

THE JOHNSONIAN AGE.



THE Johnsonian age stands out in bold relief upon the chequered page of the history of English literature. The dictatorial sway, in all things literary, of one man ; the development of a new form of literature destined to rival in popularity all previous methods of communicating thought ; the decline of the stage drama ; the resuscitation of oratory, the gradual revolt in the realms of poetry against classicism, culminating in a complete revolution at the beginning of the next age ; the yet more important revolt against old beliefs and existing social and political conditions, fostered chiefly by philosophical, historical and political writings, but by degrees permeating the poetical works of the nation, and bursting forth finally into that terrible upheaval, the French Revolution, —all these are salient features attracting alike the attention of the litterateur and the thinker.

The man who for forty years governed the English literary world with all the despotism of a Russian czar was Dr. Samuel Johnson. Why his sway was so long unquestioned would be somewhat difficult to determine, for his works, though displaying a vast amount of erudition, possess neither great depth nor striking originality, whilst the mould in which they are cast is, by many considered as too artificial to atone for lack of intrinsic merit. Two causes may be assigned, however, that in part explain the acceptance of his dictatorship, viz., the critical nature of the period, and his personal character. In literature, as in all else that is human, there is an ebb and flow, an action and re-action. A great creative age is followed by a coldly critical one. The human mind cannot continue at high pressure through a long period of time ; its powers are too finite ; they must inevitably lose tone after extraordinary effort, and be content to aim at less exalted degrees of perfection. And hence, after the noonday splendour of the creative Elizabethan age, came the pale sun-

set glow of the Classical period. Criticism supplanted creation ; the shadowy form was held in higher esteem than the real substance. Whilst genius alone, therefore, could stand foremost in the former, critical power united to a dogmatic spirit, might well lead in the latter. These two requirements Johnson possessed in a marked degree. A sound understanding, unimpeachable morality and good common sense were the groundwork upon which he built his literary judgments, and these, therefore, merited in part the deference paid to them. His critical acumen was, however, not altogether unbiased, nor was it entirely comprehensive. He was deeply infected with the prevailing spirit of classicism ; Pope, to him, was much superior to Shakespeare. Again, he wanted sympathy with the emotional in literature ; his appreciation was strong rather than deep ; he required the moral to be ever brought into wearisome didactic prominence and could not understand that it might be far more thoroughly inculcated by a faithful, life-like delineation of the secret workings of the human heart. So much for his critical power ; his dogmatic spirit was a yet more powerful fulcrum on which to rest his dictatorial lever. He was by nature rough and imperious, eager for controversy, glorying in victory, chafing under defeat. These qualities, joined to a ready, though somewhat ponderous wit, made him a formidable antagonist in debate and finally rendered him undisputed master of the literary world.

His numerous publications aided, beyond doubt, in bringing about this result. Of them all, his Dictionary calls for most commendation, not only because it was the first important work of its kind and the result of his individual labor, but also because of its luminous and happy definitions. His other literary productions are highly moral, but, as works professedly of this nature too often are, a trifle heavy. His style has been often criticised as being pompous and pedantic. His oft-recurring antitheses do smack strongly of artificiality, but he has been, perhaps, too