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# The Literary Interregnum

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## THE LITERARY INTERREGNUM

In a Phi Beta Kappa address given last year before certain university audiences of the middle west, the head of the Columbia School of Journalism, Dr. Talcott Williams, made something of a text of the dearth of contemporary literary activity of the highest order. His reference was chiefly to poetry, but he seemed to feel that there is now relative sterility nearly everywhere in the literary field. The period seemed to him not perhaps so much an interregnum, for that holds promise of succession to vacant thrones, as a period of decline; and this decline he felt to be bound up more or less directly with the waning of humanistic study consequent upon the substitution in the colleges of the "New" learning for the "Old." Thirty years ago, he pointed out, advocates of the retention of classical study as basic in education made the prediction that with the relative elimination from the curriculum of the "humanities," tested by centuries as an inspiring influence in education, there would come decline in the intellectual output of our colleges and in literary creation. This prediction, he added, has come true. Where now, he asked, are our Long-fellows, our Lowells, our Emersons, our Laniers? At how many colleges do students discuss across the table at mealtime the current poem of some great poet? Here would be a topic which the modern student never discusses nor dreams of discussing. The present generation has neither the students nor the poets. Nbr has it critics; nor, he seemed to fear, since the death of William James, has it philosophers. He implied, though not perhaps stating the belief in specific words, that the discarding of the "humanities" in the modern college curriculum and the absence of strong present-day literary inspiration stand to each other in the relation of cause and effect. The two are interrelated and their falls have synchronised.

The present is not a period of especially fresh or high literary creation, and there are many who share the misgivings of Dr. Williams regarding the relative inspiration of the new learning and the old. Yet it is difficult to concur with that distinguished journalist and educator as regards both his diagnosis and the outlook for recovery. Surely no single cause may be held re-

sponsible for the comparative barrenness of the present. The restoration to their old place of humanistic studies, or any other alteration or alterations, by prescription, in the college curriculum would probably avail little. Only in small degree may changes in the realm of the spirit come by manipulation. Also, too much must not be made of the influence of the college curriculum on literary creation. The main function of the higher institution of learning is to impart and to preserve knowledge; to keep alive the learning of the world, that asset of civilisation. It seeks to improve the quality of those who emerge from it to become citizens; that is fundamental; but in particular—often as this is forgotten in these days—it must keep the scholar from becoming extinct. The university cannot guarantee, however, to send out creators of inspired literature; it cannot expect to produce poets and dramatists and novelists as it does teachers and scholars. Indeed, the two attitudes of mind, the scholarly or critical, fostered by the institution of learning, and the imaginative or creative, that of the author, are generally incompatible. It is the student's business to learn, the teacher's to teach, the scholar's to know, and the critic's to appraise, if appraisal must be made; and all these—students, teachers, scholars, critics—are the concern of the university. But to hold the educational institution mainly responsible for somnolence in literary creation is to forget its main function, and to charge it with failing to do something which it never has done, as such, with much success, and perhaps never may do.

The cause of the present lull is not simple, nor are educational institutions mainly responsible. There always have been and there always will be in literary history "periods between," when the old is decaying and the new not yet risen. It is these periods—periods of incubation rather than retrogression—which we are accustomed to label by the somewhat hackneyed term "transitional." Of that type is the period in which we are now. The nineteenth century seems to us, as we look back from the twentieth, to have been peculiarly rich in the variety and quality of its literary performance. This is especially true of English literature, which could boast at the beginning of the century the poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Scott, Shelley, Keats; which brought the early Victorian novelists, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, the essayists Carlyle and Macaulay, the Victorian poets, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne, and

the later Victorian novelists, Meredith, Hardy, Stevenson. It is true also of American literature; for here, after a long period of preparation, social conditions had become secure enough to be favourable for a genuine creative period, one which might give expression to the new nationhood. After so many decades of high and sustained literary energy must succeed a time of reaction or waiting, such as there was before the creative outburst came. The law of rise and fall is a law of life. For a longer or shorter time must come the interregnum. Often, too, the depth of the wave of reaction is best measurable by the exaltation that went before. The more luxuriant the florescence, the more barren and desolate seems the prospect when the splendid foliage has been shed.

Sometimes there appears to be a certain degree of analogy, at least as regards lyric poetry, between the early seventeenth century lull succeeding the Elizabethans and the lull of the present. Then as now, if the great voices were still for a while, there were many minor voices singing well if somewhat faintly. Interest had not died, nor had activity ceased; though instead of strong and positive notes there was fluctuation and experiment. Then as now, the chief concern was with things that were pretty and decorative, or echoic, or ingenious, but not vital; the direction ultimately to be taken seemed in doubt. It is true of modern lyrists like William Watson, Alfred Noyes, Arthur Symons, Le Gallienne, Kipling, as it was of Carolan like Lovelace, Wither, Suckling, Carew, that among them there is steady singing, often lyric fervour, and grace and equality of performance, though no member of either group may be called great.

During these intervals or periods of comparative inertia, the reactionary critic or scholar inclines to be despondent. There are many who like better to face the past than to look forward to the future. The past seems very good; what lies ahead doubtful and slow to come. The ebbing of the old wave seems stronger than the rising of the new. The result is a feeling of depression. Arnold felt in elegiac mood, like the speaker cited at the opening, when he wrote in *Memorial Verses at Wordsworth's Death*:

"Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece  
Long since saw Byron's struggle cease.  
But one such death remained to come,  
The last poetic voice is dumb—  
We stand to-day by Wordsworth's tomb."

Or again, in *The Youth of Nature*:

“But the valleys are flooded with haze.  
Rydal and Fairfield are there;  
In the shadow Wordsworth lies dead . . .  
Well may we mourn when the head  
Of a sacred poet lies low  
In an age which can rear them no more ...

“He is dead, and the fruit-bearing day  
Of his race is past on the earth;  
And darkness returns to our eyes . . .”

Yet, in the year when the lines first quoted were written, *In Memoriam* was published; and the decades that followed were rich in creative activity, though of another kind than Wordsworth's. Unless for poetry, over which Arnold's elegy, though somewhat premature, was truer than his contemporaries believed, the founts of inspiration were not exhausted. Arnold's own critical prose was to be a powerful force in the half century that followed.

Perhaps chiefly responsible for the literary interregnum of our day is the exhaustion of material—the well-worn character of the prevailing subject matter—and the exhaustion of old modes. It is not that many people do not write well now. Rather, never in the world's history were more people writing, with so high an average level of performance. The spread of education, the diffusion of reading matter among all classes through newspapers and periodicals, has brought seething activity. Everybody writes, and nearly everybody writes well; but it seems as though the very quantity of production interfered with the highest inspiration. It seems to be true that when too many can succeed with a certain form of art—as when everybody at the close of the Sixteenth Century wrote sonnets, or as now everybody can write novels or short stories—the knell of that form has been sounded for awhile, the vein worked out. The student of literary history becomes convinced that the chances are rather in favour of a decline, or a temporary decline, of a form of expression on which many people wreak themselves. “Over-fecundity cheapens the product.” The new notes struck at the beginning of last century—for instance praise of wild nature as medicinal for the vexed human spirit, the revival of the romantic past, the revolt from convention, the praise of freedom, the latter finding

a belated echo in Swinburne; also the poetic motives that followed, the note of spiritual incertitude and wistfulness as in Arnold, relative acquiescence and advocacy of harmonious reconstruction as in Tennyson, expressed by him with a new fastidiousness and dexterity of technique—all these notes, and many others not enumerated here, have been iterated and reiterated. Having a good model, many can do well a thing once done.

“Most can raise the flowers now  
For all have got the seed.”

But zest for old things passes. If poets of the present send us to wild nature as a refuge from social *ennui*, we either give little attention or prefer the pages of those who celebrated that refuge so many decades ago. If a new poet were to compose idyls on mediaeval material like Tennyson's, no matter how well, few would read them. If a new poet were to give us psychological studies of the human mind, like Browning's, we should probably still turn to Browning, not to his follower. As Brunetière has pointed out, those who count in the history of literature and art are those who do something different from their predecessors, not those who are willing to do the same thing as their predecessors.

The old material has been worn out, and the new has not yet come; or at least we do not recognise it, though it may be germinating. But it will come. These things are inexorable. Not any conscious human ordering will bring the new literary fruitage, for the latter cannot be produced by training wholly, nor by dedication to purpose, nor even by leadership; although much in new literary movements does depend on leadership. Rather is it bound up with the rise and fall of ideas; and the play of these over the stream of human society is variable as the winds. There must be definite new thoughts to enshrine or interpret, definite new tendencies to express, new needs to be met. Reiteration, no matter how skilful, will not do. Shakespeare summed up, we say, and interpreted the sixteenth century, and in so doing proved himself to be a master interpreter of human thought and feeling. But there was first the wonderful sixteenth century to express, that age of unparalleled intensity and fresh impetus, the culmination of the English Renaissance. Wordsworth and Coleridge and Byron and Shelley may have interpreted for us the early nineteenth century; but there was first the early nine-

teenth century to express, that seething period of initiative and tremendous impulsive force, when in men's minds were yet fermenting the ideas of the French Revolution. The Victorian period succeeded, marked by the upheaval and transformation attending the Darwinian doctrine of biological evolution, a doctrine having far-reaching consequences in all departments of thought. The right man, the genius, is never enough. He must be in the right place, and he must come at the right time. That right time is not the interregnum, a time of feverish groping, when there is little to interpret and no clearly defined needs to which to minister.

It is well to recall also that the day of the poet, technically speaking, of the writer of measured verse, may be over for a very long time. The outlook for a period of supreme poetry in the near future is hardly favourable. The day of poetic monopoly has passed; there will not soon again, if ever, be the relative demand for it that there once was. Discouraging as it may seem to idealists, in literature, as in everything else, the commercial factor plays a governing part in the mass and the quality of the output.

"There are four motives which may inspire an author to do his best," pointed out Professor Brander Matthews in a recent address, "the necessity for money, the lust for fame, the impulse for self-expression, and the desire to accomplish an immediate purpose. Sometimes they are all combined, although many of the greatest writers—Shakespeare for one and Molière for another—seemed to have cared little for the good opinion of posterity. The impulse for self-expression, and the desire to accomplish an immediate purpose are both potent; but neither is so insistent and inexorable as the necessity for money. In every country and in every age, men of genius have been tempted to adventure themselves in that form of literature which happened then and there to be most popular, and therefore most likely to be profitable." Bound up with the new and overwhelming demand for plays came the florescence of the drama under Elizabeth. The same explanation holds for the dominance of the periodical essay under Queen Anne and her followers; and bound up with the demand for that relatively new species, the novel, comes the great period for the latter form under Victoria. It is the demand for magazine literature of the present day which has turned contemporary activity into the kaleidoscopically varied but

slighter forms which the magazine endeavours to supply. It may well be questioned, however, whether among these varied forms poetry will soon again play a high part. Many who might once have become poets now enter commercial pursuits, or give their energies to sociology, to history, to philosophy, or to journalism. Till about the middle of the eighteenth century poetry had nearly a monopoly of the best creative activity. Indeed it was not until this period that a good prose was developed, a clear and orderly prose, constituting an attractive medium of literary expression. With the development and popularisation of literary prose, poetry found a formidable rival; and now the former claims hundreds of readers to one reader of verse. The old order has been turned about. The stream of readers that followed Sir Walter Scott, when he turned from his verse romances to the no less exciting prose narratives of the Waverley novels—that stream of readers never returned. It is not solely because of lack of high quality of production that modern critical journals give so little space to reviews of new verse, so much to whatever may appear in prose. It is because interest in the latter mode is now so much the stronger, and therefore the impulse to its creation the more compelling. The place held by poetry before an attractive and multifarious prose literature was developed will not soon be regained.

In America the outlook for poetry seems particularly unfavourable. Even if our social conditions furnished the right atmosphere, the leisure and the stimulus for poets, as they do not, it must be acknowledged that prose seems the form of literature most suited to the aptitudes of our direct, vigorous, unemotional race, a race having if anything too well-developed a sense of humour. Prose seems properly enough the literary mode of a democracy; and as its forms have developed a greater and greater capacity to satisfy the needs of the masses of readers, it seems destined to keep for itself these readers, and therefore to annex for its creation the strongest minds. But even in England, it now seems doubtful whether poetry was, for the later Victorian era, the most vital literary mode; that which will seem in the long run best to express and characterise it. The poets Tennyson, Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne, gained their laurels partly by fuming away from the external life of their time. Even Browning shunned much dealing with contemporary problems, preferring to turn largely to the past, and to wreak himself on the psycho-

logical interpretation of selected souls. Before the energy of such analyses of contemporary English life as Meredith's and Hardy's, or the battle-scarred works of the strong minds that created, on the continent, *Ghosts*, or *The Doll's House*, *Le Debâcle*, *Resurrection*, *Die Weber*, the drawing-room complacencies of the Victorian poets shrink to side importance. The one group seems hardly touched by the wash of the larger currents of the age. The second, writing in the spirit of science, with open vision, steady temper, and determination to face reality, is the better reflection of its time. The deeper and truer vein, in the last half of the nineteenth century, ran not through its poetry but through its prose.

Criticism seems able to speak with most security when distanced from its subject. Among the Victorians themselves the forces at work were too near to be very clearly distinguished. Their judgment of their own activity will doubtless be in part reversed by time. So it is—it is perhaps well for us to bear this in mind—with us to-day. Not the present generation but those who see our time in perspective, will have the true conception. The judgment of the present is nearly always out of focus. What we think of present conditions, what we feel to be in store for us may miss the real truth; much positiveness as regards contemporary tendencies would be premature and uncritical. But prophecy is tempting, if venturesome, and a few conjectures may perhaps be hazarded.

For poetry and the drama prediction is easiest regarding form. In both certain external changes seem now to be going on. In poetry the signs are that rhymeless lyric verse is gaining favour. The great traditional forms of English verse can hardly be carried farther than they have been by the masters of technical verse culminating in Swinburne. The harmony which has been developed will always control our lyric verse; but it seems likely that metrical regularity, the counting of syllables, will play less and less part. Poetic diction, too, will be broadened even farther than it was by Browning and Whitman; or perhaps it would be truer to say that our last clinging to a conventional poetic diction will be given up, and the whole vocabulary of our language become available. In the drama the changes taking place seem too obvious to be overlooked. The four-act, the three-act, and now, in our own decade, the one-act play have succeeded the stereotyped five-act drama derived from the model of classical

antiquity. The short play is a new literary form which we may watch striving toward some sort of fixity, waiting perhaps for some genius to stamp it with permanent significance. The gradual rise to orthodox standing of the vaudeville stage, having its special needs to be met, the growth of photograph dramas, with their emphasis on "dumb-show" and spectacle, can hardly fail to bring definite changes of some sort in dramatic art. Here is that economic element working which after all is so potent a factor in literary creation.

With regard to the substance and temper of the new literature, one is inclined, with Mr. Irving Babbitt, to look for a movement that might be termed centripetal, a movement toward the centre. For nearly a century now, there has been, he points out, an almost exclusive play of centrifugal forces; of exploration into the remote and outlying regions, whether of nature or of humanity. Some day there must be a counter-movement toward the centre, a "subliminal uprush" in the direction of centralisation, instead of miscellaneous expansion. One of the striking tendencies of the day is the drift toward socialisation. Modern thought no longer considers the individual detached from his fellows, glorified by his isolation, his chief duties toward himself, as in the philosophy of the individualists, or of transcendentalists like Emerson. It considers rather the world itself, in whose betterment every man must actively do his part. Modern legislation concerns itself to a marked degree with the responsibilities of large associated bodies, such as the great corporations, toward society. The social question as it confronts us to-day is: "How to maintain each without sacrificing the other, how to be a person and at the same time an efficient member of the social body; how to realise personality in terms of the common good." This brings with it a return to something of the eighteenth century perspective view; of its conception of the individual as a social unit, not as finding his chief importance to the world in the development, at whatever cost, of his individual soul. Sooner or later, it would seem, this shift of emphasis, already claiming attention in legislation and in ethical and religious thought, must find more adequate expression in early twentieth century literature.

Perhaps—whatever changes are to come in subject matter and form—from one standpoint we ought to hope that our interregnum will not soon be ended. It has often been remarked that in its great forms literature seems somehow bound up with a

time of strain and upheaval. It is not the gentle period of unbroken prosperity, but the period of sudden and profound changes, of national struggle, that brings strongest imaginative inspiration; much as with the individual genius the highest reach in artistic creation seems often to be brought by deep passion and high excitement within itself.

“Wer nie sein Brot mit Thränen asz,  
 Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte  
 Auf seinem Bette weinend sas,  
 Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte.”

Out of great ferment, for individual or race, comes the leaven of great ideas and transfiguring energy. It is not the turmoil and the stress that bring the effect on literary creation, but the ideas which are called forth by the ferment. But if change is to come only after deep stirring of our national spirit, after strong revolutionary impulse, or desperate struggle and deep desire in the spirit of man, why should we crave that change too ardently, as ardently as though it might come wholly without cost?

That it will come, we cannot doubt. Sooner or later the pendulum will swing. We shall awake to find style revitalised, and subjects hitherto undreamed of brought within the range of art, fertilised by all the fresh ideas, social, political, religious, which characterise a new era. Even in America there will sometime be high results to chronicle. That America, the commercial and industrial inspiration of the world, will ever be the home of supreme excellence in any form of art, may seem for the present scarcely likely; certainly a prophecy hazarded to that effect would find but scornful support among our European contemporaries. But the issue remains to be worked out. Three or four centuries make only a beginning. How can we say what is to come? Already a strong and great nation has been built up, stronger and greater perhaps than the most sanguine of our forefathers dared to dream. “The future belongs to America.” Can it be that the future in literature may belong to America too? The present is an inauspicious time for such augury; yet it is possible enough that an American literature, worthy in originality and magnitude of the land and the people, embodying the national life, and finding its inspiration in the national ideals, may yet take its place among the classic literatures of the world.

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