LITERARY VALUES, AND OTHER PAPERS

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Literary values, and other papers by John Burroughs

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JOHN BURROUGHS

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IN THE DOORWAY, SLABSIDES

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BY

JOHN BURROUGHS

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LITERARY VALUES

I

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I

THE day inevitably comes to every writer when he must take his place amid the silent throngs of the past, when no new work from his pen can call attention to him afresh, when the partiality of his friends no longer counts, when his friends and admirers are themselves gathered to the same silent throng, and the spirit of the day in which he wrote has given place to the spirit of another and a different day. How, oh, how will it fare with him then? How is it going to fare with Lowell and Longfellow and Whittier and Emerson and all the rest of them? How has it fared with so many names in the past, that were, in their own day, on all men's tongues? Of the names just mentioned, Whittier and Emerson shared more in a particular movement of thought and morals of the times in which they lived than did the other two, and to that extent are they in danger of dropping out and losing their vogue. Both had a significance to their own day and genera-

tion that they can hardly have to any other. The new times will have new soul maladies and need other soul doctors. The fashions of this world pass away — fashions in thought, in style, in humor, in morals, as well as in anything else.

As men strip for a race, so must an author strip for this race with time. All that is purely local and accidental in him will only impede him ; all that is put on or assumed will impede him — his affectations, his insincerities, his imitations ; only what is vital and real in him, and is subdued to the proper harmony and proportion, will count. A malformed giant will not in this race keep pace with the lesser but better-built stripling. How many more learned and ponderous tomes has Gilbert White's little book left behind ! Mere novelty, how short-lived is that ! Every age will have its own novelties. Every age will have its own hobbies and hobbyists, its own clowns, its own follies and fashions and infatuations. What every age will not have in the same measure is sanity, proportion, health, penetration, simplicity. The strained and overwrought, the fantastic and far-fetched, are sure to drop out. Every pronounced style, like Carlyle's, is sure to suffer. The obscurities and affectations of some recent English poets and novelists are certain to drag them down. Browning, with his sudden leaps and stops, and all that Italian rubbish, is fearfully handicapped.

Things do not endure in this world without a certain singleness and continence. Trees do not

grow and stand upright without a certain balance and proportion. A man does not live out half his days without a certain simplicity of life. Excesses, irregularities, violences, kill him. It is the same with books — they, too, are under the same law; they hold the gift of life on the same terms. Only an honest book can live; only absolute sincerity can stand the test of time. Any selfish or secondary motive vitiates a work of art, as it vitiates a religious life. Indeed, I doubt if we fully appreciate the literary value of the staple, fundamental human virtues and qualities — probity, directness, simplicity, sincerity, love. There is just as much room and need for the exercise of these qualities in the making of a book as in the building of a house, or in a business career. How conspicuous they are in all the enduring books — in Bunyan, in Walton, in Defoe, in the Bible! It is they that keep alive such a book as "Two Years before the Mast," which Stevenson pronounced the best sea-story in the language, as it undoubtedly is. None of Stevenson's books have quite this probity and singleness of purpose, or show this effacement of the writer by the man. It might be said that our interest in such books is not literary at all, but purely human, like our interest in "Robinson Crusoe," or in life and things themselves. The experience itself of a sailor's life, however, would be to most of us very prosy and distasteful. Hence there is something in the record, something in the man behind the record, that colors his pages, and that is the source of our interest.

This personal element, this flavor of character, is the salt of literature. Without it, the page is savorless.

II

It is curious what an uncertain and seemingly capricious thing literary value is. How often it refuses to appear when diligently sought for, labored for, prayed for; and then comes without call to some simple soul that never gave it a thought. Learning cannot compass it, rhetoric cannot compass it, study cannot compass it. Mere wealth of language is entirely inadequate. It is like religion: often those who have it most have it least, and those who have it least have it most. In the works of the great composers — Gibbon, De Quincey, Macaulay — it is a conscious, deliberate product. Then, in other works, the very absence of the literary motive and interest gives an æsthetic pleasure.

One is surprised to read the remark of the "Saturday Review" on the published letters of Whitman, — letters that have no extrinsic literary value whatever, not one word of style, — namely, that few books are so well calculated to "purge the soul of nonsense;" and the remark of the fastidious Henry James on the same subject, that, with all their enormities of the common, the letters are positively delightful. Here, again, the source of our interest is undoubtedly in the personal revelation, — the type of man we see through the letters, and not in any wit or wisdom lodged in the letters themselves.

One reader seeks religious or moral values alone