

GARDENS, CANADIAN PROSE, AND THE BIBLE

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THERE is a popular belief that everyone speaks prose, and with that goes the inference that anybody with a ready tongue can write good prose. But the popular belief is not well founded; and as for the pen of the ready writer that goes with the ready tongue, though these are common enough, good prose is all too rare. The inference from this is not favourable to the quick and easy writer.

Here, and in what follows, the prose referred to is Canadian, not the production of the United States or of lands overseas. This distinction is based upon geography, but a further distinction may reasonably be looked for. Is not the Canadian known in London, as they tell us, by his speech, distinguishable from the American, Australian and the rest by that means? And so, sooner or later, the literature of each people, if sincere and well made, must develop characteristics of form and manner by which it will be distinguishable from all others.

Using the word "literature" in a broad sense, we must look to Canadian newspapers, periodicals and books for examples of Canadian literature. While the newspaper is concerned mainly with passing interests and the book with things of permanent value—with the periodical grasping at both—each has its literary place. That place is fixed, of course, by the external form and by the term of usefulness the publication is to have. But it must have, in addition, certain literary qualities. And if the workmanship is good, the report or the interview or the story or the essay cannot be refused recognition as literature; but if it is bad, no fine printing or wide advertising can make it a work of art in prose.

The ability to produce good work and the ability to appreciate it must go together; for the writer can carry on only so long as he has an appreciative public. Consequently, if our literature is to take a national turn, some determined effort should be made to develop a sound national taste in our readers and our prospective writers. As reading is one of the best means of forming taste, there ought to be frequent and urgent recommendation of suitable

books for general reading. One of the best, as many believe, is the English Bible. I wish to speak of it here as a work of literature.

A piece of literature may be viewed either as a manufactured article or as an agricultural product. The first view makes the author a factory-hand, while the second makes him a farm-hand or a gardener. But though the routine necessary to commercial production may reduce him to the grade of a factory piece-worker, he cannot do his best work at that level. For, when at his best, he is conscious of ideas germinating in his mind, and of their growth, blooming and fruitage. Consequently the garden or field—where there is first the seed, then the plant, then the fruit—serves more appropriately than the workshop as a symbol of the author's mind, and the book is a display of flowers.

The field crop of the farmer will fail if good seed is not planted; on the other hand, the better the seed the better the crop. For these reasons the scientific farmer will plant nothing but the best seed. Moreover, he is constantly striving to better his best. And so, if a worthy crop is looked for in Canadian literature, that flower and fruit of men's minds, it cannot be less necessary that the seed planted in the author's mind should be good. If this sort is planted in the mature mind it will produce good fruit, but if planted in the young mind it will produce, in time, the choicest fruit.

Again, in the garden the seed determines the shape, tint, and scent of each flower. With all the importance that attaches to soil, sun, and cultivation, the effects of these agents are those of degree; they do not change the variety. So if one wants poppies, he must plant poppy seed; and if he wants roses, he must plant rose cuttings. In the same way, if the flower and fruit of a fragrant, beautiful, healthy Canadian literature is to be produced, the best varieties of seed must be sown in Canadian children's minds.

Then there are the weeds. These, though they grow naturally, are none the less undesirable for being native or naturalized children of this land. And even though we grant that some of them are interesting or pretty, no person with a true sense of fitness will grow, by preference, a pretty weed instead of a genuine garden plant. The child, however, because he lacks experience, may acquire a false taste by having the literary weed flower unfold and scatter its seeds in his mind. So he must be given advice by heads wiser than his own, if he is not to spoil his own garden in this way, and, by propagating the seed, spoil other gardens besides.

These gardens lie along the highway of life in a land that is

spiritual and immaterial. In that land distance and time are unknown, for it is not a place of travelling feet and rising suns. The traveller cannot pass from point to point across the landscape; he need not wait for dawn to behold it; it is remade for him each time he may wish to view it. At will, he may enjoy an ancient classic or delight in the latest production of a modern master. But besides being a spectator it is possible for him to try his own hand at ornamenting the landscape. Although his first attempts may be very modest in dimensions or but ephemeral in interest, there is always a chance of his doing something really fine; and when that happens, he can add a scene of enduring value to this living landscape.

There is an old garden, shut in by a thick evergreen hedge. Its paths are ample, and they wind, with a suggestion of antiquity, now among beds of bright flowers, again beside graceful shrubbery; here and there stately trees are growing; a lake with its splashing fountain relieves the heat of mid-day; and the overflowing waters, trickling down their paved channel, feed a quiet stream that winds through grass and grain to the end of the garden. Over all there is spread an air of old-time quaintness; and yet each tree or bush or bloom wears the freshness of early summer. But the garden is not all loveliness. The grotesque, the horrid, and the shadow of death are there too. But for all that the garden is matchless. It invites everyone to come, young and old alike, to gather, to plant, and to cultivate its seeds. From these will grow modest or magnificent gardens, and crops to feed one household or to feast a hundred cities.

This garden is the English Bible. Its flowers are always on view, for no amount of picking will reduce the supply. Its seeds may be gathered at all seasons, and they are in unlimited quantities. This profusion of blossom and fruit is at the disposal of those who know how to use it. That use is not as texts to be quoted slavishly or models to be copied minutely, but rather as seed to be planted in somebody's mind. There the seed will germinate; and when his ideas require literary expression, it will supply them with a suitable prose form.

Let us now come face to face with the book itself, in this quotation from the second chapter of "Genesis":

The Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground. But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man He had formed.

Although the place here referred to is far off, and the events are long past, the reader need not see the setting of the story to understand it; neither will all the artist's pictures of Eden or traveller's descriptions of the East add anything vital in a later reading of the passage to what was seen in it without help at the first reading. So there appears to be but small necessity for the reader to supply a background of history or geography. And this characteristic is to be observed in many other portions of the book.

But the rest of our literature is quite different from this. As we all know, the best in English literature is deeply tinged with local colour. There are the daisy, the skylark, the sea and its tides; but what are these to the reader whose eye and ear are not familiar with them? And so the finest aroma of England's most characteristic literature escapes us, until one day, by breathing the air of her cities, hills, and streams, we discover it. None but a native, or one who has become familiar with the scenes and sounds among which Britons live, can climb the peak of national exaltation to which those masterpieces invite him, in their ecstasy of scene and sentiment. And something of the same kind is true of all national literatures.

Thus it comes about that the beginner, or the explorer of new paths in Canadian literature, when he looks for some hint of how to express his Canadian experiences of life and Nature, is not helped much by a study of the literature of another country. For the key to the words lies in the things described, and unless they are familiar to him he cannot pierce the secret of the author's art. But, in contrast to most others, this book is free from these drawbacks. It is, to a degree, neutral. And so its seed, if planted in Canadian soil, springs up as it would in English soil, but—nourished by the ingredients contained in the earth and air of this country—the flower becomes, at the same time, characteristically Canadian.

A miracle or a work of genius excepted, the larger part of any writer's output is imitative as to words, idioms, phrasing and rhythm. The same is true of the spoken word. And he who speaks well, or writes well, does the one or the other with the more ease and confidence if he is accustomed to hear and read admirable language. But if anyone feels awkward and uncertain when he has a speech to make or a piece of writing to do, it is because his memory provides no inner voice to call out his words and set his sentences in order. At such a time the recollection of a grammatical rule, or a rhetorical prohibition, will merely add to his embarrassment, or tie his sentences in knots. But if verses from the Bible lie

stored up in the memory, their reproductive and fructifying energy, when released by some event or demand of life, will supply the appropriate language.

In England much has been said in recent years about the literary worth of the Bible. But we, no less than the people there, need to be reminded of it. For while doubtful models of prose—spoken and written—are prevalent in both countries, we, the newer and less conservative people of the two, must depend upon individual discrimination, rather than upon recognized authorities, to discard the base and preserve the pure. And to this end no better standard can be chosen for the individual than the Bible.

What the Bible has meant, and still means to English literature, has been admirably expressed in more than one of his lectures by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. The following sentences by him are as worthy of the consideration of Canadians as of the English students to whom they were first addressed:

The authorized Version . . . set a seal on our national style, thinking and speaking. It has cadences homely and sublime, yet so harmonizes them that the voice is always one. . . . It is in everything we see, hear, feel, because it is in us, in our blood. . . . You have received it by inheritance, Gentlemen: it is yours, freely yours to direct your words through life as well as your hearts.