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The Literature of Romance and of Realism

Ross Winn

1903

It has been remarked that the tendency of literature in all countries today is towards what is called realism, or that method which deals with human life and action as it is rather than as it should be, as under the method of the purely romantic. This is especially true of the literature of Germany, of France, of Russia, and of America — if we can properly say that America has a literature.

This tendency is not the result of fashion, fad, or the impulse of imitation. Literature is a reflex of the national mind. This is not denying that literature is the most powerful factor in moulding the human intellect, or that all intellectual advancement of the masses is due in greatest measure to the genius of the writers and thinkers of every nation. But genius itself cannot escape the influence of environment.

The literature of romance has always flourished in that country and age where and when no great problems and revolutions occupied the public attention. But when a transition period appears, and the public mind is agitated with questions of social growth, either religious, political, or economic, we find always

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this tendency towards realism manifesting itself in the literature of every nation. As an example take the literature of China, a nation which has been stagnant for centuries; and her literature has less of realism and more of the romantic order, than that of any other people.

The agitation of economic questions and especially what is termed the class struggle in Germany, France, and Russia, has exerted a powerful influence upon the literature of those countries, resulting in the present predomination of what is called the school of realism. Today, in France, the under-current of thought forming the basis of that country's literature is essentially individualistic, or rather Anarchistic, while in Germany the same under-current of literary thought sets towards idealistic Socialism.

In Russia, where the struggle for political freedom overshadows the economic question, this same spirit of Anarchism pervades the national literature, its chief exponents being Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky. In our own America, the ideals of Anarchism and Socialism are continually gaining adherents among the popular writers.

Those who can see in the Socialist-Anarchist movement nothing but a blind spirit of discontent will find, in the literature of today, a refutation of that conception. These politico-economic ideals are throned upon the world's brain, and live in the philosophy of the age. Anarchism and Socialism are not social theories merely; they are living principles of human thought that slowly but inevitably are pushing towards universal recognition.