*A REPUBLIC OF BOOKS.**

The average man, the man who does not read anything but newspapers, thinks of books as the sealed packets of an exotic intelligence, which it will not do him much good to open. He knows nothing of the fine salt-reek in the pages of Hakluyt, or the hearty strain of the ballad-book,—

> "It fell about the Lammas tide
> When the moor-men win their hay."

But by this neglect he leaves unused his sixth sense,—that which quickens all the others, that which can add rooms to his house and a region to his brain. If over-night he has been in Nantucket with the American Farmer, De Crèvecœur, or walking the Edinburgh Canongate with Sir Walter Scott, he has a fresh vista to his street when he turns out in the morning.

In this faith, some six or seven years ago, we set out to build our new republic—a Library-in-Being, that should have in view throughout the play of literature upon life. It did not signify where we began, so long as we took for the beginning a handful of live books,—authors who had stood the racket of time and the changes of fashion. Once chosen, their elective affinities would do the rest. We pitched, as it happened, first on Boswell, since his Doctor Johnson is not only a man, but a whole tract of human nature, with London and Fleet Street for a background, and the Big Dictionary for a sign. A better inductor to the commonwealth than Dr. Johnson could hardly be desired. As we read his biography, he starts up in the book, more alive than most of us who think we live. One Monday morning,—to be exact October 4, 1779,—Boswell relates how he went to see the Doctor before he was yet out of bed. "He sent for me to his bedside," says Boswell, and seemed "as pleased as if he had been in the gaiety of youth, and called out briskly,—'Frank, go and get coffee and let us *breakfast in splendour!*'" A few days later and a little discussion of the Art of Coaxing a Fire leads to a piece of folk-lore, and to the aphorism,—"Be as wise as you can." This is from the life, and human nature is re-kindled in the page. Another page, and Dr. Johnson recommends to Boswell a Greek Lexicon, a translation of the first book of the Iliad, and Hesiod. In fact, while he was a great *viveur*, a man who lived for life, and never bookish in the dull way, he loved a cordial writer, said "the chief glory of every people arises from its authors," and waxed eloquent over the life and death of words, "some budding, some falling away."

We did not wish, however, to construct a Dr. Johnson Academy of Letters, nor a Boswell group in the Senate. We tried to keep in mind the sort of young man who once wrote confidentially to say that "his specialty was the universe." So we went

*This article, written by the editor of "Everyman's Library," is a statement of the editorial plan and purpose of that enterprise.

on boldly, knitting up antiquity with our new time, and adding Athens to Boston, and Emerson to my Lord Verulam, and in our second relay contrived even to make near neighbors of that most engaging book of wit and wisdom, "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," and Plato's "Republic."

From the last-named work we took a parable,—that of the transcendent thirst, the desire in the soul for something more than meat or drink. There are authors who create this thirst, and if biography is specially good for the purpose, so is fiction. Your real novel is an admirable incentive: familiar history itself, it leads to history. We soon had Balzac on the list, opening the great human comedy as he conceived it with his *Peau de Chagrin*, which is the fable of Everyman's strife with death and time; just as Everyman looks for his own plight of memory and age in Rip Van Winkle or in Colonel Newcome. Balzac holds a master-key to the treasury of the republic. What did he say in the confession of faith that opens his encyclopædia of human nature? "I attach to common everyday facts and acts of mere individual lives, and to their causes and principles, the importance which historians have hitherto ascribed to the events of public national life." He expanded this idea in constructing his history. He wished, in fact, to construct a republic all of his own making. "My work," said he proudly, "has its geography, as it has its genealogy and its families, its places and things,—its heraldry, its nobles and commoners, workmen and peasants, senators and dandies; its army, too,—in short a whole world of its own."

What Balzac tried to do in his single discharge, it ought to be possible to carry out, we thought, in the wider circles of human interest. Take Pepys's Diary, for instance. There is a book that is centrifugal: you do not get far in its pages without being infected by the gossip's curiosity. What of the plays he went to? "Bartholomew's Fair," by Ben Jonson, which he saw more than once; or Beaumont and Fletcher's "Philaster," or Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

Pepys, though living under Charles II., and aware of Nell Gwynn, did very well as a citizen of the literary commonwealth. And it was easy, while the theatres were in demand, to move from English to Greek drama. Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, had followed as a matter of course,—and we presently found it necessary to put Ibsen by Euripides. We would have followed Aristophanes with George Bernard Shaw, and Shaw with Synge, but for restrictions of copyright, against which the free spirits that are in books mutiny in vain. But we were able to map out other town-lands with some completeness. We could have Grote's "Greece," and Finlay's, to eke out our spiritual Athens. We could build around Gibbon's "Rome" with Sismondi's "Italian Republics," and Macchiavelli could have his vital supplement and counterblast in Mazzini. As the scheme developed, it became clear that the value of the structural idea on which it was ultimately to rest had not been exaggerated. Our silent republicans were in their way very effective. They made their colony in every quarter of the known world. They seemed of themselves to make their own groups and installations, as if to reaffirm Emerson's theory of a new dynamic quality of mind that travelled by day and night, moving in concentric circles. By their law of interfusion, the spirit in each great author found out its congenial spirit in another, and the acquisition of truth and reality in any one quarter was proved "so much good to the commonwealth of souls."

The one portion of the commonalty which we feared the average man was most likely to neglect was that of Philosophy. Everyman finds something alarming in the idea of Plato, something disturbing in the mere notion of taking up a book by René Descartes. Yet who that lights on an account of the life Descartes spent as a soldier in the Low Countries—camp life with a mixture of fighting and high thinking—is satisfied to pause there? A page of military strategy, leading on to a question of the structure of the stars and the divine proportions of the human body, may serve to kindle curiosity; and then the reader, if he have any intellectual spunk, will be bound to explore the "Meditations" and the "Discourse on Method" for himself. In 1619, the author of those works joined the army of Maximilian on the Danube, and there, he tells us, he passed the greatest day of his life, "being full of enthusiasm and having discovered the basis of true science." That is a personal revelation to draw the spirit of a Descartes close to those other free spirits, books and men, on whose effect the fortune of the literary state, invisible and spiritual, rests. From Descartes it is an inevitable step that takes one to a volume of Spinoza, or to a Bishop Berkeley who saw the external world as dependent for its very existence upon the ideal. To compare Berkeley's "New Theory of Vision" with the pages in which René Descartes discussed the ideas of corporeal and incorporeal substance and the ideas of place and space is to arrive at a new sensation of the world by which man is environed, and the modes by which he is conditioned. On this base of relative authors, with what may be called Literary Architecture, or something akin to it, we reared our expanding walls. To go to Rome in Shakespeare's "Julius Cæsar," or to Paris in Balzac's "César Birotteau," to take up the "Little Flowers" of St. Francis, or the Speeches of Abraham Lincoln, was clue enough, we believed, to bring any man and every man within the structural lines. And once within them he was lost,—or saved. The silent republicans had him at their mercy. He must submit to their law, and become wise as Plato, multiple as Shakespeare, impulsive as Burns, in spite of himself.

This conspiracy against the literary diffidence of the huge public was associated very closely with the two main ideas that lay behind the whole scheme: One, that Everyman (the typical sensual "Modern Man" of Whitman's poem) should be able to turn to

the Library for his congenial or predestinate Book and find it there. The other, that every Book should have its correlatives, and its copesmate, in the structure. This may seem to breathe an air of transcendentalism; but in fact it is only another way of applying the democratic idea in the literary arena. We consulted the crowd, and believed in the instincts and the appetite of men and women for sheer intelligence. Let them touch the live circuit anywhere, and the spark must do its work. They might turn, hoping only for sensation and the breath of Russian anarchy, to a novel like Turgenev's "Virgin Soil" or Dostoieffsky's "Crime and Punishment." That would do the business. A single Dumas book would serve to open, although with something of melodrama, the tremendous roll of the French Revolution, and so involve the unsuspecting reader in Carlyle, and then in Teufelsdröckh and in Goethe. A speech of Lincoln's might be the key to Grote and the spent democracy of Greece; and an essay of Lowell's induct the Elizabethans, and they in turn the theatre of Ibsen, and the Ibsenites and new Pittites. The live book and the play of literature upon life,—we held by these; and it almost seems now that our belief in our Academe or Republic is and will be assured.

ERNEST RHYS.