


AN INTELLECTUAL ENTENTE

By EDMUND GOSSE

HE editor of THE FORUM has asked me to give his readers my impression of the literary relations which have existed with remarkable vacillations and oscillations between America and England during the last half century. This is a very delicate theme, and I do not know that I should have the temerity to touch it, were it not for two considerations. The first is that I am by birth half English and half American, a product of the conjunction of Middlesex with Massachusetts; the second is that I have been a witness, and an attentive and interested witness, of these international relations through the past fifty years. At all events, it is not in a spirit of antagonism or prejudice that I approach a theme which it is difficult to touch, and elements which, when we have said the final word, remain imponderable. There can be no question that the intellectual co-operation of the two great countries, which alike speak the language of Shakespear, is at the present moment imperfect. There is on both sides a lack of sympathy which arises in the main from a lack of curiosity. Perhaps a little friendly conversation may do something towards breaking down a barrier which should not, at any rate, be allowed to become any broader or higher.

The only existing parallels with the conditions I am attempting to describe are those between France and Belgium, and those between Spain and Spanish America; of these, the latter are closest. The earliest work of literary importance composed in either America was the famous epic of Ercilla, the "Arancana," published fifty years before the earliest English colony was planted in Virginia, and from

that time onward poetry and prose in the Spanish language, but increasingly independent of Spanish influence, have not ceased to be cultivated in the countries of South America, especially since those states became independent and republican. The relation between Belgium and France, on the other hand, is a completely new growth, which is not more than forty years old. It had an artificial and political basis, and sprang into revolutionary prominence in consequence of events with which the Franco-German war of 1870 had a good deal to do. Dissimilar as these two cases are, they both may be used to throw a light on the literary relations of America with England, which, though more recent than those of Chile and Argentina with Spain, are far more ancient than those of Belgium with France. In all these cases, however, and we may add that of Brazil with Portugal, we have countries which employ the same language using it in the production of literature which is becoming more and more radically individual and independent.

A feature which was common to all their experiments in their early days was an inability to throw off the sense of discipleship. This is very obvious in the writings of the first colonists, who all wrote as closely as they could in the manner of the popular authors they had left behind them in England. The prose-writers, in particular, had no wider intention than to emulate and even imitate the theologians and novelists of the mother-country, and it is impossible to call what they published, "American" literature, in a distinguishing sense. Yet it cannot escape a careful reader to-day that the heavy Puritan prose-men of the seventeenth century were important exactly where they deemed themselves provincial; that is to say, in their occasional and almost unwilling expression of their own local thoughts and needs. Cotton Mather in New England is a dreary dwarf when he walks by the side of the Tillotsons and Isaac Barrows of his own age in old England, but we prick up our ears when he shrieks in hysterics about witches and "magical whim-

sies." He takes us, heavily and faintly, it is true, into a new atmosphere and an unfamiliar world. He begins to be, not an English exile, but a genuine American. In this matter, the new Belgian literature, which has sprung into maturity with the speed of a plant in a hot-house, offers under our very eyes a startling example. The Belgians began by adopting the Parisian attitude, in their imitation; but very soon they withdrew to Brussels or Antwerp, and while still employing, with careful purity, the French language, they expressed in it sentiments, aspirations, the ornaments of landscape and of art, which were exclusively Flemish and tintured by the Belgic soil.

This, it seems to me, marks the course which intellectual relations between two countries using the same language are bound to pursue. In the beginning, the literature of the younger member must always be imitative, and is in fact the result of a mere geographical accident. A Spanish soldier, with an overwhelming instinct for writing in verse, finds himself stranded by a Chilean camp-fire, and composes a poem on scraps of deer-skin. This epic has a touch of genius and survives, and becomes the basis of a South American literature. But in itself it is not South American, although it was written in America and expatiates on an American theme, the revolt of the Arancanians. It is as Spanish as if it had been written in Madrid. So it is with primitive literature of New England, and the historian has to listen for the earliest sound of a genuinely native voice, and this he hardly catches before the middle of the eighteenth century. It was in Jonathan Edwards, perhaps, rather even than in Benjamin Franklin, that the echo began to reverberate, and England, which had hitherto exclusively spoken, began to listen.

But if we now descend fifty years, we find ourselves in a very different atmosphere. When Sir Walter Scott received his copy of "Knickerbocker's History of New York," and was so enchanted by it that he insisted on reading it aloud, a new departure had been made. No longer was

America endeavoring to write up to a London level, but in the person of Washington Irving it was sending an ambassador eastward with plenary power to give England something native to America. Ten years later the same hand presented "Rip Van Winkle" to an equally delighted audience, and Irving continued to be the first author accepted in England on the score of his purely American contribution. I happen to be old enough to remember the announcement of the death of Washington Irving, which my father made to me with the explanation that this was the man who had written "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which I had then already read. I mention this because it seems to emphasize the extraordinary speed with which the literature of America has towered and branched in every direction in the course of a single human life. Meanwhile, the battle had not been gained in a day, and the record of Fennimore Cooper's misfortunes seems, at first sight, a lamentable example of retrogression of relations between the intellectual classes in the two countries, strained by painful outbursts of prejudice and misconception on both sides. And in 1823, Sydney Smith roused his large audience with the question: "Who reads an American book?"

The answer came a little later with the formation of the great New England school of writers in prose and verse, who not merely asserted the American point of view in terms of consummate purity and elegance, but made that point of view one which it was incumbent on every European reader of intelligence to adopt. And now I will venture to say that I feel the disrepute into which the New England school has fallen during the last twenty years to be a regrettable incident in the history of Anglo-American relations. After some initial struggle, English readers had become completely responsive to the appeal of Hawthorne, of Emerson and of Holmes. The purely literary class had never accepted quite so implicitly the claims of Longfellow and Whitter, but these had been names extremely welcomed by

the English public. There were minor figures, in particular Thoreau, who, although perhaps more exclusively American, were welcomed in England more eagerly than even in America. These New England writers, at all events, as a school, were acknowledged as admirably and independently representing a section of intrinsically American thought and observation. They formed a bridge across which English sympathy moved with comfort to the experience and imagination of another great country, and returned both edified and refreshed.

But all this seems to be altered. If I may judge by what reaches me in conversation with young Americans and by what I read in the press, the prestige of the New England school has declined with great rapidity. If London still reads Hawthorne and Lowell, I understand that New York and Boston does so no longer, but that these authors are now treated as faint classics, put away on the shelf, and in danger of existing for the future only in text books for schools. I make no complaint of this, which is simply one feature of the most common of all phenomena of literary religion, the desire to gain freshness of impression by change of worship. The altars of the old gods are neglected and profaned in the service of divinities who promise response more in unison with new desires and aspirations. This happens everywhere, and is a sign of vitality, however unwelcome to the earlier generation which finds itself dispossessed. But, without going for a moment into the rights and wrongs of this particular manifestation, I mention it as a cause of suspension of sympathy. English readers, who after some delay, had come to accept the great New England writers as representative of American thought, are disconcerted to find that a new generation does not accept Lowell and Holmes as leaders of anything, and are bewildered at the discovery. Meanwhile they do not follow the trend of a literature obviously opposed in all its features to what has hitherto presented itself as acceptable.

Let me take another feature of the subject. The inter-

relation of the American and English reading publics became particularly intimate during my childhood by the introduction of certain works of fiction which probably did more than anything else to cement a union of feeling between readers of the two countries. Perhaps my younger readers may smile when I mention Miss Warner's "Wide World" and Miss Cummins' "Lamplighter," and still more, Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." I recall what an event in our Devonshire village was the arrival of a copy of "Queechy." Probably there was scarcely a household in those counties of Great Britain to which one or more of these stories did not penetrate. It would doubtless be difficult to read any of them now, even the thrilling tale of Uncle Tom would carry scarcely a vestige of the old excitement; and indeed, if my memory does not betray me, they were not remarkable as works of art. But they brought with them an extraordinary sense of a great western civilization, with its dangers and its promises, its drawbacks and its advantages, which fascinated English readers and immensely enlarged their sympathetic experience. Charles Kingsley might be satirical about "The Narrow, Narrow World" and "The Hills of the Chatter-Much," but millions of English men and English women were very grateful to Miss Warner, who was, I presume, no very shining genius, for her sentimental pictures of a life of which English people had hitherto formed no conception.

In the cases I have mentioned, we took from America, what America had already marked with the stamp of popular approval. But meanwhile Europe, and particularly England, had taken into warm favor a poet very coldly received at home, namely, Edgar Allen Poe. Six years after the death of Poe, the phenomenon was repeated in the welcome given to Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," a book indignantly scouted at first by every American authority. This is not the place to go into the roughest consideration of the rightness or wrongness of the attitude of New York to Whitman, and of Boston to Poe, but the fact re-

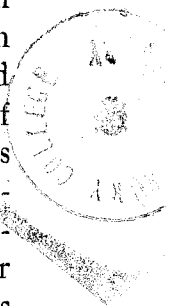
mains that each of these writers found an enthusiastic public on the eastern, before the western shores of the Atlantic. This also, I think, tended to encourage literary relations, because English vanity was gratified at the notion that it was finding treasure in America of the value of which America itself was not yet conscious, while America, perplexed at the admiration of Poe and Whitman, was stimulated to discover the cause of such divergent tastes. Curiosity was awakened, and there is nothing which is more essential to a wholesome mutual relation than curiosity.

If I am right in a conclusion which, I admit, savors of paradox, it is want of familiarity which has stimulated literary inter-relations in the past. This element of mystery, so to style it, has fostered the wish to know in the breasts of readers who were conscious of a lack of knowledge. This brings us back to the point from which we started, namely, that in the abnormal conditions brought about by the pursuit of literature in two great nations using the same language, it is essential that each should give to the other something absent from the life of the recipient. Where the products from both sides are identical, it is very unlikely that there can be much inclination to barter. Those who grow apples are not anxious to import apples, but they will exchange what they grow for what their climate declines to produce. This species of intellectual free trade flourished between England and America between thirty and forty years ago, and has steadily declined ever since, not, I believe, because of any decline in mutual sympathy, but because of the very familiarity which sympathy has produced.

In one of the extremely vivacious letters of William James, he says, referring to the question of international relations in intellectual matters, "A man coquetting with too many countries, is as bad as a bigamist, and loses his soul altogether." This is also a point of view not to be overlooked, and it is quite possible that in the eighties of the last century when the admiration for and study of the alternate literature had reached its highest point, a certain retro-

gression was not merely inevitable, but wholesome. In either case, a more definite adhesion to the native soil was asked for, and led, of course, to the snapping of many tender root-lets. An effort on both sides had been the removal of the "strangeness," the unfamiliar and unaccountable aspect of things, reducing what seemed mysterious to ordinary and therefore unstimulating proportions. Familiarity brought in its wake indifference. I remember meeting at the house of Jean Ingelow, about 1871, an American poet who was dressed in light corduroy breeches and top-boots, articles which it long afterwards transpired had been bought in Paris. It was not then, and is not now, usual to dine in Kensington travestied as a cowboy, yet the hostess and her guests were not offended but pleasurably agitated by this apparition. "Straight from the Prairies, you know!", Miss Ingelow, gently flushed, whispered to her other guests, who were gratified to know, or to think they knew, how American poets of the most genuine order looked when they dined at home.

This was an excessive case, and experience very soon taught the most credulous Londoners that they had been duped by a merry adventurer. They presently learned through personal experience, and by reading the novels of W. D. Howells and Henry James, that in such matters as dress and deportment there was no difference between London and New York, or that, if there was a difference, America was a little more meticulous of the two. It took a longer time for them to realize that even the broad compositions of Walt Whitman were deceptive, and that it was not out "on the Alleghanian hills and by the tireless Mississippi" that actual brainwork was done, but in offices and libraries, exactly as in the ancient lands of Europe. The western tales of Bret Harte, which enjoyed an excessive popularity in England fifty years ago, helped to prolong the spurious romance which attached to American literature, and this was emphasized by the army of humorous writers who now invaded the London book-shops and were eagerly welcomed.



The extravagancies of Artemus Ward and Josh Billings, which have become very faint and dim in the receding years, were enjoyed not merely for the genuineness of their whimsical form, but because they were accepted as revealing the "strangeness" of American life. When it was discovered that they were an irresponsible burlesque on a level of exactitude with the more preposterous parts of "Martin Chuzzlewit," their attractions for English readers declined.

Hitherto I have spoken exclusively of the relations of the author in one country to his readers in the other. But the element of personal approach comes in, and cannot be overlooked. The hospitality of America to all her classes of visitors is notorious, and it has been extended with remarkable warmth to English writers. There are few of the latter who do not count their visit or visits to the American shore as among the brightest of their memories. It would be invidious to ask whether the reverse is the case, and whether American authors look back upon their experiences in London with pleasure, but I hope they do so. These international visits were more frequent, I think, in the eighties than they have been since or had been before, and they should leave a very happy trace on the memories and correspondence which are now beginning to transpire. I do not think, however, that as a rule that trace is allowed to be deep enough. In the recent biographies and collections of letters from and to such men as Lowell, O. W. Holmes and Aldrich, the durable friendships enjoyed by them in Europe are neglected. The obvious reason, no doubt, is that the records of their home associations were so numerous that they pushed the exotic ones out of the frame of the picture. But the result is, so far as international relationship goes, that the foreign friends are ignored, and the isolation of one country from the other is greatly exaggerated. The one exception is the recently published correspondence of Henry James in which the balance between American and English association is evenly preserved.

It is when reading the official records of the life of

James Russell Lowell that I have been particularly struck by the exclusion of reference to foreign relationship. It was my good fortune to see that admirable diplomat often during the last years of his embassy to the court of St. James, and to witness the warmth and continuity of his friendship with English writers. His taste in literature was conservative, and he did not go out of his way to seek out or to patronize what was new. He did not, especially in a country other than his own, conceive it to be his duty to do that. But his appreciation developed with experience as the planets of the imagination swung more fully into his ken. For instance, he was not ready to welcome the early work of Meredith or of Swinburne, who was his junior, but before he left us he did full justice, and with courteous personal attention, to both the one and the other. He arrived amongst us, however, prepared to do full justice to those of a slightly earlier generation with whom his sympathy was already developed. His friendship with Robert Browning was almost fraternal, and it was a pleasant sight to see these two, noble types of the alert and vigorous intellectual order, in eager conversation over the dinner table, or marching along Piccadilly, arm in arm. With Tennyson, who was more difficult to approach, Lowell was perhaps never so intimate, but he knew him well, visited him on such familiarity as a young man of genius should show to a senior of acknowledged primacy, and yet is hardly mentioned in the official biographies of Tennyson. This fault of omission, which I regret, is repeated by editors on both sides of the Atlantic.

The years of Lowell's embassy to London were, if my memory does not betray me, those in which the literary relations of the two countries were most close and most intelligent. This personal genius was peculiarly adopted to the encouragement of such relations. He was an admirable public speaker, as is universally known, but a feature of his oratory is less widely recognized. It happened that I was present at the first public dinner which Lowell graced after

his arrival in London in 1880. I recollect very clearly that I heard him with disappointment. He seemed to me somewhat harsh, somewhat aggressive; he had not captured the tone of his surroundings. But his tact was extraordinary, and in a surprisingly short space of time, he secured exactly the form which appealed agreeably to a refined London audience. He did this without dropping anything of his essential Americanism, but he presented his national characteristics in a mood which made them winning and attractive. He spoke, in public, but still more freely in private, about the books of his own country, and about the men, in almost every instance his private friends, who wrote them. His temper united to an unusual degree the aristocratic with the democratic tendency, and while he accepted with gusto and intelligence, the element of society around him in London, he never for a moment forgot that he represented a democracy with other ideals and other traditions. But his taste was perceived to be so good, that when he commended a young American author, his London associates needed no other introduction. One instance will suffice. The novels of W. D. Howells, so perfect in their purity and freshness, but excessively un-English in their mode of presentment, began to be imported here after 1880. They owed much of their popularity to the generous appreciation which Lowell did not cease to extend to them in conversation.

Sympathy and curiosity being the main springs of international relations in literature, it is not difficult to see why those relations are not in a very flourishing condition today. The great war, which was expected to draw the allied states closer together than they had ever been before, has been prolonged so wearily that it has had precisely the opposite result. The nations are tired, morally and intellectually exhausted, and they seem for the moment at least, capable of no elastic reaction. Moreover the energy of the younger generation having been drawn away into physical and material channels, shows no sign of being anxious to return on its path. No pipes lead to the old emptied cistern. To

keep to our immediate theme, there does not appear to have arisen in any country of the world, a talent of at all a commanding importance in any field of literature, during these eight eventful years. There is, consequently, no such object for curiosity or sympathy as existed, for instance, when Ibsen or Tolstoy or even Maeterlinck made his appearance in the old years of piping peace.

These seem to be the facts, and it is useless to ignore them. But, for the very reason that amicable relations do not any longer thrust themselves into the forefront of our experience, it seems the duty of everyone who possesses the smallest influence to endeavor to fan the sinking flame. Much can be done by individuals, on both sides of the Atlantic, to encourage the sympathetic spirit. A practical difficulty is that of discrimination. How are we in England or you in America to discover what phenomena in the alternative country deserves attention and study? The task is rendered more baffling because the commercial success of a book is very far indeed from being commensurate with its literary value. The novel, for instance, in all countries, tends more and more to be an article of trade, the circulation of which is no criterion whatever of its real worth. The English novels which sell the best are, melancholy to confess, those which least deserve to be read; and I have no reason to suppose that the merit of the American "best seller" is more conspicuous. For this there is no remedy but a cultivation of the critical spirit, and a determination to detect what is healthiest and most characteristic in the literary production of both countries. But shall we ever return to the halcyon days of the 'eighties?



AROUND THE EDITORIAL TABLE



THE criticisms of Mr. Lansing's book reveal at least that Mr. Wilson's mastery over the minds that went along with his, continues, even when he is out of office. This would indicate that the mastery was sincere. It also explains partly why Mr. Wilson was so indifferent to public opinion, for when he could find men so slavishly adoring it was little wonder that he came to think of men with opinions of their own as veritable Jack Catesbys.

There are many angles from which Mr. Lansing's book may be criticised, and sharply, but those who have rushed forward to defend Mr. Wilson have not been satisfied with genuine points of vantage, but have attempted to work into Mr. Lansing's character qualities calculated to arouse contempt.

Mr. Lansing was not a strong Secretary of State and is not a strong character. In general he seems to be rather a dull person. Bainbridge Colby is quoted as saying that Lansing's book is an attack on Wilson for having appointed him Secretary of State. From such an angle as this Mr. Lansing could have been more than adequately handled, and it was our hope that Mr. Colby might have undertaken the task. But alack, even the single man of brains associated with the Wilson administration, seems to have become possessed suddenly of the qualities of the violet.

Leading most raucously the forces of offense and defense is none other than Raymond B. Fosdick, secretary of the League we did not join. Mr. Fosdick's criticism would be insignificant, either from a literary or political point of view, if in his brash desire to please The Master Mind, he had not gone to the extent of assailing the integrity of Mr. Lansing. Now, as we have said, Mr. Lansing seems neither a strong