The prospects of literature

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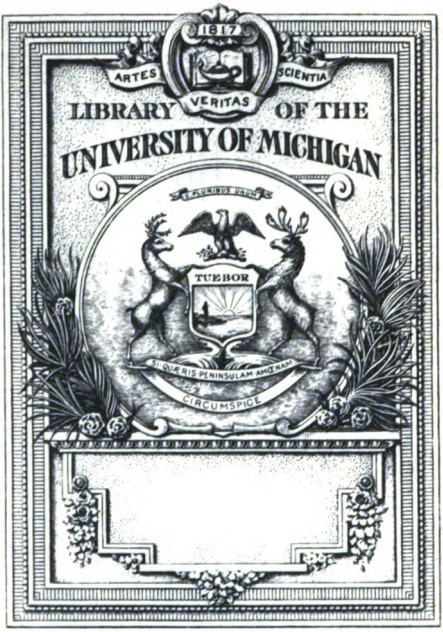

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THE PROSPECTS OF LITERATURE

BY

LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH

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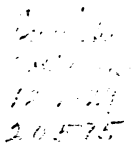

THE PROSPECTS OF LITERATURE

Mrs Virginia Woolf, in one of her delightful essays, states her belief that "we are trembling," as she puts it, "on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature." I should very much like to agree with Mrs Woolf: it would be pleasant to feel that one was at the dawn of a great epoch; nor indeed is it difficult to discover at the present time much that seems full of encouragement and promise. Our younger writers are undoubtedly daring and sincere, and they seem most anxious to tell the truth about what they think and feel in all sorts of circumstances. They have broken down

many of the old conventions, and have banished most of the taboos which used to be so hampering to freedom. There is also to-day a large public which is eager to welcome experiments; nor do I believe that there has ever been a time in our literary history when talent was more sure to meet with immediate recognition. All this, as I say, seems full of promise; but is it enough to justify us in the belief that a great age of enduring masterpieces is about to dawn upon us? Famous ages of this kind are the result of a number of complex circumstances; they have occurred, after all, very rarely in the history of literature, and, according to my reading of that history, they have been due above all to the happy coincidence of two conditions, neither of which can be said to characterize our time. In the great periods

of Greece and Rome, at the Classical revivals in Italy and France and England, as at the Romantic revivals in those countries—and these were the greatest epochs of literary creation—men shared in common certain convictions which they took more or less for granted; and it was the coherence of their beliefs and ideals, the grandiose completeness, rather than the ultimate truth, of their scheme of things, which gave them that imaginative dominion over experience which produces greatness. They had, in fact, a solution which sufficed them for life's problems, a formula, an agreed convention; it was this that enabled them to handle their material with the ease of masters; and even our predecessors of the Victorian era worked together on a basis of accepted ideas, which we, of the twentieth century, with our miscellaneous,

shattered view of the world, are very far from possessing.

But even this by itself is not enough. Literature is not a branch of philosophy or of social science; it is an art, and the arts only blossom freely—and how rarely they blossom with any freedom! —under certain technical conditions, and when their material, their medium happens to be in a state favourable to their right development. Great thoughts seem only able to produce great literature when they happen to coincide with a special condition of the means of expression, with what I may call, perhaps, a certain plastic state of language. This plastic state is due either to the unhackneyed freshness of an unexploited idiom, full of unconscious poetry, and with the dew of the morning, so to speak, upon it—and an unexhausted form of speech like this,

as with the Greeks, the Romans and the Elizabethan English, has formed the medium of the supremest literature; or it may be due, as at the Romantic period, to what is called linguistic renovation, to the vigour borrowed from popular speech, and to the revival of an old vocabulary which had fallen out of use. So important is this need of an unhackneyed, expressive diction to give to thought an enduring form, or at least so important does it seem to me (but I am perhaps a faddist on the subject), that I should hardly consider it a paradox to regard what we call the great imaginative periods of literature as being, in fact, linguistic phenomena—incidents, not so much in the history of man's mind, as in that of his language.

Of the preoccupation with language, the verbal preciosity and experiment

which absorbed so much attention in the age of Ronsard in France, and in that of Shakespeare in England, or of that search for a renewed vocabulary which inaugurated the Romantic revivals in these countries,—of any of this kind of linguistic ferment, which is the surest sign of a revival of letters, I can see, however, little or no evidence to-day. Almost all our younger writers appear to be perfectly content with the common and current vocabulary; save for a few almost grotesque aberrations, the diction and style of each of them is indistinguishable, to me at least, from the diction and style of any of the others.

The very conditions, moreover, which I have already mentioned as being apparently so full of encouragement—the widespread interest in literature, the large reading public, the prompt recog-

nition of merit,—all these things are hardly as favourable as they might seem to the development of literary talent. Enduring excellence in any art is not at all a necessary result—it would seem indeed to be more like an accidental by-product—of artistic activity, and a general interest in the art, and enthusiasm for it, often tends, by making it fashionable, to hamper and impede, rather than to foster it. And is not this what is happening to-day? A large number of people who would do well to concern themselves with other things are now led by fashion to take an intelligent, or semi-intelligent, interest in new books; they form enthusiastic cliques, so eager to welcome and make notorious any novelty, that the clever young writer is able to attain recognition much too easily. Success is, indeed, as Trollope says somewhere,

a necessary poison; but they are fortunate, he wisely adds, to whom it comes late in life and in small doses.

The effects of this easy success—and of the many dangers in the path of the would-be artist, premature success is probably the most dangerous,—the results of this quickly won popularity are not difficult to observe all about us. As soon as any glimmering of talent, any freshness of originality, makes its appearance, it is immediately noted and exploited. Editors of the weekly and even of the daily papers seize upon it; they have acquired, one may almost say of them, the habits of cannibals or ogres; they suck the brains of young writers, and then replace them by a new levy of adolescent talent. Their victims find it easy at the outstart to make money; even the fashion-papers pay them large sums for

their little essays; they acquire expensive habits; they are introduced by benevolent patrons into what is called good society, and losing before long, as journalists are apt to lose, the power of reading and of nourishing their minds by disinterested study, they soon exhaust their little stock of originality: they have nothing more to say; their contributions are no longer wanted; a new set of beginners supplants them, to be soon exhausted and supplanted in their turn.

I do not mean to suggest that journalism, the habit of rapid composition for the press, is always inimical to talent. Often, indeed, to men of matured minds it is a fortunate incentive, which compels them, as it compelled Hazlitt for instance, to give the world their accumulated treasures of reading and meditation, to pour out the richness of their

minds upon paper. But to the young, the inexperienced, the immature, how can this marketing of unripe fruit be anything but injurious?

Publishers also compete nowadays with editors in killing the goose whose golden eggs they live on. As soon as a young author makes a success his publisher urges him to repeat it at once; other publishers are eager to win his patronage, and he is not infrequently offered a fixed income on the condition that he shall regularly provide one or two volumes a year. It is difficult for the impecunious young to refuse these offers; but they stimulate, they indeed necessitate, that kind of hasty and abundant composition which must be harmful to any young writer, unless indeed he is endowed with the supremest talent. A great genius, it is true, born in a great age of literary creation,

and finding ready at hand a plastic medium in which to embody his imaginations, is sometimes able to produce abundant masterpieces, one after the other, and to write down without care pages which are destined to endure for ever. But these fortunate epochs occur so rarely, and these great unscrupulous artists who, like Shakespeare or Molière, can cater for the market without harm, and blamelessly worship the golden calf on the highest peaks of Parnassus, are so divinely gifted and so exceptional, that they are quite outside all the ordinary rules.

It would be invidious to mention names, but in following the careers of the more recent writers whose first books have charmed me, I almost invariably find that their earliest publications, or at least their earliest successes, are their best achievements; their pro-

mise ripens to no fulfilment; each subsequent work tends to be a feeble replica and fainter echo of the first. In recent years, and especially since the war, similar conditions have prevailed in France and in America; in these countries, as in England, the number of miscarriages of talent, the rate of infant mortality among gifts of promise, seems to be ever increasing. And, indeed, with all the advertisement and premature publicity of our time, where can we hope to find that leisurely ripening of talent in the shade of obscurity, that slow development by experiment and failure, by which it can best be mellowed and matured?

No; the old, hard conditions were surely better. It was much better to stone the prophets than to crown them, as we now crown them at once, with roses. They are stifled by the roses,

but the stones in the old days of stoning only drove them out into the desert to meditate on their mission and perfect their gifts, so that they might return at last to take their revenge on the world which had scorned them.

Is all lost then? If we live in an age which demands and abundantly rewards improvisation, but in which the improviser is extremely unlikely to produce enduring work; if all the circumstances of our time seem co-ordinated and organised to smother talent; if Mrs Woolf's surmised dawn is the late twilight that it seems to me, is there nothing to be done but to lay aside our pens and wait till the winter of our inanition be over? Must we console ourselves with the reflection that such winters are beneficent seasons of repose for the human spirit, and that Beauty, after being

buried for a while, will shine at its rediscovery—a hundred or two hundred years hence perhaps—with a new brightness? Or is there a way of keeping the lamp still alight, and handing it on to others through the dark; a path out of the wilderness, which can be followed under unfavourable as well as favourable circumstances; a means of achieving excellence which is more or less independent of the age one lives in?

In that lazy perusal of old books in which I spend so great a part of my existence, I sometimes come on a sentence, a phrase, an image which seems to arouse a faint echo somewhere within me. "That's for you; make a note of it; copy it out!" my Good Angel whispers, but too often I pay no attention to that wise admonition. Then afterwards, often days afterwards, some

dim reverberation of that forgotten sentence begins to haunt me; I begin to feel that some mysterious good had been embodied in it; that it had revealed perhaps the secret of a charming way of life, or had solved some perplexing problem, or had aptly expressed, it may be, some meaning of my own, giving importance to my private thought, and making it more true and lucid. In any case, back through all the books I have been reading, I must search for that lost phrase until again I find it.

"Je trouve au coin d'un bois le mot qui m'avoit fui—"

This line of Boileau's is the latest of these recaptures; and now that I have read it again in the epistles of that old bewigged poet, it creates for me an enchanting picture of a special kind of

lettered existence, of a life of toil and leisure, devoted to the development of talent—the life of Horace at his Sabine farm, of Boileau in his garden at Auteuil, of Pope at Twickenham, of Gray in his college rooms at Cambridge. Writers of this studious kind are more concerned with the conquests than the gifts of art, with what can be achieved by scrupulous correction, by the curious felicity of phrasing, by constant revision, and the assiduous labour of the file. They do not improvise, they are carried away by no sudden fits of inspiration; their industry is rather like that of the laborious bee, to which Horace, the master of them all, compared his toil; and their hives are enriched by the diligently gathered spoil of innumerable flowers. Or, to change the image, we may compare their method to the delicate chiselling of gems; nor is this

old comparison an unfitting one, since their verses often possess a gem-like quality which enables them to resist the wrong of time.

Although these laborious writers can seldom vie in achievement with the inspired poets of the creative ages, they have for us at least one great advantage; we can imitate them and learn from them, for they have much to teach us. We must honour the genius, and rejoice that he has existed, but we must take good care not to try to follow in his footsteps. The example of the man of genius is, as Flaubert was fond of pointing out, the worst kind of example for the man of talent; and talent and the development of talent amid unfavourable conditions is my subject in this paper. I have spoken of poets; but for writers of careful prose, like Flaubert for instance, or Walter Pater,

the methods of cultivating a gift and creating a style are not in any way different.

Should the age then provide no great impulse, and beget no genius, talent may still find its opportunity for development; and by the inspiration of technique and the study of the best models it may produce work of enduring value. If the thought of the time we live in gives us no general scheme of ideas and no agreed convictions, we may still be able to discover in our own thought and our own temperament, if we search for it, some point of view which will enable us to dominate our own experience; some meaning which, for ourselves at least, is central and significant. Should the language of the day be set in fixed formulas and moulds, and the vocabulary have lost its freshness, it is still possible to discard those formulas and

break those moulds, to make one's own vocabulary and create one's own individual and expressive style.

To write as if we were geniuses, and to imitate the easy carelessness of those great men in an age which does not produce them, must almost certainly lead to artistic failure. But to cultivate a talent is always possible; and how many beautiful and enduring works of literature are the fruits of talent brought by labour and care to its utmost perfection! Delightful it must be, no doubt, to live in a great epoch and be hypnotised by it, and become its mouthpiece, to have mighty words, words one cannot help, rush to one's lips in the ecstasy of inspiration; but to shut oneself away from hostile circumstance in some pleasant solitude, and devote the leisure of one's mornings to the labour of the file; to search for the word

one wants, and then to walk abroad and find it perhaps at the corner of a wood, is not this also a delightful way of living, and may it not be that those who spend their days in this delicate and learned labour taste what are after all the more conscious, the more exquisite, the more aristocratic joys of the career of letters?

But to lead this life, to taste these joys, certain qualities of temper are needed, and the ability is also needed to make certain renunciations. The labour of creating one's own style can only be undertaken by one to whom that labour is in itself delightful; his pains must be his pleasures also, he must love the medium he works in, delight in playing with words and phrases, as the painter delights in playing with his palette and paints and brushes. He must be willing, if neces-

sary, to be poor, for his fastidious pen will not support him, and if he must earn his living he must earn it by other means than those of literature. He must not repine at obscurity, for poverty and obscurity are likely to be for many years his companions; nor should he envy too much the early successes of his more popular contemporaries, or of those who are younger than himself.

This is indeed an old-fashioned way of life which I find myself recommending; and it is only, I think, by means of a desire, a purpose, an ideal aim which appears to be equally out of fashion to-day, that it has ever been possible to adopt, or at least to maintain, it.

The youth of to-day seem to me, as I have said, intensely interested in life; but, if I observe them rightly, it is life

more as a means to experience, than as an opportunity for achievement, which absorbs and excites them. To undergo one experience after another, to tell the truth about each, and thus to win the attention of their contemporaries—something of this kind strikes me as being in the main their animating motive. That life can be above all an opportunity for carrying out a preconceived plan, for striving onwards towards a distant goal; that it should only be crowned at last, if at all, by that enduring fame which is the final reward of a rounded career,—this is an antique ideal which seems to be so forgotten now, and even the words which express it sound curiously out of date in our more modern vocabulary.

It is natural enough that, to a generation disillusioned by the war, the notions embodied in high-sounding terms like

Fame and Glory should seem somewhat pompous and absurd. Perhaps they are so, perhaps all such aims are folly; perhaps those who are devoid of such ambitions are superior, as they certainly are more amiable and easy-going, human beings. Only—and this is the point I want to emphasize—we must not expect them to leave much enduring work behind them. Unless an artist regards achievement in his art, and the lasting fame it brings, as infinitely worth while, esteems it as far above immediate success and the applause of his contemporaries, unless he be sustained and spurred on, and, if you like, deluded, by a faith, a fanaticism, a folly of this kind, he is not in the least likely to maintain his purpose, striving ever onwards towards that excellence which, we are told, "dwells among rocks hardly accessible, and a

man must almost wear his heart out before he can reach her." Fame may be the last infirmity of noble mind, but the noblest minds whom Time has crowned with enduring laurel have seldom been untouched by this brave fever. With what a passion the ancient Greeks loved fame, and how abundantly was that love rewarded! The κλέα ἀνδρῶν the game of great deeds which might reach heaven was the high incentive of the Homeric heroes; the thought of it inspired Pindar's odes; and Plato expressed the feeling of this most glorious and vainglorious people, when he made the wise Diotima exalt the love in mortals of immortal fame, saying that she was persuaded "that all men do all things—and the better they are the more they do them—in the hope of the glorious fame of immortal virtue, for they desire the immortal." With

this fine passion the Greeks infected the Romans, handing it on to the nobler among them as a spark of divinest fire. It flashed out again at the Renaissance from the ashes of antiquity; and the French, with their love of *la gloire*, have carried on this, as they have other classical traditions. When the most famous of French critics comes to depict a character devoid of ambition and the love of fame, he notes the absence of this high and animating motive, this desire to excel, which, he says, elevates men above themselves, and sustains them through a whole life-time of honourable activity—he notes a deficiency of this kind as a grave default, and as a sign of poverty of spirit. It is easy enough, Sainte-Beuve says, to miss fame by not believing in it; and this, in my analysis of their plight, seems to me likely to be the

fate of our younger generation. With the love of fame, the desire to appeal to a more permanent audience than that of one's immediate contemporaries, the other unfavourable conditions of the time, however discouraging, would present no insuperable difficulties; the temptations of money and immediate success could be resisted; but if writers have no belief in lasting renown, and no desire for it, if they produce their works only for the day's consumption, how can they expect to win enduring reputations? it being useless, as Schopenhauer pointed out, for pastry-cooks to appeal to posterity.

Fame indeed is seldom with us so conscious, or at least so openly avowed, an object of ambition as it is in France, and we possess no exact equivalent for the French term *la gloire*. But the ideal of which fame is the old and

consecrated symbol, the desire to leave behind one something which the world will be unwilling to let die, and thus to live on in the thoughts of succeeding ages, has been, though they may not have so often confessed it, a most potent incentive to our greatest English writers.

What I am writing sounds no doubt rather priggish; and I am perfectly aware that it is in a way ridiculous for little mortals to be so anxious about their puny performances and their insignificant reputations. All such thoughts are chilled at once when we reflect on the almost certain indifference of posterity, or extend our cogitations as far as the next glacial epoch. But the desire for enduring renown, though rooted in the egotism of our vain human nature, reaches upward towards more permanent things, and bears fairer fruit upon its branches.

Fame, as Hazlitt, the least priggish of our critics, declared in his panegyric of that passion, is not popularity, the shout of the multitude; it is the spirit of man surviving in the minds and thoughts of other men; and the love of it is, he says, only another name for the love of excellence; or it is "the ambition to attain the highest excellence, sanctioned by the highest authority—that of time." "Fame," another critic writes (and I cannot deny myself the pleasure of copying out this eloquent passage):

> Fame, as a noble mind conceives and desires it, is not embodied in a monument, a biography, or the repetition of a strange name by strangers; it consists in the immortality of a man's work, his spirit, his efficacy, in the perpetual rejuvenation of his soul in the world. When Horace—no model of magnanimity—wrote his *exegi monumentum*, he was not thinking that the pleasure he

would continue to give would remind people of his trivial personality, which indeed he never particularly celebrated, and which had much better lie buried with his bones. He was thinking, of course, of that pleasure itself; thinking that the delight, half lyric, half sarcastic, which those delicate cameos had given him to carve would be perennially renewed in all who retraced them. Nay, perhaps we may not go too far in saying that even that impersonal satisfaction was not the deepest he felt; the deepest, very likely, flowed from the immortality, not of his monument, but of the subject and passion it commemorated; that tenderness, I mean, and that disillusion with mortal life which rendered his verse immortal. He had expressed, and in expressing appropriated, some recurring human moods, some mocking renunciations, and he knew that his spirit was immortal, being linked and identified with that portion of the truth.[1]

Such, then, is the incentive which

[1] George Santayana: *The Life of Reason*, vol. ii., *Reason in Society*, pp. 144–145.

those who do not believe in it run the risk of missing. Is a purpose of this kind lightly to be disregarded? Among all the things that men live for, is the eternity of their thought, or such eternity as earth can give, their least worthy object of desire? Was not Renan right when he said that glory after all is the thing which has the best chance of not being altogether vanity? And even if fame be nothing but a shadow and an illusion, and those who pursue it shadows also, yet surely of all illusions it is the most illustrious, being the image and symbol of the highest excellence. To love fame is no merely egotistic passion; and indeed were it otherwise, were a man's attempt to make his name immortal nothing but a mad and private venture, ought we not to prize it even so for the insolence of so vainglorious a design? Should any-

one be touched to-day by this old infatuation, and find himself among the lovers of enduring fame, he may reflect, at least, that nowhere else could he be in better company. And, anyhow, is not life more interesting, is it not more of an adventure, and (if we care to use the old-fashioned word) may we not call it nobler, if we have some impossible aim to live for, some ideal purpose, however unavailing, to animate our dust?

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