last quarter-century has done little to provide substitutes for the great writers whose death it has witnessed. In this country, the defect

is even more striking; we have a host of minor poets; we have also Mr. Woodberry and Mr. Moody who are more than minor poets, and who have done finer work than any of their English contemporaries of the newer age; we have excellent writers swarming in all the departments of literature, but we have none whose performance can quite reconcile us to the loss of our Lowell and our Longfellow and our Emerson.

Up to this point, more has been said about poets than about novelists, but a survey of our fiction leads to substantially the same conclusion. The tendency, growing all through the nineteenth century, of fiction to become the predominant literary form is still the tendency of the early twentieth century. Or it is more than a tendency now, for the sway of the novelist is so wide, and so undisputed by the vast majority of readers, that workers in other fields get scant encouragement by comparison. But where are the successors of the older novelists? We do not say of Fielding and Scott, but of Thackeray and Dickens, of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, even of Bulwer and Reade? Mr. Hardy and Sir George Meredith remain, but their work is nearly done, and they belong to the glorious past rather than to the mediocre present. Mr. James and Mr. Howells are

with us, but they give us the workmanship of fine art, without the substance which alone can make it enduring. Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Wharton are writers who carry intelligence and conscience and talent about as far as it is possible to carry them; but who would say of either that she had provided an adequate substitute for the intellectual weight and the moral force and the creative genius of George Eliot? We have American novelists by the scores, who provide us with much agreeable entertainment year after year, but we once had a Hawthorne, and who would pretend that Mr. Crawford or Mr. Cable or Mr. Allen or Dr. Mitchell should be mentioned in the same breath with him?

It is evident that the search for commanding personalities among the newer English writers must be in vain; we have done the best that is possible, and revealed only an array of writers for whom nothing more than secondary or tertiary rank may fairly be claimed. Since personalities thus fail us, there remains the question of what may be called currents, or tendencies, or movements, or whatever else we may choose to call the various developments of the period under consideration. Whatever of interest the subject has must be sought chiefly in a study of this sort, even if we reach no more definite conclusion than that

the currents are cross-currents, the tendencies centrifugal, and the movements divergent and confused. The difficulty of such an investigation is very great, when the student has to deal with the period in which he is himself immersed, or, to change the metaphor, when his field of vision is so circumscribed that he cannot see the woods for the trees. It is easy to make hasty generalizations, and quite as easy to refute them with others of the same nature. Yet the study of tendencies and their resulting transformations is the most important part of the history of any literature, and it is better to get an imperfect view of the evolutionary process that must ever be at work than to ignore that aspect of the subject altogether, leaving criticism to take refuge in the old-fashioned æsthetic appraisement of isolated individuals.

What can be said, for example, of the probable issue, from recent indications, of the secular conflict between the forces of realism and romanticism? We have been assured over and over again by the realists that their foe was finally and ignominiously routed, but every time there has followed some resurgence of the romantic impulse, the ghost has refused to be laid, and iridescent fantasy has held its own against sober-hued truth in its appeal to the complex spirit of man. Hosts of modern read-

ers are still attracted to the great romantic writers of the past, and delight in them, not as representing an outworn phase of expression,—a curious phenomenon in literary history,—but as still offering a vital response to the deepest demands of the soul. And as long as Scott and Shelley thus exercise their sway over our hearts, so long will their spiritual inheritors—no matter how much the inheritance has dwindled in the transmission—find a loyal following, even in this most material and bustling age. It would be futile to argue, all things considered, that the romantic embodiment of idealism in English literature has lost either its vitality or its potency to weave spells over the modern imagination. That “renascence of wonder,” which the unerring insight of Mr. Watts-Dunton has discerned to be the most distinctive characteristic of nineteenth-century English poetry, shows no signs of having spent its quickening force. Directly related to this phase of our discussion is the recent and highly significant rehabilitation in English literature of the Celtic or Gaelic element,—an influence seemingly moribund a generation ago,—through the activities of a group of writers numbering Dr. Douglas Hyde, Mr. W. B. Yeats, and Mr. G. W. Russell among its leaders. It may be a sort of Hibernicism thus to characterize as

a development of English literature a movement that has for its aim the revival for literary purposes of a dying form of speech, but the men just named, and others associated with them, have written chiefly in English despite their devotion to the Gaelic, and their poems and dramas and tales have contributed much to our imaginative enrichment. When Matthew Arnold discoursed at Oxford forty years ago upon Celtic literature, and incidentally showed how the intuition of genius can get at the heart of a subject with no more than the amateur's equipment of scholarship, he was mainly concerned with the task of indicating the indebtedness to the Celt of our English poetry, "in its turn for style, its turn for melancholy, and its turn for natural magic, for catching and reading the charm of nature in a wonderfully real and vivid way." He impressed us with the conception of English literature as uniting "a vast obscure Cymric basis with a vast visible Teutonic superstructure," but he hardly foresaw that these Celtic elements, basal though they might be, or subtly woven into the spiritual texture of our thought, would ever again separate themselves from the structure or the pattern, and be given concrete embodiment in works that should be undeniably Celtic through and through. Yet this is what has happened in our own

time, and in so notable a way as to constitute one of the most striking literary manifestations of recent years. The Ossianic revival of the eighteenth century was a mere galvanic phenomenon as compared with the really vital renaissance of the Celtic genius that we are now witnessing.

On the other hand, the spirit of realism has vastly extended the area of its activity. The novelists, and to a certain extent the poets also, have been busily engaged in exploiting special conditions and aspects of life everywhere. It would be difficult to name an occupation, or an industry, or an intellectual vagary, or a racial peculiarity, or a form of dialect, or a persistent provincialism, or a social experiment, or a current historical happening, that has not found its special chroniclers among the writers of our recent fiction. Socialism, hypnotism, Christian "Science," the labor agitation, the sweat-shop, civil-service reform, the divorce problem, political and commercial corruption, the hovel and the mansion,—all of these themes, and many more, have each its own literature, based upon minute observation and obviously declared sympathy or disfavor. The life of the rustic, the miner, the engineer, the sailor, the lumberman, the shop-girl, the politician, the actress, the musician, the artist, and the poet is depicted for us at

close range, often with a needless insistence upon detail, but usually with a degree of technical familiarity that must challenge our admiration if it does not win the approval of our artistic sense. Dialects and provincialisms are dragged to the light of publicity with the same zealous determination to let no picturesque possibility escape the curious reader of fiction. English novelists portray for us the speech and the manners of Welshmen and Irishmen and Scotsmen (these in numerous varieties), of Manxmen and Shetlanders, of the rustics of Wessex and Dartmoor and Devonshire. American novelists, seizing the more diversified opportunities offered by the conglomerate population of this country, seek to interest us (and generally succeed) in Georgia crackers and Tennessee mountaineers, in Pennsylvania miners and Michigan loggers, in Texas cowboys and Montana ranchmen, in New England operatives and Southern field-hands and Western railway employes, in the descendants of Creoles in Louisiana and of Dutchmen in New York and of Spaniards in California. Nothing like this exhibit was ever made or attempted in any earlier period of our literature; of no other time have we such a collection of social documents.

One of the reasons for this illumination of the nooks and corners of contemporary

life is doubtless to be found in the passion for novelty with which most writers are beset. Genius cares little whether its matter be new or old, for it has the power to bestow eternal freshness upon its creations; but we are now concerned with something very different from genius; namely, with the sort of talent that may be found almost anywhere under the conditions brought about by our widespread systems of public education. Now this kind of literary ability shrinks from being compared with creative power, and seeks to divert attention from its imitative or derivative character by the use of novel subject-matter. If in addition to this element of superficial originality there may be devised some striking pose, or mannerism, or rhetorical trick, the disguise is complete in the eyes of most readers, who put about as little conscience into reading as their favorite authors do into writing. The device may be an affectation of sugary sentiment, or a pompous parade of sophistical philosophy, or an array of audacious paradox, or almost any other form of trickiness; it achieves its purpose if it provides a new variety of sensation for the palate that has been dulled by over-indulgence in literary condiments.

This straining for effect, for originality at any cost, is one of the reasons why current literature handles so great a number

of far-fetched themes in so great a variety of manners. A deeper reason is that current literature must inevitably share in the democratic development of society. There is no escaping democracy, and we have to put up with its evils for the sake of enjoying its benefits. The evils are probably not inherent in its nature, but in its present assault upon privilege it does not pause to discriminate. The privilege which is nature's gift is confused with the privilege born of man's selfishness, and one gets as scant shrift as the other. Envy, arrogance, irreverence, and vulgarity are among the most conspicuous features of democracy in its present transitional phase, and literature reflects them all. Small wonder, then, that books should be written upon the theory that one subject is as good as another, that a man of affairs is as worthy a hero as a man of ideas, and that the pulsating present is superior for example and admonition to the lifeless past.

But these counsels of despair are not the only lessons taught us by the democratization of literature. There is also in the process a saving and uplifting element which expresses itself in broadened human sympathies and a deepened sense of social responsibility. There is no blinking the fact that the tide of socialism is rapidly rising everywhere, and threatens in its blind on-

ward sweep to engulf not only the selfish abuses of our civilization, but much also of its higher spiritual life. It particularly behooves the conservators of our heritage of wisdom and art to keep their heads clear, to deal judiciously with this invading force, and to endeavor, while accepting its inevitable consequences, to save from the deluge those finer ideals whose repository must ever be the chosen spirits of the few rather than the general mind of the unthinking masses. It is no easy matter for our vestal virgins to keep the sacred fire burning upon the altar in these stormy times of change.

The progressive socialization of our modern society is closely reflected in our modern literature. It is a world-wide movement, and among its major prophets are numbered not only the professed workers in economics and sociology, but also the poets and the novelists, and the critics of literature and art. Ruskin, Morris, Zola, and Tolstoy are counted among its standard-bearers, and the last-named writer's tractate upon the principles of art exhibits a sort of danger-signal, whereby we may take warning of what the movement is likely to mean if its direction comes under the unrestrained control of its zealots. To make the movement effective for good in the largest sense (and its potentialities for that purpose are

enormous) calls for a leadership based upon social sympathy and enlightened judgment; merely destructive criticism of its vagaries will do little, and the attitude of indifferentism nothing at all, toward holding it in check.

It has been no easy matter to overcome the spirit of smug complacency which characterized English literature not very long ago. It was a spirit content to hover over the surface of life, and finding that surface fairly pleasant to look upon, it made slight effort to look beneath. It could find little meaning, for example, in such words as those of Georg Brandes, outlining his critical programme in the early seventies. "I go down to the foundations of real life, and show how the emotions which find their expression in literature arise in the human heart. And this same human heart is no still pool, no idyllic mountain lake. It is an ocean, with submarine vegetation and terrible inhabitants." The view of criticism which the Danish writer thus determined to oppose was the natural correlative of the view of life itself which the makers of literature sought to present. Since then, both letters and the criticism of letters have got closer to reality, and have greatly enlarged the scope of their enterprise. The social conscience has become aroused in earnest, the spirit of shal-

low optimism has been exposed in all its dull insincerity, and has given place to a spirit of resolute meliorism, intent upon baring the evils of society as a necessary step toward the application of their proper remedy. Half a century ago, such books as "Alton Locke" and "Felix Holt" were startling novelties, literary phenomena isolated from the prevailing currents of their age; to-day books of their type have grown so common that it takes an effort to realize how modern is the literary fashion which they illustrate.

We must carefully distinguish the humanitarian impulse of a preceding generation, aiming only at the exposure and remedy of special abuses, from the more general and far deeper social criticism with which recent literature has become infused. The attacks made by Dickens and Reade upon the management of prisons and mad-houses, upon courts of chancery and private schools, had little in common with the terrific indictment of modern society implicit in the later books of Thomas Hardy. Or, to take examples having nothing to do with literature in the narrow sense, yet extremely significant in the social sense, a comparison might be made between "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "The Jungle." There is all the difference that exists between the exhibition of an ulcer and a diagnosis of

poison in the blood. One is within the reach of surgery; the other (assuming the diagnosis to be correct) calls for nothing less than complete renovation of the social organism.

As a consequence of the new-found willingness of many of our writers to look life squarely in the face, our literature has lost that fine quality of reticence which was its distinctive mark in the last generation. The extreme propriety of our literary manners in the mid-Victorian era was the subject of more or less ridicule on the part of foreign observers, and when propriety degenerates into prudery and casts over its shoulders the protecting mantle of hypocrisy, it deserves to be ridiculed. Cant is always loathsome, and its exhibition, both in English literature and English life, fully deserved the bludgeon of Carlyle's vehement denunciation and the satirical shafts of such diverse continental critics as Heine and Taine. But if our predecessors carried reticence too far, something more than compensation for their restraint may be found in the productions of their latter-day successors. A recent writer, Mr. Basil Tozer, is responsible for the following statistics: "Out of eighty-seven selected novels that I have by me at this moment, and that have been published within the last three years and a half, books that have

had considerable vogue, and have all, at one time or other, been obtainable at the circulating libraries, seventeen adopt the attitude of sneering at matrimony as a thing 'played out'; eleven raise upon a pinnacle imaginary co-respondents in imaginary divorce cases; twenty-two practically advocate that married men shall be allowed to keep mistresses openly; seven hold up to ridicule the wife who is faithful to her husband; and twenty-three describe seduction as openly as it can be described in a book that is not to be ostracized by the book-stalls." Such a showing as this makes one think that even prudery may have a soul of unsuspected goodness. At all events, readers of "Jude the Obscure" and "Evelyn Innes" and "The Helpmate" do not need to be told that we have gone far since the days of Anthony Trollope. When literature becomes so emancipated that even decency is felt to be an intolerable restraint, it is time to remember Goethe's deep saying, that men may attain true freedom only by submission to the fundamental laws of their being.

The recent literature of England and America supplies examples by the hundreds which might be adduced in support of our thesis concerning the growth of social sympathy. The poet, the novelist, and the playwright all make their contri-

bution, and the new social note is sounded in many keys. It is heard in the shrill falsetto of the sensationalist whose stock in trade is limited to clever epigram and startling paradox; its *basso ostinato* underlies most serious artistic attempts to portray contemporary life. It is voiced so widely and so insistently that it becomes to many, impatient of the new burden of responsibility which it would fasten upon their unwilling shoulders, a cause of irritation, from which they turn for refuge to the literature of bygone days, the literature of the easy-going past, of entertainment pure and simple, of manners and misty romance, or if, perchance, concerned with the deeper issues of human existence, to a literature which time has freed from the pressure of whatever anxieties gave it birth, thus making it fit for the delectation of minds that shrink from the envisagement of such evils as actually surround them.

The stream of socialistic tendency is not, however, the only movement to be reckoned with in an attempt to make clear the recent developments of our literature. It is opposed by a marked counter-current of individualizing effort, presenting for our admiration the type of the masterful man, whose purpose is personal triumph, and whose example is offered in many quarters for our emulation. This movement has for

its philosophical basis the evolutionary doctrine in an undigested form, and crudely applies to life and conduct the principle of the survival of the fittest. It was inevitable that some such development as this should accompany the acceptance of evolution as the master-key of scientific investigation, and should pave the way for so extreme a philosophy as has been offered by Nietzsche to ears far too ready to receive it,—a philosophy which rejects with scorn the whole system of Christian ethics, and sees in successful achievement the all-sufficient sanction of every kind of effort. This is, of course, a question-begging philosophy, for it interprets "the fittest" in the narrow sense needed to justify a rejection of those motives and ideals hitherto held most in honor by Christian civilization. But it is a dangerously specious doctrine, with its brave pretense of clearing away the obstructions that impede the evolutionary process, and its dazzling vista of a future that shall realize the fully developed type of the overman.

In its extreme form, this philosophy derives directly from the teachings of Nietzsche, although the writings of Carlyle did much to prepare the way for it. While Nietzsche has little or no professed following in England and America, his influence has nevertheless been considerable, al-

though insidiously exerted and in roundabout ways. His bold repudiation of the claims of the weakling, his defiant assertion of the individual's right to ride roughshod over all obstacles, and his scornful denunciation of Christianity as the embodiment of a servile morality, cringing unworthily before the false idols of charity and forbearance and self-sacrifice, are teachings which chime too closely with the frenzied temper of our modern materialism to fail of a certain degree of semi-conscious acceptance. And so, in opposition to the marked social trend of much of our recent literature, there is also an evident trend toward self-indulgence and brutality and the apotheosis of strength. There are only too many who are willing to recognize as an adequate measure of the good the intensity of individual desire coupled with the control of the means of its realization. Thus unabashed does a narrow form of hedonism obtrude itself into our literature, and challenge the knights of the spirit. Those of us who share Kant's conviction, that the moral law is as fixed a reality as the starry heavens, will not seriously question the ultimate issue, although we may be temporarily disheartened by the weary length of the combat.

There is nothing new in this divided allegiance of the literary forces of to-day.

There have always been writers to champion the solidarity of social interests, and other writers to assert the importance of the individual and to emphasize his claims. But the line of battle between these conflicting ideals is more sharply drawn than has been the case hitherto, and therein lies the distinctive feature of the present situation. It is a difficult problem, both for literature and for ethics, so to adjust the opposing demands as to bring them into a sort of harmony, and thus enable them both to contribute to the advancement of humanity. Social sympathy, if unregulated, always runs the risk of degenerating into a dangerous form of sentimentality, while uncontrolled individualism runs the risk of committing wanton outrage upon all the instincts which men rightly cherish as sacred. Among our latter-day prophets, Ibsen seems to have been more successful than most of his compeers in marking out the *via media* which best satisfies the balanced judgment. Holding character to be the thing that chiefly counts, he preached individualism incessantly, but always an individualism tempered and controlled by obligation. . Even when he seemed to be saying most vehemently that a man's first duty is toward himself, there was always the implication that this duty is made imperious by the claims of others upon the

individual thus self-strengthened. So he emphasized successively the obligation of husband to wife, of parent to child, of pastor to flock, and of the good citizen to society. It was essentially Goethe's teaching applied to special modern conditions.

This discussion of the present situation in English literature has taken us far afield, and the impatient reader may ask what on earth Nietzsche and Ibsen and Goethe have got to do with the case. The question is easily answered. No survey of a literary period in any country can be worth much unless it takes foreign influences into account. This has always been true to some extent, and it is vastly truer at the present time than it ever was before. Even the earlier periods of our own literature require for our comprehension that we take account of the streams of influence flowing in upon it from Italy, France, and Germany. But in none of those earlier periods was there so much of this sort of reaction to impressions from without as is now the case, when not only the greater but also the lesser writers, not only of the greater but also of the lesser countries, speedily find their way to English audiences, and blend their voices in the chorus with which our ears are filled. A self-contained literature is no longer possible anywhere in the world,—not in the old

Greek sense, nor even in the more limited modern French sense. It was a modern Frenchman who devised the formula which must henceforth become the ideal of every national literature. "Rester soi-même et pourtant s'unir aux autres." England can no longer boast of its "splendid isolation" in literature any more than it can in politics, and the American offshoot of English literature has proved itself rather more susceptible to alien influences than is the main trunk. In many cases, it has been American receptivity that has set England the example; and all the way from the Concord period down to our own, American writers have been alert to detect the new foreign note and seize the message of the old foreign classic. That the spirit of cosmopolitanism has become a permanent factor in the development of English literature is one of the clearest signs of the times. Despite the occasional aberrations of taste and extravagances of enthusiasm that may accompany the new habit of looking abroad for the fresh inspiration or the fertilizing thought, the current now sets so strongly in the direction of intellectual free-trade as to be in no danger of checks or reverses. For good or for evil,—and I hold it for good,—the world is fast growing one in spirit, and this at a time when, as never before, the instinct of race is asserting

itself as a force in the shaping of politics, and the arousing, among men of the same stock, of a common consciousness of their distinctive character. In a word, the formula of the Frenchman, previously quoted, is being fulfilled before our very eyes in the combined literary, social, and political movement of the present day, among the English, as among the other chief peoples of the modern world.

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