Literature Music Art

RAMBLING THOUGHTS

"No one," says Schopenhauer, "can get beyond his own individuality," and while this is quite true, yet there is no such limitation in the fact embodied in this statement as would appear at a first glance. After all, just what is "individuality?" Your individuality and mine? For there are no two individuals thus wholly similar if they resemble one another in many points they will differ essentially in others. So that no one can outline certain characteristics and say "Here is the description of the personality of the average man," and that very difference is what makes human intercourse so illumining, so broadening, so necessary. Man is a gregarious animal, he loves his kind, because he cannot get along without his kind, and we are speaking now of his mental wants, his mind craves communion with kindred minds, because it is only by that communing that his own intellect can become developed. It is by the contact of mind with mind that great thoughts and ideas are conceived and wonderful projects born.

If we stop to think a moment, we realize what a diversity of intellects there are, for the fact of this is borne in to us a dozen times in the course of the day. It is interesting to think upon this, and then to decide just in which of the many categories we would place our own individuality.

Take for instance, one of these evenings late in May, when mingling with the cool wind of spring in little fitful elusive gusts the amorous breath of the summer, blinding our senses for that fleeting second, filling us with desires sweet as they are transient. The blue of the sky all along the horizon is covered with a golden haze, but just above between the blue of the west and the deeper blue of the zenith stretches a maze of cirri, those soft fleecy clouds, little more than visible breaths that are indications of fair weather. Just now these cirri are faintly tinged with rose, so that the sky looks as if the gods or the fairies or whatever fanciful deities you believe in, had been scattering peach blossom and apple blossom petals there, that retained their place in spite of all the laws of gravitation or any other "ation." And then to complete the picture, and some of you can bear out the description yourselves there is the "silver sickle" of the new moon, and in beautifully close proximity, Venus, I think it is, shining like a silver sun.

Well now, haven't you a friend among your many acquaintances, who with that selfsame picture described in front of his eyes every night for nearly a week, has utterly failed to notice it? A nice sort of person, too, so sensible and practical, not much sympathy, maybe, but the sympathy is so often misplaced, but level-headed—that's the word exactly—level-headed, so level-headed that he never thinks to raise his eyes above the mundane and the common-place.

You have another friend. He was with you last night when the beauty of the sunset sky smote upon your sight and you stood still involuntarily and marveled. Following your awe struck gaze he gave a little chuckle. "New moon eh?" he had said. "Rattle your money in your pockets, old man, it'll bring you luck."

Then there is that old, old friend, you don't often see him now. You wish you could, but life is so full of things to do. You have married, maybe, and your wife and children take every moment of time you can spare from business. You would not have it otherwise of course, whenever you stop to ponder, you tell yourself over and over again, that you would not change the new order for the old, though a million dollars or so were thrown in by way of inducement, but—and you only realize this upon rare moments when you have time for contemplation but—you would like to have retained a few of the old habits, a few of the old associates, with whom you used to dream of the future as a very wonderful state quite the same in a sense and yet wholly different from what it has proved itself to be. You know where that old, old friend for instance, passed those few moments of sunset time last night. Somewhere by himself alone with sea and sky, his glass the medium between himself and the stars, bringing him closer to those heavens which he has so loved to make his life-study, a study, which scientific though it is, has not dulled his rich imagination, has not made him the poorer in poetic fancies, but only opened the door for him to a truer and more beautiful dream-world.

There is your clergyman friend, not the young curate who, very correct and orthodox, seldom calls the moon and the stars for witnesses, and "abhors anything approaching paganism," nor yet that fiery old preacher whom you go to hear sometimes, hurling his condemnation at the thousands that crowd his chapel, sparing neither priest, prince nor Croesus, but a man younger than either of these two, a shabby, beautiful-faced mission preacher, who follows his calling as the disciples did of old, or as they were commanded to do at all events, neither asking nor receiving remuneration, and with a band of followers, as devoted as they are happy. In the winter-time his place of worship is a mere shelter from the elements, but in the summer time, he preaches in the great cathedral of the out-of-doors. He will have seen in that sunset last night, a special message from God—his God of the wind and the stars and the sea, and the laugh of little children and the song of the birds in the spring mornings.

And lastly—the friend that is dead—the friend that you have never seen and only known through the wonderful messages he has left behind, fragments of thought that he embodied in poems of a beauty never-to-be-forgotten, and left for you, and the thousands of others that read them to interpret according to your several abilities and necessities.

What would he have said of the picture in the sky? "Lift thy soul with thine eyes," he would have commanded, "and know that as thy strength is, so shalt thy prayer be answered. To God all things are possible, and to thee. For thou and God art one."

And so our rambling thoughts have led us back to the beginning and the words of Schopenhauer, "No one can get beyond his individuality" because his individuality is boundless. It has its beginning in God, who is world without end?

THE AWAKENING OF THE SEEDS

Nothing more remarkable, more delightful, can well be imagined than the evidence to be met with everywhere, at the season of spring, of the re-awakening of plant life. It must occur to many to ask, What is it that determines the inexpressible outburst of energy, visible as growth, so characteristic of the season? In some measure, doubtless, it is an expression of a cyclic or rhythmic process; still more largely it may be regarded as the response to the change in external conditions—to the lengthening days and the increasing power of the sun's rays; a warmer temperature begins to prevail both above and in the soil, and this has the inevitable effect of hastening the rate at which chemical changes go on within the plant. The very slowness with which re-awakening sets in when the season is cold, as in the present year, is striking proof that warmth is the chief determinant of activity. The complexity of the phenomena underlying growth is such, however, that not many are able, even in broad outline, to visualize the processes that are involved in it; fortunate, but very few, are those who, looking at the growing plant, can fathom its workings, sympathize with its needs, and understand the difficulties against which it has to struggle—only such can appreciate the extraordinary variety of interchanges which the simple food materials it derives from air and soil undergo ere they become elaborated into the wondrous forms they ultimately assume in flower, leaf, stem and root.

What is it that causes the seed in its cold, wet bed to start growing? How many have considered the question? The seed contains a frail germ of the plant that is to be—we must suppose with all its peculiarities potentially defined—together with the store of food required for its development up to the point at which the mechanism is elaborated whereby it is enabled to utilize sunshine and live by its own labor. This food, like our food, is mainly of two kinds—non-nitrogenous and nitrogenous; like ourselves, the young plant must have starch and flesh food, though like some men, such as the Esquimo, some plants can utilize fat in place of starch; all need albuminous (white-of-egg-like) materials such as are contained in our flesh food. The food of the plant has to be digested just as our food has to be, and the digestive agents are closely akin to and in many cases identical with those at our disposal. The digestive agents or enzymes are usually laid down apart from the food materials which it is their function to convert into assimilable forms. The process of germination in some way involves the occurrence of changes whereby the enzymes are rendered operative.

Recent observations have shown that leaves are protected by a membrane, similar to that covering seeds, which prevents the escape of soluble substances, such as sugar, into water resting on the leaf surface; this membrane is permeable by ammonia, ether, chloroform, and many other substances which have only a slight affinity for water. When such substances pass into the leaf, they at once affect the changes going on within the cells; if the dose be a minute one, they merely stimulate changes in the direction which there is reason to believe is followed normally, especially during the period when the plant is not exposed to light—changes which may be referred to as downgrade, similar to those attending the digestion of food in the stomach and its conversion into soluble, assimilable forms that can pass into the circulation. If more than a minute dose be introduced into the leaf the effect is one of over-stimulation and lethal—usually the leaf turns brown. The effect may be observed most easily, perhaps, in leaves of the common spotted Japanese laurel, which rapidly turns almost black under the influence of ammonia or the vapor of ether, chloroform, etc. The leaf of the common laurel turns brown; but the browning is attended by the escape of prussic acid, a circumstance from which it is possible to infer the nature of the change that is produced in the leaf.

It is highly probable that the germination of seeds in ordinary soil is largely if not entirely determined by the traces of ammonia normally present in the soil and that the carbonic acid in soil also acts as a stimulant. Recent researches carried out at the Lawes Agricultural Trust Experiment Station at Rothamsted by Dr. Russell and his co-workers have brought to light the remarkable fact that of the large number of organisms within the soil, some—the bacteria—are effective in breaking down the organic matter in the soil until it becomes available as plant food; these are chiefly concerned in producing ammonia from the complex nitrogenous materials. Other larger organisms known as protozoa are present, but these appear to fatten on the bacteria and to diminish their activity by reducing their numbers. Dr. Russell has shown that when the protozoa are killed off and only the bacteria are allowed to survive, these latter can multiply undisturbed; the changes to which they give rise can then take place to a greater extent than in ordinary soil, and, consequently, the fertility of the soil is greatly increased. The discovery is one that promises to be of the greatest practical utility—especially in connection with cultivation under glass.

Attention has been called recently in these columns to the increased growth observed in some cases when growing crops are subjected to the influence of electric discharges. Should the results be confirmed, it will be important to ascertain wh-- such discharges are effective; they might well give rise to the production of small amounts of ammonia within the soil; and, if this prove to be the case, an explanation will have been given of the stimulative effect of electric discharges which would be in harmony with general agricultural experience. Enough will have been said to show that the effect of stimulants on plant growth is one that should be taken into consideration; that plants, in fact, do not lead an entirely humdrum existence, but, like ourselves, require and enjoy condiments.

SOME OF THIS YEAR'S ACADEMY PICTURES

A writer in the London Times deplores the quality of most of the pictures exhibited at the Academy. He says: "It is to be regretted that there is so little demand among private persons for modest decorative painting; that is to say, for painting that is designed to suit a particular room, or at any rate to suit a room rather than an exhibition. The public has learned to judge pictures by their exhibition qualities, and the natural result is that artists paint for exhibition rather than for decoration. Their pictures are designed to compete with each other, not to look well upon the walls of a room. So long as this kind of competition lasts, we shall have no steady demand for it. People like to look at exhibition pictures, but not to buy them; and they regard exhibitions more and more as entertainments rather than as markets."

The art critic in the Daily Telegraph writes as follows:

The styles are so many and diverse, and yet so little representative, in this, the one hundred and forty-third exhibition of the Royal Academy, that it becomes exceedingly difficult to base upon it general considerations in regard to the position of modern British art at the present moment. It can no longer be maintained that the Academy, as a whole, is opposed to the more moderate phases of modernity as developed by the British school, seeing that it has of late proved itself a potent Armida to more than one young Rinaldo of the opposite camp.

Of one of the most-talked-of pictures on exhibition the last quoted critic remarks:

Mr. Sargent's great effort is "Armageddon" evidently one of the series of monumental decorations destined for the public library at Boston, in the United States. This is the great symbolical battle in which the whole universe is to ring with the din of war, and in which is to be fought out the final struggle between good and evil. The theologians have never been able thoroughly to make up their minds as to the true import of this awful clashing of the powers. Moreover, we do not feel at all sure that the master has expressed their meaning, such as it is, or that we have expressed his. From a golden car has been hurled out a colossal nude figure of Herculean strength and beauty, and this embodiment of might and power, another nude figure, flying downwards, crowned with a winged headdress like that of some demoniacal Mercury, stabs to the heart with a dagger held in one hand, while with a torch held in the other he sets aflame an altar dripping with the blood of sacrifice. The huge white coursers still attached to the car tumble headlong through the empyrean, the silver tripod, overturned, drops with them; an eagle, with wings outstretched, follows in the dire confusion, ready for ruthless attack. So vast an effort, so great a display of technical accomplishment is rare, indeed, in the present day, and we are bound to treat it with the respect which it has earned. That there are passages here of great power—especially the upturned car with the mighty white coursers, and the terrible winged genius of destruction—must not be denied. The intensity of the effort is felt throughout, and deserves full acknowledgment, although no sense of true vision, of a great conception of the subject as a whole, is conveyed. We say to ourselves: "How wonderful that one who in his masterly presentments of contemporary humanity never rises, or strives to rise, to that imaginativeness which is the higher and more penetrating conception, that such a one should venture into these regions, and by sheer will-power should achieve even the measure of success which must here in fairness be conceded." Our thought is ever of the painter battling with his subject, not of the subject itself. This theme, if pictorially admissible at all, should hold the onlooker breathless with awe, but here, on the contrary, leaves him cold and puzzled, though filled with admiration, for astonishing pluck and mastery of technical difficulties. The now too much despised German painter, Cornelius, once deemed the greatest creative genius in art of the nineteenth century, but now merely respected and neglected, has produced work infinitely more coherent and impressive of its kind than this, though pictorially harsh and unsatisfying. His creations coming within this category—above all, the cycle of frescoes in the Glyptothek of Munich—however much we may criticize and condemn, live in the memory as with a grim power, summing up the vast subjects attempted. Mr. Sargent leaves us unawed, unconvinced, discontentedly arguing with him and, above all, with ourselves.

Mr. Lavery, in the equestrian portrait-study, "The Amazon," achieves a remarkable success, both as pleinairste and portrait painter. With a splendid audacity, he has established his equestrian figure—a youthful amazon of today, who sits motionless and attentive in her saddle, holding, Dian-like, her long hunting spear, and gazing undismayed into the far distance. Her horse stands firm on the rocky eminence of the foreground, below which enrolls itself a beautiful prospect of undulating green scenery, colored here and there to a deeper tint by some passing cloud. With a perfect simplicity and realism there is something of grandeur in this quiet, attentive figure, that stands alone with the world, nerved to face adventure and resolute to achieve.

One of the most conspicuous pictures in the exhibition is Mr. George Harcourt's "Evening in June." One may call it a subject picture without a subject, because the motive, which is merely Chinese lanterns shining in a blue dusk with a number of figures doing nothing in particular, is treated on a scale and with an emphasis which we only expect where the subject has some imaginative significance. In theory, of course, an artist can make a masterpiece out of anything, or rather anything may be a subject of imaginative significance to him. But, if it is, he will express its significance to the spectator. Mr. Harcourt has not done this. One feels that only his eye has been interested in this arrangement of colored lights and in their play upon the figures and the foliage. The picture, in fact, is a piece of impressionism, skilfully observed and composed, but painted on far too large a scale. It looks empty, because there is no imaginative emphasis anywhere and none of that beautiful quality of paint which is the expression of imaginative delight. It is a representation of phenomena not often represented; and its interest dies away with its novelty.

In Gallery XI. there are two subject pictures, one of which will certainly attract attention, while the other deserves it. Mr. Byam Shaw in his "The Woman, the Man, and the Serpent" has painted the Temptation with a curious mixture of decorative and dramatic intention. Adam and Eve are surrounded with a blaze of flowers of all latitudes while the Serpent is a python with a patterned skin almost as bright as the flowers. All these accessories, if one can call the Serpent an accessory, are evidently studied very closely from life and are painted with great precision. But the artist has failed just where he has not been able to study from life—namely, in our first parents. They, except for their absence of clothes, belong to the stage, not to the Garden of Eden. Their expressions are forced and hackneyed, like those of bad actors in an emotional scene. So there is a violent incongruity between them and the rest of the picture. Mr. Shaw, in fact, has tried to do too much. In design his picture is a mere pattern of flowers and the nude; but he has attempted to impose a dramatic pictorial conception. The result is an imaginative failure where there might have been a decorative success.

MUSICAL NOTES

Some Wagnerian Memoirs

Wagner, relating in his memoirs his early experiences, says that when at the age of nine he was introduced to Weber the latter asked his mother whether the boy was likely to become a musician. His mother replied that, although Richard was perfectly mad about the opera "Der Freischutz," she had never yet noticed anything in him that pointed to musical talent. He was the only one of his family not allowed to learn to play the piano, his mother fearing that if he did so it might awaken his slumbering affection for the theatre. Thus, when his love for music overpowered him, he began to learn secretly, and also devoted himself to the study of harmony, whereby he neglected totally all his school studies.

When he became a student at Leipzig University, he plunged into a fighting corps, wore the colors proudly, and narrowly escaped some serious duels. The manner in which he confesses his faults, throws new light upon his character. In simple but exceedingly moving words he tells of the gambling passion that held him like a demon; his long run of ill-luck maddened him; he lost interest in all else but play. Indifferent to the opinion of his former companions, he vanished from their midst, passing night after night with only the lowest of students in the small gambling houses of Leipzig. With dull apathy he bore the contempt of his sister Rosalie, who, like his mother, rarely caught a glimpse of him.

Finally, having lost everything, he used some money he held in trust for his mother, and that, too, was swallowed up with the exception of one thaler. Sick in mind and body—he had eaten nothing for hours—he sat through that terrible night distracted. He knew that the thaler represented his whole life and existence, for, that lost, he could never return home, and he saw himself wandering aimlessly in the grey of the morning through the fields and woods—a prodigal son. Suddenly, while on the verge of despair, he won and won again. Mechanically he staked again, and still he won, until there was sufficient to repay all his debt. The warmth that filled his soul and body was, he says, of a sacred nature; he felt that he was not abandoned by God and His angels; he felt a holy presence whispering warning and consolation. He was cured. He went home and slept soundly for hours, and awoke new born.

Deterred by no sense of shame, he told his mother of his experience in that momentous night, and returned her money under acknowledgment of his sin. She folded her hands and thanked God for the grace He had shown her son, and expressed her firm conviction that he was saved, and that temptation would never again assail him. This was actually the case, and Wagner then threw himself with renewed ardor into his musical studies, entering upon a new and serious phase.

I congratulate Madame Paderewski, says M. A. P., upon the success of her poultry farm at Berne. Not only has she sold a pair of white Orpingtons for £1,500, but she has been decorated by the French Government for her efforts on behalf of agriculture. What with laying and playing, the Paderewski household must be making quite an income.

Under the gracious patronage of the King and Queen and Queen Alexandra, Madame Adelina Patti will give a benefit concert at Albert Hall, on June 1, for Mr. William Ganz, who has unfortunately been disabled by an accident from following his profession since last December. Among the distinguished artists who have promised their assistance are Madame Aino Ackte, Madame Edvma (by permission of the Grand Opera Syndicate), Miss Maggie Teyte, Mr. Ben Davies, Mr. Gregory Hast, Mr. Robert Radford, M. Jean Gerardy (solo violoncello), Mr. Harold Bauer (solo pianoforte), Miss Ellen Terry, Mr. George Alexander, and Mr. Henry Ainley.

Madame Liza Lehmann writes to correct a slight misapprehension which has arisen through a notice of the concert at which her new song-cycle, "Prairie Pictures," was performed, for the first time. It was suggested that a few more of the folk-songs of the North American Indians might have been introduced into the work. "After traveling through Arizona," says Madame Liza Lehmann, "I made an extensive study of all pertaining to the subject, and the fact is there are no North American folk-songs, only fragments of melody which they repeat ad infinitum with slight variations. The same thing applies to their words, and therefore I wrote my own for these songs, and did not use 'translations of Indian songs.'"

THE QUEEN AND A NEW IRISH INDUSTRY

The Queen has recently expressed her continued interest in the attempt which is being made to establish a new knitting industry in Ireland by ordering a second hand-made woollen coat. The following message was also received from her private secretary:

"The Queen commands me to inform you that she is much pleased with the coat and considers it very well made."

It is now 18 months since the experiment was started of producing hand-knitted coats in the village of Donegal. Tradition has it that the peasants of Donegal learned the art of knitting from the Spanish sailors, who found refuge in the district after the destruction of the Armada. The industry prospered until 30 or 40 years ago, when the introduction of knitting machinery caused the work done by hand in Donegal to shrink almost to vanishing point. With a view to meeting the competition of hand-knitted coats from Switzerland an effort was made by a London wholesale house to revive the industry in Ireland. Classes were established at various centres in Donegal in which the peasants were taught not only various styles of knitting, but practical dressmaking. The peasants do the work in their own homes, visiting a central depot once a week to hand in their work and to receive a fresh supply of yarn. The number of workers engaged has rapidly grown from 100 to 1,500, and there is still room for further development. The centre of the Irish Section at the Festival of Empire at the Crystal Palace will be devoted to the new industry. There will be a representation of a Donegal cottage, and two Irish knitters will demonstrate how the coats are made.

"Woman's influence has been held supermannish—daimonic or demonic—under the prevalence of ideals monastic, chivalric or platonic; in the intervening moments of enlightenment she has, up to date—been dissected and declared to be 'stuffed with sawdust.'" These are the words of Jefferson Butler Fletcher in the preface to his Religion of Beauty in Woman. The book is quite as delightful throughout as one is led to hope from this introduction. Professor Fletcher terms his volume chapters of a possible "literary history of woman," a history which, as he points out, strangely enough has been written mostly by men. Professor Fletcher's style is as charming as his imaginery, and quite leads one to believe that the art of essay writing is not extinct despite the assertions of some people.