

The Survey Course in College

IN a recent number of the *Athenaeum*, Mr. J. Middleton Murry considers the late Professor Barrett Wendell's book, *The Traditions of European Literature from Homer to Dante*, chiefly for "the rather sinister light it throws upon the methods of a great American University." As Mr. Murry points out with some satisfaction, "the book could hardly have been written by an Englishman because there is no public in England to which it might be expected to appeal. It is designed for American students of English literature who have no classical education. There are, of course, plenty of English students of English who have no knowledge of the classics, and their number is steadily increasing; but Professor Wendell's book will hardly satisfy them. They will want to know less and more than he has to tell them; a lesser extent and a greater depth of knowledge." In other words, Mr. Murry sees in this book another evidence of the American superstition of numbers. The college course based upon it contained perhaps a greater number of names of authors and works and literary phenomena than were ever brought together under one head before—a sort of Big Tent of literature, with special studies of selected curiosities depending from it like side shows. And Mr. Murry adds rather ungenerously the opinion that Professor Wendell had a great many students on his roll for *The Traditions of European Literature*.

The general course in literature in the American college is a product of the elective system. The unanswerable argument for the introduction of that system was the necessity of opportunity for specialization. But as the demands of specialization became more exacting, its requirements reached farther and farther back into the field of general education and more and more of that area was restricted to its uses. To replace courses preempted by the specialist student, and to give that student a chance to secure a summary view of fields other than his own, the general survey course was invented, not only in literature, but in history and in social and national science. These courses were intended as a corrective to the over-emphasis of specialization, the concentration upon the unimportant, the absorption in detail. But the evil is that the general student, exercising his right of private judgment along the path of least resistance, tends more and more to restrict himself to such surveys. Laboratory science he rejects as belonging to a course of specialization which he has renounced. The classics and mathematics he scorns as having no *raison d'être* in a realistic view of the world. With the classics has gone the preliminary

training for modern languages which the general student usually finds too exacting and burdensome, and from the obligations of which college and high school are now rapidly relieving him. The general student is thus, by right of private judgment, confined to his own language and literature, and such superficial studies in history and the social and natural sciences as he can accomplish with that instrument alone. His view is therefore narrow; his penetration is slight; he becomes, in short, a specialist in the obvious.

Undoubtedly there is something to be said for the general course in literature as in other subjects. As a preliminary survey it may be used as a basis of selection for subsequent specialization: it gives a certain facility in the use of a handbook, some bibliographical information and knowledge of where and how to find out things. Undoubtedly it is the most rapid way of spreading culture thinly and superficially, but evenly, over the selected surface. But this process is merely ancillary to education. Educational itself, literally speaking, it is not. It contains no element of training in investigation, reasoning and drawing conclusions. The way in which the study of literature can be made a matter of training is to send the student to the sources, the original material, and hold him responsible for his conclusions. In the teaching of chemistry and geology such a method would as a matter of course be followed. No matter how often an experiment has been tried, and its results quantitatively assessed, no matter how often a region has been mapped, the essential experience for the student is to act in the spirit of the discoverer. But in the study of literature the general student is invited to a bibliography of criticisms, and a summary already made, and is too often discouraged if he dissents from the accepted view and attempts a verification by methods of his own. The actual reading of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Swift, Burke, Wordsworth will give the student at least a certain training in concentration; but this is hard, slow, dry work. It is so much easier, and superficially more rewarding, instead of reading one play of Shakespeare to read about all the plays, including a conjectural life of the author, an appreciation of his dramatic art, and some views of the Elizabethan stage. It was William James who pointed out this distinction between *knowledge about* and *acquaintance with* an author. The extent to which we have substituted for the direct vision with its stimulating appeal to individual reaction, the conventional summary and accepted criticism, the official formula and the stereotyped view is the chief reason for the ready-made uniformity of our educational product.

The pioneer democracy of America itself is re-

sponsible for a method of instruction typically American. The superstitious faith in education was the basis of a system whereby many busy middle-aged persons whose early advantages had been limited, by means of attractive summaries, outlines and hand-books, could acquaint themselves with the names of men, books and events which form the Binet-Simon test of culture, and enable the initiate to hold up his head in circles where the best that has been thought or said in the world is habitually referred to. This method is carried out in hundreds of cultural camp-meetings every summer, by thousands of popular lectures, in countless programs of study for women's clubs. Unfortunately it is coming to be not only the typical but the only method of general education in America. It has penetrated even to the college and the university. Better that our fathers had died, their intellectual thirst unsatisfied, than that they had left this legacy of mental soft drinks for their children!

The tendency to substitute the criticism for the creation, the second-hand approach for direct action in the study of literature, is regrettable enough in a world of busy men and women. The extent to which this method deprives us of our real inheritance in letters is to be seen when we consider how far Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Wordsworth have been replaced for us by Lowell, Coleridge, Macaulay, and Matthew Arnold. To know the real men belongs, except in the field of exploration and scholarship, to the unstandardized sum of human achievement: to know the best that has been thought and said about them is a part of culture, and such knowledge enters easily into the currency of daily exchange. But such methods and results have no legitimate place in higher education. There, if at all, the pursuit of the reality and the stimulus of direct vision must be maintained. This is the final indictment which Mr. Murry brings against Professor Wendell's book and the method which it incarnates. "Not one breath of the real essence penetrates through these massive pages. A few names, a few facts, and that is all. To have read Thucydides in Crawley, the Republic in Jowett, the Poetics in Bywater, Virgil in Dryden, and Lucretius in Monro—to have read even one of these would perhaps have given an inkling of the mysterious secret; but to have read all their names, to have learnt that 'those best qualified to know' . . . think that Aeschylus was a very fine poet, or that . . . Theocritus wrote 'graceful, trifling, mostly hexametric poems'—what can all this mean to an American student, or to anybody else in the world?"

Let Us Alone!

IS it possible for prosperous middle-aged America to return to the world that existed in 1913? On the face of it this seems an absurd question but it is not too absurd to be implied by one of the kindest of American conservatives, Mr. Meredith Nicholson, in his new book, *The Man in the Street*. In this book Mr. Nicholson collects his recent "papers on American topics," papers that express "the humorous and yet fundamentally serious outlook" of well-off, good-natured, comfortable, pseudo-progressive America. Its graver efforts at political thinking are to be found in *The Second-Rate Man in Politics* and in *How, Then, Should Smith Vote?* The heart of the book is the actual plea, *Let Main Street Alone!*

It would be proper, of course, to blame the wicked world entirely for not letting Main Street alone. Even if Sinclair Lewis had never opened fire, the world itself has upheaved that placid institution much worse than any critical novelist. Just about the time that Main Street was chanting "victory"—victory wrapped in tissue paper and tricolor ribbons and hung on the Christmas tree—we were compelled to deal with a Europe half-hysterical and half-savage, mottled with revolutions, broken out in plague and famine, reckless with paper currency and a paper armistice. Our failure in this adventure was not by any means to be blamed solely on Europe, but relief organizations helped to satisfy Main Street's heart in the succeeding situation, just as Red Cross bandage rolling and "Y" drives had previously appeased it—Main Street can be driven even if it can't be led. But when the world began tobogganing on its devil's switchback of economic uncertainty, Main Street and the bungalows and suburban houses and country houses that sprang from it gradually became filled with something like panic and malaise. A world infested with Jewish finance, the Bolsheviks, the Sinn Fein element, pro-Germans, Japanese militarists, French imperialists, and domestic fanatics could hardly be pleasant to live in. Hence the passionate demand to "let Main Street alone," to return to the optimism of 1913, the path of what has now become famous as Normalcy.

The impracticability of giving peace to Main Street is in itself worth considering but it seems far less relevant at the moment than the persisting state of mind of a sweet-tempered American like Mr. Nicholson. The return to normalcy is not so pregnant a topic as that desire for normalcy which is the permanent handicap in America to all serious political discussion. For what, in the end, does it matter that Mr. Nicholson busily associates himself with the cause of good government and