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The Influence of Literature upon Morality.

By

Saml. A. Merc.

The Influence of Literature upon Morality.

It is universally characteristic of man that he exerts an influence upon the world around him. It is impossible in the nature of things that he should not. Even the unfortunate idiot does not live for himself alone; his very condition speaks forth volumes whose language cannot be misunderstood. The splendid, but mournful mins of a mind deprived of reason cannot fail to excite the sympathy of the spectator or strongly impress him with the frailty of human nature.

The occasions, modes and degrees of this power of mind over mind are exceedingly numerous and diversified. A few however stand forth with peculiar prominence. While the great majority of earthly scenes pass away with the rapidity of thought, these in their effects are lasting as eternity. Among them maybe justly ranked the influence of literature. Expressed as it is in words, the literature of a nation must live forever. Words are but the embodiment of the mind's action, the mirrors which reflect the images of the soul, Spectres which flatter forth to enlighten or darken, to cheer or torment, and as they are the product of the intellect, whose action precedes that of the sensibilities, they must exercise an important power over the emotions of the heart. The divinely inspired

Language of eloquence flowing from Parnassus' height and
 the heavenly strains of poetry from the Castalian fount
 will ever sway their magic scepter over the human mind.
 The voice of the orator and of the poet may be hushed in the
 silence of the tomb, but who can say they are just as though they
 never were?

Morality, in its restricted meaning is the system of
 relative duties. Duty can only arise upon the feeling of ob-
 ligation consequent upon the perception of relation, ^{relation can only be perceived by the intellect} hence
 the action of the intellect is at the foundation of morality.
 But as literature is the mere expression of the perceptions
 of the intellect it must also be intimately connected with
 morality. The history of the world establishes this conclu-
 sion, and shows that the Morality of a nation varies with its
 literature.

If we look at the condition of the heathen world sunk
 in immorality and vice, we shall find a corresponding degra-
 dation in their literary character. But as knowledge increased
 and letters are cultivated they advanced in morality; their
 ideas expand and their conceptions are enlarged. Thus it
 was with the early Greeks: Simple in their manners and un-
 contaminated by other nations they sang the deeds of their heroes
 and the praises of their gods, their literature, unshackled
 by the chains of bondage, exerted a healthful influence upon their
 morals, elevated their sentiments, and inspired them with
 devotional feelings. But as the age of simplicity rolled away, and
 the aristocracy of learning arose, there followed a uni-
 versal declension in manners. Greece, distinguished

as she was for the wisdom of her philosophers, the talents of her poets and the sagacity of her Statesmen, was equally remarkable for her moral degeneracy.

The literature, as well as the morality of the early Romans was of rather a negative character. The people were warlike in their manners and dispositions. But with the light of science they arose from their moral darkness, and in the days of their freedom many brilliant stars illuminated their horizon. Though the golden age of Roman literature was in the reign of Augustus, yet there were certain causes by which it was greatly modified. It was the captive of Empire, of power, and in consequence it, influence in purifying the morals of the people was contradicted, having become the victim of despotic sway, its decline was as rapid and remarkable as its previous existence had been glorious.

The Moral Condition of Europe during the Middle Ages was all Roman. She slept in ignorance profound. True, the spark of genius was not extinguished, nor literature entirely unknown. It was cultivated, but not for the people; it was the resident of the cloister, and partook of the same gloomy character as the cells it inhabited. Hankland has suffered much loss from that execrable policy of the pontificate, which kept the people in ignorance. How much farther advanced in learning and piety might the world have been had the light of science and revelation been allowed free access to every mind. Had the same zeal been manifested during the Middle Ages, in distributing the word of life, the literature of the Bible, as there is now,

where would there be an idol or nation unblest by its divine radiance? Fortunate was it for the world that the Egyptian Monk snatched the torch of truth from the dying embers of pure morality. Then arose a light destined to envelope the earth in the mantle of Heaven's benignant smile. Then was the surd policy of the Church exposed and the doom of Anti-Christ sealed.

With the revival of literature and religion the moral condition of Europe improved, and has continued ever since on the advance. The healthful stream that there arose has reached the Western world, and ere long it will have refreshed the whole earth with its waters. Sacred literature has of late been extensively cultivated, and its influence upon the world has been immense. The Bible has given tone and direction to the literature and morality of every nation where it has been widely circulated. Writings that were formerly grateful to the taste are now detested, and almost forgotten. The fabric of society has undergone a radical change through the influence of Christianity and the Christian Revelation. It may be objected that the influence of the Bible is not to be attributed to it as a literary production, but to the fact of its containing a revelation from Heaven. We reply, that it is not acknowledged by all who are under its influence, to contain a revelation, yet they are affected by it, and compelled to admire it. As a composition it far surpasses the best relics of antiquity. Strip it from the moral and literary heavens, and we shall be immediately plunged into heathenish darkness and immorality. This the vilest atheist would deprecate.

We find in modern history a confirmation of our assertion that the ethics of a nation vary with its literature. Many things that were formerly considered within the bounds of morality are now regarded as immoral. The Bible existed a Century ago, but the morality of using intoxicating liquors, of War, and Slavery was scarcely ever questioned. But how is it now? No that partaker of the increasing draught canude be a Christian. War is regarded as a scourge and a calamity, and by many it is still us cast as a denunciation as evidence of the peaceful reign of Messiah. Slavery is considered by many a moral evil, and doubtless justly so. The demoralizing tendency of theatres has been greatly restricted, and moral reformation has been felt in every department of society. This has been the effect of the onward march of Christianity and its literature. The general diffusion of learning and the liberty of the press have contributed greatly to these happy results.

It is ^{of course} in the power to employ the pen for the safety or destruction of society. Of all responsibilities that of the Author is the greatest, as his writings may live and exert an influence for ages after he has gone down to the grave. Many a writer when he has beheld how he has slighted the best interests of man would rejoice could he but consign to eternal oblivion the noxious effusions of his phrenzied brain. But it is impossible.

"Sensum scripturam uel inuocabile uerbum."

Let the literature of the Bible be the model, let whatever is contrary to it be condemned, and authors convinced of their responsibility, and such an influence will go forth into the earth as will purify its inhabitants, make the wilderness bloom, and prepare the world for the jubilee of heaven.

Thos. G. Ware.

June 1840.

Commencement Oration of Samuel George Hare, Class of 1840
Transcribed by Sarah Skalak, June 2008
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