

(January 29th, 1912.)

## English World Literature.

BY PROFESSOR RICHARD GREEN MOULTON.\*

AT a regular meeting of the Canadian Club held on January 29th, 1912, Professor R. G. Moulton said:

Mr. President, there is something I specially like about the hospitality of the Canadian Club, and it is that, if I understand you rightly, you invite people to be your guests, not merely those who are competent to advise with you upon questions specifically Canadian, but also representatives of any and most diverse aspects of culture and public life. It seems to me to be the very limit of hospitality when you invite a man here, not to talk your shop, but his own shop.

So I am to speak to you to-day about literature, and literature from the educational side. And I want to take the opportunity of so broadminded a representation of public opinion to say to you that I think our study of literature is on the eve of revolution, or rather let me substitute another word, on the eve of evolution. It is at any rate a change so wide-reaching and pervading, that I am accustomed to express it to myself by saying that the study of literature is about to begin. This sounds strange to some people, who think rather that the study of literature is about to end, now we have silenced another subject so much more practical. I answer, where can you find anything that can be called, in anything like an adequate sense the study of literature? When I look at the universities and the colleges and the private schools and the culture in these, what I say is this: here you see the study of people in combination with that of the English language; in another class room it is taken in connection with Greek literature, in a third, other things are combined with literature, in another French literature is taken up, in another German literature, and so on. Everywhere, where you see literary study, you find literature mixed up with a number of other things; they are reading history that may be, but certainly not literature. And

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what is worse still, it is never the study of literature with the large L, it is some part of literature,—English, German, Greek, Latin.

How different this is from what prevails with other studies! What would you think of the study of philosophy, if only there were a thing corresponding to the term, if people understood it in English, and read English philosophy, or Greek philosophy, or German philosophy? You understand instinctively that philosophy is a thing in itself, that it has a method, a field, and a history of its own. The whole thing is not the sum of the individual parts. In fact the study is not born, at least it has not come of age, in respect of the recognition of the unity of the field which it treats of. There was a time, when it was recognized that the fact that a man knew his Hebrew poetry was considered sufficient, he was not expected to know about Greek or French. But people began to see points of resemblance and difference, and comparative language study grew up. It was recognized that all language was one, and the study of language came of age. There was a time when the professor of ancient history was not on speaking terms with the professor of mediaeval history or the professor of modern history. Now it is seen that history is all one, the ancient leads to mediaeval and mediaeval to modern, and that is what makes the scientific study of history. The astronomer, the astrologer, the physicist, the psychologist are all perfectly conscious that their study is one and the same of the thing which they call nature.

But meanwhile it looks as if the humanities side of education had been constructed in water-tight compartments; that English was separate from Greek, and Latin, and German, and French, and the Oriental languages. The idea that literature is one is not reflected in our various studies. Now how comes it that literary study, the foremost of our studies, is so backward in taking its rightful place? I think the reason of it is the vastness of it. You see, in literary study, the smallest thing is incomplete in itself. You can't study literature in one poet. You can't study Shakespeare by reading the extracts in a Shakespeare Birthday Book! (Laughter.) If the smallest unit then is a complete work, the whole question comes to be not that of one literature but all literature of all the people of the world. The thing seems vast, impracticable, out of reach.

Just here is the change of spirit which I think is coming over the study, which reflects itself, as all such changes, in a technical term: we are beginning to talk of World Literature. This is not the same as universal literature; that could mean

the sum total of all the literatures of all the world. But World Literature is this universal literature seen in perspective, from a given point of view, preferably a national point. The difference between the two things is something like the difference with which physical geography on the one side and landscape art on the other side would deal with the same particulars. Here we have to deal with a mountain ten thousand feet high, a lake a quarter of a mile across, and a pond of modest, indefinite extent; if physical geography is to take cognizance of this landscape and express it, it must look at these features in their exact dimensions; but when the landscape painter portrays it the vast mountain now becomes a point of snow in the distance, and had it been less than ten thousand feet high it would have been invisible, while the pond occupies the centre of the canvas, and the lake is a streak in the distance just on the horizon: the whole is seen, but in perspective from a given point of view. In the same way, World Literature is universal literature seen in perspective. World Literature then to an Englishman is different from World Literature to a Japanese: Shakespeare, who looms in the foreground to the Englishman, is a foreign curiosity scarcely discernible, to the Japanese. Moreover World Literature is not the same to the Englishman as to the Frenchman, though it is more nearly so than in the case of the Englishman and the Japanese. It is simply the proportion of parts which is changed.

This idea of World Literature as depending on perspective from a given point of view is the foundation of the coming change. You see the vastness of the thing is no barrier to the clear conception of it. The map of America is just as intelligible as the map of Toronto: once you admit perspective, the vastness ceases to be an obstacle.

I like to consider World Literature from the point of view of English-speaking peoples, because the pedigree of English-speaking people is so clear-cut. We are the product of two forces, the combination of which has made us just what we are. These forces are described by the terms Hellenic and Hebraic. The Hellenic element is that which produced the civilization of the Greeks; the Hebraic is not Hebrew, but the perpetuation of Hebrew literature reflected in what we call the Bible. These things have influenced us, and these are our two ancestral lines. Our art, science, philosophy, politics, these are no more than the continuation of the processes commenced for us by the Greeks; but when you come to our spiritual nature, we have nothing in common with the Greeks: we have taken it from that Hebraic civilization which is re-

flected in the Bible. It is the coming together of these two forces which makes our history. At first the Hellenic and Hebraic elements work out their life independently, and the two things came together first in the conquests of Alexander the Great, and these conquests forced Hellenic civilization upon the whole world, therefore upon the Hebrews, and Palestine became Hellenized. Hence the importance of St. Paul, a combination of the Hellenic and the Hebraic. The next point when they came together was during the time of the Roman Empire, when the Hellenic civilization was grafted upon the Biblical tree, but the combination was still imperfect. There needed the third contact, which was in the Renaissance when the complete literature of the Greeks and the Bible came together. The Renaissance was the gateway through which we entered into the full enjoyment of those two elements of Hellenic and Hebraic civilization which during our whole history were coming together.

What is wrong in our study of the humanities is that we have been trying to study these elements separately. We have confused two things that are entirely distinct, the history of England—that is one thing,—and the history of English civilization, which is quite another thing. When Julius Caesar was invading England, and English stock was so mixed up among the tribes of Europe, that, some think, was the first faint beginnings,—at that time was the advent of English civilization; but it had been in existence a long time, the foundation stone had been laid centuries and centuries before, when in distant Mesopotamia Abram set out upon that most original of all missions to found a people, which should by the distinction not of birth or race or language but by its spiritual mission, last to the end of time. Another foundation stone of English civilization was laid in the same period, when the Greek poets and dramatists, who thought only of competing with each other, were establishing the fundamental principles of taste in poetry, to remain to the end of time. A third foundation stone was laid when Socrates and the Sophists of his time consciously were laying down the logic of mental processes. So when Hengist and Horsa invaded the island of Britain the civilizations were coming together of the Roman Empire and of the Christian religion, and the foundation was laid of the universal church which was at the same time the universal State. You are till now reading English history as beginning with the introduction of Christianity at the Roman conquest of England. By the introduction of Christianity into England, England was plunged into the universal Church. It

became the heir of twenty centuries. By the Norman conquest England was plunged into the European commonwealth, represented by the whole of civilization. The succeeding stages of the history of England show England gradually differentiating itself from the rest of Europe, adding the treasure of its own individuality to the history of Europe. You may have read history, but it has been the history of England with nine-tenths of that history left out. Our common education has been confusing two things, the history of England and English civilization. How much more perfectly this applies to the study of literature! The age of any literature reflects the national history, but world history reflects the history of civilization. There is a better way of putting it: I like to say that world literature is the autobiography of civilization. The historian who is a biographer can only analyze from the outside. The most he can do is to give us an anatomy, a physiology of what he treats of, but world literature is the history of civilization as presented by itself from the inside in a series of brilliant moments. This issue I put to you is the difference between English literature and English world literature. I say it is more important for our culture that we should know Homer than Chaucer or Dryden. We all want to know Shakespeare, but you can't understand Shakespeare's drama unless you know Greek. But just as classical literature is one foundation stone, so also is that of the knowledge of the Bible. It is a lop-sided culture that tries to stand awkwardly on the one side of culture. "English history you see in our own literature," you say. By all means: what has been done by the English has been written and expressed by our own English writers. But literature which equally is inspired came from men who have inspired us. The true English literature is the literature which has been absorbed by English civilization from all over the world. The genius of Fitzgerald has brought it about that the Rubaiyat is more English than Persian. The genius of William Morris has worked on the writings of the Scandinavian and Norse people and brought together the southeast and the Northwest, enabling us to see the world's fresh simplicity coupled with the sombre afternoon of the grey Norse poem in Sigurd the Volsung. Translators, men of the type of Arthur White, Gilbert Murray, Benjamin Richards—their work is to transplant the best of other literatures and make it flourish in our soil. By the enterprise of publishers you can now purchase a dozen world classics for the price of a popular novel.

This is the issue I want to put before you: the difference between English Literature and English World Literature. I

have thought that the issue should interest the Canadian Club. (Applause) because it seems to me that it is a distinction which can be paralleled in other walks of life. It seems to me that the distinction between English Literature and this English World Literature is something like the difference between a man, say an Englishman, living in England, and trying to know and do his duty as an Englishman without knowing anything about any country but England, and the same man who, without forgetting that he is an Englishman, remembers also that he is a member of the British Empire, a world organization, composed of parts as distinct from each other as Canada and Australia, in regions of the world and containing people as distinct as those of India and South Africa, but each with the same problems which it works out with freedom and independence, but aided by the strength that comes from a world-wide outlook. The difference between English Literature and English World Literature is like the difference between England and the British Empire. Therefore I think I am justified in presenting this issue for your consideration. I therefore say, in conclusion, as I said in the beginning of my address, that the true study of Literature is about to begin!