

The Literature of Democracy.

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The character of a people is written as indelibly on the pages of its literature as is the bounty of nature inscribed on her wonderful scroll of field, forest, and sea.

In a study of writers, the real criterion is the inherent worth, the truth and soundness of the production and the perfection of its form. But this criterion is now seldom applied exclusively, the supreme test being associated in modern criticism with others of varying importance.

A critical school of writers of the close of this century has been endeavoring to trace definitely the connection between the development of society in a country and the history of its literature. In this, as in all lines, the United States is proving herself a fascinating study. However a nation, like an individual must pass through progressive stages of development before a mature or complete character can be attained, and sufficient time has not yet passed

since the birth of this nation to furnish any definite array or style of literature that one may put his finger on and say, "This is American". Indeed, any treatise whatever on American literature until of recent years must have been far more a prophecy than a criticism.

It is the object of this paper to discuss informally a few of the past and present tendencies of the literature of the United States, assuming these states to be the democracy most familiar to American students.

The conditions under which the early colonists existed were not production of an extensive literature of any kind. For more than a century there was a busy, agricultural life. They came here with the practical aim of making homes for themselves, and had to fight for a place even here. The kind of religious zeal they possessed was not conducive to a superfluity of even religious literature, and they were sufficiently connected with the old world, so that a lack of authorlike favor did not nec-

essarily leave them entirely bookless. It was a period of material progress, of industry, and governmental organization.

The few writers of the Seventeenth Century were among the colonists themselves. Capt. John Smith wrote a description of Virginia life; the Mathers and others discoursed on theological themes.

During the Eighteenth Century a group of writers appear, many of whom were American born, who seem to have dropped in a degree, their servile attitude toward England and her sovereigns. The trend of the time, expressed in a homely phrase, "Every tub should stand on its own bottom," is further revealed in the French and Indian War of 1755-'63 which served the colonists as a splendid school in self-reliance.

In the works of Jonathan Edwards of New England region and those of Benjamin Franklin as a voice from the Middle Groups of Colonists, we have examples of their literature.

In summing up the characteristics of the different localities Prof. Tyler

writes, "In general the characteristic note of American literature in the colonial time is for New England, scholarly, logical, speculative, unworldly, rugged, sombre; and as one passes southward, along the coast, this note changes rapidly toward lightness and brightness until it reaches the sensuous mirth, the frank, jovial, worldliness, the satire, the persiflage, the gentlemanly grace, the amenity, the jocular coarseness of literature in Maryland, Virginia and farther south."

Toward the close of this century, political questions took precedence of everything else, and it is a pity we have no record, other than mainly statistical, of the meetings of their congresses. For American statesmen stood in that crisis, without-purs in their depth of thought and the power of their oratory.

We have in our literature two truly American and democratic landmarks as results of this tide of feeling that swept over the country. Even outside our own nation, the time honored documents - one beginning "When in

the course of human events"; the other - "the people of the United States" are looked upon as deep voices teaching the true principles of independence and democracy. While in our own country they are considered a part of the nation, its foundation and support; and give the aspiring young orator a theme of which he never tires (though his audience may). Considering the number who display their patriotic fervor and command of adjectives, by snatching, as it were, the American Eagle from his proverbial perch among the turrets of Liberty, and flourishing him before helpless humanity, it is a wonder to the writer that the American eagle is not baldier than he is.

Patriotism under the can be better and far more practically lived than uttered.

Among the famous writers of that time we find Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, Adams, Jefferson, Paine, and many others familiar to the student of American History, and in their doctrines as expressed are found the firm nucleus about which affairs of state have ever since massed themselves.

Thus the United States becomes indeed a nation.

A nation, but before she can be original,— before she may have any distinct and peculiar nationality, she must have had time to absorb and unify the originalities of the many nations of which she is made up.

Only a few of the recognized general tendencies of our literature can be mentioned here. As a nation we have been criticised for lack of sobriety and sedateness, lack of simplicity, of respect for authority, and of scholarship and profundity.

To a certain extent we must recognize the justness of these charges. Indeed a general, cut-and-dried, orthodox style, without blemish, severe and placid, would have been an unnatural outgrowth here.

To be sure the above criticisms are aptly applied in general, but in consideration of particular cases,— one would think twice before he would make the assertion that Emerson lacked and sedateness, or that the Inquirerport Whittier lacked in simplicity; and any want of scholarship and profundity in the works of Bryant, Longfellow and Lowell have certainly as yet escaped observation.

However, among the Nineteenth Century authors we have but here and there one that is indigenous to American soil.

Irving, Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, and others among prose writers, Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier and Lowell of the poets are renowned as American authors. Yet in this stately array Emerson alone stands out as a distinctly American product.

Many writers are prone to pass through the field of American possibilities with majestic tread. One may deign to pick a daisy in the grass, and as a result, literature is enriched by, perhaps, a beautiful sonnet in which the wayside blossom is made a symbol of some sweet lesson of life; and all this is good — but — is it timely, is it American? They take the early colonist as a picturesque conception, the Indian as a quaint figure about which fanciful legends may be twined instead of the lazy reality which must be fed, clothed and educated.

There are not the fanciful touches in Emerson's works that enhance to many the charm of an author, but his is the strong, sensible simplicity that bespeaks a vast

country as yet untamed; his sentences, concentrated worth like a nugget of yellow gold.

Longfellow himself observes the lack of an adequate American literature in, "Kavanaugh" when Mr Hatheway says, "We want a national literature - altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth like a herd of buffalo thundering over the prairie".

Making due allowance for Mr Hatheway's explosive propensities, one is inclined to agree, in part, with the gentleman.

While surroundings cannot create genius, yet genius is influenced thereby. The government, the physical grandeur, the range of climatic conditions, - the general effect of this country is to broaden and deepen man's nature. Make broad in that he is brought into contact with many peoples and is on an equal footing with all. Make deep, in that the man is the unit of government, and as he is strong, so will his country be.

The duties of citizenship entail upon the American a definite knowledge of the affairs of the nation and of his position regarding them. In short he must know himself;

but self knowledge and the expression of this knowledge are as inseparable as the artist's thought and the resulting beauty of shape and color that remains on his canvas. — try as one may to keep a thought, an experience entirely to himself, "murder will out;" and in consequence of this, all phases of life and experience, all the passions, pleasures and pains of humanity have found their vent in literature.

The earnest author, when, as Fo^o says, "Genius burns," will take the reader into his confidence and have a heart-to-heart talk with him — and that reader's heart must be one of adamant if he comes not out from this communion with his brother, impressed as by some soul experience of his own.

Each phase of literature, each tendency, reflects some phase of human nature as truly as the willows on a river's edge are reflected in the waters beneath.

The literature of this time is impatient of restraint. It utilizes rules and methods but is not their tool — without feeling or passion — but rather mirrors all the drama, the tragedy of human existence. It is the product of

seed that has been sown broadcast and though apparently springing from particular soils, in reality its subtle roots permeate deep through all the fields of common humanity its hopes, its loves, its all.

A discussion of the tendencies of American literature would not approach completeness without a glance at a character, who, by many, is thought to be America's national poet—Walt Whitman. The life of this sturdy, original man has been full of vigor and power. One may well wish to be able to say, as he did on his sixty-fourth birthday, May 31, 1892, "I have the most devoted and ardent of friends and affectionate relatives — and of enemies I really make no account."

Under the inspiration of his mind and pen, the reader is lead to believe that the individual may indeed be imbued with the extent of American possibilities — governmental and physical — may allow his personality to become a part of the broad fields, the precipitous canons, the sweeping prairies, — and expressing himself in literature give in this way a characteristic national trend. He encourages in particular, the

westerner, the Kansan, - this section of the country as yet adequately expressed by but few writers. "As to scenery," he says, "while I know the standard claim is that Yosemite, Niagara Falls and the Upper Yellowstone afford the greatest natural shows, I'm not so sure but the prairies and plains while not so stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest and make North America's characteristic landscape."

Hamlin Garland probably adventures farther into the every day life of the "prairie folk," thrifty and otherwise, enters into closer communion with their hopes and fears, makes his reader feel more as if he could hear the rattling of cotton-wood leaves, was brushing against the tall sun-flower, or wading through sweet clover tangle, than does any other writer who has attempted a picture of Kansas life.

Looking with Whitman through "Democratic Vistas", we see America, the most self-reliant nation on earth, so rich are her resources, so perfect their development.

The most important problems that are undergoing earnest attempts at solution to-day are social and religious. On the correctness of

their ultimate solution depends a colossal success or the most stupendous failure ever known, and through the literature of the country the stages of the solution may be observed.

There have been many backward steps taken — mistakes that stand out in darkest silhouette against the background of our literature. Books on Witchcraft, Solomon Northup's "Twelve Years a Slave", and Uncle Tom's Cabin are of a class whose perusal rouses indignation and sorrow in the mind of the reader of to-day. And one does not doubt that the political intrigue and religious intolerance of more recent times, will affect readers a quarter of a century hence, in a similar manner.

The democratic form of government ~~cannot be~~ carried out in its highest, fullest sense, is essentially that of the equality and brotherhood of humanity. Of forbearance, sympathy and progress. This spirit does not admit of stagnant stand still tendencies and with the newspapers and periodicals as a mouth piece, the nation sends forth clarion notes of the real state of society.

Being American, the strain has a cosmopolitan tone, and mingled with thoughtful, sober German melodies, issuing from hundreds of colleges and universities, has been heard the bough call of China and Japan; the guitar-like notes of indolent Spain that bring pictures of lazily lapping waves, dark eyed women and arched brows. And from the far north comes a wail as of muted violins, — a wail from innocent, exiled souls that are there ground under the relentless heel of oppression.

A responsive note is stirred by each of these in the sympathetic heart of every American, and the current literature expresses this. And this very responsiveness and openness to conviction impresses one as being a marked characteristic of the present literary tendency in this country and tho' the Realistic school is not placed by the writer as the culmination of all that is admirable in literature, — yet the writer of that school exhibits a keenness of perception and a propensity for investigation of evils that is certainly good.

Looking down the Democratic vistas that open before us, we see at this time, the thoughts, the lives, of our great busy people bound together by the common government.

by common perusal of the products of that speaking factor in progress, the printing press; bound by the mechanism of iron and steel that carries the nations products far and near; bound by the fiery force that is wratched from the clouds and hurls the shot in a brief moment from ocean to ocean.

But farther on, we see them bound closer yet by a great and living work or series of works, penned by a master its inspiration drawn from the deep wells of human experience, its characters taken from the familiar walks of life, its theme the pleasure pain and passion of humanity, its object - to bring man into true sympathy with his fellow man and close to his ideal of that which is good - his God.