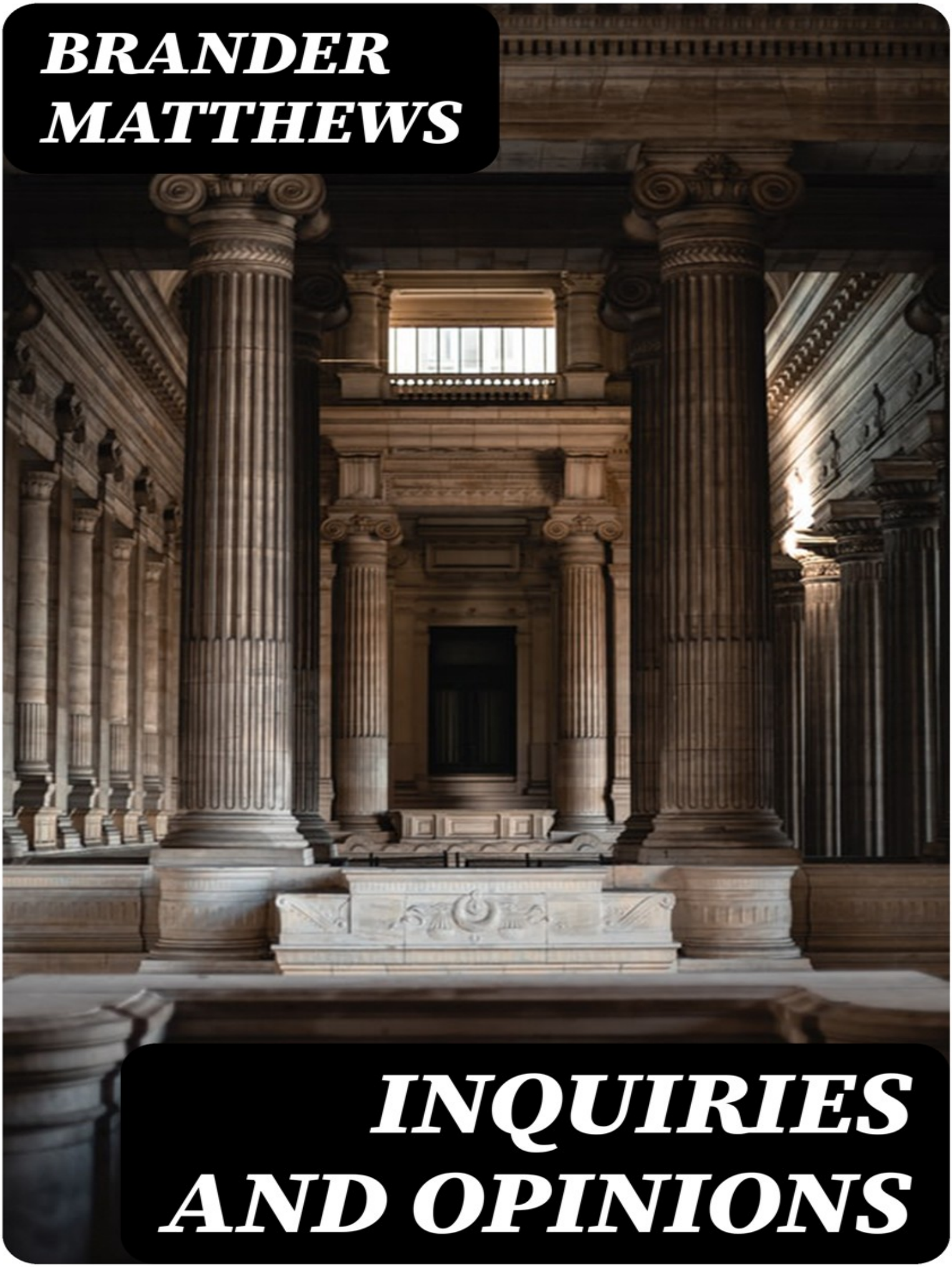
BRANDER MATTHEWS



INQUIRIES AND OPINIONS

Brander Matthews

Inquiries and Opinions

EAN 8596547372486

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I

Table of Contents

"The scientific spirit," so an acute American critic defined it recently in an essay on Carlyle,—who was devoid of it and detested it,—"the scientific spirit signifies poise between hypothesis and verification, between statement and proof, between appearance and reality. It is inspired by the impulse of investigation, tempered with distrust and edged with curiosity. It is at once avid of certainty and skeptical of seeming. It is enthusiastically patient, nobly literal, candid, tolerant, hospitable." This is the statement of a man of letters, who had found in science "a tonic force" stimulating to all the arts.

By the side of this, it may be well to set also the statement of a man of science. In his address delivered in St. Louis in December, 1903, the President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science,—who is also the president of one of the foremost of American universities,—declared that "the fundamental characteristic of the scientific method is honesty.... The sole object is to learn the truth and to be guided by the truth. Absolute accuracy, absolute fidelity, absolute honesty are the prime conditions of scientific progress." And then Dr. Remsen went on to make the significant assertion that "the constant use of the scientific method must in the end leave its impress upon him who uses it. A life spent in accord with scientific teaching would be of a high order. It would practically conform to the teachings of the highest type of religion."

This "use of the scientific method" is as remote as may be from that barren adoption of scientific phrases and that sterile application of scientific formulas, which may be dismissed as an aspect of "science falsely so called." It is of deeper import also than any mere utilization by art of the discoveries of science, however helpful this may be. The painter has been aided by science to perceive more precisely the effect of the vibrations of light and to analize more sharply the successive stages of animal movement; and the poet also has found his profit in the wider knowledge brought to us by later investigations. Longfellow, for example, drew upon astronomy for the figure with which he once made plain his moral:

Were a star quenched on high,
For ages would its light,
Still travelling downward from the sky,
Shine on our mortal sight.

So, when a great man dies,
For years beyond our ken
The light he leaves behind him lies
Upon the paths of men.

Wordsworth, a hundred years ago, warmly welcomed "the remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist and mineralogist," as "proper objects of the poet's art," declaring that "if the time should ever come when what is now called 'science,' thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will

welcome the being thus produced as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man."

Again, the "use of the scientific method" is not equivalent to the application in the arts of scientific theories, altho here once more the man of letters is free to take these for his own and to bend them to his purpose. Ibsen has found in the doctrine of heredity a modern analog of the ancient Greek idea of fate; and altho he may not "see life steadily and see it whole," he has been enabled to invest his somber 'Ghosts' with not a little of the inerrable inevitability which we feel to be so appalling in the master work of Sophocles. Criticism, no less than creation, has been stimulated by scientific hypothesis; and for one thing, the conception of literary history has been wholly transformed since the theory of evolution was declared. To M. Brunetière we owe the application of this doctrine to the development of the drama in his own language. He has shown us most convincingly how the several literary forms,—the lyric, the oration, the epic, with its illegitimate descendant, the modern novel in prose,—may cross-fertilize each other from time to time, and also how the casual hybrids that result are ever struggling to revert each to its own species.

Science is thus seen to be stimulating to art; but the "use of the scientific method" would seem to be more than stimulation only. It leads the practitioners of the several arts to set up an ideal of disinterestedness, inspired by a lofty curiosity, which shall scorn nothing as insignificant, and which is ever eager after knowledge ascertained for its own sake. As it abhors the abnormal and the freakish, the superficial and the extravagant, it helps the creative artist

to strive for a more classic directness and simplicity; and it guides the critic toward passionless proportion and moderation. Altho it tends toward intellectual freedom, it forces us always to recognize the reign of law. It establishes the strength of the social bond, and thereby, for example, it aids us to see that, altho romance is ever young and ever true, what is known as "neo-romanticism," with its reckless assertion of individual whim, is anti-social, and therefore probably immoral.

The "use of the scientific method" will surely strengthen the conscience of the novelist and of the dramatist; and it will train them to a sterner veracity in dealing with human character. It will inhibit that pitiful tendency toward a falsification of the facts of life, which asserts the reform of a character in the twinkling of an eye just before the final fall of the curtain. It will lead to a renunciation of the feeble and summary psychology which permits a man of indurated habits of weakness or of wickedness to transform himself by a single and sudden effort of will. And, on the other hand, it may tempt certain students of life, subtler than their fellow-craftsmen and more inquisitive, to dwell unduly on the mere machinery of human motive and to aim not at a rich portrayal of the actions of men and women, but at an arid analysis of the mechanism of their impulses. More than one novelist of the twentieth century has already yielded to this tendency. No doubt, this is only the negative defect accompanying a positive quality,—yet it indicates an imperfect appreciation of the artist's duty. "In every art," so Taine reminded us, "it is necessary to linger long over the true in order to attain the beautiful. The eye, fixing itself on

an object, begins by noting details with an excess of precision and fulness; it is only later, when the inventory is complete, that the mind, master of its wealth, rises higher, in order to take or to neglect what suits it."

The attitude of the literary critic will be modified by the constant use of the scientific method, quite as much as the attitude of the literary creator. He will seek to relate a work of art, whether it is an epic or a tragedy, a novel or a play, to its environment, weighing all the circumstances of its creation. He will strive to estimate it as it is, of course, but also as a contribution to the evolution of its species made by a given people at a given period. He will endeavor to keep himself free from lip-service and from ancestor-worship, holding himself derelict to his duty if he should fail to admit frankly that in every masterpiece of the past, however transcendent its merits, there must needs be much that is temporary admixt with more that is permanent,—many things which pleased its author's countrymen in his own time and which do not appeal to us, even tho we can perceive also what is eternal and universal, even tho we read into every masterpiece much that the author's contemporaries had not our eyes to perceive. All the works of Shakspere and of Molière are not of equal value,—and even the finest of them is not impeccable; and a literary critic who has a scientific sincerity will not gloss over the minor defects, whatever his desire to concentrate attention on the nobler qualities by which Shakspere and Molière achieved their mighty fame. Indeed, the scientific spirit will make it plain that an unwavering admiration for all the works of a great writer, unequal as these must be of

necessity, is proof in itself of an obvious inability to perceive wherein lies his real greatness.

Whatever the service the scientific spirit is likely to render in the future, we need to be on our guard against the obsession of science itself. There is danger that an exclusive devotion to science may starve out all interest in the arts, to the impoverishment of the soul. Already there are examples of men who hold science to be all-sufficient and who insist that it has superseded art. Already is it necessary to recall Lowell's setting off of "art, whose concern is with the ideal and the potential, from science which is limited by the actual and the positive." Science bids us go so far and no farther, despite the fact that man longs to peer beyond the confines. Vistas closed to science are opened for us by art; and science fails us if we ask too much; for it can provide no satisfactory explanation of the enigmas of existence. Above all, it tempts us to a hard and fast acceptance of its own formulas, an acceptance as deadening to progress as it is false to the scientific spirit itself. "History warns us," so Huxley declared, "that it is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies, and to end as superstitions."

II

Table of Contents

The growth of the scientific spirit is not more evident in the nineteenth century than the spread of the democratic movement. Democracy in its inner essence means not only the slow broadening down of government until it rests upon the assured foundation of the people as a whole, it signifies also the final disappearance of the feudal organization, of

the system of caste, of the privileges which are not founded on justice, of the belief in any superiority conferred by the accident of birth. It starts with the assertion of the equality of all men before the law; and it ends with the right of every man to do his own thinking. Accepting the dignity of human nature, the democratic spirit, in its finer manifestations, is free from intolerance and rich in sympathy, rejoicing to learn how the other half lives. It is increasingly interested in human personality, in spite of the fact that humanity no longer bulks as big in the universe as it did before scientific discovery shattered the ancient assumption that the world had been made for man alone.

Perhaps, indeed, it is the perception of our own insignificance which is making us cling together more closely and seek to understand each other at least, even if we must ever fail to grasp the full import of the cosmic scheme. Whatever the reason, there is no gainsaying the growth of fellow-feeling and of a curiosity founded on friendly interest,—both of which are revealed far more abundantly in our later literatures than in the earlier classics. In the austere masterpieces of the Greek drama, for example, we may discover a lack of this warmth of sympathy; and we can not but suspect a certain aloofness, which is akin to callousness. The cultivated citizens of Athens were supported by slave-labor; but their great dramatic poets cast little light on the life of the slaves or on the sad conditions of their servitude. Something of this narrow chilliness is to be detected also in the literature of the court of Louis XIV; Corneille and Racine prefer to ignore not only the peasant but also the burgher; and it is partly

because Molière's outlook on life is broader that the master of comedy appears to us now so much greater than his tragic contemporaries. Even of late the Latin races have seemed perhaps a little less susceptible to this appeal than the Teutonic or the Slavonic, and the impassive contempt of Flaubert and of Maupassant toward the creatures of their imaginative observation is more characteristic of the French attitude than the genial compassion of Daudet. In Hawthorne and in George Eliot there is no aristocratic remoteness; and Turgenieff and Tolstoi are innocent of haughty condescension. Everywhere now in the new century can we perceive the working of the democratic spirit, making literature more clear-sighted, more tolerant, more pitying.

In his uplifting discussion of democracy, Lowell sought to encourage the timid souls who dreaded the danger that it might "reduce all mankind to a dead level of mediocrity" and that it might "lessen the respect due to eminence whether in station, virtue, or genius;" and he explained that, in fact, democracy meant a career open to talent, an opportunity equal to all, and therefore in reality a larger likelihood that genius would be set free. Here in America we have discovered by more than a century of experience that democracy levels up and not down; and that it is not jealous of a commanding personality even in public life, revealing a swift shrewdness of its own in gaging character, and showing both respect and regard for the independent leaders strong enough to withstand what may seem at the moment to be the popular will.

Nor is democracy hostile to original genius, or slow to recognize it. The people as a whole may throw careless and liberal rewards to the jesters and to the sycophants who are seeking its favor, as their forerunners sought to gain the ear of the monarch of old, but the authors of substantial popularity are never those who abase themselves or who scheme to cajole. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were only two writers whose new books appeared simultaneously in half a dozen different tongues; and what man has ever been so foolish as to call Ibsen and Tolstoi flatterers of humanity? The sturdy independence of these masters, their sincerity, their obstinate reiteration each of his own message,—these are main reasons for the esteem in which they are held. And in our own language, the two writers of widest renown are Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling, known wherever English is spoken, in every remote corner of the seven seas, one an American of the Americans and the other the spokesman of the British Empire. They are not only conscientious craftsmen, each in his own way, but moralists also and even preachers; and they go forward in the path they have marked out, each for himself, with no swervings aside to curry favor or to avoid unpopularity.

The fear has been exprest freely that the position of literature is made more precarious by the recent immense increase in the reading public, deficient in standards of taste and anxious to be amused. It is in the hope of hitting the fancy of this motley body that there is now a tumultuous multiplication of books of every degree of merit; and amid all this din there must be redoubled difficulty of choice. Yet the selection gets itself made somehow, and not

unsatisfactorily. Unworthy books may have vogue for a while, and even adulation; but their fame is fleeting. The books which the last generation transmitted to us were, after all, the books best worth our consideration; and we may be confident that the books we shall pass along to the next generation will be as wisely selected. Out of the wasteful overproduction only those works emerge which have in them something that the world will not willingly let die.

Those books that survive are always chosen from out the books that have been popular, and never from those that failed to catch the ear of their contemporaries. The poet who scorns the men of his own time and who retires into an ivory tower to inlay rimes for the sole enjoyment of his fellow mandarins, the poet who writes for posterity, will wait in vain for his audience. Never has posterity reversed the unfavorable verdict of an artist's own century. As Cicero said —and Cicero was both an aristocrat and an artist in letters, —"given time and opportunity, the recognition of the many is as necessary a test of excellence in an artist as that of the few." Verse, however exquisite, is almost valueless if its appeal is merely technical or merely academic, if it pleases only the sophisticated palate of the dilettant, if it fails to touch the heart of the plain people. That which vauntingly styles itself the *écriture artiste* must reap its reward promptly in praise from the *précieuses ridicules* of the hour. It may please those who pretend to culture without possessing even education; but this aristocratic affectation has no roots and it is doomed to wither swiftly, as one fad is

ever fading away before another, as Asianism, euphuism, and Gongorism have withered in the past.

Fictitious reputations may be inflated for a little space; but all the while the public is slowly making up its mind; and the judgment of the main body is as trustworthy as it is enduring. 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Pilgrim's Progress' hold their own generation after generation, altho the cultivated class did not discover their merits until long after the plain people had taken them to heart. Cervantes and Shakspere were widely popular from the start; and appreciative criticism limped lamely after the approval of the mob. Whatever blunders in belauding, the plain people may make now and again, in time they come unfailingly to a hearty appreciation of work that is honest, genuine, and broad in its appeal; and when once they have laid hold of the real thing they hold fast with abiding loyalty.

III

Table of Contents

As significant as the spread of democracy in the nineteenth century is the success with which the abstract idea of nationality has exprest itself in concrete form. Within less than twoscore years Italy has ceased to be only a geographical expression; and Germany has given itself boundaries more sharply defined than those claimed for the fatherland by the martial lyric of a century ago. Hungary has asserted itself against the Austrians, and Norway against the Swedes; and each by the stiffening of racial pride has insisted on the recognition of its national integrity. This is but the accomplishment of an ideal toward which the

western world has been tending since it emerged from the Dark Ages into the Renascence and since it began to suspect that the Holy Roman Empire was only the empty shadow of a disestablished realm. In the long centuries the heptarchy in England had been followed by a monarchy with London for its capital; and in like manner the seven kingdoms of Spain had been united under monarchs who dwelt in Madrid. Normandy and Gascony, Burgundy and Provence had been incorporated finally with the France of which the chief city was Paris.

Latin had been the tongue of every man who was entitled to claim benefit of clergy; but slowly the modern languages compacted themselves out of the warring dialects when race after race came to a consciousness of its unity and when the speech of a capital was set up at last as the standard to which all were expected to conform. In Latin Dante discust the vulgar tongue, tho he wrote the 'Divine Comedy' in his provincial Tuscan; yet Petrarch, who came after, was afraid that his poems in Italian were, by that fact, fated to be transitory. Chaucer made choice of the dialect of London, performing for it the service Dante had rendered to the speech of the Florentines; yet Bacon and Newton went back to Latin as the language still common to men of science. Milton practised his pen in Latin verse, but never hesitated to compose his epic in English. Latin served Descartes and Spinoza, men of science again; and it was not until the nineteenth century that the invading vernaculars finally ousted the language of the learned which had once been in universal use. And even now Latin is retained by the church which still styles itself Catholic.

It was as fortunate as it was necessary that the single language of the learned should give way before the vulgar tongues, the speech of the people, each in its own region best fitted to phrase the feelings and the aspirations of races dissimilar in their characteristics and in their ideals. No one tongue could voice the opposite desires of the northern peoples and of the southern; and we see the several modern languages revealing by their structure as well as by their vocabularies the essential qualities of the races that fashioned them, each for its own use. Indeed, these racial characteristics are so distinct and so evident to us now that we fancy we can detect them even tho they are disguised in the language of Rome; and we find significance in the fact that Seneca, the grandiloquent rhetorician, was by birth a Spaniard, and that Petronius, the robust realist, was probably born in what is now France.

The segregation of nationality has been accompanied by an increasing interest in the several states out of which the nation has made itself, and sometimes even by an effort to raise the dialects of these provinces up to the literary standard of the national language. In this there is no disloyalty to the national ideal,—rather is it to be taken as a tribute to the nation, since it seeks to call attention again to the several strands twined in the single bond. In literature this tendency is reflected in a wider liking for local color and in an intenser relish for the flavor of the soil. We find Verga painting the violent passions of the Sicilians, and Reuter depicting the calmer joys of the Platt-Deutsch. We see Maupassant etching the canny and cautious Normans, while Daudet brushed in broadly the expansive exuberance of the

Provençals. We delight alike in the Wessex-folk of Mr. Hardy and in the humorous Scots of Mr. Barrie. We extend an equal welcome to the patient figures of New England spinsterhood as drawn by Miss Jewett and Miss Wilkins, and to the virile Westerners set boldly on their feet by Mr. Wister and Mr. Garland.

What we wish to have explored for us are not only the nooks and corners of our own nation; those of other races appeal also to our sympathetic curiosity. These inquiries help us to understand the larger peoples, of whom the smaller communities are constituent elements. They serve to sharpen our insight into the differences which divide one race from another; and the contrast of Daudet and Maupassant on the one hand with Mark Twain and Kipling on the other brings out the width of the gap that yawns between the Latins (with their solidarity of the family and their reliance on the social instinct) and the Teutons (with their energetic independence and their aggressive individuality). With increase of knowledge there is less likelihood of mutual misunderstandings; and here literature performs a most useful service to the cause of civilization. As Tennyson once said: "It is the authors, more than the diplomats, who make nations love one another." Fortunately, no high tariff can keep out the masterpieces of foreign literature which freely cross the frontier, bearing messages of good-will and broadening our understanding of our fellowmen.

IV

Table of Contents

The deeper interest in the expression of national qualities and in the representation of provincial peculiarities is to-day accompanied by an increasing cosmopolitanism which seems to be casting down the barriers of race and of language. More than fourscore years ago, Goethe said that even then national literature was "rather an unmeaning term" as "the epoch of world-literature was at hand." With all his wisdom Goethe failed to perceive that cosmopolitanism is a sorry thing when it is not the final expression of patriotism. An artist without a country and with no roots in the soil of his nativity is not likely to bring forth flower and fruit. As an American critic aptly put it, "a true cosmopolitan is at home,—even in his own country." A Russian novelist set forth the same thought; and it was the wisest character in Turgenieff's 'Dimitri Roudine' who asserted that the great misfortune of the hero was his ignorance of his native land:—"Russia can get along without any of us, but we cannot do without Russia. Wo betide him who does not understand her, and still more him who really forgets the manners and the ideas of his fatherland! Cosmopolitanism is an absurdity and a zero,—less than a zero; outside of nationality, there is no art, no truth, no life possible."

Perhaps it may be feasible to attempt a reconciliation of Turgenieff and Goethe, by pointing out that the cosmopolitanism of this growing century is revealed mainly in a similarity of the external forms of literature, while it is the national spirit which supplies the essential inspiration that gives life. For example, it is a fact that the 'Demi-monde' of Dumas, the 'Pillars of Society' of Ibsen, the

'Magda' of Sudermann, the 'Grand Galeoto' of Echegaray, the 'Second Mrs. Tanqueray' of Pinero, the 'Gioconda' of d'Annunzio are all of them cast in the same dramatic mold; but it is also a fact that the metal of which each is made was smelted in the native land of its author. Similar as they are in structure, in their artistic formula, they are radically dissimilar in their essence, in the motives that move the characters and in their outlook on life; and this dissimilarity is due not alone to the individuality of the several authors,—it is to be credited chiefly to the nationality of each.

Of course, international borrowings have always been profitable to the arts,—not merely the taking over of raw material, but the more stimulating absorption of methods and processes and even of artistic ideals. The Sicilian Gorgias had for a pupil the Attic Isocrates; and the style of the Athenian was imitated by the Roman Cicero, thus helping to sustain the standard of oratory in every modern language. The 'Matron of Ephesus' of Petronius was the great-grandmother of the 'Yvette' of Maupassant; and the dialogs of Herondas and of Theocritus serve as models for many a vignette of modern life. The 'Golden Ass' went before 'Gil Blas' and made a path for him; and 'Gil Blas' pointed the way for 'Huckleberry Finn.' It is easy to detect the influence of Richardson on Rousseau, of Rousseau on George Sand, of George Sand on Turgenieff, of Turgenieff on Mr. Henry James, of Mr. James on M. Paul Bourget, of M. Bourget on Signor d'Annunzio; and yet there is no denying that Richardson is radically English, that Turgenieff is thoroly Russian, and that d'Annunzio is unquestionably Italian.

In like manner we may recognize the striking similarity—but only in so far as the external form is concerned—discoverable in those short-stories which are as abundant as they are important in every modern literature; and yet much of our delight in these brief studies from life is due to the pungency of their local flavor, whether they were written by Kjelland or by Sacher-Masoch, by Auerbach or by Daudet, by Barrie or by Bret Harte. "All can grow the flower now, for all have got the seed"; but the blossoms are rich with the strength of the soil in which each of them is rooted.

This racial individuality is our immediate hope; it is our safeguard against mere craftsmanship, against dilettant dexterity, against cleverness for its own sake, against the danger that our cosmopolitanism may degenerate into Alexandrianism and that our century may come to be like the age of the Antonines, when a "cloud of critics, of compilers, of commentators darkened the face of learning," so Gibbon tells us, and "the decline of genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste." It is the spirit of nationality which will help to supply needful idealism. It will allow a man of letters to frequent the past without becoming archaic and to travel abroad without becoming exotic, because it will supply him always with a good reason for remaining a citizen of his own country.

(1904.)

THE SUPREME LEADERS

Table of Contents

In the fading annals of French Romanticism it is recorded that at the first performance of an early play of the elder Dumas at the Odéon, a band of enthusiasts, as misguided as they were youthful, were so completely carried away that they formed a ring and danced in derision around a bust of Racine which adorned that theater, declaring boisterously that the elder dramatist was disgraced and disestablished: *'Enfoncé Racine!'*

This puerile exploit took place not fourscore years ago, and already has this play of Dumas disappeared beneath the wave of oblivion, its very name being recalled only by special students of the history of the French stage, while the Comédie-Française continues, year in and year out, to act the best of Racine's tragedies, now nearly two centuries and a half since they were first performed.

Again, in the records of the British theater of the eighteenth century, we find mention of a countryman of John Home, who attended the first performance of the reverend author's 'Douglas.' The play so worked upon the feelings of this perfervid Scot that he was forced to cry out triumphantly: "Whaur's your Wully Shakspere noo?"

And yet this Scottish masterpiece failed to establish itself finally on the stage; and it has long since past out of men's memories, leaving behind it only a quotation or two and a speech for boys to spout. So in every age the disinterested observer can take note of the rise and fall of some unlucky author or artist, painter or poet, widely and loudly proclaimed as a genius, only to be soon forgotten, often in his own generation. He may have soared aloft for a brief