

CHAPTER XXI

ON ROMANTIC AND CLASSIC LITERATURE, IN RELATION TO STYLE

IN the course of these lectures you will find me often using such words as “romantic” and “classic” — in relation either to poetry or to prose, — to expression or sentiment. And it is rather important that you should be able to keep in mind the general idea of the difference of the qualities implied by these adjectives. What is a romantic composition? — What is a classic or classical composition?

Details, explanations of these terms, I have already given in the course of other lectures, and details will not be necessary at present. It will be sufficient, quite sufficient, to remember that classic work, as regards any modern production, means work constructed according to old rules which have been learned from the classic authors of antiquity, the Greek and the Latin masters of literature. So that the very shortest possible definition of classical composition would be this: any prose or poetry written according to ancient rules, that is, ancient rhetoric. And, conversely, you might suppose romantic to mean any compositions not according to rhetoric, not according to the old rules. But this would be but partly true. Work done without regard to rules of any kind could scarcely be good literature, and European romantic literature really includes the best of almost everything in drama, in poetry, in fiction, and even in the essay. There have been rules observed, of course; when I tell you that Tennyson was romantic quite as much as Shakespeare was, you will see that absence of law does not signify romanticism.

To define exactly what is romantic in literature, would require a very exact understanding of what was up to our own time considered classic in English literature; for romantic

work has always been neither more nor less than a justifiable departure from the observance of accepted literary conventions. And to explain these conventions fully you would find a very tiresome undertaking—involving much lecturing about rhetorical forms and their origins. A better way to clear the field will be to define the romantic position thus:

It is right and artistic to choose whatever form of literary expression an author may prefer, provided only that the form be beautiful and correct.

The classical position represented extreme conservatism in literature, and might be thus put into a few words:

You have no right whatever to choose your own forms of literary expression, either in poetry or in prose. Experience has proved that the forms which we prescribe are the best, and whatever you have to say must be said according to our rules. If you do not obey those rules, you will be inflicting an injury upon your native language and your native literature; and for such an injury you cannot be forgiven.

The great mistake which the champions of classical feeling made in England, and indeed throughout modern Europe, was the mistake of considering language as something fixed and perfected, completely evolved. If any modern European languages were really perfect, or even so nearly perfect as the old Greek language has been, then indeed there might be some good reason for conservative rules. After any language has reached its perfect period, then it is threatened with decay from exterior sources; and at such a time measures may be taken with good reason to check such decay. But all European languages are still in the process of growth, of development, of evolution. To check that growth would have been the inevitable result of a triumph of classicism. You must imagine the classicist as saying to the romanticist, "Do not try to do anything new, because you cannot do anything better than what has already been done." And the romanticist answers, "What you want is to stop all progress. I know that I can do better, and I am

going to do it, in my own way." Of course the same literary division is to be found in every country, however little, whether of Europe or of the East. There will always be the conservative party, anxious to preserve the traditions of the past, and dreading every change that can affect those traditions—because it loves them, recognizing their beauty, and cannot believe that anything new could ever be quite so beautiful and useful. And everywhere there must be the romantic element, young, energetic, impatient of restraint, and all-confident of being able to do something much better than ever was done before. Strange as it may seem, it is only out of the quarrelling between these conflicting schools that any literary progress can grow.

Before going further, permit me to say something in opposition to a very famous Latin proverb,—*Medio tutissimus ibis**—"Thou wilt go most safely by taking the middle course."

In speaking of two distinct tendencies in literature, you might expect me to say that the aim of the student should be to avoid extremes, and to try not to be either too conservative or too liberal. But I should certainly never give you any such advice. On the contrary, I think that the proverb above quoted is one of the most mischievous, one of the most pernicious, one of the most foolish that ever was invented in this world. I believe very strongly in extremes, in violent extremes, and I am quite sure that all progress in this world, whether literary, or scientific, or religious, or political, has been obtained only with the assistance of extremes. But remember that I say "with the assistance of"—so I do not mean that extremes alone accomplish the end; there must be antagonism, but there must be also conservatism. What I mean by finding fault with the proverb is simply this,—that it is very bad advice for a young man. To give a young man such advice is very much like telling him not to do his best, but to do only half best,—in other words, to be half-hearted in his undertakings!

An old man with experience certainly learns how to

* Ovid *Metamorphosis*. ii. 137—Editor.

take a middle course through conviction and knowledge, not through prudence or caution. But this is practically impossible for the average young man to do with sincerity to himself. Without experience you cannot expect him to master strong prejudices, great loves and hates, admirations, repulsions. The old man can master all these, because he has had the practical opportunity of studying most questions from a hundred different sides. And also he has learned patience in a degree impossible to youth. And it is not the old men who ever prove great reformers; they are too cautious, too wise. Reforms are made by the vigour and the courage and the self-sacrifice and the emotional conviction of young men, who do not know enough to be afraid, and who feel much more deeply than they think. Indeed, great reforms are not accomplished by reasoning, but by feeling. And therefore I should say that nothing ought to be more an object with young scholars than the cultivation of their best feelings; for feelings are more important in their future career than cold reasoning. It is rather a good sign for the young man to be a little imprudent, a little extravagant, a little violent, in his way of thinking and speaking about those subjects in which he is most profoundly interested; and I should say that a young man who has no prejudice, no strong opinion, is not really a vigorous person either in mind or in body. Too much of the middle course is a bad sign.

And now let us apply the principle indicated, to literature. Literature is a subject upon which a young man of education should feel very strongly. Ought he to be a conservative, a classicist? Ought he to be a liberal, a romanticist? I should answer that it does not matter at all which he may happen to be; but he certainly ought to put himself upon one side or the other, and not to try anything so half-hearted as to take a middle course. No middle course policy ever accomplished anything for literature, and never will accomplish anything. But conservatism has done very much; and liberalism has done still more; and they have done it

by their continual contest for supremacy. In the end this contest is that which makes the true and valuable middle course. But no middle course—I mean, no system ever combining the best qualities of the two schools—could have grown out of a middle course policy, which simply means a state of comparative inaction.

As for the question, ought I to be romantic or conservative?—that can best be answered by one's own heart. How do you feel upon the matter? If you have a sincere admiration for the romantic side of literature, and sincere faith in its principles, then it is your duty to be romantic. If, on the other hand, you can feel more strongly the severe beauty of classic methods, and perceive the advantage to national literature of classic rules, —then it is your duty to be as classical as you can. In the course of time you will find that larger experience will make you much more tolerant, in either direction; but at the outset, it is much better to join one of the two camps. And you can do so with the full conviction that you will be serving literature, whichever side you sincerely espouse.

You know that in a steam engine there is a part of the machinery designed to check speed,—to prevent the structure from operating too rapidly. Without this governing apparatus, a steam engine would quickly break itself to pieces. Now, conservatism, classicism, has acted exactly in the way suggested. It has prevented changes from being too quickly made. It has prevented the machinery of literature from breaking to pieces. On the other hand, it could accomplish by itself very little good. As I said before, a long period of classic domination would mean literary stagnation. This is the story of conservatism in every European literature. Whenever it became supremely powerful, literature began to decay or to grow barren. But on the other hand the romantic tendency unchecked also leads to literary decadence. At first the romantic principle of liberty is exercised only within comparatively narrow limits. Presently, however, the more impatient and unsubmitive party in the liberals

desire to break down even the rules which they once hoped to maintain. Still later a violation of all rules is likely to become a temporary fashion. Eventually the nation, the public, become disgusted with the result, and a strong reaction sets in, putting the classical party into supreme power again. This tendency is very well exemplified by the present history of literature in France,—where a reaction has been provoked by the excesses of literary liberalism. In England also there are signs that a classic reaction is coming. Prose has decayed; poetry is almost silent; and when we find a decay of prose and a comparative silence of poetry, past experience assures us that a classical reaction is likely.

But when classicism returns after a long period of romantic triumph, it never returns in exactly the same form. After reinstatement, the classic spirit invariably proves to have gained a great deal by its last defeat. It returns as a generous conqueror—more liberal, more enterprising, more sympathetic than before. Again it exercises restraint upon choice of forms and modes of sentiment, but not the same restraint as formerly. So, too, we find romanticism gaining strength by each defeat. When it obtains control again after an interval of classic rule, it proves itself to have learned not a little from its previous mistakes; it is apt to be less extravagant, less aggressive, less indifferent to race-experience than before. In other words, every alternation of the literary battle seems to result in making the romantic spirit more classic, and the classic spirit more romantic. Each learns from the other by opposing it.

What I have thus far said, relates especially to European literature; and I am much too ignorant of Japanese literature to speak to you about it with any attempt at detail. But I may venture some general remarks justified by such inferences as may be drawn from the past history of literature in other countries. Whether there has been a true romantic movement in Japanese literature, I do not even know; but I am quite sure that such a movement must take

place sooner or later in the future, and that not once, but many times. I imagine that the movement would especially take the form of a revolt against the obligation of writing in the written language only, and perhaps against fixed forms and rules of poetical composition. I am quite sure that a revolt of some kind must happen,—that is, in the event of any great literary progress. And it is proper here that I should state how my sympathies lie in regard to European literature,—they are altogether romantic. The classical tendencies I think of as painfully necessary; but I have never been able to feel any sympathy whatever with modern classical literature in the strict sense of the word. Consequently, as regards any departure in future Japanese literature, I should naturally hope for a romantic triumph. I should like to hear of the breaking down of many old rules, and the establishment of many new ones. I should like to hear of some great scholar not afraid to write a great book in the language of the common people; and I should like to hear of attempts in the direction of the true epic and of the great romance in some new form of Japanese poetry. But, having said thus much, I only mean to express my frank sympathies. As to the question whether one should attempt or should not attempt a new departure in Japanese literature, there is very much to be said. Before anybody attempts to make a great change, it were well that he should be able to correctly estimate his own strength.

Suppose that we take, for example, the subject of writing in the colloquial language—let us say a great novel, a great drama, or a great work of a didactic description. It seems to me that the first question to ask oneself, as to the advisability of using the popular instead of the literary language, should be this:—“Am I able, by using the colloquial, to obtain much greater and better effects than I can by following the usual method?” If any young author, who has had a university training, can ask himself that question, and honestly answer it in the affirmative, then I think it

would be his duty to throw aside the old form and attempt to do something quite new. But unless a man is certain of being able to accomplish more in this way than he could accomplish in any other way, I should not encourage him to work in a new direction. The only reason for making great changes in any art is the certainty of improvement,—the conviction of new power to be gained. To attempt something new only with the result of producing inferior work were a very serious mistake, because such a mistake would react against the whole liberal movement, the whole tendency to healthy change. But if you have at any time a strong conviction that by breaking old rules you can effect new things of great worth, then it would be your duty without fearing any consequence to break the rules.

In Europe every romantic triumph has been achieved at a very considerable cost. Literature, like religion, like patriotism, must have its martyrs. Men must be ready to sacrifice their personal interests in order to bring about any great changes for the better. Immense forces have always been marshalled on the classic side in modern Europe. For example, first, the universities, which represent a tremendous power. Secondly, the religious element; for religion has always been necessarily conservative in Europe; and on the subject of literature, this conservatism has not been without good cause. And thirdly, I may remark that the nobility, the aristocracy, even the upper middle classes, have generally given their support to literary as well as to other kinds of conservatism.

And you can scarcely imagine what power, in a country like England, was formerly represented by the universities, the Church, and society. It really required extraordinary courage to oppose the judgment of these, even in so small a matter as literary style. I do not know whether in this country a literary innovator would have any corresponding opposition; but I am led to suppose that there is a very considerable strength of conservatism still ruling certain departments of Japanese literature, because I have been told,

when urging that certain things might be done with good results, that these things were contrary to custom. The fact itself would not be, I think, a sufficient reason for attempting nothing new. The super-excellent, the rare, the best of anything, is nearly always in some sort contrary to custom. But it is true that only the men of force, the giants, should break the customs. And that is why I believe that a conservatism like that of the English has been of very great value to literature in the past. The opposition which it offered to change was so great that only the most extraordinary man dared to break through. It is not an excuse to break a rule, that the rule is difficult to follow or tiresome to obey. As I have already said, it seems to me that a young man's convictions ought to make him either a conservative or a liberal in literature,—that he ought to be naturally either classical or romantic. But in declaring this, I do not mean that any one would be justified in following his literary tendencies to the extent of breaking rules merely for the production of inferior work. One may be romantic, for example, by taste, by sympathy, by feeling, without producing anything of which the evident weakness would not disgrace the school he represents.

And now I want to say something about western styles as represented by romantic and classic writers. According to the rules of classic rhetoric, style, to be cultivated, ought to be more or less uniform. Rules having been established for the construction and the proportion and the position of every part of a sentence, as well as of every part of a verse, one would presume that all who perfectly mastered and obeyed these rules would write in exactly the same way,—so that you could not tell the style of one man from the style of another.

If all men's minds were exactly alike, and all had studied classic rules, this would have really been the case throughout Europe at different periods of literary history. In the English classic age—I might say during the greater part of the eighteenth century, such uniformity did actually

obtain that we find it hard to distinguish the work of one writer from that of another, if we do not know the name of the author or the name of the book. Thousands and thousands of pages of prose were then produced by different men,—each page as much resembling every other as one egg or one pea might resemble all other eggs or all other peas; it also was so in poetry. Among the school of poets who used in that time the heroic couplet—that is, the rhymed ten syllable lines that Pope made fashionable—it requires a very clever critic to distinguish the work of one man from the work of another merely by studying the text itself.

I think that in France the results of classical uniformity became even more marked. Without a good deal of preliminary study you would find the work of the French classic poets very much alike in the use of the alexandrine—a verse as tiresome and as artificial as the heroic couplet of Pope. But the French prose of the classic age is much more uniform than the poetry—and much more uniform than English prose ever could be, for the English is less perfect than the French, and therefore less subject to the discipline of fixed rules. But you might take half a dozen pages of French prose written by each of fifty different authors, and you would find it very hard to distinguish one style from another. I do not mean to say that style does not exist in the personal sense. It does exist; but the differences are so fine, so delicate, that to the common reader there is no difference at all.

However, even under the severest discipline of classic rules, what we call style can always be detected by a trained critic. This is simply because there is something in the mind of each man so very different from that which is in the mind of every other man, that no two men could ever obey the same rule in exactly the same way. The judgment of each, the feeling of each, would move in a slightly different direction from every other. In the classic sense, strictly speaking, style has only the meaning of obedience to general rules, correctness, exactitude. But in the romantic

sense, this has nothing to do with style. To the romantic comprehension of style as we understand the term to-day, it was the particular differences by which the writing of one man could be distinguished from the writing of another that really signified. And in our own day literary style means personal character—means the individual quality of feeling which distinguishes every author's work. The romantic tendency is to accentuate and expand such differences, such individual characteristics; the tendency of classical discipline is to suppress them—at least to suppress them as much as possible. From this fact I think you will perceive one signification of romanticism,—one character of it which should command our utmost respect. Romanticism aims to develop personality; consciously or unconsciously the object of every school of romanticism has been to develop the individual, rather than to develop any general power of literary expression. Conservatism represses the individual as much as possible; and all classic schools in Europe have endeavoured to cultivate or maintain a general type of literary excellence at the expense of the individual.

So the question resolves itself into the question of Personality in literature. What is personality? It is that particular quality of character which makes each man or woman in this world different from all other men or women in the world. Individuality only means separateness; personality means very much more—all the distinctions in human nature of an emotional or an intellectual kind belong to personality. In the lowest ranks of life you find that the people are very much alike in their habits, thoughts, and emotions. Really there are personal differences, but they are not very strong. We say of these classes that personality has not much developed among them. Higher up the differences become much more definite and visible. In the intellectual classes personality develops to such a degree that uniformity of opinion is out of the question; here each man thinks and acts and feels differently from most of the rest. We can go still higher. In such classes

of select minds as are represented by professional philosophy, professional science, not to speak of art and music, the differences of personality are so great that you will not find any two professors of the same subject thinking in exactly the same way, and unity of opinion, upon any subject, becomes extremely difficult among them.

We therefore come to the conclusion that personality especially belongs to the higher ranges of intellectual culture and of emotional sensibility. I need not insist upon its importance to literature. The classic school has always championed impersonality; the romantic school has always been the highest expression of personality. And this is the reason why I think that it is quite legitimate to express my own preference and sympathy for the romantic tradition. It was this tradition which really produced every great change for the better in every literature. It was the school of Personality; and Personality in its highest forms, signifies Genius. Out of all the glorious names on the roll of European literature you will find that the vast majority are names of romanticists. I do not deny that there are some great English names and French names and German names representing classicism. But the romantic names only take the very highest rank in the history of these literatures. I might cite fifty names by way of illustration; but I imagine this would be unnecessary. Let me only remind you of what the nineteenth century represents in English literature. There is not a single poet of importance in it belonging to the classic school in the real sense of the word. The first group of great poets are all of them romantic,—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey; Byron (classical in form at times, yet altogether romantic in feeling and expression), Shelley, and Keats; Tennyson, Swinburne, Rossetti, Browning,—even Matthew Arnold, in spite of classical training, yielded to romantic tendencies. Or go back to the eighteenth century—the very age of classicism. There you have indeed two great classic figures in poetry, Dryden and Pope; but I should doubt very much whether these could justly be

estimated at the level of Gray, Cowper, Burns, or in some respects of Blake. And a greater poetical influence than any of the classical school really wielded was exerted in the close of the century by the work of Scott, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Even among the writers of the early part of the nineteenth century the only poet of classical sympathies, Byron, is the only poet whose work seems likely to disappear from memory; and whatever of it may survive is certainly that part which shows least sympathy with classic tradition of any sort.

On the other hand, though the romantic spirit has produced almost all the great marvels of English literature, from Shakespeare onwards, and although there appears every possible reason for giving all our sympathies to it, since it represents supreme genius in its highest expression, it certainly has its dangers. The great genius can afford to dispense with any discipline which impedes its activity; it can be excused for the breaking of the rules, because it has something better to give in return for what it breaks. But not every man is a genius; half a dozen men out of a million represent perhaps the proportion. So that a great multitude of writers, without genius, even without marked ability of any kind, may do much mischief by following the example of genius breaking rules, without being able to atone for this temerity by producing anything of a respectable order. The fact is that thousands of young men in Europe want to be romantic merely because romanticism represents for them the direction of least resistance. Even to do anything according to classical rules requires considerable literary training and literary patience. And these men forget that the great romantics have mostly been men, who, although breakers of rule, could make new rules of their own. I mean that in Europe at present, both in France and in England, the romantic tendency is to throw all rules aside without reason, and without good results. The persons who wish to do this, mistake romance for self-license, and they can only succeed in bringing about a general degrada-

tion of literature. As that comes, it will evidently be almost a duty of every lover of good literature to help a classic reaction—because a classic reaction is the only possible remedy for literary decadence through license. On the other hand a romantic reaction is the only possible remedy when too much classic discipline has brought about a petrification or stagnation of literary utterance of emotion—as happened in the middle of the eighteenth century. So you will see that the same man might very consistently be at one period of his life in favour of classicism, and at another in favour of romanticism. You will understand clearly hereafter what is meant by those terms in a general way. And as for what they signify in the literature of your own country, you are much more competent to judge than I.