

WASHINGTON IRVING AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE. (I.)

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IN the early years of this century Dr. Wm. Channing asked of the American public the question: "Do we possess what may be called a national literature?" and sadly regretted in his next breath that the reply was so obvious. In an essay of some forty pages on national literature he names only Franklin and Edwards as original and profound thinkers, but even these, and the few living authors who, he says, do honour to their country, are prized chiefly as giving "a promise of higher and more extensive effort. Before enquiring how far this promise has been fulfilled in the course of the century now almost closed we must ascertain what Channing meant by national literature. He defines it himself. "We mean by national literature the expression of a nation's mind in writing. We mean the production among a people of important works in philosophy, and in the departments of imagination and taste. We mean the contributions of new truths to the stock of human knowledge. We mean the thoughts of profound and original minds, elaborated by the toil of composition, and fixed and made immortal in books. We mean the manifestation of a nation's intellect in the only forms by which it can multiply itself at home and send itself abroad." In this last sentence Channing shows a lack of confidence in the inventive genius of the American race that has been proved unwarranted by two of the greatest triumphs of modern civilization. The electric telegraph of Morse, the electric light of Edison have surely been manifestations of intellect in

forms which could be multiplied at home and sent abroad. Apart from these peculiar productions of Man's creative power, which Channing would probably rule out of his definition, has America contributed anything to science, to philosophy, to the literature of imagination and taste?

With her achievements in science, we have little here to do. The magnificent contributions of the Smithsonian Institute which fill several cases in our new university library are alone a proof of what has been done in the United States for the advancement of scientific research. But the names of Chas. Dana, the Nestor of American geologists; of Lieut. Maury, the first to explore the Atlantic Ocean, whose patriotism to a lost cause sheds a halo upon his beautiful character; of Whitney, whose Sanskrit grammar is a text book in the universities of Germany; these are enough to give in evidence on the question of America's place in science.

Philosophy is not so foreign to my theme as pure science, but just here is the weak side in the development of the national literature. For though the American may point to Emerson and to Channing himself, and to Draper, the misguided historian of European intellect, and to Elisha Mulford, the American Aristotle, there is a certain lack of power about all these men which has prevented them from winning the ear of Europe, however great their reputations at home. Emerson's friendship with Carlyle, which may be paralleled with the intercourse between Irving and Scott, did, indeed, give the American philosopher a certain vogue in England,