CHAPTER VIII

LITERATURE AND POLITICAL OPINION

IT has been for some time my purpose to deliver a little lecture illustrating the possible relation between literature and politics—subjects that seem as much opposed to each other as any two subjects could be, yet most intimately related. You know that I have often expressed the hope that some of you will be among those who make future literature of Japan, the literature of the coming generation; and in this connection, I should like to say that I think the creation of Japanese literature (and by literature I mean especially fiction and poetry) to be a political necessity. If "political necessity" seems to you too strong a term, I shall say national requirement; but before I reach the end of this lecture, I think you will acknowledge that I used the words "political necessity" in a strictly correct sense.

In order to explain very clearly what I mean, I must first ask you to think about the meaning of public opinion in national politics. Perhaps in Japan to-day public opinion may not seem to you of paramount importance in deciding matters of statecraft, though you will acknowledge that it is a force which statesmen have, and must always have, to deal with. But in western countries, where the social conditions are very different, and where the middle classes represent the money power of the nation, public opinion may mean almost everything. I need scarcely tell you that the greatest force in England is public opinion—that is to say, the general national opinion, or rather feeling, upon any subject of moment. Sometimes this opinion may be wrong, but right or wrong is not here the question. It is the power that decides for or against war; it is the power that decides for or against reform; it is the power that to a very great

degree influences English foreign policy. The same may be said regarding public opinion in France. And although Germany is, next to Russia, the most imperial of European powers, and possesses the most tremendous military force that the world has ever seen, public opinion there also is still a great power in politics. But most of all, America offers the example of public opinion as government. There indeed the sentiment of the nation may be said to decide almost every question of great importance, whether domestic or foreign.

Now the whole force of such opinion in the West depends very much for its character upon knowledge. When people are correctly informed upon a subject, they are likely, in the mass, to think correctly in regard to it. When they are ignorant of the matter, they are of course apt to think wrongly about it. But this is not all. What we do not know is always a cause of uneasiness, of suspicion, or of fear. When a nation thinks or feels suspiciously upon any subject, whether through ignorance or otherwise, its action regarding the subject is tolerably certain to be unjust. Nations, like individuals, have their prejudices, their superstitions, their treacheries, their vices. All these are of course the result of ignorance or of selfishness, or of both together. But perhaps we had better say roundly that all the evil in this world is the result of ignorance, since selfishness itself could not exist but for ignorance. You will also have remarked in your reading of modern history that the more intelligent and educated, that is to say the less ignorant, a nation is, the more likely is its policy in foreign matters to be marked by something resembling justice.

Now how is national feeling created to-day upon remote and foreign subjects? Perhaps some of you will answer, by newspapers — and the remark would contain some truth. But only a little truth; for newspapers do not as a rule treat of other than current events, and the writers of newspapers themselves can write only out of the knowledge they happen to have regarding foreign and unfamiliar matters. I should

say that the newspaper press has more to do with the making of prejudice than with the dissemination of accurate knowledge in regard to such matters, and that at all times its influence can be only of the moment. The real power that shapes opinion in regard to other nations and other civilizations is literature — fiction and poems. What one people in Europe knows about another people is largely obtained, not from serious volumes of statistics, or grave history, or learned books of travel, but from the literature of that people — the literature that is an expression of its emotional life.

Do not think that public opinion in western countries can be made by the teaching of great minds, or by the scholarship of a few. Public opinion, in my meaning, is not an intellectual force at all. It could not possibly be made an intellectual force. It is chiefly emotional, and may be a moral force, but nothing more. Nevertheless, even English ministers of state have to respect it always, and have to obey it very often indeed. And it is largely made, as I have told you, by literature—not the literature of philosophy and of science, but the literature of imagination and of feeling. Only thousands of people can read books of pure science and philosophy; but millions read stories and verses that touch the heart, and through the heart influence the judgment.

I should say that English public feeling regarding many foreign countries has been very largely made by such literature. But I have time only to give you one striking example —the case of Russia. When I was a boy the public knew absolutely nothing about Russia worth knowing, except that the Russian soldiers were very hard fighters. But fighting qualities, much as the English admired them, are to be found even among savages, and English experience with Russian troops did not give any reason for a higher kind of admiration. Indeed, up to the middle of the present century the Russians were scarcely considered in England as real human kindred. The little that was known of Russian

customs and Russian government was not of a kind to correct hostile feeling—quite the contrary. The cruelties of military law, the horrors of Siberian prisons,—these were often spoken of; and you will find even in the early poetry of Tennyson, even in the text of "The Princess," references to Russia of a very grim kind.

All that was soon to be changed. Presently translations into French, into German, and into English, of the great Russian authors began to make their appearance. I believe the first remarkable work of this sort directly translated into English was Tolstoy's "Cossacks," the translator being the American minister at St. Petersburg, Mr. Schuyler. The great French writer Mérimée had already translated some of the best work of Gógol and Púshkin. These books began to excite extraordinary interest. But a much more extraordinary interest was aroused by the subsequent translations of the great novels of Turgénev, Dostöevsky, and others. Turgénev especially became a favourite in every cultured circle in Europe. He represented living Russia as it was—the heart of the people, and not only the heart of the people but the feelings and the manners of all classes in the great empire. His books quickly became world-books, nineteenth century classics, the reading of which was considered indispensable for literary culture. After him many other great works of Russian fiction were translated into nearly all the languages of Europe. Nor was this all. The great intellect of Russia, suddenly awakening, had begun to make itself heavily felt in the most profound branches of practical science. The most remarkable discovery of modern times in chemistry, concerning the law of atomic weights, was a Russian discovery; the most remarkable work of physiography accomplished in regard to Northern Asia was the work of Prince Kropotkin, who still lives, and writes wonderful books and memoirs. I am mentioning only two cases out of hundreds. In medicine, in linguistics, in many other scientific directions, the influence of Russian work and thought is now widely recognized. But however

scientific men might find reason to respect the Russian intellect, it is not by intellect that a nation can make itself understood abroad. The great work of making Russia understood was accomplished chiefly by her novelists and story-tellers. After having read those wonderful books, written with a simple strength of which we have no parallel example in western literature, except the works of a few Scandinavian writers, the great nations of the West could no longer think of Russians as a people having no kinship with them. Those books proved that the human heart felt and loved and suffered in Russia just as in England, or France, or Germany; but they also taught something about the peculiar and very great virtues of the Russian people, the Russian masses — their infinite patience, their courage, their loyalty, and their great faith. For, though we could not call these pictures of life beautiful (many of them are very terrible, very cruel), there is much of what is beautiful in human nature to be read between the lines. The gloom of Turgénev and of his brothers in fiction only serves to make the light seem more beautiful by contrast. And what has been the result? A total change of western feeling towards the Russian people. I do not mean that western opinion has been at all changed as regards the Russian government. Politically Russia remains the nightmare of Europe. But what the people are has been learned, and well learned, through Russian literature; and a general feeling of kindliness and of human sympathy has taken the place of the hatred and dislike that formerly used to tone popular utterances in regard to Russians in general.

Now you will see very clearly what I mean, what I am coming to. Vast and powerful as the Russian nation is, it has great faults, great deficiencies, such as have not characterized the people of this country for thousands of years. So far as civilization signifies manners and morals, education and industry, I should certainly say that the Japanese even hundreds of years ago were more civilized as a nation than the Russians of to-day are, than the Russians can be even

for a long time to come. Yet what is known in western countries about Japan? Almost nothing. I do not mean that there are not now hundreds of rich people who have seen Japan, and have learned something about it. Thousands of books about Japan have been written by such travellers. But these travellers and writers represent very little; certainly they do not represent national opinion in any way. The great western peoples—the masses of them—know just as little about Japan to-day as was known about Russia at the beginning of this century. They know that Japan can fight well, and she has railroads, and ships of war; and that is about all that has made an impression upon the public mind. The intellectual classes of Europe know a great deal more, but as I have said, these do not make public opinion, which is largely a matter of feeling, not of thinking. National feeling can not be reached through the head; it must be reached through the heart. And there is but one class of men capable of doing this — your own men of letters. Ministers, diplomats, representatives of learned societies — none of these can do it. But a single great novelist, a single great poet, might very well do it. No one foreign in blood and in speech could do it, by any manner of means. It can only be done by Japanese literature, thought by Japanese, written by Japanese, and totally uninfluenced by foreign thinking and foreign feeling.

Let me try to put this truth a little more plainly to you by way of illustration. At present the number of books written by foreigners about Japan reaches many thousands; every year at least a dozen new books appear on the subject; and nevertheless the western reading public knows nothing about Japan. Nor could it be said that these books have even resulted in lessening the very strong prejudices that western people feel towards all Oriental nations — prejudices partly the result of natural race-feeling, and partly the result of religious feeling. Huxley once observed that no man could imagine the power of religious prejudice until he tried to fight it. As a general rule the men who try to

fight against western prejudices in regard to the religions of other peoples, are abused whenever possible, and when not possible, they are either ignored or opposed by all possible means. Even the grand Oxford undertaking of the translations of the sacred books of the eastern races was very strongly denounced in many quarters; and the translators are still accused of making eastern religions seem more noble than they really could be. I mention this fact only as an illustration of one form of prejudice; and there are hundreds of others. At the present time any person who attempts to oppose these, has no chance of being fairly heard. But the general opinion is that any good things said about the civilization, the ethics, the industry, or the faith of Japan, are said for selfish motives — for reasons of flattery or fear or personal gain; and that the unkind, untruthful, and stupid things said, are said by brave, frank, independent, and very wise people. And why is this? Because the good and bad alike have been said only by foreigners. What any foreigner now says about Japanese life and thought and character will have very little influence on the good side, though it may have considerable influence on the other side. This is inevitable. Moreover, remember that the work done by foreigners in the most appreciative and generous directions has not been of a kind that could reach the western mass of readers. It could reach only small intellectual circles. You can not touch the minds of a great people by mere books of travel, or by essays, or by translations of literature having nothing in common with western feeling. You can reach them only through more humane literature, fiction and poetry, novels and stories. If only foreigners had written about Russia, the English people would still think of the Russian upper classes as barbarians, and would scarcely think of the great nation itself as being humanly related to them. All prejudices are due to ignorance; ignorance can be dissipated best by appeals to the nobler emotions. And the nobler emotions are best inspired by pure literature.

I should suppose that more than one of you would feel inclined to ask, "What need we care about the prejudices and the stupidities of ignorant people in western countries?" Well, I have already told you that at the present time these relatively ignorant and stupid millions have a great deal to do with state-policy. It is the opinion of the ignorant, much more than the opinion of the wise, that regulates the policy of western governments with foreign nations. That would be a good reason of itself. But I will now go further, and say that I think the absence of a modern Japanese literature, such as I am advocating, is indirectly to be regretted also for commercial reasons. It is quite true that commerce and trade are not exactly moral occupations; they are conducted according to relative morality, perhaps, not according to positive morality. In short, business is not moral. It is a kind of competition; and all competitions are in the nature of war. But in this war, which is necessary, and which can not be escaped, a very great deal depends upon the feelings with which the antagonists regard each other. A very great deal depends upon sympathy, even in business, upon an understanding of the simplest feelings regarding right and wrong, pleasure and pain; for, at bottom, all human interests are based upon these. I am quite certain that a Japanese literature capable of creating sympathy abroad would have a marked effect in ameliorating business conditions and in expanding commercial possibilities. The great mass of business is risk. Now men are more or less in the position of enemies, when they have to risk without perfect knowledge of all the conditions upon the other side. In short, people are afraid of what they do not understand. And there is no way by which the understanding could be so quickly imparted as through the labours of earnest men of letters. I might mention in this connection that I have seen lately letters written by merchants in a foreign country, asking for information in regard to conditions in this country, which proved the writers to know even less about Japan than they know about the moon. In ten years, two

or three—nay, even one great book—would have the effect of educating whole business circles, whole millions of people in regard to what is true and good in this country.

Now I have put these thoughts before you in the roughest and simplest way possible, not because I think that they represent a complete argument on the subject, but because I trust they contain something which will provoke you to think very seriously about the matter. A man may do quite as great a service to his country by writing a book as by winning a battle. And you had proof of this fact the other day, when a young English writer fell sick, with the result that all over the world the cables were set in motion to express to him the sympathy of millions and millions of people, while kings and emperors asked about his health. What had this young man done? Nothing except to write a few short stories and a few little songs that made all Englishmen understand each other's heart better than before, and that had made other nations better understand the English. Such a man is really worth to his country more than a king. If you will remember this, I believe the lecture I have given will bear good fruit at some future day.