

THE VARSITY

A Weekly Journal of Literature, University Thought and Events.

VOL. XIX.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, DECEMBER 6, 1899.

No. 8

SOCIAL IDEALS IN ENGLISH LETTERS.

II.

IN fulfilment of my last week's promise I submit, more in detail, a review of the two chapters of Scudder's book previously referred to. A few extracts from the chapter dealing with the age of Swift will give some idea of the subject matter and its treatment.

"Approaching the 18th century from the centuries that lie behind it, a modern man feels for a time singularly at home in its literature. As he roams through its pleasant and neatly ordered ways, he meets people much like himself, neither heroic beings like the men of the 16th century, nor grave, if slightly grotesque, Puritans, but cultivated, easy, well-bred men and women with interests often very similar to our own. . . . Yet below all this outward likeness the reader soon becomes aware of an inalienable difference, separating that literature from our own; and in time this sense so grows upon him that he comes to feel the 18th century, with its easy superficial modernness, more remote from ourselves in essential spirit in real attitude, than the middle ages or the Renaissance. Carlyle could clasp hands more readily with Langland than with Addison; Matthew Arnold would be quite at ease on meeting Moore in fields Elysian, but even his elasticity would be taxed to find common ground with the 18th century wit or the 18th century divine. The modes of thought in the reign of Queen Anne and of the Georges are further from the modern democracy than any logic line can reach."

Such a chasm between 18th and 19th century thought is remarkable, and needs explanation. This the author proceeds to give in his discussion of its significance, commenting therein on the main tendencies of 18th century literature, and its function. The religion of this age had much to do with the character of the literature, and in speaking of the former Scudder says: "It is extremely difficult to understand the religion of the 18th century, or would be, if so much of the same type did not linger among us. . . . The church had become a vast machine, for the patronage of morality and the promotion of her own officers; those officers speak repeatedly with a candor unmistakable and refreshing, compared to the evasions not unknown to-day. How admirable an investment is religion! Such is the burden of their pleading. Sure gauge of respectability here and comfort hereafter! To turn over the pages of their sermons is to feel the Sermon on the Mount receding into infinite space. . . ."

"It would be wrong to disparage the kindly common sense and entire sincerity of 18th century religion; but one may be excused for finding in it few reminiscences of the Gospels. The perplexity of the honest 18th century divines, wrestling with the Sermon on the Mount, is entertaining and instructive." Then follows a quotation from Clarke's sermons which concludes by summing up our social duty thus: "Only to retrench our vain and foolish expenses; not to sell all and give to the poor, but to be charitable out of the superfluity of our plenty; not to lay down our lives or even the comfortable enjoyments of life, *et anal.*" These are the reassuring exhortations of 18th century divinity.

Notwithstanding this apparently comfortable and easy philosophy it is to be noted that nearly every one of the great writers of the period was overshadowed by, or succumbed to, some form of mental disease; nowhere have we a sadder example of this than in the life of the great Swift.

The author sketches briefly the fierce and melancholy life of the Dean, and adds: "It is a sorrowful history. Yet the essential sadness of Swift's life lay deeper than personal experience. It was interwoven with the conditions of his age. He knew his times intimately and long; the little world of the great, the great world of the humble, the statesman's palace, and the peasant's hut. He was a profoundly sensitive man, yet he was also matter-of-fact. His honest recognition of things as they were was mitigated by no intervening haze of romance, and no spiritual revelation of distant hopes. He was no mystic, like Langland, visited by visions of consolation; no philosopher like Moore, able to escape the sordid present by weaving speculative schemes. He took life as he found it, with savage sincerity; he saw it steadily and saw it whole, if ever a realist can attain such vision; and he saw it as unrelieved tragedy. . . ."

This is followed by some considerations of the cynical, satirical character of the age, and of its significance. "Satire untouched by wrath or sorrow, satire acquiescent and flippant and amused at itself, satire unburdened by the sense of outrage and of pain, is the most tragic thing in the world." The nature of Swift's satire, sparkling with the cold, snapping light of contempt and hatred, is exemplified by quotation from an extraordinary little skit on 'Polite Conversation.' Commenting on this the author adds: "This nonsense is entertaining enough; but Swift does not write it because he is amused; he writes it because he is disgusted. Never was frivolity recorded with such painstaking scorn. The trivial dialogue is redolent of pure vacuity. . . ."

Swift's political satires are next dealt with, and then the author goes on to consider his social work. "There is probably no social pamphlet in existence which leaves the reader so breathless with horror, so impelled to flee from civilization, like Christian from the City of Destruction, as Swift's 'Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of the Poor in Ireland from being Burdensome, and for Making them Beneficial?'" This pamphlet was inspired by Ireland, where he watched the increasing wretchedness of the land with fierce and mournful gloom. Even yet the reader is scorched by the steady, colorless flame of the "Modest Proposal." Space forbids quotation here, but the pamphlet is memorable. "Whether Swift looked at society, at politics, or at the wider world of Irish life, his mind was visited by no ray of cheer or hope. He saw in society an utter absence of all ideal aims; in politics, a scramble of personal ambition and intrigue; in the life of the poor, a natural, inevitable, and irremediable tragedy. . . ."

After analysing "Gulliver's Travels," the great popular work of Swift, Scudder concludes: "Few stranger paradoxes are to be found in literary history than this of our greatest pessimist and cynic tranquilly pursuing the