

UNDER CURRENTS OF MODERN LITERATURE.

IN investigating the causes that have affected the general tendencies of modern literature, two great movements chiefly arrest our attention. They both date from the last century and frequently act upon and support each other, although in their origin and nature entirely different. These are the scientific and revolutionary or democratic movements.

The former arose from the progress made in the various departments of science. The adoption of the Copernican theory not only created a new era in the scientific world, but also powerfully affected the literature of the day. A struggle for the mastery between the new and old systems of astronomy may be observed in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the poet being undecided whether to entirely adopt the new theory, supported as it is by reason and common sense, or yield to popular belief. The theory of evolution has also had a very marked effect upon modern literary productions. Though far from being either proved or self-evident it has been taken for granted by some novelists and poets of the present century; and its leading idea to a very considerable extent pervades their writings.

The latter or revolutionary movement owed its origin to disturbances in the established order of social customs of which we have so many examples in the last century. The subversion of governments and the sudden rise of democracies more especially in France opened up new vistas of thought, and gave rise to opinions often erroneous, and generally dangerous to social order. The democratic movement reached its height when these social ebullitions culminated in the French Revolution; and during the stormy period that immediately followed the overthrow of the French monarchy it held within the borders of that kingdom undisputed sway. It did not remain, however, within those bounds, for gradually the revolutionary spirit spread over the whole civilized world.

In England the principles of the Revolution did not meet with much favor from

the masses of the people, nor did they produce results so direful as on the Continent. One reason for this may be found in the greater freedom, springing from the constitutional form of their government, which the English people enjoyed. But although the Revolution left intact the political institutions of the country, it stamped itself indelibly upon the literature of the period. There were not wanting men of distinction and great literary ability who were captivated by its principles, and for whom the words *liberty, equality, and fraternity*, had a peculiar charm. Coleridge and Wordsworth gloried in the Revolution, and devoted their poetical talents to its praises. Shelley invested it with all the fascination of his beautiful imagery and charming verse. In Byron we have the type of a revolutionary writer, bold, defiant, impatient of all restraint, he entered into the spirit of the Revolution with a fervor worthy of a better cause. On the other hand the magnificent diction and stately eloquence of Edmund Burke were employed against it, while many other writers of less note pointed out its fallacies.

A reactionary movement springing up from the very excesses of the revolution then set in; and though narrow and limited at first it gradually grew in extent and importance. In France it was known as the Catholic movement; in England it became the orthodox or Oxford movement. Simultaneously with these there appeared the Romantic or Mediæval movement in art and literature of which Sir Walter Scott and Victor Hugo were leading exponents. Lamennais by the force and brilliancy of his writings did much for the Catholic movement in France; unfortunately the heretical doctrines which he subsequently advanced brought down upon him the censures of the Church.

The transcendental movement spread from England to America, and was represented by some of the cleverest men on both sides of the Atlantic. It first bore the name of the Oxford movement, springing partly from a religious motive, part