ARLO BATES

TALKS ON THE STUDY OF LITERATURE.

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I
WHAT LITERATURE IS

As all life proceeds from the egg, so all discussion must proceed from a definition. Indeed, it is generally necessary to follow definition by definition, fixing the meaning of the terms used in the original explanation, and again explaining the words employed in this exposition.

I once heard a learned but somewhat pedantic man begin to answer the question of a child by saying that a lynx is a wild quadruped. He was allowed to get no further, but was at once asked what a quadruped is. He responded that it is a mammal with four feet. This of course provoked the inquiry what a mammal is; and so on from one question to another, until the original subject was entirely lost sight of, and the lynx disappeared in a maze of verbal distinctions as completely as it might have vanished in the tangles of the forest primeval. I feel that I am not wholly safe from danger of repeating the experience

of this well-meaning pedant if I attempt to give a definition of literature. The temptation is strong to content myself with saying: "Of course we all know what literature is." The difficulty which I have had in the endeavor to frame a satisfactory explanation of the term has convinced me, however, that it is necessary to assume that few of us do know, and has impressed upon me the need of trying to make clear what the word means to me. If my statement seem insufficient for general application, it will at least show the sense which I shall give to "literature" in these talks.

In its most extended signification literature of course might be taken to include whatever is written or printed; but our concern is with that portion only which is indicated by the name "polite literature," or by the imported term "belles-lettres," – both antiquated though respectable phrases. In other words, I wish to confine my examination to those written works which can properly be brought within the scope of literature as one of the fine arts.

Undoubtedly we all have a general idea of the limitations which are implied by these various terms, and we are not without a more or less vague notion of what is indicated by the word literature in its most restricted and highest sense. The important point is whether our idea is clear and well realized. We have no difficulty in saying that one book belongs to art and that another does not; but we often find ourselves perplexed when it comes to telling why. We should all agree that "The Scarlet Letter" is literature and that the latest sensational novel is not, – but are

we sure what makes the difference? We know that Shakespeare wrote poetry and Tupper doggerel, but it by no means follows that we can always distinguish doggerel from poetry; and while it is not perhaps of consequence whether we are able to inform others why we respect the work of one or another, it is of much importance that we be in a position to justify our tastes to ourselves. It is not hard to discover whether we enjoy a book, and it is generally possible to tell why we like it; but this is not the whole of the matter. It is necessary that we be able to estimate the justice of our preferences. We must remember that our liking or disliking is not only a test of the book, – but is a test of us as well. There is no more accurate gauge of the moral character of a man than the nature of the books which he really cares for. He who would progress by the aid of literature must have reliable standards by which to judge his literary feelings and opinions; he must be able to say: "My antipathy to such a work is justified by this or by that principle; my pleasure in that other is fine because for these reasons the book itself is noble."

It is hardly possible to arrive at any clear understanding of what is meant by literature as an art, without some conception of what constitutes art in general. Broadly speaking, art exists in consequence of the universal human desire for sympathy. Man is forever endeavoring to break down the wall which separates him from his fellows. Whether we call it egotism or simply humanity, we all know the wish to make others appreciate our feelings; to show them how we suffer, how we enjoy. We batter our fellow-

men with our opinions sufficiently often, but this is as nothing to the insistence with which we pour out to them our feelings. A friend is the most valued of earthly possessions largely because he is willing to receive without appearance of impatience the unending story of our mental sensations. We are all of us more or less conscious of the constant impulse which urges us on to expression; of the inner necessity which moves us to continual endeavors to make others share our thoughts, our experiences, but most of all our emotions. It seems to me that if we trace this instinctive desire back far enough, we reach the beginnings of art.

It may seem that the splendidly immeasurable achievements of poetry and painting, of architecture, of music and sculpture, are far enough from this primal impulse; but I believe that in it is to be found their germ. Art began with the first embodiment of human feelings by permanent means. Let us suppose, by way of illustration, some prehistoric man, thrilled with awe and terror at sight of a mastodon, and scratching upon a bone rude lines in the shape of the animal, – not only to give information, not only to show what the beast was like, but also to convey to his fellows his feelings when confronted with the monster. It is as if he said: "See! I cannot put into words what I felt; but look! the creature was like this. Think how you would feel if you came face to face with it. Then you will know how I felt." Something of this sort may the beginnings of art be conceived to have been.

I do not mean, of course, that the prehistoric man who made such a picture – and such a picture exists – analyzed his motives.

He felt a thing which he could not say in words; he instinctively turned to pictorial representation, – and graphic art was born.

The birth of poetry was probably not entirely dissimilar. Barbaric men, exulting in the wild delight of victory, may seem unlikely sponsors for the infant muse, and yet it is with them that song began. The savage joy of the conquerors, too great for word, found vent at first in excited, bounding leaps and uncouthly ferocious gestures, by repetition growing into rhythm; then broke into inarticulate sounds which timed the movements, until these in turn gave place to words, gradually moulded into rude verse by the measures of the dance. The need of expressing the feelings which swell inwardly, the desire of sharing with others, of putting into tangible form, the emotions that thrill the soul is common to all human beings; and it is from this that arises the thing which we call art.

The essence of art, then, is the expression of emotion; and it follows that any book to be a work of art must embody sincere emotion. Not all works which spring from genuine feeling succeed in embodying or conveying it. The writer must be sufficiently master of technique to be able to make words impart what he would express. The emotion phrased must moreover be general and in some degree typical. Man is interested and concerned in the emotions of men only in so far as these throw light on the nature and possibilities of life. Art must therefore deal with what is typical in the sense that it touches the possibilities of all human nature. If it concerns itself with

much that only the few can or may experience objectively, it has to do with that only which all human beings may be conceived of as sharing subjectively. Literature may be broadly defined as the adequate expression of genuine and typical emotion. The definition may seem clumsy, and hardly exact enough to be allowed in theoretical æsthetics; but it seems to me sufficiently accurate to serve our present purpose. Certainly the essentials of literature are the adequate embodiment of sincere and general feeling.

By sincerity here we mean that which is not conventional, which is not theoretical, not artificial; that which springs from a desire honestly to impart to others exactly the emotion that has been actually felt. By the term "emotion" or "feeling" we mean those inner sensations of pleasure, excitement, pain, or passion, which are distinguished from the merely intellectual processes of the mind, – from thought, perception, and reason. It is not necessary to trespass just now on the domain of the psychologist by an endeavor to establish scientific distinctions. We are all able to appreciate the difference between what we think and what we feel, between those things which touch the intellect and those which affect the emotional nature. We see a sentence written on paper, and are intellectually aware of it; but unless it has for us some especial message, unless it concerns us personally, we are not moved by it. Most impressions which we receive touch our understanding without arousing our feelings. This is all so evident that there is not likely to arise in your minds any confusion in

regard to the meaning of the phrase "genuine emotion."

Whatever be the origin of this emotion it must be essentially impersonal, and it is generally so in form. There are comparatively few works of art which are confessedly the record of simple, direct, personal experience; and perhaps none of these stand in the front rank of literature. Of course I am not speaking of literature which takes a personal form, like any book written in the first person; but of those that are avowedly a record of actual life. We must certainly include in literature works like the "Reflections" of Marcus Aurelius, the "Confessions" of Augustine, and – though the cry is far – Rousseau, and the "Journal Intime" of Amiel, but there is no one of these which is to be ranked high in the scale of the world's greatest books. Even in poetry the same thing is true. However we may admire "In Memoriam" and that much greater poem, Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese," we are little likely to regard them as standing supremely high among the masterpieces. The "Sonnets" of Shakespeare which we suppose to be personal are yet with supreme art made so impersonal that as far as the reader is concerned the experiences which they record might be entirely imaginary. It is in proportion as a poet is able to give this quality which might be called generalization to his work that it becomes art.

The reason of this is not far to seek. If the emotion is professedly personal it appeals less strongly to mankind, and it is moreover likely to interfere with its own effective embodiment.

All emotion in literature must be purely imaginative as far as its expression in words is concerned. Of course poetical form may be so thoroughly mastered as to become almost instinctive, but nevertheless acute personal feeling must trammel utterance. It is not that the author does not live through what he sets forth. It is that the artistic moment is not the moment of experience, but that of imaginative remembrance. The "Sonnets from the Portuguese" afford admirable examples of what I mean. It is well known that these relate a most completely personal and individual story. Not only the sentiments but the circumstances set forth were those of the poet's intimate actual life. It was the passion of love and of self-renunciation in her own heart which broke forth in the fine sonnet: —

> Go from me, yet I feel that I shall stand
> Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
> Alone upon the threshold of the door
> Of individual life shall I command
> The uses of my soul; or lift my hand
> Serenely in the sunshine as before
> Without the sense of that which I forebore, —
> Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
> Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
> With pulses that beat double. What I do
> And what I dream include thee, as the wine
> Must taste of its own grapes: and when I sue
> God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
> And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

There came to Mrs. Browning a poignant moment when she realized with a thrill of anguish what it would mean to her to live out her life alone, separated forever from the lover who had won her back from the very grasp of death. It was not in the pang of that throe that she made of it a sonnet; but afterward, while it was still felt, it is true, but felt rather as a memory vividly reproduced by the imagination. In so far both he who writes impersonally and he who writes personally are dealing with that which at the instant exists in the imagination. In the latter, however, there is still the remembrance of the actuality, the vibration of the joy or sorrow of which that imagining is born. Human self-consciousness intrudes itself whenever one is avowedly writing of self; sometimes even vanity plays an important part. From these and other causes it results that, whatever may be the exceptions, the highest work is that which phrases the general and the impersonal with no direct reference to self. Personal feeling lies behind all art, and no work can be great which does not rest on a basis of experience, more or less remotely; yet the greatest artist is he who embodies emotion, not in terms of his own life, but in those which make it equally the property of all mankind. It is feeling no longer egotistic, but broadly human. If the simile do not seem too homely, we might say that the difference is that between arithmetic and algebra. In the one case it is the working out of a particular problem; in the other of an equation which is universal.

Mankind tests art by universal experience. If an author has really felt what he has written, if what he sets down has been actual to him in imagination, whether actual in experience or not, readers recognize this, and receive his work, so that it lives. If he has affected a feeling, if he has shammed emotion, the whole is sure to ring false, and the world soon tires of his writings. Immediate popular judgment of a book is pretty generally wrong; ultimate general estimate is invariably correct. Humanity knows the truth of human feeling; and while it may be fooled for a time, it comes to the truth at last, in act if not in theory. The general public is guided by the wise few, and it does not reason out the difference between the genuine and the imitation; but it will in the end save the real, while the sham is forgotten through utter neglect.

Even where an author has seemingly persuaded himself that his pretended emotions are real, he cannot permanently deceive the world. You may remember the chapter in Aldrich's delightful "Story of a Bad Boy" which relates how Tom Bailey, being crossed in love at the mature age of fourteen, deliberately became a "blighted being;" how he neglected his hair, avoided his playmates, made a point of having a poor appetite, and went mooning about forsaken graveyards, endeavoring to fix his thoughts upon death and self-destruction; how entirely the whole matter was a humbug, and yet how sincere the boy was in supposing himself to be unutterably melancholy. "It was a great comfort," he says, "to be so perfectly miserable and yet

not to suffer any. I used to look in the glass and gloat over the amount and variety of mournful expression I could throw into my features. If I caught myself smiling at anything, I cut the smile short with a sigh. The oddest thing about all this is, I never once suspected that I was not unhappy. No one … was more deceived than I." We have all of us had experiences of this kind, and I fancy that there are few writers who cannot look back to a stage in their career when they thought that it was a prime essential of authorship to believe themselves to feel things which they did not feel in the least. This sort of self-deception is characteristic of a whole school of writers, of whom Byron was in his day a typical example. There is no doubt that Byron, greatly gifted as he was, took his mooning melancholy with monstrous seriousness when he began to write it, and the public received it with equal gravity. Yet Byron's mysterious misery, his immeasurable wickedness, his misanthropy too great for words, were mere affectations, – stage tricks which appealed to the gallery. Nobody is moved by them now. The fact that the poet himself thought that he believed in them could not save them. Byron had other and nobler qualities which make his best work endure, but it is in spite of his Bad-Boy-ish pose as a "blighted being." The fact is that sooner or later time tries all art by the tests of truth and common sense, and nothing which is not genuine is able to endure this proving.

To be literature a work must express sincere emotion; but how is feeling which is genuine to be distinguished from that which is affected? All that has been said must be regarded as simply

theoretical and of very little practical interest unless there be some criterion by which this question may be settled. Manifestly we cannot so far enter into the consciousness of the writer as to tell whether he does or does not feel what he expresses; it can be only from outward signs that we judge whether his imagination has first made real to him what he undertakes to make real for others.

Something may be judged by the amount of seriousness with which a thing is written. The air of sincerity which is inevitable in the genuine is most difficult to counterfeit. What a man really feels he writes with a certain earnestness which may seem indefinite, but which is sufficiently tangible in its effects upon the reader. More than by any other single influence mankind has in all its history been more affected by the contagion of belief; and it is not easy to exaggerate the susceptibility of humanity to this force. Vague and elusive as this test of the genuineness of emotion might seem, it is in reality capable of much practical application. We have no trouble in deciding that the conventional rhymes which fill the corners of the newspapers are not the product of genuine inner stress. We are too well acquainted with these time-draggled rhymes of "love" and "dove," of "darts" and "hearts," of "woe" and "throe;" we have encountered too often these pretty, petty fancies, these twilight musings and midnight moans, this mild melancholy and maudlin sentimentality. We have only to read these trig little bunches of verse, tied up, as it were, with sad-colored ribbons, to feel their artificiality. On

the other hand, it is impossible to read "Helen of Kirconnel," or Browning's "Prospice," or Wordsworth's poems to Lucy, without being sure that the poet meant that which he said in his song with all the fervor of heart and imagination. A reader need not be very critical to feel that the novels of the "Duchess" and her tribe are made by a process as mechanical as that of making paper flowers; he will not be able to advance far in literary judgment without coming to suspect that fiction like the pleasant pot-boilers of William Black and W. Clark Russell, if hand-made, is yet manufactured according to an arbitrary pattern; but what reader can fail to feel that to Hawthorne "The Scarlet Letter" was utterly true, that to Thackeray Colonel Newcome was a creature warm with human blood and alive with a vigorous humanity? Theoretically we may doubt our power to judge of the sincerity of an author, but we do not find this so impossible practically.

Critics sometimes say of a book that it is or is not "convincing." What they mean is that the author has or has not been able to make what he has written seem true to the imagination of the reader. The man who in daily life attempts to act a part is pretty sure sooner or later to betray himself to the observant eye. His real self will shape the disguise under which he has hidden it; he may hold out the hands and say the words of Esau, but the voice with which he speaks will perforce be the voice of Jacob. It is so in literature, and especially in literature which arouses the perceptions by an appeal to the imagination. The writer must be in earnest himself or he cannot convince the

reader. To the man who invents a fiction, for instance, the story which he has devised must in his imagination be profoundly true or it will not be true to the audience which he addresses. To the novelist who is "convincing," his characters are as real as the men he meets in his walks or sits beside at table. It is for this reason that every novelist with imagination is likely to find that the fictitious personages of his story seem to act independently of the will of the author. They are so real that they must follow out the laws of their character, although that character exists only in imagination. For the author to feel this verity in what he writes is of course not all that is needed to enable him to convince his public; but it is certain that he is helpless without it, and that he cannot make real to others what is not real to himself.

In emotion we express the difference between the genuine and the counterfeit by the words "sentiment" and "sentimentality." Sentiment is what a man really feels; sentimentality is what he persuades himself that he feels. The Bad Boy as a "blighted being" is the type of sentimentalists for all time. There is about the same relation between sentimentality and sentiment that there is between a paper doll and the lovely girl that it represents. There are fashions in emotions as there are fashions in bonnets; and foolish mortals are as prone to follow one as another. It is no more difficult for persons of a certain quality of mind to persuade themselves that they thrill with what they conceive to be the proper emotion than it is for a woman to convince herself of the especial fitness to her face of the latest device in

utterly unbecoming headgear. Our grandmothers felt that proper maidenly sensibility required them to be so deeply moved by tales of broken hearts and unrequited affection that they must escape from the too poignant anguish by fainting into the arms of the nearest man. Their grandchildren to-day are neither more nor less sincere, neither less nor more sensible in following to extremes other emotional modes which it might be invidious to specify. Sentimentality will not cease while the power of self-deception remains to human beings.

With sentimentality genuine literature has no more to do than it has with other human weaknesses and vices, which it may picture but must not share. With sentiment it is concerned in every line. Of sentiment no composition can have too much; of sentimentality it has more than enough if there be but the trace shown in a single affectation of phrase, in one unmeaning syllable or unnecessary accent.

There are other tests of the genuineness of the emotion expressed in literature which are more tangible than those just given; and being more tangible they are more easily applied. I have said that sham sentiment is sure to ring false. This is largely due to the fact that it is inevitably inconsistent. Just as a man has no difficulty in acting out his own character, whereas in any part that is assumed there are sure sooner or later to be lapses and incongruities, so genuine emotion will be consistent because it is real, while that which is feigned will almost surely jar upon itself. The fictitious personage that the novelist actually shapes in his

imagination, that is more real to him than if it stood by his side in solid flesh, must be consistent with itself because it is in the mind of its creator a living entity. It may not to the reader seem winning or even human, but it will be a unit in its conception and its expression, a complete and consistent whole. The poem which comes molten from the furnace of the imagination will be a single thing, not a collection of verses more or less ingeniously dovetailed together. The work which has been felt as a whole, which has been grasped as a whole, which has as a whole been lived by that inner self which is the only true producer of art, will be so consistent, so unified, so closely knit, that the reader cannot conceive of it as being built up of fortuitous parts, or as existing at all except in the beautiful completeness which genius has given it.

What I mean may perhaps be more clear to you if you take any of the little tinkling rhymes which abound, and examine them critically. Even some of more merit easily afford example. Take that pleasant rhyme so popular in the youth of our fathers, "The Old Oaken Bucket," and see how one stanza or another might be lost without being missed, how one thought or another has obviously been put in for the rhyme or to fill out the verse, and how the author seems throughout always to have been obliged to consider what he might say next, putting his work together as a joiner matches boards for a table-top. Contrast this with the absolute unity of Wordsworth's "Daffodils," Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection," or any

really great lyric. You will perceive the difference better than any one can say it. It is true that the quality of which we are speaking is sufficiently subtile to make examples unsatisfactory and perhaps even dangerous; but it seems to me that it is not too much to say that any careful and intelligent reader will find little difficulty in feeling the unity of the masterpieces of literature.

This lack of consistency is most easily appreciated, perhaps, in the drawing of character. Those modern writers who look upon literature as having two functions, first, to advance extravagant theories, and second, – and more important, – to advertise the author, are constantly putting forward personages that are so inconsistent that it is impossible not to see that they are mere embodied arguments or sensationalism incarnate, and not in the least creatures of a strong and wholesome imagination. When in "The Doll's House" Ibsen makes Nora Helma an inconsequent, frivolous, childish puppet, destitute alike of moral and of common sense, and then in the twinkling of an eye transforms her into an indignant woman, full of moral purpose, furnished not only with a complete set of advanced views but with an entire battery of modern arguments with which to support them, – when, in a word, the author, for the sake of his theory, works a visible miracle, we cease to believe in his imaginative sincerity. We know that he is dogmatizing, not creating; that this is artifice, not art.

Another test of the genuineness of what is expressed in literature is its truth to life. Here again we tread upon ground

somewhat uncertain, since truth is as elusive as a sunbeam, and to no two human beings the same. Yet while the meaning of life is not the same to any two who walk under the heavens, there are certain broad principles which all men recognize. The eternal facts of life and of death, of love and of hate, the instinct of self-preservation, the fear of pain, the respect for courage, and the enthrallment of passion, – these are laws of humanity so universal that we assume them to be known to all mankind. We cannot believe that any mortal can find that true to his imagination which ignores these unvarying conditions of human existence. He who writes what is untrue to humanity cannot persuade us that he writes what is true to himself. We are sure that those impossible heroes of Ouida, with their superhuman accomplishments, those heroines of beauty transcendently incompatible with their corrupt hearts, base lives, and entire defiance of all sanitary laws, were no more real to their author than they are to us. Conviction springs from the imagination, and imagination is above all else the realizing faculty. It is idle to say that a writer imagines every extravagant and impossible whimsy which comes into his head. He imagines those things, and those things only, which are real to his inner being; so that in judging literature the question to be settled is: Does this thing which the author tells, this emotion which he expresses, impress us as having been to him when he wrote actual, true, and absolutely real? To unimaginative persons it might seem that I am uttering nonsense. It is not possible for a

man without imagination to see how things which are invented by the mind should by that same mind, in all sanity, be received as real. Yet that is precisely what happens. No one, I believe, produces real or permanent literature who is not capable of performing this miracle; who does not feel to be true that which has no other being, no other place, no other significance save that which it derives from the creative power of his own inner sense, working upon the material furnished by his perception of the world around him. This is the daily miracle of genius; but it is a miracle shared to some extent by every mortal who has the faintest glimmer of genuine imagination.

To be convincing literature must express emotion which is genuine; to commend itself to the best sense of mankind, and thus to take its place in the front rank, it must deal with emotion which is wholesome and normal. A work phrasing morbid emotion may be art, and it may be lasting; but it is not the highest art, and it does not approve itself to the best and sanest taste. Mankind looks to literature for the expression of genuine, strong, healthy human emotion; emotion passionate, tragic, painful, the exhilaration of joy or the frenzy of grief, as it may be; but always the emotion which under the given conditions would be felt by the healthy heart and soul, by the virile man and the womanly woman. No amount of insane power flashing here and there amid the foulness of Tolstoi's "Kreutzer Sonata," can reconcile the world to the fact that the book embodies the broodings of a mind morbid and diseased. Even to concede that the author of such a

work had genius could not avail to conceal the fact that his muse was smitten from head to feet with the unspeakable corruption of leprosy. Morbid literature may produce a profound sensation, but it is incapable of creating a permanent impression.

The principles of which we are speaking are strikingly illustrated in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. He was possessed of an imagination narrow, but keen; uncertain and wayward, but alert and swift; individual and original, though unhappily lacking any ethical stability. In his best work he is sincere and convincing, so that stories like "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Gold Bug," or "The Purloined Letter," are permanently effective, each in its way and degree. Poe's masterpiece, "The Fall of the House of Usher," is a study of morbid character, but it is saved by the fact that this is viewed in its effect upon a healthy nature. The reader looks at everything through the mind of the imaginary narrator, so that the ultimate effect is that of an exhibition of the feelings of a wholesome nature brought into contact with madness; although even so the ordinary reader is still repelled by the abnormal elements of the theme. There is in all the work of Poe a good deal that is fantastic and not a little that is affected. He is rarely entirely sincere and sane. He shared with Byron an instinctive fondness for the rôle of a "blighted being," and a halo of inebriety too often encircles his head; yet at his best he moves us by the mysterious and incommunicable power of genius. Many of his tales, on the other hand, are mere mechanical tasks, and as such neither convincing nor permanent. There is a

great deal of Poe which is not worth anybody's reading because he did not believe it, did not imagine it as real, when he wrote it. Other stories of his illustrate the futility of self-deception on the part of the author. "Lygeia" Poe always announced as his masterpiece. He apparently persuaded himself that he felt its turgid sentimentality, that he thrilled at its elaborately theatrical setting, and he flattered himself that he could cheat the world as he had cheated himself. Yet the reader is not fooled. Every man of judgment realizes that, however the author was able to deceive himself, "Lygeia" is rubbish, and sophomoric rubbish at that.

There has probably never before been a time which afforded so abundant illustrations of morbid work as to-day. We shall have occasion later to speak of Verlaine, Zola, Ibsen, and the rest, with their prurient prose and putrescent poetry; and here it is enough to note that the diseased and the morbid are by definition excluded from literature in the best sense of the word. Good art is not only sincere; it is human, and wholesome, and sound.

II
LITERARY EXPRESSION

So much, then, for what literature must express; it is well now to examine for a little the manner of expression. To feel genuine emotion is not all that is required of a writer. Among artists cannot be reckoned

> One born with poet's heart in sad eclipse
> Because unmatched with poet's tongue;
> Whose song impassioned struggles to his lips,
> Yet dies, alas! unsung.

He must be able to sing the song; to make the reader share the throbbing of his heart. All men feel; the artist is he who can by the use of conventions impart his feelings to the world. The musician uses conventions of sound, the painter conventions of color, the sculptor conventions of form, and the writer must employ the means most artificial of all, the conventions of language.

Here might be considered, if there were space, the whole subject of artistic technique; but it is sufficient for our purposes to notice that the test of technical excellence is the completeness with which the means are adapted to the end sought. The crucial question in regard to artistic workmanship is: "Does it faithfully and fully convey the emotion which is the essence

of the work?" A work of art must make itself felt as well as intellectually understood; it must reach the heart as well as the brain. If a picture, a statue, a piece of music, or a poem provokes your admiration without touching your sensibilities, there is something radically wrong with the work – or with you.

First of all, then, expression must be adequate. If it is slovenly, incomplete, unskillful, it fails to impart the emotion which is its purpose. We have all sat down seething with excitement and endeavored to get our feelings upon paper, only to discover that our command of ourselves and of technical means was not sufficient to allow us to phrase adequately that which yet we felt most sincerely. It is true that style is in a sense a subordinate matter, but it is none the less an essential one. It is manifestly of little consequence to the world what one has to say if one cannot say it. We cannot be thrilled by the song which the dumb would sing had he but voice.

Yet it is necessary to remember that although expression must be adequate, it must also be subordinate. It is a means and not an end, and the least suspicion of its having been put first destroys our sense of the reality of the feeling it embodies. If an actress in moments of impassioned declamation is detected arranging her draperies, her art no longer carries conviction. Nobody feeling the heart-swelling words of Queen Katharine, for instance, could while speaking them be openly concerned about the effective disposition of her petticoats. The reader of too intricate and elaborate verse, such as the French forms of triolet,

rondeau, rondel, and so on, has an instinctive perception that a poet whose attention was taken up with the involved and artfully difficult versification could not have been experiencing any deep passion, no matter how strongly the verse protests that he has. Expression obviously artful instantly arouses suspicion that it has been wrought for its own sake only.

Technical excellence which displays the cleverness of the artist rather than imparts the emotion which is its object, defeats its own end. A book so elaborated that we feel that the author was absorbed in perfection of expression rather than in what he had to express leaves us cold and unmoved, if it does not tire us. The messenger has usurped the attention which belonged to the message. It is not impossible that I shall offend some of you when I say that Walter Pater's "Marius the Epicurean" seems to me a typical example of this sort of book. The author has expended his energies in exquisite excesses of language; he has refined his style until it has become artfully inanimate. It is like one of the beautiful glass flowers in the Harvard Museum. It is not a living rose. It is no longer a message spoken to the heart of mankind; it is a brilliant exercise in technique.

Literature, then, is genuine emotion, adequately expressed. To be genuine it must come from the imagination; and adequate expression is that which in turn reaches the imagination. If it were not that the phrase seems forbiddingly cumbersome, we might, indeed, define literature as being such writings as are able to arouse emotion by an appeal to the imagination.

A sensational story, what the English call a "penny dreadful" or a "shilling shocker" according to the cost of the bundle of cheap excitement, may be an appeal to the emotions, but it aims to act upon the senses or the nerves. Its endeavor is to work by the grossest and most palpable means. It is an assault, so to say, upon the perceptions. Books of this sort have nothing to do with imagination, either in reader or writer. They would be ruled out by all the tests which we have given, since they are not sincere, not convincing, not consistent, not true to life.

One step higher in the scale come romances of abounding fancy, of which "She" may serve as an example. They are clever feats of intellectual jugglery, and it is to the intellectual perceptions that they appeal. Not, it is true, to the intellect in its loftiest moods, but the understanding as distinguished from the feeling. No reader is really moved by them. The ingenuity of the author amuses and absorbs the attention. The dexterity and unexpectedness of the tale excite and entertain. The pleasure experienced in reading these books is not far removed from that experienced in seeing a clever contortionist. To read them is like going to the circus, – a pleasant diversion, and one not without a certain importance to this over-wrought generation. It is amusement, although not of a high grade.

Do not suppose, however, that I am saying that a story cannot have an exciting plot and yet be literature. In the restricted sense in which these lectures take the term, I should say that "The Adventures of Captain Horn," an agreeable book which has been

widely read of late, is not literature; and yet "Treasure Island," upon which perhaps to some extent the former was modeled, most certainly is literature. The difference is that while Stockton in "Captain Horn" has worked with clever ingenuity to entertain, Stevenson in "Treasure Island" so vividly imagined what he wrote that he has made his characters human, informed every page with genuine feeling, and produced a romance permanently vital. The plot of those superb masterpieces of adventure, the "D'Artagnan Romances," is as wild, perhaps as extravagant, as that of the marrow-curdling tales which make the fortunes of sensational papers; but to the excitement of adventure is added that unification, that humanization, that perfection of imaginative realism which mark Dumas as a genius.

The difference of effect between books which are not literature and those which are is that while these amuse, entertain, glance over the surface of the mind, those touch the deepest springs of being. They touch us æsthetically, it is true. The emotion aroused is impersonal, and thus removed from the keen thrill which is born of actual experiences; but it depends upon the same passions, the same characteristics, the same humanity, that underlie the joys and sorrows of real life. It is because we are capable of passion and of disappointment that we are moved by the love and anguish of Romeo and Juliet, of Francesca and Paolo. Our emotion is not identical with that with which the heart throbs in personal love and grief; yet art which is genuine awakes emotion thoroughly genuine. Books

of sensationalism and sentimentality may excite curiosity, or wonder, or amusement, or sham feeling; but they must have at least some spark of sacred fire before they can arouse in the intelligent reader this inner throb of real feeling.

The personal equation must be considered here. The same book must affect different readers differently. From the sentimental maid who weeps in the kitchen over "The Seventy Sorrows of Madelaine the Broken-hearted," to her master in his library, touched by the grief of King Lear, is indeed a far cry; and yet both may be deeply moved. It may be asked whether we have arrived at a standard which will enable us to judge between them.

The matter is perhaps to be cleared up somewhat by a little common sense. It is not hard to decide whether the kitchen-maid in question has an imagination sufficiently well developed to bring her within the legitimate grounds of inquiry; and the fiction which delights her rudimentary understanding is easily ruled out. It is not so easy, however, to dispose of this point entirely. There is always a border-land concerning which doubts and disagreements must continue to exist. In all matters connected with the feelings it is necessary to recognize the fact that the practical is not likely to accord fully with the theoretical. We define literature only to be brought face to face with the difficulty which is universal in art, the difficulty of degree. No book will answer, it may be, to a theoretical definition, no work conform completely to required conditions. The composition which is a masterpiece stands at one end of the list, and comes so near to

the ideal that there is no doubt of its place. At the other end there is the rubbish, equally unquestioned in its worthlessness. The troublesome thing is to decide where between comes the dividing line above which is literature. We call a ring or a coin gold, knowing that it contains a mixture of alloy. The goldsmith may have a standard, and refuse the name gold to any mixture into which enters a given per cent of baser metal; but in art this is impossible. Here each reader must decide for himself. Whether works which lie near the line are to be considered literature is a question to be decided individually. Each reader is justified in making his own decision, provided only that he found it upon definite principles. It is largely a question what is one's own responsiveness to literature. There are those to whom Tolstoi's "War and Peace" is a work of greatness, while others fail to find it anything but a chaotic and unorganized note-book of a genius not self-responsible. "John Inglesant" appeals to many persons of excellent taste as a novel of permanent beauty, while to some it seems sentimental and artificial. Mr. Lowell and others have regarded Sylvester Judd's "Margaret" as one of the classics of American fiction; yet it has never appealed to the general public, and an eminent literary man told me not long ago that he finds it dull. To these and to all other varying opinions there is but one thing to be said: Any man has a right to his judgment if it is founded upon the logical application of definite principles. Any opinion which is sincere and based upon standards must be treated with respect, whether it is agreed with or not.

It is difficult, on the other hand, to feel that there is any moral excuse for prejudices which are the result of individual whims rather than of deliberate judgment. An opinion should not be some burr caught up by the garments unawares; but a fruit carefully selected as the best on the tree. The fact is that the effort of forming an intelligent judgment is more severe than most persons care to undertake unless absolutely forced to it. It sometimes seems as if the whole tendency of modern life were in the direction of cultivating mental dexterity until the need of also learning mental concentration is in danger of being overlooked. Men are trained to meet intellectual emergencies, but not to endure continued intellectual strain. The difficulty which is to be conquered by a sudden effort they are able to overcome, but when deliberation and continuous mental achievement are required, the weakness of their training is manifest. The men, and perhaps still more the women, of to-day are ready to decide upon the merits of a book in the twinkling of an eye; and it is to be acknowledged that these snap judgments are reasonable far more often than could have been expected. When it comes, however, to having a reason for the faith that is in them, it is lamentable how many intelligent persons prove utterly incapable of fairly and logically examining literature; and it must be conceded that there should be some other test by which to decide whether a book is to be included under the gracious name of literature than the dogmatic assertion: "Well, I don't care what anybody says against it; I like it!"

We have discussed the distinctions by which it may be decided what is to be considered literature; and, did space warrant, we might go on to examine the principles which determine the rank of work. They are of course largely to be inferred from what has been said already. The merit of literature will be chiefly dependent upon the closeness with which it conforms to the rules which mark the nature of literature. The more fully genuine its emotion, the more adequate its expression, the higher the scale in which a book is to be placed. The more sane and healthful, the more entirely in accord with the needs and springs of general human life, the greater the work. Indeed, beyond this there is little to say save that the nobility of intention, the ethical significance of the emotion embodied, mark the worth and the rank of a composition.

I have tried to define literature, and yet in the end my strongest feeling is that of the inadequacy of my definition. He would be but a lukewarm lover who was capable of framing a description which would appear to him to embody fully the perfections of his mistress; and art is a mistress so beautiful, so high, so noble, that no phrases can fitly characterize her, no service can be wholly worthy of her. Life is full of disappointment, and pain, and bitterness, and that sense of futility in which all these evils are summed up; and yet even were there no other alleviation, he who knows and truly loves literature finds here a sufficient reason to be glad that he lives. Science may show man how to live; art makes living worth his while. Existence to-day without literature

would be a failure and a despair; and if we cannot satisfactorily define our art, we at least are aware how it enriches and ennobles the life of every human being who comes within the sphere of its wide and gracious influence.

III
THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

When it is clearly understood what literature is, there may still remain a good deal of vagueness in regard to the study of it. It is by no means sufficient for intellectual development that one have a misty general share in the conventional respect traditionally felt for such study. There should be a clear and accurate comprehension why the study of literature is worth the serious attention of earnest men and women.

It might at first thought seem that of this question no discussion is needed. It is generally assumed that the entire matter is sufficiently obvious, and that this is all that there is to it. The obvious, however, is often the last to be perceived; and such is the delusiveness of human nature that to call a thing too plain to need demonstration is often but a method of concealing inability to prove. Men are apt to fail to perceive what lies nearest to them, while to cover their blindness and ignorance they are ready to accept without reasoning almost any assumption which comes well recommended. The demand for patent medicines, widespread as it is, is insignificant in comparison to the demand for ready-made opinions. Most men accept the general belief, and do not trouble themselves to make it really theirs by examining the grounds upon which it is based. We all agree that it is well to

study literature, it is probable; but it is to be feared that those of us who can say exactly why it is well do not form a majority.

The word "study," it may be remarked in passing, is not an entirely happy one in this connection. It has, it is true, many delightful associations, especially for those who have really learned how to study; but it has, too, a certain doleful suggestiveness which calls up painful memories of childhood. It is apt to bring to mind bitter hours when some example in long division stood like an impassable wall between us and all happiness; when complex fractions deprived life of all joy, or the future was hopelessly blurred by being seen through a mist of tears and irregular French verbs. The word "study" is therefore likely to seem to indicate a mechanical process, full of weariness and vexation of spirit. This is actually true of no study which is worthy of the name; and least of all is it true in connection with art. The word as applied to literature is not far from meaning intelligent enjoyment; it signifies not only apprehension but comprehension; it denotes not so much accumulation as assimilation; it is not so much acquirement as appreciation.

By the study of literature can be meant nothing pedantic, nothing formal, nothing artificial. I should like to call the subject of these talks "Experiencing Literature," if the verb could be received in the same sense as in the old-fashioned phrase "experiencing religion." That is what I mean. The study of literature is neither less nor more than experiencing literature, –

the taking it to heart and the getting to its heart.

To most persons to study literature means nothing more than to read. There is, it is true, a vague general notion that it is the reading of some particular class of books, not always over clearly defined. It is not popularly supposed that the reading of an ordinary newspaper is part of the study of literature; while on the other hand there are few persons who can imagine that the perusal of Shakespeare, however casual, can be anything else. Since literary art is in the form of written works, reading is of course essential; but by study we mean something more grave and more fruitful than the mere surface acquaintance with books, no matter how high in the scale of excellence these may be.

The study of literature, in the true signification of the phrase, is that act by which the learner gets into the attitude of mind which enables him to enter into that creative thought which is the soul of every real book. It is easily possible, as every reader knows, to read without getting below the surface; to take a certain amount of intellectual account of that which we skim; to occupy with it the attention, and yet not to be at all in the mood which is indispensable for proper comprehension. It is this which makes it possible for the young girl of the present day to read novels which her more sophisticated brothers cannot look at without blushing to see them in her hands – at least, we hope that it is this! We all have moments when from mental weariness, indifference, indolence, or abstraction, we slide over the pages as a skater goes over the ice, never for a moment having so much as a glimpse of

what is hidden beneath the surface. This is not the thing about which we are talking. We mean by study the making our own all that is contained in the books which we read; and not only all that is said, but still more all that is suggested; all that is to be learned, but above everything all that is to be felt.

The object of the study of literature is always a means and not an end, and yet in the development of the mind no means can fulfill its purpose which is not an enjoyment. Goethe has said: "Woe to that culture which points man always to an end, instead of making him happy by the way." No study is of any high value which is not a delight in itself; and equally, no study is of value which is pursued simply for itself. Every teacher knows how futile is work in which the pupil is not interested, – in other words, which is not a pleasure to him. The mind finds delight in all genuine activity and acquirement; and the student must take pleasure in his work or he is learning little. Some formal or superficial knowledge he may of course accumulate. The learning of the multiplication table is not to be set aside as useless because it is seldom accompanied by thrills of passionate enjoyment. There must be some drudgery in education; but at least what I have said certainly holds good in all that relates to the deeper and higher development of the mind.

The study of literature, then, is both a duty and a delight; a pleasure in itself and a help toward what is better. By it one approaches the comprehension of those books which are to be ranked as works of art. By it one endeavors to fit himself to

enter into communication with the great minds and the great imaginations of mankind. What we gain in this may be broadly classified as pleasure, social culture, and a knowledge of life. Any one of these terms might almost be made to include the other two, but the division here is convenient in discussion.

Pleasure in its more obvious meaning is the most superficial, although the most evident, gain from art. In its simplest form this is mere amusement and recreation. We read, we say, "to pass the time." There are in life hours which need to be beguiled; times when we are unequal to the fatigue or the worry of original thought, or when some present reality is too painful to be faced. In these seasons we desire to be delivered from self, and the self-forgetfulness and the entertainment that we find in books are of unspeakable relief and value. This is of course a truism; but it was never before so insistently true as it is to-day. Life has become so busy, it is in a key so high, so nervously exhaustive, that the need of amusement, of recreation which shall be a relief from the severe nervous and mental strain, has become most pressing. The advance of science and civilization has involved mankind in a turmoil of multitudinous and absorbing interests from the pressure of which there seems to us no escape except in self-oblivion; and the most obvious use of reading is to minister to this end.

At the risk of being tedious it is necessary to remark in passing that herein lies a danger not to be passed over lightly. There is steadily increasing the tendency to treat literature as if it had no

other function than to amuse. There is too much reading which is like opium-eating or dram-drinking. It is one thing to amuse one's self to live, and quite another to live to amuse one's self. It is universally conceded, I believe, that the intellect is higher than the body; and I cannot see why it does not follow that intellectual debauchery is more vicious than physical. Certainly it is difficult to see why the man who neglects his intellect while caring scrupulously for his body is on a higher moral plane than the man who, though he neglect or drug his body, does cultivate his mind.

In an entirely legitimate fashion, however, books may be read simply for amusement; and greatly is he to be pitied who is not able to lose himself in the enchantments of books. A physical cripple is hardly so sorrowful an object. Everybody knows the remark attributed to Talleyrand, who is said to have answered a man who boasted that he had never learned whist: "What a miserable old age you are preparing for yourself." A hundredfold is it true that he who does not early cultivate the habit of reading is neglecting to prepare a resource for the days when he shall be past active life. While one is in the strength of youth or manhood it is possible to fill the mind with interests of activity. As long as one is engaged in affairs directly the need of the solace of books is less evident and less pressing. It is difficult to think without profound pity of the aged man or woman shut off from all important participation in the work or the pleasure of the world, if the vicarious enjoyment of human interests through

literature be also lacking. It is amazing how little this fact is realized or insisted upon. There is no lack of advice to the young to provide for the material comfort of their age, but it is to be doubted whether the counsel to prepare for their intellectual comfort is not the more important. Reading is the garden of joy to youth, but for age it is a house of refuge.

The second object which one may have in reading is that of social cultivation. It is hardly necessary to remark how large a part books play in modern conversation, or how much one may add to one's conversational resources by judicious reading. It is true that not a little of the modern talk about books is of a quality to make the genuine lover of literature mingle a smile with a sigh. It is the result not of reading literature, so much as of reading about literature. It is said that Boston culture is simply diluted extract of "Littell's Living Age;" and in the same spirit it might be asserted that much modern talk about books is the extract of newspaper condensations of prefaces. The tale is told of the thrifty paupers of a Scotch alms-house that the aristocrats among them who had friends to give them tea would steep and re-steep the precious herb, then dry the leaves, and sell them to the next grade of inmates. These in turn, after use, dried the much-boiled leaves once again, and sold them to the aged men to be ground up into a sort of false snuff with which the poor creatures managed to cheat into feeble semblance of joy their withered nostrils. I have in my time heard not a little so-called literary conversation which seemed to me to have gone to the last of these processes,

and to be a very poor quality of thrice-steeped tea-leaf snuff! Indeed, it must be admitted that in general society book talk is often confined to chatter about books which had better not have been read, and to the retailing of second-hand opinions at that. The majority of mankind are as fond of getting their ideas as they do their household wares, at a bargain counter. It is perhaps better to do this than to go without ideas, but it is to be borne in mind that on the bargain counter one is sure to find only cheap or damaged wares.

Real talk about books, however, the expression of genuine opinions about real literature, is one of the most delightful of social pleasures. It is at once an enjoyment and a stimulus. From it one gets mental poise, clearness and readiness of ideas, and mental breadth. It is so important an element in human intercourse that it is difficult to conceive of an ideal friendship into which it does not enter. There have been happy marriages between men and women lacking in cultivation, but no marriage relation can be so harmonious that it may not be enriched by a community of literary tastes. A wise old gentleman whom I once knew had what he called an infallible receipt for happy marriages: "Mutual love, a sense of humor, and a liking for the same books." Certainly with these a good deal else might be overlooked. Personally I have much sympathy with the man who is said to have claimed a divorce on the ground that his wife did not like Shakespeare and would read Ouida. It is a serious trial to find the person with whom one must live intimately incapable

of intellectual talk.

He who goes into general society at all is expected to be able to keep up at least the appearance of talking about literature with some degree of intelligence. This is an age in which the opportunities for what may be called cosmopolitan knowledge are so general that it has come to be the tacit claim of any society worth the name that such knowledge shall be possessed by all. I do not, of course, mean simply that acquaintance with foreign affairs which is to be obtained from the newspapers, even all wisdom as set forth in their vexingly voluminous Sunday editions. I mean that it is necessary to have with the thought of other countries, with their customs, and their habits of thought, that familiarity which is by most to be gained only by general reading. The multiplication of books and the modern habit of travel have made an acquaintance with the temper of different peoples a social necessity almost absolute.

To a great extent is it also true that modern society expects a knowledge of social conditions and æsthetic affairs in the past. This is not so much history, formally speaking, as it is the result of a certain familiarity with the ways, the habits of thought, the manners of bygone folk. Professor Barrett Wendell has an admirable phrase: "It is only in books that one can travel in time." What in the present state of society is expected from the accomplished man or woman is that he or she shall have traveled in time. He shall have gone back into the past in the same sense as far as temper of mind is concerned that one goes to Europe; shall

have observed from the point of view not of the dry historian only, but from that of the student of humanity in the broadest sense. It is the humanness of dwellers in distant lands or in other times which most interests us; and it is with this that he who would shine in social converse must become familiar.

The position in which a man finds himself who in the company of educated men displays ignorance of what is important in the past is illustrated by a story told of Carlyle. At a dinner of the Royal Academy in London, Thackeray and Carlyle were guests, and at the table the talk among the artists around them turned upon Titian. "One fact about Titian," a painter said, "is his glorious coloring." "And his glorious drawing is another fact about Titian," put in a second. Then one added one thing in praise and another another, until Carlyle interrupted them, to say with egotistic emphasis and deliberation: "And here sit I, a man made in the image of God, who knows nothing about Titian, and who cares nothing about Titian; – and that's another fact about Titian." But Thackeray, who was sipping his claret and listening, paused and bowed gravely to his fellow-guest. "Pardon me," he said, "that is not a fact about Titian. It is a fact – and a very lamentable fact – about Thomas Carlyle." Attempts to carry off ignorance under the guise of indifference or superiority are common, but in the end nobody worth deceiving is misled by them.

It is somewhat trite to compare the companionship of good books to that of intellectual persons, and yet the constant

repetition of a truth does not make it false. To know mankind and to know one's self are the great shaping forces which mould character. It has too often been said to need to be insisted upon at any great length that literature may largely represent experience; but it may fitly be added that in reading one is able to choose the experiences to which he will be exposed. In life we are often surrounded by what is base and ignoble, but this need not happen to us in the library unless by our deliberate choice. Emerson aptly says: —

> Go with mean people and you think life is mean. Then read Plutarch, and the world is a proud place, peopled with men of positive quality, with heroes and demigods standing around us, who will not let us sleep.

It so often happens that we are compelled in daily life to encounter and to deal with mean people that our whole existence would be in great danger of becoming hopelessly sordid and mean were it not for the blessed company of great minds with whom we may hold closest communion through what they have written.

One more point in regard to the social influence of reading should be mentioned. Social ease and aplomb can of course be gained in no way save by actual experience; but apart from this there is nothing else so effective as familiarity with the best books. Sympathetic comprehension of literature is the experience of life taken vicariously. It is living through the consciousness of others, and those, moreover, who are the

cleverest and most far-reaching minds of all time. The mere man of books brought into contact with the real world is confused and helpless; but when once the natural shyness and bewilderment have worn off, he is able to recall and to use the knowledge which he has acquired in the study, and rapidly adapts himself to any sphere that he may find himself in. I do not mean that a man may read himself into social grace and ease; but surely any given man is at a very tangible advantage in society for having learned from books what society is.

IV
WHY WE STUDY LITERATURE

In all that is said in the last chapter we have dealt only with the outward and accidental, barely touching upon the really significant and deeper meanings of our subject. The third object which I named, the gaining a knowledge of life, transcends all others.

The desire to fathom the meaning of life is the most constant and universal of human longings. It is practically impossible to conceive of consciousness separated from the wish to understand self and the significance of existence. This atom selfhood, sphered about by the infinite spaces of the universe, yearns to comprehend what and where it is. It sends its thought to the farthest star that watches the night, and thence speeds it down the unsounded void, to search unweariedly for the answer of the baffling, insistent riddle of life. Whatever man does or dreams, hopes or fears, loves or hates, suffers or enjoys, has behind it the eternal doubt, the question which man asks of the universe with passionate persistence, – the meaning of life.

Most of all does man seek aid in solving this absorbing mystery. Nothing else interests the human like the human. The slatternly women leaning out of tenement-house windows and gossiping across squalid courts talk of their neighbors. The wisest

philosopher studies the acts and the thoughts of men. In the long range between these extremes there is every grade of intelligence and cultivation; and in each it is the doings, the thoughts, most of all the feelings, of mankind which elicit the keenest interest. The motto of the Latin playwright is in reality the motto of the race: "Nothing human is indifferent to me."

We are all intensely eager to know what are the possibilities of humanity. We seek knowledge of them as an heir questions searchingly concerning the extent of the inheritance which has fallen to him. Literature is the inventory of the heritage of humanity. Life is but a succession of emotions; and the earnest mind burns with desire to learn what emotions are within its possibilities. The discoverer of an unsuspected capability of receiving delight, the realization of an unknown sensation, even of pain, increases by so much the extent of the possessions of the human being to whom he imparts it. As explorers in a new country tell one another of the springs upon which they have chanced, of the fertile meadows one has found, of the sterile rocks or the luscious jungle, so men tell one another of their fresh findings in emotion. The knowledge of life – this is the passionate quest of the whole race of men.

All that most deeply concerns man, all that reaches most penetratingly to the roots of being, is recorded, so far as humanity has been able to give to it expression, in art. Of all art, literature is perhaps the most universally intelligible; or, if not that, it is at least the most positively intelligible. Our interest in life

shows itself in a burning curiosity to know what goes on in the minds of our friends; to discover what others make out of existence, what they find in its possibilities, its limitations, its sorrows, and its delights. In varying degrees, according to individual temperament, we pass life in an endeavor to discover and to share the feelings of other human beings. We explain our feelings, our motives; we wonder whether they look to others as they do to us; we speculate whether others have found a way to get from life more than we get; and above all are we consciously or unconsciously eager to learn whether any other has contrived means of finding in life more vivid sensations, more vibrant emotions, more far-reaching feelings than those which we experience. It is in this insatiable curiosity that our deepest interest in literature lies.

Books explain us to ourselves. They reveal to us capabilities in our nature before unsuspected. They make intelligible the meaning and significance of mental experiences. There are books the constant rereading of which presents itself to an imaginative man as a sort of moral duty, so great is the illumination which they throw upon the inner being. I could name works which I personally cannot leave long neglected without a feeling of conscious guilt. It is of books of this nature that Emerson says that they

> Take rank in our life with parents and lovers and passionate experiences, so medicinal, so stringent, so revolutionary, so authoritative, – books which are the work

and the proof of faculties so comprehensive, so nearly equal to the world which they paint, that though one shuts them with meaner ones, he feels the exclusion from them to accuse his way of living. —*Books.*

There are probably none of us who have lived in vital relations to literature who cannot remember some book which has been an epoch in our lives. The times and the places when and where we read them stand out in memory as those of great mental crises. We recall the unforgettable night in which we sat until the cold gray dawn looked in at the window reading Lessing's "Nathan the Wise," the sunny slope where we experienced Madame de Gasparin's "Near and Heavenly Horizons," the winter twilight in the library when that most strenuous trumpet blast of all modern ethical poetry, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," first rang in the ears of the inner self. We all have these memories. There are books which must to us always be alive. They have spoken to us; we have heard their very voices; we know them in our heart of hearts.

That desire for sympathy which is universal is another strong incentive to acquaintance with literature. The savage who is less miserable in fear or in suffering if he find a fellow whose living presence saves him from the awful sense of being alone is unconsciously moved by this desire. The more fully the race is developed the more is this craving for human companionship and human appreciation conscious. We know how impossible it is ever completely to blend our consciousness for the smallest

instant with that of any other human being. The nearest approach to this is the sharing with another some common feeling. There are blissful moments when some other is absorbed in the same emotion as that which we feel; when we seem to be one with the heart and the mind of another creature because the same strong passion sways us both. These are the mountain-tops of existence. These are the times which stand out in our remembrance as those in which life has touched in seeming the divine impossible.

It is of the greatest rarity, however, that we find, even in our closest friends, that comprehension and delicate sympathy for which we long. Indeed, such is human egotism that it is all but impossible for any one so far to abandon his own personality as to enter fully into the more delicate and intangible feelings of his fellow. A friend is another self, according to the proverb, but it is apt to be himself and not yourself. To find sympathy which comes from a knowledge that our inmost emotions are shared we turn to books. Especially is this true in bereavement and in sorrow. The touch of a human hand, the wistful look in the eye of the friend who longs to help, or the mere presence of some beautiful and responsive spirit, is the best solace where comfort is impossible; but even the tenderest human presence may jar, while in books there is a consolation and a tenderness unhampered by the baffling sense of a consciousness still outside of our own no matter how strenuously it longs to be in perfect unity. I knew once a mother who had lost her only child, and who used to sit for hours pressing to her heart Plutarch's divinely

tender letter to his wife on the death of his own little one. It was almost as if she felt her baby again in her arms, and the leather covers of the book were stained with tears consecrated and saving. Who could count the number to whom "In Memoriam" has carried comfort when living friends had no message? The critical defects of that poem are not far to seek; but it would ill become us to forget how many grief-laden hearts it has reached and touched. The book which lessens the pain of humanity is in so far higher than criticism.

Josiah Quincy used in his old age to relate how his mother, left a young widow by the death of her husband within sight of the shores of America when on his return from a mission to England, found comfort in the soothing ministration of books: —

> She cultivated the memory of my father, even in my earliest childhood, by reading me passages from the poets, and obliging me to learn by heart and repeat such as were best adapted to her own circumstances and feelings. Among others the whole leave-taking of Hector and Andromache, in the sixth book of Pope's Homer, was one of her favorite lessons… Her imagination, probably, found consolation in the repetition of lines which brought to mind and seemed to typify her own great bereavement.

> And think'st thou not how wretched we shall be, —
> A widow I, a helpless orphan he?

> These lines, and the whole tenor of Andromache's

address and circumstances, she identified with her own sufferings, which seemed relieved by the tears my repetition of them drew from her.

This comforting power of literature is one which need not perhaps have been enlarged upon so fully, but it is one which has to do with the most intimate and poignant relations of life.

It is largely in virtue of the sympathy which it is possible to feel for books that from them we not only receive a knowledge of the capacities of human emotion, but we are given actual emotional experience as well. For literature has a twofold office. It not only shows the possibilities of life, but it may make these possibilities realities. If art simply showed us what might be without aiding us further, it would be but a banquet of Tantalus. We must have the substance as well as the shadow. We are born not only with a craving to know what emotions are the birthright of man, but with an instinctive desire to enter into that inheritance. We wish to be all that it is possible for men to be. The small boy who burns to be a pirate or a policeman when he grows up, is moved by the idea that to men of these somewhat analogous callings come a richness of adventure and a fullness of sensation which are not to be found in ordinary lives. The lad does not reason this out, of course; but the instinctive desire for emotion speaks in him. We are born with the craving to know to the full the emotions of the race. It is to few of us in modern civilized life that circumstances permit a widely extended experience in actual mental sensations. The commonplace actualities of every-day life

show plain and dull beside the almost infinite possibilities of existence. The realization of the contrast makes not a few mortals unhappy and dissatisfied; but those who are wiser accept life as it is, and turn to art for the gratification of the instinctive craving which is unsatisfied by outward reality.

It may be that fate has condemned us to the most humdrum of existences. We trade or we teach or are lawyers or housekeepers, doctors or nurses, or the curse of the gods has fallen upon us and we are condemned to the dreariness of a life of pleasure-seeking. We cannot of ourselves know the delights of the free outlaw's life under "the greene shaw," – the chase of the deer, the twang of the bowstring, the song of the minstrel, the relish of venison pasty and humming nut-brown ale, are not for us in the flesh. If we go into the library, however, take down that volume with the cover of worn brown leather, and give up the imagination to the guidance of the author, all these things become possible to the inner sense. We become aware of the reek of the woodland fire, the smell of the venison roasting on spits of ash-wood, the chatter of deep manly voices, the cheery sound of the bugle-horn afar, the misty green light of the forest, the soft sinking feel of the moss upon which in imagination we have flung ourselves down, while Will Scarlet teases Friar Tuck yonder, and Allan-a-Dale touches light wandering chords on his harp. – Ah, where are the four walls of the library, where is the dull round of cares and trifles which involve us day by day? We are in merry Sherwood with bold Robin Hood, and we know what there was felt and

lived.

We cannot in outward experience know how a great and generous heart must feel, broken by ingratitude and unfaith, deceived and tortured through its noblest qualities, outraged in its highest love. The poet says to us: "Come with me; and through the power of the imagination, talisman more potent than the ring of Solomon, we will enter the heart of Othello, and with him suffer this agony. We will endure the torture, since behind it is the exquisite delight of appeasing that insatiable thirst for a share in human emotions. Or would you taste the passion of young and ardent hearts, their woe at parting, and their resolved devotion which death itself cannot abate? We will be one with Romeo and one with Juliet." Thus, if we will, we may go with him through the entire range of mortal joys and sorrows. We live with a fullness of living beside which, it may be, our ordinary existence is flat and pale. We find the real life, the life of the imagination; and we recognize that this is after all more vital than our concern over the price of stocks, our petty bother about the invitation to the Hightops' ball on the twenty-fourth, or the silly pang of brief jealousy which we experienced when we heard that Jack Scribbler's sonnet was to appear in the next number of the magazine which had just returned our own poem "with thanks." The littlenesses of the daily round slip out of sight before the nobility of the life possible in the imagination.

It is not necessary to multiply examples of the pleasures possible through the imagination. Every reader knows how

varied and how enchanting they are. To enter into them is in so far to fulfill the possibilities of life. The knowledge which is obtained through books is not the same, it is true, as that which comes from actual doing and enduring. Perhaps if the imagination were sufficiently developed there would be little difference. There have been men who have been hardly able to distinguish between what they experienced in outward life and what belonged solely to the inner existence. Coleridge and Wordsworth and Keats made no great or sharply defined distinction between the things which were true in fact and those that were true in imagination. To Blake the events of life were those which he knew through imagination, while what happened in ordinary, every-day existence he regarded as the accidental and the non-essential.

It will probably be thought, however, that those who live most abundantly are not likely to feel the need of testing existence and tasting emotions through the medium of letters. The pirate, when decks are red and smoke of powder is in the air, is not likely to retire to his cabin for a session of quiet and delightful reading; the lover may peruse sentimental ballads or make them, but on the whole everything else is subordinate to the romance he is living. It is when his lady-love keeps him at a distance that he has time for verse; not when she graciously allows him near. It is told of Darwin that his absorption in science destroyed not only his love of Shakespeare but even his power of enjoying music. The actual interests of life were so vivid that the artistic sense was numbed.

The imagination exhausted itself in exploring the unknown world of scientific knowledge. It is to be noted that boys who go deeply into college sports, especially if they are on the "teams," are likely to become so absorbed in the sporting excitement that literature appears to them flat and tame. The general rule is that he who lives in stimulating and absorbing realities is thereby likely to be inclined to care less for literature.

It is to be remembered, however, that individual experience is apt to be narrow, and that it may be positively trivial and still engross the mind. That one is completely given up to affairs does not necessarily prove these affairs to be noble. It is generally agreed, too, that the mind is more elastic which is reached and developed by literature; and that even the scientist is likely to do better work for having ennobled his perceptions by contact with the thoughts of master spirits. Before Darwin was able to advance so far in science as to have no room left for art, he had trained his faculties by the best literature. At least it is time enough to give up books when life has become so full of action as to leave no room for them. This happens to few, and even those of whom it is true cannot afford to do without literature as an agent in the development and shaping of character.

The good which we gain from the experiences of life we call insight. No man or woman ever loved without thereby gaining insight into what life really is. No man has stood smoke-stained and blood-spattered in the midst of battle, caught away out of self in an ecstasy of daring, without thereby learning

hitherto undreamed-of possibilities in existence. Indeed this is true of the smallest incident. Character is the result of experience upon temperament, as ripple-marks are the result of the coming together of sand and wave. In life, however, we are generally more slow to learn the lessons from events than from books. The author of genius has the art so to arrange and present his truths as to impress them upon the reader. The impressions of events remain with us, but it is not easy for ordinary mortals so to realize their meaning and so to phrase it that it shall remain permanent and clear in the mind. The mental vision is clouded, moreover, by the personal element. We are seldom able to be perfectly frank with ourselves. Self is ever the apologist for self. Knowledge without self-honesty is as a torch without flame; yet of all the moral graces self-honesty is perhaps the most difficult to acquire. In its acquirement is literature of the highest value. A man can become acquainted with his spiritual face as with his bodily countenance only by its reflection. Literature is the mirror in which the soul learns to recognize its own lineaments.

Above all these personal reasons which make literature worthy of the serious attention of earnest men and women is the great fact that upon the proper development and the proper understanding of it depend largely the advancement and the wise ordering of civilization. Stevenson spoke words of wisdom when he said: —

> One thing you can never make Philistine natures understand; one thing, which yet lies on the surface, remains

as unseizable to their wits as a high flight of metaphysics, – namely, that the business of life is mainly carried on by the difficult art of literature, and according to a man's proficiency in that art shall be the freedom and fullness of his intercourse with other men.

In a fine passage in a little-known pamphlet, James Hannay touches upon the relation of literature to life and to the practical issues of society: —

> A notion is abroad that that only is "practical" which can be measured or eaten. Show us its net result in marketable form, the people say, and we will recognize it! But what if there be something prior to all such "net results," something higher than it? For example, the writing of an old Hebrew Prophet was by no manner of means "practical" in his own times! The supply of figs to the Judean markets, the price of oil in the synagogue-lamps, did not fluctuate with the breath of those inspired songs! But in due time the prophet dies, stoned, perhaps, … and in the course of ages, his words do have a "practical" result by acting on the minds of nations… In England what has not happened from the fact that the Bible was translated? We have seen the Puritans – we know what we owe to them – what the world owes to them! A dozen or two of earnest men two centuries ago were stirred to the depths of their souls by the visions of earnest men many centuries before that; do you not see that the circumstance has its practical influence in the cotton-markets of America at this hour? – Quoted in Espinasse's *Literary Recollections*.

It is impossible to separate the influences of literature from the growth of society and of civilization. It is because of the reaching of the imagination into the unknown vast which incloses man that life is what it is. The order that is given to butcher or baker or candlestick-maker is modified by the fact that Homer and Dante and Shakespeare sang; that the prophets and the poets and the men of imagination of whatever time and race have made thought and feeling what they are. "The world of imagination," Blake wrote, "is the world of eternity." Whatever of permanent interest and value man has achieved he has reached through this divine faculty, and it is only when man learns to know and to enter the world of imagination that he comes into actual contact with the vital and the fundamental in human life. Easily abused, like all the best gifts of the gods, art remains the noblest and the most enduring power at work in civilization; and literature is its most direct embodiment. To it we go when we would leave behind the sordid, the mean, and the belittling. When we would enter into our birthright, when we remember that instead of being mere creatures of the dust we are the heirs of the ages, then it is through books that we find and possess the treasures of the race.

V
FALSE METHODS

The most common intellectual difficulty is not that of the lack of ideas, but that of vagueness of ideas. Most persons of moderately good education have plenty of thoughts such as they are, but there is a nebulous quality about these which renders them of little use in reasoning. This makes it necessary to define what is meant by the Study of Literature, as in the first place it was necessary to define literature itself. Many have a formless impression that it is something done with books, a sort of mysterious rite known only to the initiated, and probably a good deal like the mysteries of secret societies, – more of a theory than an actuality. Others, who are more confident of their powers of accurate thinking, have decided that the phrase is merely a high-sounding name for any reading which is not agreeable, but which is recommended by text-books. Some take it to be getting over all the books possible, good, bad, and indifferent; while still others suppose it to be reading about books or their authors. There are plenty of ideas as to what the study of literature is, but the very diversity of opinion proves that at least a great many of these must be erroneous.

In the first place the study of literature is not the mere reading of books. Going on a sort of Cook's tour through literature,

checking off on lists what one has read, may be amusing to simple souls, but beyond that it means little and effects little. As the question to be asked in regard to a tourist is how intelligently and how observantly he has traveled, so the first consideration in regard to a reader is how he reads.

The rage for swiftness which is so characteristic of this restless time has been extended to fashions of reading. By some sort of a vicious perversion, the old saw that he who runs may read seems to have been transposed to "He who reads must run." In other words there is too often an assumption that the intellectual distinction of an individual is to be estimated by the rapidity with which he is able to hurry through the volumes he handles. Intellectual assimilation takes time. The mind is not to be enriched as a coal barge is loaded. Whatever is precious in a cargo is taken carefully on board and carefully placed. Whatever is delicate and fine must be received delicately, and its place in the mind thoughtfully assigned.

One effect of the modern habit of swift and careless reading is seen in the impatience with which anything is regarded which is not to be taken in at a glance. The modern reader is apt to insist that a book shall be like a theatre-poster. He must be able to take it all in with a look as he goes past it on a wheel, and if he cannot he declares that it is obscure. W. M. Hunt said, with bitter wisdom: "As print grows cheap, thinkers grow scarce." The enormous increase of books has bred a race of readers who seem to feel that the object of reading is not to read but to have read;

not to enjoy and assimilate, but to have turned over the greatest possible number of authors. This idea of the study of literature is as if one selected as the highest social ideal the afternoon tea, where the visitor is presented to numberless strangers and has an opportunity of conversing rationally with nobody.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.