The Coasts of Bohemia

UNDER the most favorable conditions of national authorship and continuous tradition one can hardly expect to be touched by a work of art exactly as it touched the generation for which it was produced. But at the same time, in the case of those books that have stirred their age most profoundly, however foreign they may now have come to seem, it is still possible as a general thing to detect at least something of the secret of their original power. So after a fashion we can understand the reason of "Obermann," for instance, or even of "Wilhelm Meister," that greatest of all literary superstitions.

But how Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* ever came by the reputation and influence it once possessed remains a mystery.* To us nowadays it seems but a loose collection of questionable episodes, which have not even the wit to be amusing, told without any particular point or art, affording no outlook upon life worth having. Of morality, even of that doubtful sort which engages seriously with disagreeable problems, it never boasted; its philosophy ends with the recognition of chance; and as for its point of view, it is only the occasional college sophomore, that most irresponsible of amateurs, who still continues to cultivate the genial vices as a specific for genius.

Surely the times have changed and the literary fashion. For these shabby seeming tales were the fountain at which French youth inspired itself half a century ago, the fruit at which our young fathers, or grandfathers possibly, if they read French, nibbled, no doubt with a half-shamefaced impression that they were tampering with the tree of knowledge. Whether such a place as Murger's Bohemia ever existed or not was to them a matter of very little importance. They recognized a sense in which fancy is as true as actuality and illusion as real as fact, since, after all, the work of the mind is as genuine as that of the hand; and they troubled themselves very little with subtle distinctions between phenomena psychological and historical. We can even remember a specious contention of this same date to the effect that the Bible would still be more wonderful and worthy of reverence as a creation of the human imagination than as an historical document—a singular and extreme instance of what we may call the literary confusion. But this, on the contrary, is an age of exact verisimilitude, which must have its Shakespeare rigorously synchronized, which cannot suffer an anachronism and loves Autolycus' toes out of his boots and will have its little stories studied *sur le vif*—always, of course, with a concession to the official optimism. And for this age it may be doubted whether poor old sentimental Henry Murger knew a spell. And yet to "the not incurious" the book may serve to recall a time when the modern world, like the sophomore aforesaid, was passing through a stage, for which, let us hasten to add, no one should think the worse of it, prosperous and *bien réglé* as it now is.

* THE LATIN QUARTER. (*Scènes de la Vie de Bohème.*) *By Henry Murger. Translated by Ellen Marriage and John Selwyn.* New York: Doubleday, Page & Co. $1.50.

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