

WHY IS AMERICAN LITERATURE BOURGEOIS?

BY GERTRUDE ATHERTON.

AMERICAN literature after its first natural imitation of Old-World standards showed for a time a disposition to take its cue from the Declaration of Independence. In reading the state papers of the great men of the first era of the Republic—Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, and the rest—one sees plainly the influence of the “Spectator”; and even Hawthorne and Poe, to say nothing of the Boston groups, and Washington Irving, might never have breathed the free air of a young republic. Cooper was American in nothing but choice of subject. But when Mark Twain and Bret Harte appeared, then indeed we had produced two authors who could have been born and nourished nowhere else on the planet.

Mark Twain, in particular, was so intensely individual, so rampantly—one may say without disrespect—American, that it must have seemed, to those watching what was then the lawn rather than the field of literature in the United States, that the new force was destined to redirect the whole course of American letters. He might indeed have been apprehended as a mighty hose or hydraulic pump, washing the very earth out of the carefully trimmed beds on the lawn. As one looks back to-day, it seems almost incredible that his uncommon and instantly popular methods, his quite unconscious disdain of petty conventions, his convincing expression of the best as well as the most salient of our national characteristics, did not immediately found a school. Even the facts that the true greatness of his intellect was not appreciated, and that he let Cupid severely alone, are not a sufficient explanation of the riddle of his standing apart to-day. Neither does his originality ex-

plain it: other original writers have founded their schools. At least his triumphs might have encouraged the young to be as free and individual as himself, even if more slenderly equipped as to creative power: it is not the imitators, of course, who count in the final summing up of literary achievement, almost sure as they are to win temporary success by adhering to the footprints of some leader whom the critic knows it is safe to praise. If Twain ever had so much as an imitator—barring mere humorists—I never heard of him. Harte had many, but they are forgotten. But that is not the point. What is truly remarkable is the fact that the brilliant success of these two men did not remind others that originality is the final and supreme touch which secures an artist a permanent position on the heights, which commands forever the attention of the intelligent masses below.

As a rule, originality has a hard fight, for those who write of writers are, necessarily, unoriginal, and, therefore, no matter how conscientious, timid about endorsing a bold deviation from long established standards. But Twain and Harte had no struggle for recognition, from the public at least. No one remembers to-day what their critics wrote; all the world knows of their success. Undoubtedly, there were reasons for this, quite aside from their worth, and it would be unfair not to state them: Twain published his first books by subscription, and was already a personality; Harte published in his own magazine, "*The Overland Monthly*." Both from the start were independent of editors and reviewers. But if this explains their skilful avoidance of the average great author's weary bystanding at the public portals, it by no means explains their failure to encourage others.

American literature to-day, taking it as a whole, taking no account of its strangely few exceptions, is the most timid, the most anæmic, the most lacking in individualities, the most bourgeois, that any country has ever known. There is not a breath of American independence, impatience, energy, contempt of ancient convention in it. It might, indeed, be the product of a great village censored by the village gossip. How utterly unrepresentative it is may be seen by holding it up to contrast with the general trend and conduct of American affairs, political, financial, commercial, with all that is typical of what has come to be recognized as the genius of the American race. Compare it with the bold defiance of the weak and scattered colonies who

rose against a mighty nation; with the group of men who literally evolved another nation out of their own brains; with the fierce love of liberty and determination to realize their unique independence which has characterized this country for a century and a quarter. Compare it even with the enterprise of the four men, who, with a few thousand dollars in their pockets, projected and carried to triumphant conclusion the great Central Pacific Railway. These four men have been accused of all the crimes, and perhaps they were guilty of them; but the fact remains that they were men of a magnificent audacity, and that they conferred an inestimable blessing on the United States. Compare our literary intelligence with the boldness and dynamic energy of the American race in general, and of thousands in particular, who in the last thirty years alone have made the progress of this country phenomenal in the history of nations. To-day, we are more feared, hated, and admired than any country on the two hemispheres—with the possible exception of England. We are a synonym in Europe*—which knows little of our literature and cares less—for cleverness of a new order; for all that is unique, startling, unexpected; for dangerous and unfathomed power; for a personality so original that we are thought of as a mass rather than as individuals of varying mental and social degree. Above all, we are envied because of our personal liberty, our divorce courts, our notorious attitude of standing on our own feet and bidding the rest of the world like us or let us alone.

Up to a certain point they understand us; and they have not derived their enlightenment from our fiction. European women sneer at American women, but envy them. The women of the upper and professional classes of the Old World may be more deeply educated, more elaborately accomplished than ours, more intellectual, through their life-long association with men of affairs, through dwelling in an atmosphere where cleverness and intellect are the final seals of distinction; but the dash of the American woman, born of the spirit of independence, too often puts them out of court. Full of knowledge, as distinct from mere information, they sit dumb and discontented before the rush of the American tongue—when unaccented—and, no doubt, long for the time when Europe shall be quite Americanized.

* Geographically, Europe may include England, but to the modern habit of thought, at least, it is "England and Europe."

It would seem almost superfluous to wonder what would be a European's reply if one asked him what parallel he found between those of our men whom he regards as typical—such men as Roosevelt, Pierpont Morgan, Yerkes, Cleveland, or even Croker—between our imminent financial supremacy, our devouring commercial inroads, our gigantic trusts violating many laws, our colossal strikes, our utter contempt for the survival of the monarchic-al superstition in the Old World—and our literature. Where is the parallel? And where shall we seek the cause of this temporary misrepresentation of the most original and audacious country the world has ever known? I use the word temporary with aforethought, for phenomena have appeared recently which would have been quite impossible a few years ago. The public would seem to be disentangling itself from leading strings, rebellion is in the air, much that provoked loud protest a few years ago is now accepted as a matter of course, and there are signs everywhere that, in the course of another generation, we shall have discarded our Puritanism, and have grown into a broad tolerant, and no less virtuous race. But habit is hard to kill, and we may count upon a persistence of the present order of things for some time to come, and in spite of the occasional success achieved without the sanction of the American literary powers.

In the late eighties, when I began to indulge in coherent dreams of the literary career, I cut from some weekly newspaper, or magazine, a picture of Mr. Howells's study, pasted it on cardboard, enthroned it upon my desk. At this time he was the controlling force in American letters—James was a sort of wayward younger brother; and although Mr. Howells's novels dealt too much with the small side of daily life to appeal to my temperament and demands, I read them dutifully, with becoming humility; for California—when you are there—seems a planet away from the great centres, which loom, with their famous ones, high in the glowing fancy. I had made no study of literary conditions at that time—enthusiastic young writers who are equally sincere never do; but I caught the Howells fever and was even a little awed. Alas! my first book, written on that very desk, written in the very shadow of Mr. Howells's study, was perhaps the wildest contribution which has been made to American fiction. I shall not mention its name, and I sincerely hope it is forgotten.

But it convinced me that I should waste time did I indulge in the hope of becoming a member of the Howells school. Its four years of wandering before it reached a doubtful haven, the universal disapproval it provoked, the frank statements that I was not wanted, and had best leave the field at once, before my battered remains were removed to potter's field, the widely copied paraphrase of a line of George Eliot: "If this is originality give us 'the millionth book in superfluous herds,'" failed to transplant me into the straight and narrow way; for the one good reason that with this track nothing in me claimed affinity. Even had I been so poor-spirited as to make the attempt, certain literary phenomena would have called a halt, bidding me meditate upon the fallibility of the powers. In the first place, several novels, notably "The Story of a Country Town," hailed as little less than great, were even by this time quite forgotten, and their authors already mute. In the second place, my book being a tale of metempsychosis had been refused, many times with manifest annoyance, on the ground that the public would not for a moment consider such a preposterous subject; yet, shortly after its appearance, the market was flooded with the "reincarnation novel"; and even my own nameless attempt sold some ten thousand copies on the strength of its theme. These other books, so quickly does the human mind readjust itself, were treated by the reviewers as a matter of course, and even my own effusion was no longer held up to anathema.

Nevertheless, the main current of Realism—or would it not be better to call it Littleism?—flowed placidly on. There was nothing in the reincarnation outburst, including my own performance, or in other outbursts, such as are always bubbling on the surface of letters, to deflect its course or dispute its empire. Its first serious blow came at the close of the war with Spain, when an apparently insatiable demand arose for history and romance, fighting men and picturesque women, incident, adventure, a total repudiation of the little and the obvious. This new drove of literary sheep has been almost invariably without style, distinction; it has been more lacking in the deep personal note than the work of the Littleists, it has been full of exaggeration; it has even been ungrammatical. Nevertheless, it has done a good work in rousing the public to demand in their literature that which is not familiar to them from their uprising to their chaste

retiring. The right medium will be reached, but the time is not yet; for the average new writer comes apologetically to the field, stiff with the old superstitions: the influential newspapers of the better class will praise nothing which the big magazines and their publishing-houses have not approved—and approval is dear to the heart of the young aspirant to literary honors; reverence for the critic is planted in his soul. The big magazines and their houses will publish nothing that does not conform to the standard which has weathered other upheavals; and the authors who have defied the powers and won an honorable position independent of any temporary demand, are so few in number that they rather terrify than encourage the youthful aspirant: their fight has been too long and arduous, and that other way lies sure, if no very brilliant, success.

It is safe to say that it is the ambition of every new writer to "get into the magazines." Perhaps the grim necessity of daily bread demands immediate recognition, but I fancy it is more in the nature of an obsession. The magazines are taken in every well-conducted household, so carefully has the public been educated, and the aspiring young mind is trained by this eminently correct fiction—which it reads long before novels are permitted. It is natural, therefore, that those who have the creative gift in an attenuated form should not only admire but emulate. And although it may be difficult to "get into the magazines," it is still more difficult to get out. Indeed, if we may judge by the results, that has never been attempted. So great has the power of the magazines been that they have convinced half the world they stand for the true aristocracy of letters, that he who ignores their canons must withdraw, and forever dwell, beyond the pale. The newspapers have taken their cue from them; it saves thinking; and there is, beyond all question, a certain public which will not recognize the existence of an author who has not been bred in one of the magazines or launched by one of the associate publishing-houses. To be a pariah is not a pleasant thing in this world, particularly if there was a moment when you dwelt with the elect. It is safe and pleasant to be consistently approved; moreover, it is profitable. Not recklessly so perhaps, but it is agreeable to look forward to a nice little income for a reasonable number of years. All this begets timidity; and timidity is a leech at the throat of originality.

Let us examine the canons which govern the "aristocracy of American letters." Originality, except in the mildest form, we have seen is proscribed. "What never has been done never can be done" may be said to be the motto of American literature. If this statement be thought to stand in need of corroboration let the reader invest not only in the best of current novels, but in two bound volumes of any one of the big magazines and examine the fiction. In two such volumes that I have under my table at the present moment there are a number of stories which are still fresh in my mind. One, by a popular magazine writer of long standing, is about a girl who went from San Francisco to Chicago in a Pullman car and returned. That is all that happened. Another is about a married woman who flirted platonically with an actor, and upon his death received her effusive, but presumably virtuous, epistles from the hand of his wife. Another is an interminable "study" of a dressmaker. One by Gelett Burgess is quite unworthy of him; it contains not an echo of his eerie talent. Not one, possibly with the exception of Burgess's story, is redeemed by a single grace of phrase, a fine thought, careful or distinguished writing. Indeed, I have more than once found the most serious grammatical offences in these magazine stories. The majority, however, are guiltless in this respect, cleverly written, if without individuality. There are perhaps four or five regular contributors to the magazines who write with distinction, and conform admirably to all the canons of the short story. But each year they manifest more plainly that they have relinquished all intention of attempting to rise above the high-water mark of mediocrity—the pink-and-blue signal of the magazine. They are something to be grateful for, however; and are as salient a credit to these periodicals as the beautiful illustrations, typography, and paper, which make a sumptuous whole of which any country might be proud.

The second canon is firm adherence to the most curious convention that has ever been insisted upon in any country: that this world is not as it is, but as it ought to be. The sole taboo is not sex by any means; many another tendency of the human mind, many another exposition of life, must be forever ignored and denounced. Whether or not this convention originated with certain men, powerful in shaping American literature, who had seen nothing of the world, or whether there was a deliberate concerted at-

tempt on the part of the literary powers to make American literature "refined," aristocratic, undemocratic, a rarified thing in the third stratum above mortals, it would be hard to say. The result, however, it may be observed here, is not aristocratic, but distinctly middle-class. It is the expression of that *bourgeoisie* which is afraid of doing the wrong thing, not of the indifferent aristocrat; of that element which dares not use slang, shrinks from audacity, rarely utters a bold sentiment and as rarely feels one. It is as correct as Sunday clothes and as innocuous as sterilized milk, but it is not aristocratic. The natural result of its success is, that American writers feel no necessity to see the world. Too much knowledge, indeed, would upset the prescribed poise, and they spend their years comfortably describing the little life about them, adding nothing whatever to the knowledge of mankind. Their utmost range is after dialect—i. e., illiterate phrases—and local color. They mildly interest people who are used to them and can get nothing else.

A third canon, which is indeed but a part of the second, is that fiction to be literature—American literature—must be anæmic. Vigor, vitality, richness, vividness, audacity of thought or phrase, any quality in short which is distinctively American, must be weeded out, bleached out, of the ambitious author, would he receive recognition as an American of letters. Here again, if they are trying to be aristocratic they are making a curious blunder. The qualities I have enumerated as anathema distinguish the aristocracies of all nations, and, as your true democrat is an aristocrat, therein lies the close relationship between the high civilization of the Old World and the superb Americanism which laughs at ancient forms and superstitions, goes its own gait with apologies to no one. Our literature fairly represents the bourgeois spirit of Europe, but it does not represent the United States in anything but matter of a sort.

A fourth canon, still to subdivide the second, is what might be called the fetish of the body. Magazine editors, their confederate publishers, their writers and readers, deify the body, grovel in the dust before it. It never has done and can do no wrong; at all events it must be protected at every hazard and cost. Let the brain rot. The brain is invisible and insignificant. Let the mind close its doors to the best of literatures, to the immensity of life, but let it keep its physical frame-work even as a little

child. That the body was materialized for no other purpose in the world but for reproduction, and as a more tangible expression for the mind, and that the mind is given us that we may put into it all the knowledge that can be found in this world, has never occurred to any of these teachers.

A fifth canon is that sleep must not be disturbed nor even the nerves titillated. Some years ago there was an institution in New York known as "Uncut Leaves." Before its assemblages authors read stories, articles, and poems, designed for the magazines. The tickets sold at a high price, the gatherings were attended by the demi-fashionable. At one time they were almost as notable as Bagby's Monday Mornings. A young author who had not made her *début* in the magazines, but had attracted considerable attention, was, with rare audacity, invited to read—but with prudent reservation she was asked to submit the MS. first. The story the writer selected was impeccable in its morals, but it was extremely, though briefly, tragic, and its climax was rather terrible. It was submitted, and returned—kindly and politely—with the excuse that there "might be sensitive ladies present whose nerves would be distressingly affected." The obvious reply, that women whose nerves were in a delicate condition had better stay at home, may or may not have been made.

It is this curious shrinking from the larger life that is most characteristic of what at present stands for American literature. It is quite true that the magazines and the publishing-houses may retort that they are money-making institutions, and that the great body of the people are commonplace, narrow, and prudish; also that the great majority of readers are women. This is quite true. It is also true that the genius of any race is determined by the thousand active exceptions, not by the million vegetables—what Clarence King calls "the vulgar fractions in the census"; also by the men, not by the women. But if no educating force is applied to the million, how are they to advance? If their literature—which, being sheep, they meekly accept—tells them only of their own life and kind, if not a hint from the real great world ever reaches them, how are they to deepen and augment their spots? If American middle-class human nature is like other middle-class nature, commonplace and narrow, they owe a large percentage of the infliction to the levelling influence of the literary powers, for there are natural promptings in their blood

to help them—other assistance being equal—to quicker understandings.

As for the authors these powers have educated and encouraged, their writing conveys the impression of having flowed forth in snug studies, between a well-filled stomach and an ear cocked to catch the prattle of the nursery. There is not one of these arbitrary creations of the leading publishing-houses and their magazines who reads as if he had ever suffered a pang, ever descended even in chaste thought to the vast underworld where the greatest writers of the earth have found their inspirations, ever travelled except in a sublimated Cook fashion, ever—alas never!—heard of Dickens's advice to a young author. They are all good family men, who eat well, rarely drink, are too dull to be bored with their own wives, but who have reached a certain perfection of literary phrase and construction which would be a credit to any country. As well-drilled brains, finished, acute, and polished, they are above reproach. But there is not an ego among them. Each could do the other's work and never be detected.

It is almost an unpardonable lapse into the obvious to remark that such a school will never produce even one great writer. To be great, it is above all things necessary to develop your ego, your power, and there is only one way to do it: by divorcing yourself from all that is smug, that is easy, that is comfortable, that is orthodox and conventional, by seeing life from its peaks to its chasms. No writer with a real gift and with a real ambition has any business with a home, children, the unintermittent comforts of life which stultify and stifle. If a man has the gift to write, to create,—the greatest of all gifts—what more does he want? To insist upon the right to lounge amidst the commonplace comforts, and the mild distractions of "society," is not only ungrateful but fatal. Art, the most jealous of all mistresses, is always prompt to desert him of the divided allegiance, and leave him to finish his career with the husks, with the shell from which the soul has gone. Even the writer who has no inclination to deal with the great passions—which the fastidious American calls "temperament!"—should study unceasingly the great map of life. He has no right to ask people to buy his books if he cannot tell them something they did not know before. To be great, you must know as much as one can learn in one life, and by experience, even if you never intend to use one-third of your knowledge.

He of the slender equipment is always running about looking for copy, for local color, but his eyes are closed to the great things. I do not mean to intimate that any one of our prosperous family authors would in any condition be great; had they had greatness in them they would have broken loose long ago, and snapped their fingers at the powers—Henry James is a case in point—but they might be improved.

I should never venture to admonish women in any such fashion, for very few women know how to use their liberty, above all how to take life impersonally, to regard all life as a spectacle, to disassociate the mind from the body. Where one develops the strength of brain and ego triumphantly to override every convention and always remain high and dry, always the spectator, whom no circumstance can affect, the great number, indubitably, are the miserable victims of their own personalities; which in their turn are the victims of tradition. It is more than probable that the next fifty years will see the highly civilized woman as truly emancipated as man—as a very few women have been in the past; those who have genius needing nothing else to encourage and advise them. But there is no such excuse for men of genius or of talent. They should be content with their art, gratefully demanding nothing more, developing their ego in that service and absolutely indifferent whether the world approves of them as citizens or not. A writer who is singled out to create—to be useful to the race—owes all to that gift, nothing to his trifling self. Who cares to-day that Poe was a drunkard, Coleridge an opium-eater, that Byron had forty mistresses and Georges Sand forty lovers? Not that excess is necessary, not by any means; many of the greatest men in literature have been sane, and careful of themselves; the temperaments that demand artificial stimulation pay a bitter price, and, what is worse, limit their contribution to art. Alcohol, stimulant of any sort—even strong coffee—in nine cases out of ten, and particularly in the case of women, who have active nerves enough, scatter the brain, weakening its coherence and logic long before actual decay sets in; or pitches it a note too high, so that the effect is bizarre rather than original.

There is only one way in which man or woman can develop real strength, and that is to fight unceasingly and to stand absolutely alone.

GERTRUDE ATHERTON.

THE SON OF ROYAL LANGBRITH.

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

PART V.

XXIII.

AFTER Mrs. Enderby went out Dr. Anther remained in a silence which the rector could not quite bring himself to break. He thought that his visitor looked fagged, and that he looked even more sad than fagged. He would have liked to ask Anther about Hawberk, in the way of a beginning, but somehow he did not, though he had heard that Hawberk was holding up a little, and he was interested in the experiment of his physician, as it was known to any one who cared to listen to Hawberk's sanguine prophecies of the outcome.

Mrs. Enderby, lingering honorably out of intelligible eavesdropping, but not out of earshot, was disinterestedly impatient of the interval before Anther spoke.

"What do you think," he began, and at the sound of his voice she fled from temptation, "of evil done in the past, and so effectually covered up, except from two or three people, that for the public generally it never existed: should you think it the duty of the two or three, or any one of them to make it known?"

"I'm not quite sure that I follow you," said the rector, but confessing his interest by his look of prompt animation. He was seeking, as he professed, a stronger light upon it, but he could not feel that Anther cast this light upon it by what he said next.

"Take the case of —," the doctor resumed, and he named a famous case which once agonized the public with a curiosity still unsatisfied. "He must have known, and a few others must have known quite as well, whether he was guilty or innocent in that business. Do you believe it would have been to the advantage of religion or morals to have had the fact generally known; or was it just as well to have had it hushed up forever, as it apparently was?"

"I don't see what advantage the common knowledge of it would have been," the rector said, still feeling his way rather blindly. "I can't see what use it would have been as concerns this world, to have had the fact known. If the fact would benefit some one,

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