

Elizabethan Literature.

THE study of literature, it has been said, is a form of travel; it enables us to move about freely among the minds of other races. But it enables us also to move about freely in time, so that we may become familiar not only with the minds of other races, but with the minds of other epochs in the history of our own, as well as of the other races.

"The literature of a nation," says Professor Hudson, "is not a miscellaneous collection of books which happen to have been written in the same tongue or within a certain geographical area. It is the progressive revelation, age by age, of that nation's mind and character." The history of any nation's literature is, then, the record of the unfolding of the peculiar genius or spirit of that nation, and is supplementary to its history and a commentary upon it.

And so in order to understand and appreciate the literature of a people or of an epoch, we need to know something of the life behind it, by which it is fed. How else can we understand the growth and decay of literary tastes and fashions, the formation of new schools, the changes in critical tastes and standards, the decay of some forms of literary expression, such as the old chronicles or mediæval romances, and the appearance of new forms, as seen in the growth of the novel?

For an explanation of all this we must try to see the motive forces at work, outside its literature, in the life of the society which produced that literature.

LITERATURE AND ITS OWN AGE.

The same society produced "The Fairy Queen," "Paradise Lost," "The Rape of the Lock," "The Deserted Village," "In Memoriam," "The Absent-Minded Beggar," and Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier." But the epoch which produced "The Fairy Queen" could obviously not have produced "In Memoriam," and the spirit of the hour, as well as the personality of the writer, differentiates the poetry of Rupert Brooke from that of Kipling. Within an epoch, for example in the Elizabethan age or in the Victorian, there may be a rich variety of modes of expression, poets, playwrights, philosophers, story-tellers all crowding the stage at the same time. But within each epoch, the writers, despite their individual differences, stand together as a group, in contrast with the groups of writers of any other epoch,

and show distinctive qualities of theme, manner, spirit and treatment, so that the literature of one epoch is marked off from that of any other by certain distinct and distinguishing characteristics. The writer, like every other man, is the citizen of his age, and as Renan said, belongs to his century and race.

We have to remember, also, in studying the literature of any given epoch, that the age in question grew out of that which preceded it; and that its own spirit and ideals were never fixed or settled, but were in a continuous state of transformation.

THE BIRTH OF ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE.

The period of English literature loosely called "Elizabethan," related as it is to the mediævalism which preceded it, and leading to the classic or Augustan age which followed it, has as real a unity as the age of Pericles or that of Petrarch and Boccaccio; and it stands out clearly from every other period in English literature, richly productive of works of every kind; like a garden in a favourable season, producing many flowers of such outstanding growth and beauty that they attract every eye, but in which there are also many smaller blossoms, with a charm and beauty of their own, but which, for the very reason of their profusion, tend to pass unnoticed. And this rich flowering grew quite naturally out of the life of England, and was an expression of the soul and spirit of the age in which it appeared.

At no period of English history has the national feeling been more deeply roused, the national spirit more buoyant and confident than during the second half of the reign of Elizabeth; and this elation and enthusiasm were perhaps the more potent in contrast to the uncertainty and disquietude which prevailed at her accession. The new outlook was brought about by several factors, forces operating together to produce profound changes in national life and a corresponding lifting of the national spirit and rousing of the nation's soul.

When Elizabeth ascended the throne in the middle of the sixteenth century, England had been through a period of devastating religious uncertainty, with controversies, persecutions, and bitter antagonisms such as pass our comprehension today; but by 1570 England had made her choice, mediævalism in religion had passed for ever, the Reformation had taken place; and when in that year the Pope, Pius V, published a bull excommunicating Elizabeth and the "heretics adhering unto her," he merely fanned the flames of anti-Romanism and of patriotism till they burned with unquenchable brightness. England had successfully made her first bid for religious freedom by casting off the tyranny of Rome. But there were other contributing factors. She had conquered the only foreign enemy she had to fear, and

had shown herself strong enough to defend her shores from invasion; the valour of her seamen had saved her from the "Invincible" Armada. The nation's riches were increasing, the country was prosperous, and a richness and display unknown before came into the way of living, owing partly to increase in overseas trade. New lands were being discovered and claimed for England, and returning travellers were telling fantastic tales of uncharted seas, and of lands flowing with milk and honey.

On the purely literary side, the Renaissance, which had already influenced other European countries, was sweeping its culture into and over England, and though it came into full flower here later than in more southern lands, its effects seemed to be all the richer for the delay, for nowhere else in Europe was there anything comparable to the quality and output of the writers of the Elizabethan era. A widespread independence of thought, a purer simpler faith, a deep religious earnestness, great vigour of imagination, a burning jubilant patriotism, all these are reflected in the literary out-pourings of the time, the lusty spirit of the age producing new literary forms, lyrics, sonnets, pastorals, religious and metaphysical poems, and, supreme among them all, the plays of Shakespeare.

ELIZABETHAN DRAMA.

Few events in our literary history are so startling as the sudden rise of the Elizabethan drama, and nothing in our literary history compares with the dramatist who, once he has moved out of the orbit of the drama of his time, sweeps into his own vast and unreturning curve. The middle ages, at this period, were fast receding, the discovery of new territories and of new worlds of knowledge was stirring the imaginations of men, and more than ever before knowledge of the life of man on earth and visions of his greater destiny were influencing men's minds, and this intense interest in the life of men found its freest artistic expression in the drama. The plays of Shakespeare reveal a new poetic expression in the perfected blank verse, a new philosophy of tragedy, a new dramatic technique, a new world of characters. And because of the greatness of Shakespeare and the fact that he was the first dramatist to take humanity for his province, and to create characters which are universal, his contemporary dramatists, conforming more to the manners of the time and therefore dated and stylised, have not the popularity and interest which some of them deserve; for example, Christopher Marlowe with his "Tamburlaine," "Life and Death of Dr. Faustus," "The Jew of Malta," "Edward II," and "Hero and Leander": and Ben Jonson with his "Everyman in his Humour," "The Alchemist," "Volpone and the Fox." Of the minor dramatists,

two of the best known were Beaumont and Fletcher, jointly responsible for a number of plays, the most read to-day being "The Knight of the Burning Pestle." Beaumont's premature death in 1616, at the age of thirty-two probably deprived us of great things. He was himself buried in Westminster Abbey, about which he had written :

ON THE TOMBS IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY.

Mortality, behold and fear,
 What a change of flesh is here !
 Think how many royal bones
 Sleep within this heap of stones ;
 Here they lie, had realms and lands,
 Who now want strength to stir their hands,
 Where from their pulpits sealed with dust
 They preach, "In greatness is no trust."
 Here's an acre sown indeed
 With the richest royallest seed
 That the earth did e'er suck in
 Since the first man died for sin :
 Here the bones of birth have cried
 "Though gods they were, as men they died."
 Here are sands, ignoble things,
 Dropt from the ruin'd sides of kings :
 Here's a world of pomp and state
 Buried in dust, once dead by fate.

FRANCIS BEAUMONT (1584-1616).

Apart from the drama, the chief manifestation of the literary impulse of the period was in the realm of poetry; and the poetic impulse manifested itself in many forms, the lyric, the sonnet, the pastoral and religious and metaphysical poems, all flourishing over a long period.

ELIZABETHAN LYRICS.

Many of the most charming lyrics of the Elizabethan age are to be found in the plays of the period, and especially in those of Shakespeare. "Oh, Mistress Mine, where are you roaming," "Tell me where is fancy bred," "Come unto these yellow sands," "I know a bank," and many others are so well known that they need only to be referred to here. Not so well known is the extract from "Hero and Leander" beginning, "It lies not in our power to love or hate," and ending with the couplet :

Where both deliberate, the love is slight ;
 Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight ?

The last line is often attributed to Shakespeare, and it does appear in "As You Like It" where Phoebe, after her encounter with Rosalind in masculine attire, says :

Dead Shepherd, now I find thy saw of might,
 Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight ?

But here Shakespeare is quoting his friend and contemporary Marlowe.

The finest lyrics in the plays were probably inserted to overcome the limitations of the Elizabethan stage: and they are best read in their setting. The action is interrupted, and they seize the dominant emotion of the scene, dally with it, and relieve it.

Next to Elizabethan drama, Elizabethan song is, as has been said, the most characteristic literary product of the age. And, as well as in the plays, the lyrics are found scattered through the volumes of poetry of a different order, or in the Miscellanies and Song Books of which so many were published during the period; for most of the Elizabethan poets at some time wrote lyrical verse. If we look in the Elizabethan lyric for the kind of feeling which Burns and Shelley poured into song, we shall at first be disappointed. The older poetry was often less impassioned, less personal. It gives us less of the feeling of a singer pouring out his soul in a song. But it gives a unique display of a number of skilled craftsmen taking great joy in their work, in the beating out of a rhythm, in the designing of a motive or of contrasted motives, or the building of a stanza. The result is a wonderful fertility of lyrical pattern, a wonderfully diffused power of lyrical execution. An Elizabethan lyric lately reset to music has been very popular for the last few years. It is taken from Thomas Ford's "Music of Sundry Kinds," 1607, the first well-known stanza being:

There is a lady sweet and kind,
Was never face so pleased my mind;
I did but see her passing by,
And yet I love her till I die.

Sir Philip Sidney, the hero of Zutphen, whose life story and chivalry in death enrich the pages of our history books, left many poems of a subtle and delicate charm, among them the well-known lyric beginning:

My true love hath my heart, and I have his,
By just exchange one for another given;
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss,
There never was a better bargain driven:
My true love hath my heart, and I have his.

Other Elizabethan lyrics include those of Greene, Lodge, Drayton, Campion, Ben Jonson and John Donne. Most of them are impersonal in character and full of objective idealism, and most reveal an extreme lightness and delicacy of touch, great vivacity, and brilliant fancy, and much conventionality of theme.

It has already been noted that the "new learning" had at the beginning of the sixteenth century begun to make itself felt in

England. There was at that time no native literary tradition, no good available English models, and our writers, with commendable humility, often turned to the classics for guidance. And at first English poetry was experimental and imitative, even oppressed and retarded, and it was towards the end of the century that the literary impulse freed itself from foreign influence and that Elizabethan poetry reached the height of its glory.

INTRODUCTION OF THE SONNET.

The sonnet was introduced into England by Wyatt, but it soon took on a new and purely English character. Shakespeare broke entirely with the Italian model which consisted of an octave and sestet, the crisis coinciding as a rule with the change from the one to the other, and evolved the sonnet consisting of three quatrains, and a closing couplet for emotional and melodic climax. Shakespeare composed more than a hundred and forty of these poems, in addition to his other vast output; it has been said by critics that his sonnets were his mode of taking literary exercise. But they cannot be dismissed like that. Lovely lines of poetry are scattered throughout them and some attain great perfection. We do not need to be reminded of "True Love" beginning:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediment.

And we find, surely, more than the skill of the craftsman in:

REMEMBRANCE.

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste;

Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long-since-cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight.

Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before:

—But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored, and sorrows end.

W. SHAKESPEARE.

Between the years 1591 and 1597 many sonnet-books were published; Edmund Spenser published a set of eighty-eight under the title *Amoretti*; other series were published by Daniel, Constable, Lodge, Barnes and Drayton. Drayton's "Since there's

no help, come, let us kiss and part," is one of the finest sonnets, magnificent in its restrained passion, and perfect in the simplicity of its beautifully balanced diction. Michael Drayton (1563-1631), author also of the familiar "Fair stood the wind for France," is one of the best known of the Elizabethans. Samuel Daniel (1562-1619), was one of the most prolific of the writers of the period; there are in his works magnificent passages, as when he speaks of the serenity of the wise and virtuous man in his epistle to Margaret, Countess of Cumberland, and beautiful lines as when he invokes Apollo:

O clear-eyed Rector of the holy hill.

He wrote a good deal of historical verse, some in epic form, and many sonnets. Here is one from the series to "Delia":

THEN AND NOW.

When men shall find thy flower, thy glory, pass,
 And thou, with careful brow sitting alone,
 Received hast this message from thy glass,
 That tells the truth and says that all is gone;
 Fresh shalt thou see in me the wounds thou madest,
 Though spent thy flame, in me the heat remaining;
 I that have loved thee thus before thou fadest,
 My faith shall wax when thou art in thy waning.

The world shall find this miracle in me,
 That fire can burn when all the matter's spent;
 Then what my faith hath been, thyself shall see,
 And that thou wast unkind, thou mayst repent.
 Thou mayst repent that thou hast scorned my tears,
 When winter snows upon thy sable hairs.

Daniel was still enjoying a poetical prestige in the eighteenth century when so little Elizabethan literature was being read, and later he was warmly praised by Charles Lamb and by Coleridge. He was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, and spent most of his life in the study of poetry and philosophy. He is wanting in fire and passion, but in scholarly grace and tender mournful reverie he is pre-eminent. An echo of this tender reverie is found in Yeats' "When you are old and grey and full of sleep," very reminiscent of Daniel's "Then and Now."

RELIGIOUS AND METAPHYSICAL POETRY.

The stupendousness of the religious changes brought about by the English Reformation exercised a great influence on the literature of the period. At no time in history has the national conscience been so alive. For a long time before the religious settlement under Elizabeth, men had been willing to die for their faith, and for the new vision vouchsafed to them, and those of the Elizabethan writers who had not themselves witnessed the

tortures and persecutions, were near enough to them in time to know about them at first hand and to be influenced by them. And the long controversies had quickened men's minds, had roused men's enthusiasms and fixed their loyalties.

The break with Rome brought a religious freedom unknown before, and as never before Englishmen began to have a sense of a living God to whom they had personal access. And this God seemed to be on their side. Had he not answered the petition inserted in their new Prayer Book, when, in answer to the invocation of the priest "Give peace in our time, O Lord," they responded "Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O Lord"?

All this is reflected in the writings of the period, and it has been said that the new church became the nursing mother of English prose, and trained it more than any single influence. Towards the end of the period the Elizabethan compromise, on which religious matters rested, began to break down, and Calvinistic puritanism began to make itself felt. Most of the controversy was academic, as for example with regard to vestments and episcopacy, and, enshrined in the prose writings of the time, persisted well into the seventeenth century. But religious influence is very marked in the poetry of the later Elizabethan period. Ben Jonson was affected by it, and we find him writing :

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk doth make man better be :

in striking contrast to his lyric beginning :

Still to be neat, still to be dressed
As you were going to a feast,

charming in sentiment as the latter is. But we see this influence most in the work of John Donne (1573-1631), one of the greater poets of the nation. Carew's celebrated epitaph hailed him as a king :

Who ruled as he thought fit
The universal monarchy of wit.

His love poetry is some of the finest of the period, less conventionalised than that of his contemporaries. He runs through mood after mood, and sometimes expresses a universal feeling, as in the poem beginning :

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did till we loved.

He was brought up a Roman Catholic, but became deeply interested in religion on its intellectual side, and plunged into the controversy between the Roman and Anglican Churches. He joined the latter, became a royal chaplain, was appointed

preacher at Lincoln's Inn, and later was Dean of St. Paul's. One of his finest sonnets is on Death :

Death, be not proud, though some have callèd thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so ;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From Rest and Sleep, which but thy picture be,
Much pleasure : then from thee much more must flow ;
And soonest our best men with thee do go,—
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery !

Thou'rt slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke. Why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And Death shall be no more ; Death, thou shalt die.

George Herbert (1593-1633) was one of the sincerest and most deeply spiritual of the religious writers of the period, though not comparable with Donne as a great poet. Izaak Walton said of him that "he sang on earth such hymns and anthems as he and the angels and Mr. Ferrar now sing in heaven." And his songs are still being sung on earth. Who does not know his :

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

* * * * *

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine ;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold ;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

But most loved of all his poems, probably, is "The Gifts of God," in some anthologies called "The Pulley":

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by ;
Let us (said He) pour on him all we can ;
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way ;
Then beauty flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure :
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone, of all His treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said He)
 Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
 He would adore my gifts instead of me,
 And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature :
 So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
 But keep them with repining restlessness :
 Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
 If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
 May toss him to my breast.

Of the other religious poems of the period, the best known to-day is probably Sir Henry Wotton's "Character of a Happy Life":

How happy is he born or taught
 That serveth not another's will ;
 Whose armour is his honest thought,
 And simple truth his highest skill !
 Whose passions not his masters are,
 Whose soul is still prepared for death ;
 Untied unto the world with care
 Of princely love or vulgar breath ;

* * * * *

Who God doth late and early pray
 More of His grace than gifts to lend ;
 Who entertains the harmless day
 With a well-chosen book or friend ;
 —This man is freed from servile bands
 Of hope to rise, or fear to fall ;
 Lord of himself, though not of lands ;
 And having nothing yet hath all.

Wotton was born in 1568, and we have recently, on December 5th, 1939, celebrated the tercentenary of his death.

THE TRANSLATORS : THE AUTHORISED VERSION.

One of the glories of the Renaissance was the resurrection of the Classics, and the opening of the treasure house of Italian literature. There were hosts of translators during the Elizabethan era, headed by the Queen herself, who is said to have translated from Plutarch and Horace. But in an age of great translations, the greatest of all was, of course, our own Authorised Version of the Bible. Published in 1611, it is interesting to think that Shakespeare lived for five years after its first appearance, and probably read it in its first edition. But though, historically, its place in literature is in this epoch, it would be a mistake to attribute the incomparable form and superlative beauty of its language to the "grand style that was in the air." Many reasons beyond the scope of this article contributed to its perfection. Translations leading finally to the Authorised Version had been made over

a period of a hundred years, and probably to Tyndale, who sealed his work with his blood, we owe, more than to any other, the Bible as we know it to-day. Tyndale's boast that he would make it possible for the boy who drove the plough to know more of Scripture than the Popes had hitherto known was no idle one. The people learned to read on purpose to study the Bible; they stayed up all night to peruse it; and since the publication of the Authorised Version its language has pervaded the whole of our literature.

No Anthology is perfect, somebody's favourite is always left out. And the omissions in the above brief survey are glaring. Edmund Spenser, for instance, whose epitaph in Westminster Abbey names him as the "Prince of Poets in his time, whose divine spirit needs no other witness than the works he left behind him," has been merely referred to. We have, in fact, but skimmed the surface and done the barest justice to a few of the names that crowd the records of the period. And we could not hope to do more. We could only hope to re-capture something of the spirit of a glorious age, and to realise again something of its greatness and significance.

E. WEBB SAMUEL.

The Hour and its Need, by William Paton, D.D. (1s.)
Should Missions Go On?, by Basil Mathews, and
Chinese Christians Face Their War, by Stanley H. Dixon.
War-time Pamphlets Nos. 1 and 2 (3d. each).

The Carey Press should be congratulated on the prompt publication of these booklets. They are of value to all who are concerned with the continuance of missionary work in this time of war.