

## WHAT A LITERATURE IS HERE!

Prolonged solitary confinement is regarded as an extremely severe punishment for offenders and is sometimes said to amount to torture. Human beings are social creatures who need to share their experiences and discuss their concerns: letters have long enabled those separated by distance to do so.

Occasionally a memorable single letter can stand alone as an independent achievement comparable to a short, self-contained poem. On the eve of his *Dictionary's* publication, Dr. Johnson's letter rebuking Lord Chesterfield for withholding his assistance till it is too late to be of use puts on display the often uneasy relationship between writer and patron in the eighteenth century. When the agnostic T. H. Huxley is grieving for the death of his small son, he explains, in his reply to a message of condolence from the Reverend Charles Kingsley, that he refuses to take refuge in the hope of an afterlife, since he sees no evidence that there is one.

Usually, however, letters can best claim a place in literature when a collection covering the writer's life has been given a chronological arrangement. The great epistolary compilations span a youth, a maturity and an old age, and, necessary as the work of an editor is, the foremost shaping hand is that of mortality. The productions of the major letter writers are in effect biographies which are free from an autobiographer's retrospective thoughts and distortions, and in which there is no third party, other than an unobtrusive editor, to come between the subject and the reader.

Besides creating self-portraits, the most accomplished letter-writers draw character sketches of contemporaries, leave a record of their engagement with the events of their time, and disclose their relationship with the spirit of their age. Their missives deal with the great issues of private and public life: relations between parent and child; views of marriage; struggle against sickness; endurance of bereavement; grappling with financial exigency; dedication to an art; religious faith and allegiance; the quest for liberty and the need for order; questions of war and peace. Such topics are treated in innumerable novels, plays and poems; letters, well selected and edited, constitute a branch of literature of equal worth.

When they survive from past ages, letters can bring the reader face to face with scenes from history. Sometimes, as in the cases of the Paston and Lisle collections, they are themselves part of the action. More often the writers are observers. British letter-writers especially record the attraction continental Europe held and holds for Anglo-Saxondom, and most particularly the centuries of magnetism exerted by Italy, the country where the Renaissance is born and a great artistic civilization with its city states and country houses is supported by a sunny Mediterranean climate. Its classic ground was anciently the centre of the Empire which provides to a great extent a model for the British Empire, and it possesses the capital of the faith which both attracts and repels so many inheritors of the Reformed Religion, while its great maritime republic of Venice dazzles travellers and expatriates from Sir Henry Wotton to Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

It is difficult to study a considerable number of letter-writers without thinking of ranking them. At the head, I place Horace Walpole for his combination of a many-faceted self-portrait with a panorama of his age. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lord Byron may tie for second place; both lead bold, adventurous lives, experience stormy personal relations, undertake exotic and less exotic travels, and show a passionate interest in the literature to which they contribute. Lady Mary's judgments of people, places and books are revealingly coloured by the Augustan values of her time; in Byron there is an intriguing mixture of pride, anger, resentment, courage and compassion. Next comes Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with her unforeseen romance, her joyful parenthood, her religious quest, her tender heart, her liberal politics, and her poetic achievement.

Only a little below these stand the proud, ambitious Swift, whose penetrating intellect co-exists with a companionable playfulness in the absence of which he would be a lesser Swift; the ever dignified Lord Chesterfield, who expresses his Augustan views, a few surprisingly liberal, with great force and clarity; the tragic Cowper, whose life is blighted by a misguided faith; the much tried Mary Russell Mitford, who suffers much and enjoys much; the polymath Coleridge, who can be almost unintelligible in his most abstruse passages, but has great powers of description and narration; and the restless minded Jane Carlyle, whose painful marriage so contrasts with that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Will we see again letter-writers equal to these? It is impossible to tell whether electronic communications will kill the epistolary art, which goes back to antiquity. Emails can be printed and preserved, and it is to be hoped that future centuries will continue to provide readers with a mode of literature that has merits and delights all its own.