

tesy among the rural population of New England and the Middle States, least among the recent immigrants in the cities and the unsettled population of the West. However, the most material point to remark is the improvement of recent years. The concurrent testimony of European travellers, including both admirers and detractors of democracy, proves that manners must have been disagreeable fifty years ago, and one finds nowadays an equally general admission that the Americans are as pleasant to one another and to strangers as are the French or the Germans or the English. The least agreeable feature to the visitors of former years, an incessant vaunting of their own country and disparagement of others, has disappeared, and the tinge of self-assertion which the sense of equality used to give is now but faintly noticeable.

## CHAPTER CX

### THE INFLUENCE OF DEMOCRACY ON THOUGHT

Two opposite theories regarding the influence of democratic institutions on intellectual activity have found currency. One theory extols them because they stimulate the mind of a people, not only sharpening men's wits by continual struggle and unrest, but giving to each citizen a sense of his own powers and duties in the world, which spurs him on to exertions in ever-widening fields. This theory is commonly applied to Athens and other democracies of the ancient world, as contrasted with Sparta and the oligarchic cities, whose intellectual production was scanty or altogether wanting. It compares the Rome of Cicero, Lucretius, and Catullus, and the Augustan age, whose great figures were born under the Republic, with the vaster but comparatively sterile Roman world of Marcus Aurelius or Constantine, when freedom had long since vanished. It notes the outburst of literary and artistic splendour that fell in the later age of the republics of mediæval Italy, and dwells with especial pleasure on the achievements of Florence, the longest-lived and the most glorious of the free commonwealths of Italy.

According to the other theory, Democracy is the child of ignorance, the parent of dulness and conceit. The opinion of the greatest number being the universal standard, everything is reduced to the level of vulgar minds. Originality is stunted, variety disappears, no man thinks for himself, or, if he does, fears to express what he thinks. A drear pall of monotony covers the sky.

“Thy hand, great Anarch, lets the curtain fall  
And universal darkness buries all.”

This doctrine seems to date from the appearance of Tocqueville's book, though his professed disciples have pushed it

much further than his words warrant. It is really an *a priori* doctrine, drawn from imagining what the consequences of a complete equality of material conditions and political powers ought to be. But it claims to rest upon the observed phenomena of the United States, which, thirty years ago, were still the only great modern democracy; and it was with reference to the United States that it was enunciated by Mr. Robert Lowe in one of those speeches of 1866 which so greatly impressed his contemporaries.

Both these theories will be found on examination to be baseless. Both, so far as they are *a priori* theories, are fanciful; both, in so far as they purport to rest upon the facts of history, err by regarding one set of facts only, and ignoring a great number of concomitant conditions which have probably more to do with the result than the few conditions which have been arbitrarily taken to be sufficient causes. None of the Greek republics was a democracy in the modern sense, for all rested upon slavery; nor, indeed, can the name be applied, except at passing moments, to any of the Italian cities. Many circumstances besides their popular government combined to place the imperishable crown of literary and artistic glory upon the brows of the city of the Violet and the city of the Lily. So also the view that a democratic land is necessarily a land of barren monotony, while unsound even as a deduction from general principles, is still more unsound in its assumption of certain phenomena as true of America, and in the face it puts on the phenomena it has assumed. The theorists who have propounded it give us, like Daniel, the dream as well as their interpretation of it. But the dream is one of their own inventing; and such as it is, it is wrongly interpreted.

It is a common mistake to exaggerate the influence of forms of government. As there are historians and politicians who, when they come across a trait of national character for which no obvious explanation presents itself, set it down to "race," so there are writers and speakers who, too indolent to examine the whole facts of the case, or too ill-trained to feel the need of such examination, pounce upon the political institutions of a country as the easiest way to account for its social and intellectual, perhaps even for its moral and religious, peculiarities. Few problems are in reality more complex than the

relation between the political and the intellectual life of a country; few things more difficult to distinguish than the influences respectively attributable to an equality of political rights and powers on the one hand, and an equality of material and social conditions on the other. It is commonly assumed that Democracy and Equality go hand in hand, but as one may have popular government along with enormous differences of wealth and dissimilarities in social usage, so also one may have social equality under a despot. Doubtless, when social and political equality go hand in hand they intensify one another; but when inequality of material conditions becomes marked, social life changes, and as social phenomena become more complex their analysis becomes more difficult.

Reverting to the two theories from which we set out, it may be said that the United States furnish little support to either. American democracy has certainly produced no age of Pericles. Neither has it dwarfed literature and led a wretched people, so dull as not even to realize their dulness, into a barren plain of featureless mediocrity. To ascribe the deficiencies, such as they are, of art and culture in America, solely or even mainly to her form of government, is not less absurd than to ascribe, as many Americans of what I may call the trumpeting school do, her marvellous material progress to the same cause. It is not Democracy that has paid off a gigantic debt and raised Chicago out of a swamp. Neither is it Democracy that has hitherto denied the United States philosophers like Burke and poets like Wordsworth.

Most writers who have dealt with these matters have not only laid more upon the shoulders of democratic government than it ought to bear, but have preferred abstract speculations to the humbler task of ascertaining and weighing the facts. They have spun ingenious theories about democracy as the source of this or that, or whatever it pleased them to assume; they have not tried to determine by a wide induction what specific results appear in countries which, differing in other respects, agree in being democratically governed. If I do not follow these time-honoured precedents, it is not because the process is difficult, but because it is unprofitable. These speculations have perhaps had their use in suggesting to us what phenomena we ought to look for in democratic countries;

but if any positive results are to be reached, they must be reached by carefully verifying the intellectual phenomena of more than one country, and establishing an unmistakable relation between them and the political institutions under which they prevail.

If some one, starting from the current conception of democracy, were to say that in a democratic nation we should find a disposition to bold and unbridled speculations, sparing neither theology nor morals, a total absence of rule, tradition, and precedent, each man thinking and writing as responsible to no criticism, "every poet his own Aristotle," a taste for strong effects and garish colours, valuing force rather than fineness, grandeur rather than beauty, a vigorous, hasty, impetuous style of speaking and writing, a grandiose, and perhaps sensational art: he would say what would be quite as natural and reasonable *a priori* as most of the pictures given us of democratic societies. Yet many of the suggested features would be the opposite of those which America presents.

Every such picture must be fanciful. He who starts from so simple and (so to speak) bare a conception as that of equal civil rights and equal political powers vested in every member of the community cannot but have recourse to his fancy in trying to body forth the results of this principle. Let any one study the portrait of the democratic man and democratic city which the first and greatest of all the hostile critics of democracy has left us,<sup>1</sup> and compare it with the very different descriptions, of life and culture under a popular government in which European speculation has distorted itself since Tocqueville's time. He will find each theory plausible in the abstract, and each equally unlike the facts which contemporary America sets before us.

Let us then bid farewell to fancy and endeavour to discover what are now the salient intellectual features of the mass of the native population in the United States.

As there is much difference of opinion regarding them, I present with diffidence the following list:—

<sup>1</sup> Plato indeed indulges his fancy so far as to describe the very mules and asses of a democracy as prancing along the roads, scarcely deigning to bear their burdens. The passion for unrestrained licence, for novelty, for variety, is to him the note of democracy, whereas monotony and even obstinate conservatism are the faults which the latest European critics bid us expect.

1. A desire to be abreast of the best thought and work of the world everywhere, to have every form of literature and art adequately represented, and excellent of its kind, so that America shall be felt to hold her own among the nations.

2. A fondness for bold and striking effects, a preference for large generalizations and theories which have an air of completeness.

3. An absence among the multitude of refined taste, with a disposition to be attracted rather by brilliance than by delicacy of workmanship; a want of mellowness and inadequate perception of the difference between first-rate work in a quiet style and mere flatness.

4. Little respect for canons or traditions, accompanied by the notion that new conditions must of necessity produce new ideas.

5. An undervaluing of special knowledge or experience, except in applied science and in commerce, an idea that an able man can do one thing pretty much as well as another, as Dr. Johnson thought that if he had taken to politics he would have been as distinguished therein as he was in tragic poetry.

6. An admiration for literary or scientific eminence, an enthusiasm for anything that can be called genius, with an over-readiness to discover it.

7. A love of intellectual novelties.

8. An intellectual impatience, and desire for quick and patent results.

9. An over-valuing of the judgments of the multitude; a disposition to judge by newspaper "success" work which has not been produced with a view to such success.

10. A tendency to mistake bigness for greatness.

Contrariwise, if we regard not the people generally but the most cultivated class, we shall find, together with a few of the above-mentioned qualities, others which indicate a reaction against the popular tendencies. This class has a strong relish for subtlety of thought and highly finished art, whether in literature or painting. It is so much afraid of crudity and vagueness as to be prone to devote itself to minute and careful study of subjects unattractive to the masses.

Of these characteristics of the people at large some may at first sight seem inconsistent with others, as for instance the

admiration for intellectual gifts with the undervaluing of special knowledge; nevertheless it could be shown that both are discoverable in Americans as compared with Englishmen. The former admire intelligence more than the latter do; but they defer less to special competence. However, assuming for the moment that there is something true in these suggestions, which it would take too long to attempt to establish one by one, be it observed that very few of them can be directly connected with democratic government. Even these few might take a different form in a differently situated democracy. The seventh and eighth seem due to the general intelligence and education of the people, while the remainder, though not wholly uninfluenced by the habits which popular government tends to breed, must be mainly ascribed to the vast size of the country, the vast numbers and intellectual homogeneity of its native white population, the prevalence of social equality, a busy industrialism, a restless changefulness of occupation, and the absence of a leisured class dominant in matters of taste — conditions that have little or nothing to do with political institutions. The prevalence of evangelical Protestantism has been quite as important a factor in the intellectual life of the nation as its form of government.

Some one may say — I wish to state the view fairly though I do not entirely agree with it — that assuming the foregoing analysis to be correct, the influence of democracy, apart from its tendency to secure an ample provision of education, is discernible in two points. It produces self-confidence and self-complacency, national and personal, with the result both of stimulating a certain amount of thought and of preventing the thought that is so produced from being subjected to proper tests. Ambition and self-esteem will call out what might have lain dormant, but they will hinder a nation as well as a man from duly judging its own work, and in so far will retard its progress. Those who are naturally led to trust and obey common sense and the numerical majority in matters of state, overvalue the judgment of the majority in other matters. Now the judgment of the masses is a poor standard for the thinker or the artist to set before him. It may narrow his view and debase his style. He fears to tread in new paths or express unpopular opinions; or if he despises the multitude

he may take refuge in an acrid cynicism. Where the masses rule, a writer cannot but think of the masses, and as they do not appreciate refinements he will eschew these, making himself at all hazards intelligible to the common mind, and seeking to attract by broad, perhaps coarsely broad, effects, the hasty reader, who leaves Walter Scott or Thackeray unread to fasten on the latest sketch of fashionable life or mysterious crime.

I do not deny that there is some force in this way of putting the case. Democracy tends to produce a superficially active public, and perhaps also a jubilant and self-confident public. But it is quite possible to have a democratic people which shall be neither fond of letters nor disposed to trust its own judgment and taste in judging them. Much will depend on the other features of the situation. In the United States the cultivated public increases rapidly, and the very reaction which goes on within it against the defects of the multitude becomes an important factor. All things considered, I doubt whether democracy tends to discourage originality, subtlety, refinement, in thought and in expression, whether literary or artistic. I doubt if there be any solid ground for expecting monotony or vulgarity under one form of government more than another. The causes lie deeper. Art and literature have before now been base and vulgar under absolute monarchies and under oligarchies. One of the most polished and aristocratic societies in Europe has for two centuries been that of Vienna; yet what society could have been intellectually duller or less productive? Venice was almost the only famous Italian city that contributed nothing to the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the habits of popular government which open a career to talent in public life, open it in literature also. No man need lean on a faction or propitiate a coterie. A pure clear voice with an unwonted message may at first fail to make itself heard over the din of competitors for popular favour; but once heard, it and its message will probably be judged on their own merits.

Passing away from this question as to the supposed narcotic power of democracy, the further question may be asked, What is the distinctive note of democratic thought and art as they

actually appear in the United States? What is the peculiar quality or flavour which springs from this political element in their condition? I cannot tell. I find no such note. I have searched for it, and, as the Americans say, it is hard work looking for what is not there. Some Europeans and many Americans profess to have found it, and will tell you that this or that peculiarity of American literature is due to democracy. No doubt, if you take individual writers, you may discover in several of them something, though not always the same thing, which savours of democratic feeling and tinges their way of regarding human life. But that is not enough. What must be shown is a general quality running through the majority of these writers — a quality which is at once recognized as racy of the soil, and which can be traced back to the democratic element which the soil undoubtedly contains. No such quality seems to have been shown. That there is a distinctive note in many — not, perhaps, in all — of the best American books may be admitted. It may be caught by ears not the most delicate. But is this note the voice of democracy? Is it even the voice of democracy and equality combined? There is a difference, slight yet perceptible, in the part which both sentiment and humour play in American books, when we compare them with English books of equivalent strength. The humour has a vein of oddity, and the contrast between the soft copiousness of the sentiment and the rigid lines of lingering Puritanism which it suffuses, is rarely met with in England. Perhaps there is less repose in the American style; there is certainly a curious unrestfulness in the effort, less common in English writers, to bend metaphors to unwonted uses. But are these differences, with others I might mention — and, after all, they are slight — due to any cause connected with politics? Are they not rather due to a mixed and curiously intertwined variety of other causes which have moulded the American mind during the last two centuries? American imagination has produced nothing more conspicuously original than the romances of Hawthorne. If any one says that he finds something in them which he remembers in no previous English writer, we know what is meant and probably agree. But can it be said that there is anything distinctively American in Hawthorne, that is to say, that his specific quality is of a

kind which reappears in other American writers? Few will affirm this. The most peculiar, and therefore I suppose the most characteristically American school of thought, has been what used to be called the Concord or Transcendental school of fifty years ago; among the writings produced by which those of Emerson are best known in Europe. Were the authors of that school distinctively democratic either in the colour of their thought, or in its direction, or in the style which expresses it? And if so, can the same democratic tinge be discerned in the authors of to-day? I doubt it; but such matters do not admit of proof or disproof. One must leave them to the literary feeling of the reader.

A very distinguished American man of letters once said to me that he hated nothing so much as to hear people talk about American literature. He meant, I think, that those who did so were puzzling themselves unnecessarily to find something which belonged to a new country and a democratic country, and were forgetting or ignoring the natural relation of works of imagination and thought produced in America to books written by men of the same race in the Old World before and since 1776.

So far, then, as regards American literature generally, I do not believe that there is in it anything specifically democratic. Nor if we look at the various departments of speculative thought, such as metaphysics and theology, or at those which approach nearer to the exact sciences, such as economics and jurisprudence, shall we find that the character and substance of the doctrines propounded bear marked traces of a democratic influence. Why should we be surprised at this, seeing that the influence of a form of government is only one among many influences, even where a nation stands alone, and creates a literature distinctively local? But can books written in the United States be deemed to constitute a literature locally American in the same sense as the literatures of France and Germany, of Italy and Russia, belong to those countries? For the purposes of thought and art the United States is a part of England, and England is a part of America. Many English books are more widely read and strike deeper to the heart in America than in England. Some American books have a like fortune in England. Differences there are, but differences how

trivial compared with the resemblances in temper, in feeling, in susceptibility to certain forms of moral and physical beauty, in the general view of life and nature, in the disposition to revere and be swayed by the same matchless models of that elder literature which both branches of the English race can equally claim. American literature does not to-day differ more from English literature than the Scottish writers of eighty or a hundred years ago — Burns, Scott, Adam Smith, Reid, Hume, Robertson — differed from their English contemporaries. There was a fondness for abstractions and generalizations in the Scottish prose writers; there was in the Scottish poets a bloom and fragrance of mountain heather which gave to their work a charm of freshness and singularity, like that which a faint touch of local accent gives to the tongue of an orator. But they were English as well as Scottish writers: they belong to English literature and make part of its glory to the world beyond. So Fenimore Cooper, Hawthorne, Emerson, Longfellow, and those on whom their mantle has fallen, belong to England as well as to America; and English writers, as they more and more realize the vastness of the American public they address, will more and more feel themselves to be American as well as English, and will often find in America not only a larger but a more responsive audience.

We have been here concerned not to discuss the merits and estimate the place of American thinkers and writers, but only to examine the relation in which they stand to their political and social environment. That relation, however, sets before us one more question. The English-speaking population of the United States will soon be twice as large as that of the United Kingdom. The white part of it is a more educated population, in which a greater number of persons come under the influence of books and might therefore be stirred up to intellectual production. Why then does it not make more important contributions to the common literary wealth of the race? Is there a want of creative power? and if so, to what is the want due?

This is a question frequently propounded. I propose to consider it in the chapter which follows.

## CHAPTER CXI

### CREATIVE INTELLECTUAL POWER

THERE is a street in Florence on each side of which stand statues of the famous Florentines of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, — Dante, Giotto, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ghiberti, Machiavelli, Michael Angelo, and others scarcely less illustrious, all natives of the little city which in their days had never a population of more than seventy thousand souls.<sup>1</sup> No one can walk between these rows of world-famous figures, matched by no other city of the modern world, without asking himself what cause determined so much of the highest genius to this one spot; why in Italy herself populous Milan and Naples and Venice have no such list to show; why the succession of greatness stopped with the beginning of the sixteenth century and has never been resumed? Questions substantially the same constantly rise to the mind in reading the history of other countries. Why did England produce no first-rate poet in the two stirring centuries between Chaucer and Shakespeare, and again in the century and a half between Milton's birth and Wordsworth's? Why have epochs of comparative sterility more than once fallen upon Germany and France? and why has music sometimes reached its highest pitch of excellence at moments when the other arts were languishing? Why does the sceptre of intellectual and artistic leadership pass now to one great nation, now to another, inconstant and unpredictable as are the shifting winds?

These questions touch the deepest and most complex problems of history; and neither historian nor physiologist has yet been able to throw any real light upon them. Even the commonplace remark that times of effort and struggle tend to

<sup>1</sup> Petrarch saw the light in Arezzo, but his family was Florentine, and it was by a mere accident that he was born away from his own city.