

# THE LITERARY HIGHWAY

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**M**AIN Street is an uncomfortable place for your egotist. It oppresses him with the sense of his insignificance. The buildings may be taller and the crowd larger and more interesting than in his native quarters; but they deprive him of the satisfaction he has derived from the contemplation of his own importance. Moreover, its course is so straight and so well defined. Main Street is hard on eccentrics. There is something tyrannical in the relentlessness with which it curbs waywardness. The individualist, with hankerings after "the long brown path leading wherever I choose", finds it a severe discipline.

Literature, too, has its Main Street. There is no distinction to be derived from acquaintance with the classics. These are the books that everyone has read, or at least is supposed to have read. To quote them impresses no one, as does a casual and easy reference to some bye-way of Letters. Shakespeare and Dickens are common property; a reputation for wide reading or exclusive tastes is not to be acquired by citing them. It is different if you pluck some nonentity out of his obscurity and hold him up for the admiration of mankind; in that case you are likely to hear yourself spoken of as "a distinguished critic". This exploration of the unknown flatters your pride, giving you the happy consciousness of an independence that can ignore the servile conventionality of the ignorant crowd. In your own writing, too,—if you happen to write—you may find the standards set up by the masters cramping. You tell yourself that there is no use in being like everyone else; the only reason for writing at all is that you may make your own particular contribution to the literature of your times.

That is not merely the practice of our age, but is also its theory of literature. "Sincerity" is held to be the chief if not the only virtue, and "sincerity" means self-assertion, giving expression to your individual point of view, achieving a distinctive style. All the pride of revolt against what is tame, unadventurous, imitative is in that theory.

But in this, as in other matters, a distinction should be drawn between humility and servility. One might almost say that humility is the basis of culture. Let it be granted that a taste for the classics is something that has to be acquired, and that appreciation of Dante, for instance, is not the spontaneous and natural thing that your relish of the last best-seller is. And we have got it into our heads that acquired tastes are artificial, i.e. unreal, simulated.

If we don't care about the classics, let us say so and have done with it—that is the attitude of our generation. But stay! Your doctor tells you, maybe, that you have been living at too great a speed, that your nerves are jangled and your stomach upset by highly seasoned and artificial dieting. He says that you ought to go away to the country and live quietly, cultivating a love of simple, wholesome things. And then there follows a conversation something like this:

*Patient:* But, Doctor, I can't. I'm not used to it. I wouldn't know what to do with myself. The solitude would drive me mad. Its not natural for me to live that kind of life.

*Doctor:* I know. That's why I'm prescribing this regimen. It ought to be natural for you, and we've got to get you back to what is normal for average human nature. I'm not thinking of what suits you as an individual, but what suits you as a man.

*Patient:* Well, I suppose I'm different from other people. I can't do without excitement and cock-tails and bridge-parties and all that sort of thing. It'll kill me to change.

*Doctor:* Not as quickly as it'll kill you to go on in your present course. Of course it'll be a painful thing to get back to the normal; that's the price you have to pay for your irregularities. You must learn to adapt yourself to new conditions if ever you are to regain physical and mental health.

*Patient:* Well, if my present mode of life is unhealthy, at least it is natural to me. What you call adaptation would turn me into someone else.

*Doctor:* You are thinking more of your present individual likings than of what is human and general and normal.

The great masters of Literature, elected to their position as such by the verdict of the centuries, represent the common tradition of mankind. There is no accident about their pre-eminence. They have survived because they expressed something central and universal. They may not be as exciting as the daily paper hot from the press. We may not jump to them as we do to X's audacious novel or Y's erotic verse, but that is not because they are wrong. It is we, whose jaded taste cannot appreciate them, who are wrong. They have not the idiom of the last literary fashion, it is true. It is true, also, that there is such a thing in cultural matters as provincialism. To live exclusively in the small circle of contemporary literature and to ignore the larger and longer traditions of our civilisation is provincial. If we don't like these writers, we ought.

Yes, there is an *ought* in literature. The tradition which has been created is not arbitrary. The consensus which established

it was based on fundamental laws and to those laws, whether we like it or not, we must subscribe. There is a point at which revolt from the "conventional" becomes mere irresponsible eccentricity, and excommunicates us from the society of the truly cultured. In the course of time men have come to certain fixed if unformulated conclusions as to what constitutes great literature. No one will ever persuade me that the *Book of Job* and *Homer's Iliad* do not belong to this category, and I say frankly that if we cannot perceive their greatness, the fault is ours. If we desire to be intellectually and aesthetically normal, we ought to train ourselves to like them. If the taste for them does not come naturally, it must be acquired, or we must content ourselves to live outside the pale. The process of adaptation no doubt is a humiliating and painful one. The fussy little egotist, clamouring for individual distinction, the Twentieth Century provincial speaking the dialect of 1936 and unable to understand the native and universal language of mankind, resent the discipline. But no one pretends that discipline is pleasant, or that its unpleasantness excuses us from it.

"But surely you would not standardise taste?" *Standardisation* is a modern term and a modern thing. It means the imposition from outside of a mechanical uniformity. The conformity which it indicates has no roots in personality. It is not a spiritual thing. It is due simply to the fact that we have submitted to the tyranny of our machine-age. But the acquisition of common cultural standards such as those of which we have been speaking demands purpose. And there is a still greater and more important difference.

Standardisation forbids individuality. The public which reads the same newspapers, sees the same films, listens to the same radio talks and concerts, lives in houses patterned on the same model and eats food issued from the same or almost identical factories, grows up without the capacity for developing individual taste and initiative. The Middle Ages, on the contrary, though they rejoiced in a culture that was common to Christendom, show an amazingly varied pageant. The architects and craftsmen of the time wrought with true originality. To take only English literature, no one would accuse either Chaucer or Langland of lacking individuality.

The truth is that reverence for tradition is the firmest basis for developing one's own particular contribution. It is a good thing when one visits a strange city to make straight for Main Street. But only because that gives you your bearings with regard to tributary streets. Once you have made the acquaintance of

Main Street, you know where you are. Your freedom is increased by having a definite and fixed point of departure. Instead of plunging about at hap-hazard, you can explore systematically. In like manner, familiarity with the Literary Highway gives the novice the sense of assurance which enables him to evolve in a sane fashion a distinctive style. Experiments are all very well. It is inevitable that we should make them. But experiments conducted at random, experiments that resemble "lucky bag" dips, are futile. So is the "originality" that is due to an unreasoned effort to be "different". Fruitful experiment must have a starting-point, and must know what it wants. Scientific experiment proceeds from the known to the unknown. The chemist does not mix different ingredients according to the whim of the moment in the hope that he will make some momentous discovery. Your true adventurers are careful, and even laboriously cautious as to the line of approach by which they can best invade uncharted realms.

The present phase of feverish eccentricity in literature will pass. And when it is passed it will be found that the stars of the firmament, obscured for awhile by the storm clouds of our troubled century, have kept their ancient places. They will look down calmly, yet not without pity, on the grave-yard where the eccentrics lie buried. These, indeed, achieved "a bubble reputation". They were the talk of the literary journals for a few weeks. Critics anxious above all things to be in the fashion acclaimed them as assured of immortality. But in fifty years only those will remain in memory whose roots went down into the soil of the great human tradition.

We might extend these considerations still further, and perhaps with still greater profit, by pointing out that even more necessary than familiarity with the masters of Letters is familiarity with those subjects in which the masters were interested. It is the sign of a great literature that it is concerned with what is universal. We seek in Shakespeare not a picture of Elizabethan times (though he gives us this), but a picture of man as he is in all times. The repertory of the poets who have lived longest is quite small, the themes they have treated quite limited in number. But they have been at the heart of human experience. It is the newspaper which gives us the fads and fashions of the hour, the local colour of the contemporary scene. Literature deserving of the name is concerned with the permanent. In the long run, it is better to be familiar with the constellations on which Abraham and Alexander and Vergil looked than to be able to write a brilliant report of the firework display which welcomed yesterday's hero.