

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.

develop an unusually active intellectual movement, and therewith to awaken or nourish rare geniuses, is not altogether true; for some of the geniuses have arisen at moments when there was no excitement to call them forth, and at other times seasons of storm and stress have raised up no one capable of directing the efforts or interpreting the feelings of his generation. One thing, however, is palpable: numbers have nothing to do with the matter. There is no average of a man of genius to so many thousands or millions of persons. Out of the sixty thousand of Florence there arise during two centuries more men of undying fame than out of huge London during the last three centuries. Even the stock of solid second-class ability does not necessarily increase with increasing numbers; while as to those rare combinations of gifts which produce poetry or philosophy of the first order, they are revealed no more frequently in a great European nation now than they were in a Semitic tribe or a tiny Greek city twenty-five or thirty centuries ago.

There is therefore no reason why the absence of brilliant genius among the sixty-five millions in the United States should excite any surprise; we might as well wonder that there is no Goethe, or Schiller or Kant or Hegel in the Germany of to-day, so much more populous and better educated than the Germany of their birth-time. It is not to be made a reproach against America that men like Tennyson or Darwin have not been born there. "The wind bloweth where it listeth;" the rarest gifts appear no one can tell why or how. In broad France a century ago no man was found able to spring upon the neck of the Revolution and turn it to his will. Fate brought her favourite from a wild Italian island, that had but just passed under the yoke of the nation to which it gave a master.

The question we have to ask as regards the United States is therefore not why it has given us few men of the highest and rarest distinction, but whether it has failed to produce its fair share of talents of the second rank, that is, of men capable of taking a lead in all the great branches of literary or artistic or scientific activity, men who instruct and delight their own generation, though possibly future generations may not hold all of them in remembrance.

Have fewer men of this order adorned the roll of fame in the United States, during the century of their independence, than in England, or France, or Germany during the same period? Obviously this is the fact as regards art in all its branches; and also as regards physical and mathematical science. In literature the disparity is less evident, yet most candid Americans will agree with Englishmen that it is greater than those who know the education and intelligence of the younger people would have expected. I pass by oratory and statesmanship, because comparison is in these fields very difficult. The fact therefore being admitted, we have to endeavour to account for it.

If the matter were one of numerical averages, it would be pertinent to remark that of the sixty-six millions of people in the United States seven or eight millions are negroes, at present altogether below the stratum from which production can be expected; that of the whites there may be two millions to whom English is a foreign language, and that several millions are recent immigrants from Europe. This diminishes the contrast between numbers and intellectual results. But numbers have so little to do with the question that the point scarcely deserves a passing reference.

Those who have discussed the conditions of intellectual productivity have often remarked that epochs of stir and excitement are favourable, because they stimulate men's minds, setting new ideas afloat, and awakening new ambitions. It is also true that vigorous unremitting labour is, speaking generally, needed for the production of good work, and that one is therefore less entitled to expect it in an indolent time and from members of the luxurious classes. But it is not less true, though less frequently observed, that tranquillity and repose are necessary to men of the kind we are considering, and often helpful even to the highest geniuses, for the evolving of new thoughts and the creation of forms of finished and harmonious beauty. He who is to do such work must have time to meditate, and pause, and meditate again. He must be able to set his creation aside, and return to it after days or weeks to look at it with fresh eyes. He must be neither distracted from his main purpose, nor hurried in effecting it. He must be able to concentrate the whole force of his reason or imagination on one subject, to abstract himself when needful from the flitting sights

and many-voiced clamour of the outer world. Juvenal said this long ago about the poet; it also applies, though possibly in a lower degree, both to the artist and to the serious thinker, or delicate workman, in any field of literature, to the metaphysician, the theologian, the philosophic historian, the economist, the philologist, even the novelist and the statesman. I have heard men who had gone from a quiet life into politics complain that they found their thinking powers wither, and that while they became far more expert in getting up subjects and speaking forcibly and plausibly, they found it harder and harder to form sound general views and penetrate beneath the superficialities of the newspaper and the platform. Interrupted thought, trains of reflection or imaginative conceptions constantly broken by a variety of petty transient calls of business, claims of society, matters passing in the world to note and think of, not only tire the mind but destroy its chances of attaining just and deep views of life and nature, as a wind-ruffled pool ceases to reflect the rocks and woods around it. Mohammed falling into trances on the mountain above Mecca, Dante in the sylvan solitudes of Fonte Avellana, Cervantes and Bunyan in the enforced seclusion of a prison, Hegel so wrapt and lost in his speculations that, taking his manuscript to the publisher in Jena on the day of the great battle, he was surprised to see French soldiers in the streets; these are types of the men and conditions which give birth to thoughts that occupy succeeding generations: and what is true of these greatest men is perhaps even more true of men of the next rank. Doubtless many great works have been produced among inauspicious surroundings, and even under severe pressure of time; but it will, I think, be almost invariably found that the producer had formed his ideas or conceived his creations in hours of comparative tranquillity, and had turned on them the full stream of his powers to the exclusion of whatever could break or divert its force.

In Europe men call this a century of unrest. But the United States is more unrestful than Europe, more unrestful than any country we know of has yet been. Nearly every one is busy; those few who have not to earn their living and do not feel called to serve their countrymen, find themselves out of place, and have been wont either to make amusement into

a business or to transfer themselves to the ease of France or Italy. The earning of one's living is not, indeed, incompatible with intellectually creative work, for many of those who have done such work best have done it in addition to their gainful occupation, or have earned their living by it. But in America it is unusually hard for any one to withdraw his mind from the endless variety of external impressions and interests which daily life presents, and which impinge upon the mind, I will not say to vex it, but to keep it constantly vibrating to their touch. Life is that of the squirrel in his revolving cage, never still even when it does not seem to change. It becomes every day more and more so in England, and English literature and art show increasing marks of haste. In the United States the ceaseless stir and movement, the constant presence of newspapers, the eagerness which looks through every pair of eyes, even that active intelligence and sense of public duty, strongest in the best minds, which make a citizen feel that he ought to know what is passing in the wider world as well as in his own, all these render life more exciting to the average man than it is in Europe, but chase away from it the opportunities for repose and meditation which art and philosophy need, as growing plants need the coolness and darkness of night no less than the blaze of day. The type of mind which American conditions have evolved is quick, vigorous, practical, versatile; but it is unfavourable to the natural germination and slow ripening of large and luminous ideas; it wants the patience that will spend weeks or months on bringing details to an exquisite perfection. And accordingly we see that the most rich and finished literary work America has given us has proceeded from the older regions of the country, where the pulsations of life are slower and steadier than in the West or in the great commercial cities. It was from New England that the best books of the last generation came; and that not solely because the English race was purest there, and education most generally diffused, for the New Englanders who have gone West, though they have carried with them their moral standard and their bright intelligence, seem either to have left behind their gift for literary creation, or to care to employ it only in teaching and in journalism.

It may be objected to this view that some of the great

literary ages, such as the Periclean age at Athens, the Medicæan age at Florence, the age of Elizabeth in England, have been ages full of movement and excitement. But the unrestfulness which prevails in America is altogether different from the large variety of life, the flow of stimulating ideas and impressions which marked those ages. Life is not as interesting in America, except as regards commercial speculation, as it is in Europe, because society and the environment of man are too uniform. It is hurried and bustling; it is filled with a multitude of duties and occupations and transient impressions. In the ages I have referred to, men had time enough for all there was to do, and the very scantiness of literature and rarity of news made that which was read and received tell more powerfully upon the imagination.

Nor is it only the distractions of American life that clog the wings of invention. The atmosphere is over full of all that pertains to material progress. Americans themselves say, when excusing the comparative poverty of learning and science, that their chief occupation is at present the subjugation of their continent, that it is an occupation large enough to demand most of the energy and ambition of the nation, but that presently, when this work is done, the same energy and ambition will win similar triumphs in the fields of abstract thought, while the gifts which now make them the first nation in the world for practical inventions, will then assure to them a like place in scientific discovery. There is evidently much truth in this. The attractions of practical life are so great to men conscious of their own vigour, the development of the West and the vast operations of commerce and finance which have accompanied that development have absorbed so many strenuous talents, that the supply of ability available not only for pure science (apart from its applications) and for philosophical and historical studies, but even for statesmanship, has been proportionately reduced. But, besides this withdrawal of an unusually large part of the nation's force, the predominance of material and practical interests has turned men's thoughts and conversation into a channel unfavourable to the growth of the higher and more solid kinds of literature, perhaps still more unfavourable to art. Goethe said, "If a talent is to be speedily and happily developed the chief point is that a great deal of

intellect and sound culture should be current in a nation." There is certainly a great deal of intellect current in the United States. But it is chiefly directed to business, that is, to railways, to finance, to commerce, to inventions, to manufactures (as well as to practical professions like law), things which play a relatively larger part than in Europe, as subjects of universal attention and discussion. There is abundance of sound culture, but it is so scattered about in divers places and among small groups which seldom meet one another, that no large cultured society has arisen similar to that of European capitals or to that which her universities have created for Germany. In Boston thirty years ago a host could have brought together round his table nine men as interesting and cultivated as Paris or London would have furnished. But a similar party of eighteen could not have been collected, nor even the nine anywhere except in Boston. At present, culture is more diffused: there are many cities where men of high attainments and keen intellectual interests are found, and associate themselves in literary or scientific clubs. Societies for the study of particular authors are frequent among women. I remember to have been told of a Homer club and an Æschylus club, formed by the ladies of St. Louis, and of a Dante club in some Eastern city. Nevertheless a young talent gains less than it would gain in Europe from the surroundings into which it is born. The atmosphere is not charged with ideas as in Germany, nor with critical *finesse* as in France. Stimulative it is, but the stimulus drives eager youth away from the groves of the Muses into the struggling throng of the market-place.

It may be thought fanciful to add that in a new country one whole set of objects which appeal to the imagination, are absent,—no castles gray with age; no solemn cathedrals whose altering styles of architecture carry the mind up or down the long stream of history from the eleventh to the seventeenth century; few spots or edifices consecrated by memories of famous men or deeds, and among these none of remote date. There is certainly no want of interest in those few spots: the warmth with which Americans cherish them puts to shame the indifference of the English Parliament to the historic and prehistoric sites and buildings of Britain. But not one American youth in a thousand comes under the spell of any such

associations. In the city or State where he lives there is nothing to call him away from the present. All he sees is new, and has no glories to set before him save those of accumulated wealth and industry skilfully applied to severely practical ends.

Some one may say that if (as was observed in last chapter) English and American literature are practically one, there is no need to explain the fact that one part of a race undivided for literary purposes leaves the bulk of literary production to be done by the other part, seeing that it can enter freely into the labours of the latter and reckon them its own. To argue thus would be to push the doctrine of the unity of the two branches rather too far, for after all there is much in American conditions and life which needs its special literary and artistic interpretations; and the question would still confront us, why the transatlantic branch, nowise inferior in mental force, contributes less than its share to the common stock. Still it is certainly true that the existence of a great body of producers, in England of literature, as in France of pictures, diminishes the need for production in America. Or to put the same thing in another way, if the Americans did not read English they would evidently feel called on to create more high literature for themselves. Many books which America might produce are not produced because the men qualified to write them know that there are already English books on the same subject; and the higher such men's standard is, the more apt are they to overrate the advantages which English authors enjoy as compared with themselves. Many feelings and ideas which now find adequate expression through the English books which Americans read would then have to be expressed through American books, and their literature would be not only more individual, but more copious and energetic. If it lost in breadth, it would gain in freshness and independence. American authors conceive that even the non-recognition of international copyright told for evil on their profession. Since the native writer was undersold by reprints of English and French books, which, paying nothing to the European author, could be published at the cost of the paper and printing only, native authorship was discouraged, native talent diverted into other fields, while at the same time the intellectual standard of the public was lowered and its taste vulgarized. It might

have been thought that the profusion of cheap reprints would quicken thought and diffuse the higher kinds of knowledge among the masses. But by far the largest part of these reprints, and the part most extensively read, were novels, and among them many flimsy novels, which drove better books, including some of the best American fiction, out of the market, and tended to Europeanize the American mind in the worst way. One may smile at the suggestion I have met with that the allegiance of the working classes to their democratic institutions will be seduced by descriptions of English duchesses; yet it is probably true — eminent observers assure one of it — that the profusion of new frothy or highly spiced fiction offered at fivepence or tenpence a volume did much to spoil the popular palate for the enjoyment of more wholesome and nutritious food. And whatever injures the higher literature by diminishing the demand, may further injure it by creating an atmosphere unfavourable to the growth of pure and earnest native literary talent.

What then of the newspapers? The newspapers are too large a subject for this chapter, and their influence as organs of opinion has been already discussed. The vigour and brightness of many among them are surprising. Nothing escapes them: everything is set in the sharpest, clearest light. Their want of reticence and delicacy is regretfully admitted by all educated Americans — the editors, I think, included. The cause of this deficiency is probably to be found in the fact that, whereas the first European journals were written for the polite world of large cities, American journals were, early in their career, if not at its very beginning, written for the bulk of the people, and published in communities still so small that everybody's concerns were already pretty well known to everybody else. They had attained no high level of literary excellence when some forty years ago an enterprising man of unrefined taste created a new type of "live" newspaper, which made a rapid success by its smartness, copiousness, and variety, while addressing itself entirely to the multitude. Other papers were almost forced to shape themselves on the same lines, because the class which desired something more choice was still relatively small; and now the journals of the chief cities have become such vast commercial concerns that they still think

first of the mass and are controlled by its tastes, which they have themselves done so much to create. There are cities where the more refined readers who dislike flippant personalities are counted by tens of thousands, but in such cities competition is now too severe to hold out much prospect of success to a paper which does not expect the support of hundreds of thousands. It is not, however, with the æsthetic or moral view of the newspaper that we are here concerned, but with the effect on the national mind of the enormous ratio which the reading of newspapers bears to all other reading, a ratio higher than even in France or England. A famous Englishman, himself a powerful and fertile thinker, contrasted the value of the history of Thucydides with that of a single number of the *Times* newspaper, greatly to the advantage of the latter. Others may conceive that a thoughtful study of Thucydides, or, not to go beyond our own tongue, of Bacon, Milton, Locke, or Burke, perhaps even of Gibbon, Grote, or Macaulay, will do more to give keenness to the eye and strength to the wings of the mind than a whole year's reading of the best daily newspaper. It is not merely that the matter is of more permanent and intrinsic worth, nor that the manner and style form the student's taste; it is not merely that in the newspaper we are in contact with persons like ourselves, in the other case with rare and splendid intellects. The whole attitude of the reader is different. His attention is loose, his mind unbraced, so that he does not stop to scrutinize an argument, and forgets even valuable facts as quickly as he has learnt them. If he read Burke as he reads the newspaper, Burke would do him little good. And therefore the habit of mind produced by a diet largely composed of newspapers is adverse to solid thinking and dulling to the sense of beauty. Scorched and stony is the soil which newspaper reading has prepared to receive the seeds of genius.

Does the modern world really gain, so far as creative thought is concerned, by the profusion of cheap literature? It is a question one often asks in watching the passengers on an American railway. A boy walks up and down the car scattering newspapers and books in paper covers right and left as he goes. The newspapers are glanced at, though probably most people have read several of the day's papers already. The

books are nearly all novels. They are not bad in tone, and sometimes they give incidentally a superficial knowledge of things outside the personal experience of the reader; while from their newspapers the passengers draw a stock of information far beyond that of a European peasant, or even of an average European artisan. Yet one feels that this constant succession of transient ideas, none of them impressively though many of them startlingly stated, all of them flitting swiftly past the mental sight as the trees flit past the eyes when one looks out of the car window, is no more favourable to the development of serious intellectual interests and creative intellectual power than is the limited knowledge of the European artisan or peasant.

Most of the reasons I have hazarded to account for a phenomenon surprising to one who recognizes the quantity of intellect current in America, and the diffusion, far more general than in any other country, of intellectual curiosity, are reasons valid in the Europe of to-day as compared with the Europe of last century, and still more true of the modern world as compared with the best periods of the ancient. Printing is by no means pure gain to the creative faculties, whatever it may be to the acquisitive; even as a great ancient thinker seems to have thought that the invention of writing in Egypt had weakened the reflective powers of man. The question follows, Are these causes, supposing them to be true causes, likely to be more or less operative in the America of next century than they now are? Will America become more what Europe is now, or will she be even more American?

I have elsewhere thrown out some conjectures on this point. Meantime it is pertinent to ask what are the most recent developments of American thought and research, for this will help us to see whether the tide of productive endeavour is rising or falling.

The abundant and excellent work done in fiction need be mentioned only for the sake of calling attention to the interest it has, over and above its artistic merit, as a record of the local manners and usages and types of character in various parts of the Union — types which are fast disappearing. The Creoles of Louisiana, the negroes under slavery, with African tales still surviving in their memories, the rough but kindly