

LECTURE XI.

PREDOMINANCE OF THE ENGLISH LITERATURE, CONTINUED.—ITS INTRINSIC SUPERIORITY.

IN addition to that which has been already remarked of the predominance of the English literature in a pastor's studies, it should be further observed, that, all things considered, the English literature is intrinsically superior to every other. In the preceding Lecture we claimed this superiority for it on the ground of professional usefulness. It is now claimed on the ground of intrinsic worth. I repeat the qualifying clause of the statement, "all things considered." It is a foolish partisanship in learning to decry any of the great collections of wisdom which represent the growth of great nations in intellectual power. That man has one of the elements of scholarship yet to acquire, who is unable to admit the inferiority in some respects of that which, as a whole, may be his favorite language and his dearest resource of thought.

I do not wish to assert extravagant claims, still less to speak magisterially of literatures in which I am not at home. I assume to give you only the judgment which is founded upon that knowledge of our own literature which is current among educated men, and is supplemented by the judgment of other literatures expressed by men whose knowledge entitles them to

be received as authorities. In a sober estimate thus formed I must think that our own literature heads the list. The grounds of this judgment are numerous, and they underlie the whole discussion of what is and what is not vital in the current of a nation's thought. We can do little more than to glance at them with remark sufficient to indicate the line of argument.

In the first place, the argument is narrowed in its range by the fact that but few of the literatures of the world can enter into the account at all. There have been but few great literatures in history. You will easily recall them. The only great ones of antiquity are those of Palestine, Greece, and Rome. The Egyptian, the Arabic, the Hindoo, the Chinese, are all provincial. They are all either infantile in character, or *lateral* to those lines of culture which have projected themselves with power of control into modern thought. Those secondary literatures had no power of reproduction. They were eddies in the stream and along the shore of civilization.

Then, of the modern literatures, all that can bear comparison with each other are the English, the French, and the German. No intelligent scholar would place by the side of these the Italian, the Spanish, the Portuguese, or those of the Scandinavian nations. It is at the head of these imperial literatures which have made and are making the deepest grooves in history, that I would place the work of the English mind as a whole, and as a means of culture to be used upon the world of the present and the future.

This is, furthermore, presumptively true, because the English literature is the expression of a *composite* order of mind. Nations, like individuals, are subject to physi-

ological laws. One of these laws is, that virility of national mind is proportioned to the intermingling of virile races. Mental power does not flow in the isolated currents of national being which aristocratic jealousy has kept running for centuries in the channels of pure blood. In this relation of things pure blood is weak blood. It runs low, and grows pale. It is what Shakspeare calls "pigeon-livered." Mental force flows rather in the crosses and reduplications and interfusions of diverse and even contrary elements of being. Conquests which bring warring elements into one solution are essential to the best intellectual resultant. The best national mind in the history of civilization is what the composite column is in architecture. It consists of a union of eclectic forces. We can not designate it briefly and yet more definitely than by terming it a composite mind.

Just this the English mind is in its make. The English literature is an expression of such a composite mind. There is no other spot in the Old World into which so many diverse streams of life-blood have flowed as into the British Isles. Not a full-blooded race in all the northern and central parts of Europe is unrepresented in the present blood of Great Britain. Those are the cool regions, where forceful men are made by the very elements. This is a vital fact, that the cool zones of Europe have poured their populations, either for colonization or conquest, into the original reservoir of the British Empire. Germany and France have both contributed some vital vigor through the Angles, the Saxons, and the Normans, to the living English.

Dr. George P. Marsh finds linguistic evidences, in the

structure of the Anglo-Saxon dialects, of a marvelous commingling of tribes in the early invasions of Britain. He pronounces the linguistic evidence of such a commingling more conclusive than the historic evidence. "Diversity, not unity, of origin," he says, is indicated by the structure of the Anglo-Saxon. There is no evidence that any one people ever spoke it outside of Great Britain. It bears internal signs of having grown up there from heterogeneous elements imported from abroad. Moreover, philologists think they find traces of the same heterogeneousness of origin in the modern dialects still existing around the North Sea, the district from which the early invaders of Britain came. In no other part of Europe, it is said, are there so many forms of language, within the same area, which are not intelligibly interchangeable, as are found there. Such philological phenomena all point to the fact of a most remarkable solution of ingredients foreign to each other in the original compound which forms the basis of the English tongue. And what the English tongue is in this respect, the English mind is, from which our literature has sprung, and of which it is the immortal expression.

It is accordant with all the laws which govern the growth of national minds, that a literature which is the natural representative of such a composite mind in books should be, as a whole, the superior of the literatures springing from the provincial resources which have been tributaries to the stock of that mind. The "Father of Waters," it is to be presumed, has a volume and a momentum exceeding those of any one of its feeders.

The same law which in this respect has made our

literature what it is, is now operating anew in our own country to make our literature what it is to be. Races are intermingling here to an extent unprecedented since the Gothic conquests of Rome. New blood is flowing in from every source on the globe which contains the elements of national vigor. It is borne hither in the veins of the most enterprising and athletic classes of the old nations. Such are always the migratory classes. They are the classes in which family stock has a future. It has not spent itself in the vices and luxuries of a decadent civilization. Such migratory hordes always carry with them the germs of great nations. That virility which first appears in the growth of numbers and of material prosperity will by and by show itself in a new stock of composite mind. This, again, will reproduce and prolong under new conditions the national literature. It must be English at heart, but broadened and deepened to represent the mind of a new world.

The claims of the English literature to pre-eminence in our culture are confirmed by a third fact; viz., that the English as compared with other literatures is pre-eminently a literature of power as distinct from a literature of knowledge only. Turn to De Quincey's "Essays on the Poets." In his essay on Alexander Pope you will find very clearly expressed a vital distinction between the literature of power and the literature of knowledge. The function of the literature of knowledge is to teach: that of the literature of power is to move. "The first is a rudder; the second, a sail." To illustrate, he inquires, "What do you learn from the 'Paradise Lost'?" Nothing at all. What do you learn from a cookery-book? Something you did not know

before, on every page. But would you, therefore, put the cookery-book on a higher level than the 'Paradise Lost'? What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge, of which a million separate items are but a million advancing steps on the same earthly level. What you owe is *power*; that is, expansion and exercise to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards, — a step ascending, as upon Jacob's ladder, from earth to mysterious altitudes."

I can not develop this idea further so vividly as you will find it expressed in the essay to which I have referred. The whole essay, by the way, is a superior specimen of criticism. The point I would observe more particularly is, that, in the judgment of European critics, the English literature as a whole is superior to any other modern embodiment of thought as a literature of power. It is a plastic as distinct from a didactic literature. The most intelligent German scholars concede this respecting English poetry as compared with that of their own language. German critics write commentaries on Shakspeare as on one of the prophets. M. Guizot concedes substantially the same thing to the English as compared with the French drama.

Our literature is less accumulative than the German, but more creative. An impulse received from its great models strikes deeper, and lives longer. The English mind is constructive, and builds for durability. We have more numerous poets, historians, orators, whose productions have become standards and whose influence is of the creative sort, than are to be found in either of the rival literatures of the Continent. German philosophers and philologists are more numerous

than ours. French scientists are more numerous than ours. But with these exceptions our authors of the rank which De Quincey designates by the word "power" as contrasted with "knowledge," outnumber those of France and Germany together. On such a subject as this, few men can claim to be authorities. But the drift of critical judgment among scholars, if I have not misread it, is in this direction, giving ascendancy to the English over the Continental literatures in respect to creative and durable vitality.

Again: the English is pre-eminently a Christian literature. No other is to so large an extent pervaded with Christian thought. No other has so little in its standard works that is adverse to Christianity. No other is so profoundly rooted in the Christian theory of life. No other deals so intelligently with Christian ideas of destiny. No other is so reverent towards the Christian Scriptures. No other owes so much of its own vitality to the literature of the Hebrews.

These features constitute the great distinction of our literature above those of antiquity. No Pagan embodiment of thought can possibly be a substitute for it or an approximation to it. It stands on an upper level, above Greek and Roman culture, in the very fact that it is built on Christianity. It therefore embodies a large experience, which the ancient classic languages had not even words to express, if the ancient people had had the ideas. Coleridge, for example, declares that "sublimity" in the true conception of it is not extant in any production of the Greek literature. He contends that it is a modern idea which was Hebrew in its origin. Yet the English literature is full of it. Moreover, the sterility of the classic Greek language in words expres

sive of Christian thought is seen in the very existence of the New Testament. But our English tongue is built upon Christian thought.

The English is also a Protestant literature, — Protestant as distinct from a Romish, and equally distinct from an infidel bias. In this it stands above both its rivals on the Continent. Dr. Newman of Oxford says, speaking of the conversion of England to Rome, “The literature of England is against us. It is Protestant in warp and woof. We never can unmake it.” This feature of it gives to it a splendid opening into the world’s future, if there is any truth in our faith that the world is to be converted to some simple, spiritual, apostolic type of Christianity.

Furthermore: the English is the literature of constitutional freedom. It is not a literature of anarchy, nor of despotism, as so large a fragment of the Continental literatures is, but is an expression of constitutional liberty. I emphasize, it is an *expression* of that liberty. It is not a silent nor an expurgated volume in respect to the ideas of freedom which are upheaving the nations. The body of it has never sprung by stealth from a muzzled press. It has not been obliged to ask leave to be, from the police. Next to the Bible, no other single fortress of liberty in the world is so impregnable as the walls and buttresses of English libraries.

Those libraries are full of outbursts of the love of liberty in poetic forms which stir the passions of nations. The common people sing them in their homes; mothers over cradles; and plowmen among the hills. Our libraries are full of calm and scholarly defenses of freedom in the forms of constitutional argument which

create great statesmen for the leadership of nations. They are full of the statute laws of England, which are liberty embodied in good government. They are full of histories of liberty in the great battles and revolutions of England, — a record which a nation never retreats from or dishonors till it falls off from the platform of great Powers.

Other nations can not know our literature with safety to despotic ideas. Men have to expurgate it, as slaveholders did our school-books before the civil war, in order to make it innocent of hostility to despotism. The poetry of England must be riddled with expurgations, before it can be safely taught in the schools of a people who fear the growth of free ideas. The Bible is but a fragment of that mass of thought which Romanism would expel from our schools. The sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth, the speeches of Edmund Burke, the story of Magna Charta, the biography of Wilberforce, the battle of Bunker Hill, must all be expunged or garbled before Romanism is safe in common schools in which the English literature is taught or sung. No poetic fiction is it, but the most prosaic of sober facts in political economy, which Wordsworth uttered :—

“ We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakspeare spake.”

This affiliation of our literature with constitutional freedom is a feature of it which must open avenues for it into the world's future. Certain great arteries of life in the great nations run directly into it. The heart of the nations is beating in sympathy with it to an extent not true of any other literature dead or living.

Moreover, the English is a well-balanced literature. No important department of it is meager. In some departments the Continental literatures surpass it in affluence; but the critic betrays ignorance of the English mind who pronounces it barren in any of the great lines of scholarly thought.

The only department of culture in which England is poor, as compared with the Continental countries, is that of the fine arts. Canova gave the true explanation of that when he said, "It is all owing to your free institutions. They drain away genius from the arts to the bar and the House of Commons. Had England been Italy, Pitt and Fox would have been your artists." In no great department of literature is the English language barren.

Our literature is evenly balanced, also, in the fact of its aversion to extremes of opinion, and extravagances of culture. In philosophy, in criticism, in morals, in poetry, in theology, in politics, the English mind revolts from excesses. As a whole, the literature is healthy. It is full-chested, and walks erect. In the main, it is a liberal and candid literature. It is free, also, from innate inclinations to sentimentality or to mysticism. It is an earnest growth of thought rooted in good sense. If a literary monomaniac happens to spring up, and attract attention by unseemly antics, the reading people of England look on long enough to laugh, and then go about their business.

Opposites are well balanced in our literature. It never surges this way and that, as if a whole nation had run mad for the want of mental ballast. In this respect it is superior to that of France. No single man could ever have had such power to lead the Eng-

lish people on a tramp of delusion and godlessness as Voltaire had over the French mind. It was not in the make of the English mind to be thus inveigled into a volcanic revolution. Both nations had their revolutions. Both executed their monarchs on the scaffold. But England did it decently, under the forms and in the spirit of her ancient laws. She did not sacrifice all her institutions for the sake of doing it. The conscience of the nation acted in it a great national tragedy, with no heart for ribaldry and brutality. It was done under a *régime* marked by days of religious fasting.

Macaulay says that the two most profound revolutions in English history were that which effaced the distinction between the Norman and the Saxon, and that which effaced the distinction between master and slave. Both were brought about by silent and imperceptible changes. Civil war accomplished neither; moral causes produced both. It is impossible to fix the time when either ceased to be. Lord Macaulay says that the institution of villanage has never been abolished by statute to this day. With such history as this in the process of making, and constantly going on record in her libraries, and taught in her universities, and fostered by her pulpits, and acted in her drama, and sung in the ballads of her people, it has never been possible for England to have a "Reign of Terror."

The literature of this English stock, therefore, excites trust in its genuineness. It is a grandly equable thing by which to form a scholar's mind. It cultivates his powers symmetrically. It exalts intellectual and moral above material and turbulent causes in his judgment of events. It creates a predisposition in his tastes

to a moderation of passionate opinions and to an appreciation of opposites both in historic and in living character.

Yet again: the English is the most mature of all the great embodiments of the world's thought. It expresses the results of the longest growth of power in literary forms. It has claims, superior to those of any other, to be regarded as the last and ripest fruitage of intellectual energy that the world has yet seen. The proof of this can only be hinted at here.

In the comparison with the ancient literatures, it is sufficient to say, as we have before observed, that the English has utilized them all. It is in part built upon them. It has absorbed whatever is vital in every one of them. If they were extinguished to-day in their original forms, every idea they contain which is vital to mental culture could be reproduced from the English literature alone. Dr. Johnson said, that, in his day, almost the whole bulk of human thought and learning could be expressed in a vocabulary drawn from the writings of Bacon, Raleigh, and Shakspeare. It is more strictly true that not a thought which is of any value to the present or the future of civilization can be found, in either of the three great literatures which represent the ancient development of mind, which is not extant in English libraries. Consequently no man can thoroughly master the English literature without receiving unconsciously into his own culture the substantial literary life of Palestine, Greece, and Rome.

Large account may fairly be made of this fact in the case which is prominently before us, of a man whose life is given to an arduous profession, and who, therefore, can find little time or mental force for the study

of the ancient classics. Let him master the classics of his own vernacular, and he is breathing an atmosphere made up, in part, of the best Hebrew and Greek and Roman models all the while.

In the comparison of the English with the German and French literatures, it is sufficient, so far as the point of relative maturity is concerned, to note the fact that the English is much the oldest of the three, and yet is growing abreast with its rivals. So far back as when Chaucer, Spenser, Shakspeare, Milton, Hooker, and Jeremy Taylor had all appeared, the French literature was barely beginning. De Quincey says, that, in the time of Corneille, he was the only French living author of general credit, and Montaigne the only deceased author of equal eminence. The English had an immense bulk of literature long before that, which has lived to our day. As to German literature, at that time it was almost a cipher. The English literature is by far the most mature of those of modern growth, in that it has the longest historical development, and is yet thriving. It gives no signs of decadent taste.

Still further: the English is the nearest approach the world has seen to a popular literature. Strictly speaking, there is no popular literature in existence; but ours is an approximation to it to an extent which is not true of any other which has existed since the time of the old Greek drama. Created as it has been under the influence of free institutions, it is a nearer approach to the masses of the people than any other of modern times. A mind formed under its sway has less to acquire from other sources in order to fit it for leadership of the masses of men than if formed under any foreign culture whatever.

The spirit of the French literature, in this respect, was expressed in the sentiment of Voltaire, that the people should be amused, and have bread, but should never be tempted to reason; for, "if the people became philosophers, all would go to destruction." The literary mind of France, till a recent date, has had no faith in the people. Moreover, so far as French authors do address themselves to the popular mind, it is chiefly to the Parisian mind; and they publish much which is vicious both in morals and in taste. The chief representative of popular literature in France is the French novel, the most corrupt of all modern fiction. It seldom deserves a place in a popular library.

In Germany we find a similar gulf between the people and the national literature. I am unable to say what changes may be taking place there in this respect; but, if I am rightly informed, there is scarcely another body of men living, of equal numbers and intelligence, comprising so many masters of solid learning, who are so far removed from the masses of the people as the scholarly men of Germany. German taste in literature seeks the clouds. My attention has been called to the fact, that, so far as German books are addressed to the popular mind, they are aimed at a lower grade of intellect than the same class of books in this country. They assume that the people are nearer childhood in their tastes. The paternal idea which pervades so largely the German theory of government is prominent in German books for the people.

This involves no disparagement of the German literature in other relations. Palliations of the existing state of things are found in the political distractions of Germany for the last half-century. German govern-

ments have virtually said to German scholars, "Think and print for yourselves and among yourselves. Do not set the people to thinking." Consequently, as related to the English, the German literature is inferior in those elements which go to make a thinking commonalty. The English has more of the popular mind and heart expressed in it, and in forms which can reach and inspire the popular mind and heart. It assumes the existence among the people of a more manly mind and a broader range of thinking. It has more of those universal ideas which appeal to human nature as such and in its maturity of development, and which are seconded by the large common sense of mankind.

Consequently, a mind in whose culture English thought and taste predominate will, other things being equal, have a larger capacity of influence over the popular mind than one in whose growth the German literature is ascendant. It will have less of the contraction of an exclusively scholastic discipline.

Finally, the English literature contains a rich department devoted to the several forms of persuasive speech. Eloquence proper is more largely represented in the English language than in any other in all history. The forensic and deliberative eloquence of England has contributed standards to libraries which have almost no counterpart, and can have none, in any other living language. The senate and the bar on the continent of Europe have till recently been almost nonentities for any purpose of oratorical culture. The restriction of free speech there has doomed the Continental libraries to sterility in both these departments which are so essential to the culture of a public man in America.

The strictly professional literature of the pulpit also is

largely represented in our native tongue. De Quincey, by a refreshing departure from his usual contempt for the clergy, admits that the living pulpit of England is uttering a vast amount of unpublished literature every Sunday. The English language has a large contribution from the pulpit of the past also already among its published standards. In the richness of this department it stands unrivaled. The ancient classics contain no word for such a thing as a pulpit. Preaching was an undiscovered art when Plato taught and when Homer sung. Aristotle's rhetoric would be proof, if there were no other, that he never heard a sermon. The vocabulary of Plato and Homer can not express all the ideas which are predominant in Christian preaching.

The French and the German pulpits bear no comparison with the English. They contain no single models which equal Barrow and South and Taylor and Robert Hall. Still less do they contain any such variety as is found in the history of English preaching. The French ideal of the pulpit is too theatrical for profound and long-lived influence. The Germans can hardly be said to have an ideal of it which reaches up to the German ideal of learning. In the German view the pulpit is beneath scholarly criticism. Tholuck, Krummacher, Nitzsch, Schleiermacher, and Steinmeyer are fair representatives of the first rank of German preachers in the last half-century. Not one of them would be placed by an intelligent critic by the side of American preachers of the corresponding rank.

The English language, on the contrary, overflows with the literature of the pulpit. It abounds in material which secular critics admit to *be* literature. This is a

concession which secular criticism makes with difficulty. But the fact compels it. We have standards which were created by the pulpit, to which scholars in all departments of thought turn, as among the choicest productions of the English mind. The bearing of this opulence of our literature in the forms of persuasive speech upon the claims of it on the study of a preacher is obvious.

It is not that the ancient or the foreign literatures should be ignored, or estimated lightly, but that they should be subordinated. We should go to them from an English culture, and come back from them to an English culture. Enlarge that culture, expand it, deepen it, elevate it, but let it in the end be English, pervaded by English tastes, controlled by English good sense, and supported by sympathy with English models.