



Aspects of Fiction and Other Ventures in Criticism

Brander Matthews

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From the beginning of the first chapter.

The history of mankind is little more than the list of the civilizations that have arisen one on the ruin of the other, the Roman supplanting the Greek, as the Assyrian had been ousted by the Babylonian. The life of each of these successive civilizations was proportioned to the vitality of the ideas by which it was animated; and we cannot estimate it or even understand it except in so far as we are able to grasp these underlying principles. What the ideas were which dominated these vanished civilizations it is for us to discover for ourselves as best we may by a study of all the records they left behind them, and especially by a reverent examination of their laws, their arts, and their writings in so far as these have been preserved to us. Of all these relics of peoples now dead and gone, none is so instructive as literature, and none is so interesting; by its aid we are enabled to reconstruct the past, as we are also helped to understand the present.

Of the literatures which thus explain to us our fellow-man as he was and as he is, three seem to me pre-eminent, standing out and above the others not only by reason of the greater number of men of genius who have illustrated them, but also by reason of their own more persistent strength and their own broader variety. These three literatures are the Greek, the French, and the English.

There are great names in the other modern languages, no doubt—the names of Dante and of Cervantes and of Goethe, than which, indeed, there are none greater. In French literature, however, and in English there are not wanting names as mighty as these. Fortunately, the possession of genius is not the privilege of any one language, of any one country, or of any one century. Where French literature and English can claim superiority over Italian, Spanish, and German is rather in sustaining a higher average of excellence for a longer period of time. The literature of the Italian language, of the Spanish, and of the German has no such beadroll of writers of the first rank as illustrates the literature of the French and of the English.

There is perhaps no more manly instrument of precision than the Latin language, none which better repays the struggle for its mastery; but Latin literature, if not second-rate, when tried by the loftiest standards, is at least secondary, being transplanted from Greece and lacking resolute roots in its own soil. Nor is any dispute possible as to the high value of Hebrew literature; as Coleridge declared with characteristic insight, "sublimity is Hebrew by birth"; but Hebrew literature has not the wide range of the Greek, nor its impeccable beauty.

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