

An historical and literary inquiry into the development of the epistolary literature of England.

A great part of the intercourse of human life is carried on by epistolary writing. It is necessary to friendship and love, to interest and ambition. In every pursuit and in every department of polished life to write letters, is an indispensable requisite, and to write them well, has been at all times regarded a liberal and polite accomplishment. In our days the epistolary literature has in a high degree attracted the attention of the people, and the letters of every distinguished man are regarded as precious relics, are assiduously collected and read with great predilection. It will scarcely be necessary to give reasons for it; for it is evident, that nowhere a man better displays his character, that nowhere he speaks more ingenuously the true language of his heart, than in letters to his family or friends. Nowhere therefore the source of his real ideas and sentiments flows more clearly than in his epistolary intercourse. As it is the proper nature of letters to treat trifling and serious subjects with the same circumstantiality and to dwell freely on those matters, which are to be concealed from the eyes of man, we shall be astonished to find by their reading our information corrected and enlarged. What a statesman in his speeches, the learned author in his works omits, or of which he gives but obscure and unintelligible hints, all this is very often minutely explained in the letters, which they have given to their colleagues or friends. Concerning this we need only to observe, how much the letters of Cicero, Pliny, Seneca, and in the German literature those of Lessing, Schiller and Goethe have contributed to understand the time, in which these authors lived and the works they have written. —

The history of the development of the epistolary literature of England can be divided into two periods, the first of which begins at the commencement of epistolary writing down to the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, and the other comprises the modern age.

CHAPTER I.

**On the epistolary literature before the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century.**

We need not to observe, that in descending to the origin of the epistolary literature and, as it were, to the literary infancy of the English nation, we shall find the first letters, which have been published, deficient in what we call elegance and conciseness of diction. It is with literature as with every other art and science. Every beginning is feeble, and yet nothing indicates the greatness, which it is destined to attain afterwards. The first publication we know of, are the Original Letters,<sup>1)</sup> which were written during the reign of Henry VI., Edward IV. and Richard III. As they are dated from that age, in which these terrible and famous quarrels between the White and Red Roses took place, and of which they give some details, we may regard them as remarkable documents of history; but for their style, they do not deserve our attention, for there is nothing so incompact and loose as the language, in which they are written. —

We have from this time another faint dawn in the Paston Letters,<sup>2)</sup> which date from the second part of the fifteenth century and treat common affairs of a noble family residing in Norfolk. This collection has no other interest than to show that the juncture of the dissimilar parts of the Anglo-Saxon and the Norman-French was finished, and even the rules fixed, by which the amalgamation of those two quite different languages in words and phrases had been effected.<sup>3)</sup> These letters are therefore intelligible to every body, who understands modern English. Some few words have afterwards lost their original significations and changed their terminations. But as these letters are mere curiosities for those, who will study particularly the development of English prose, we hasten to those writers, whose letters are more instructive and useful. —

At the head of our literary inquiry we may place the letters of Thomas Morus,<sup>4)</sup> the renowned Chancellor of King Henry VIII., the same man, who following his conviction died a martyr to his religion and to the belief of his ancestors. In the history of the English literature we find him cited as the first author, whose prose is good. The same may be said of his letters. They are a picture of his character, where energy and mildness, sound understanding and profound learning were united to a high degree of harmony in thoughts and feelings. The reader will be astonished to find at a time, so barren in nearly every department of literature, excellent letters, distinguished not only by richness of ideas but in laying open the first qualities of the human heart: sincerity, true love and attachment to his family and country; and what is very surprising, these letters are written in a simple, true and unpolished style, in which words and sentences flow pleasantly, and the whole structure of the phrase is without constraint. Many of his letters are written, after

<sup>1)</sup> Original Letters, published by John Penn, London 1787.

<sup>2)</sup> Paston Letters ed. by Knyght.

<sup>3)</sup> Bouterweck, Geschichte der Künste und Wissenschaften. VII. 10 u. Macaulay, History vol 1. p. 16. Tauchn ed.

<sup>4)</sup> Chambers' Cyclopaedia.



the custom of that age, in Latin and are addressed to Erasmus Roterodamus, to Martinus Dorpius, Petrus Aegidius and the many other learned men. Besides these there are still some, which he wrote to his family in the English language. The simplicity and conciseness of his diction will be the more admired, in as much as the epistolary style after him lost for a long time these properties. For the English prose had then to struggle with new difficulties. It was the time when the old classical literature of Greece and Rome was introduced into England. By prevalence of Greek and Roman learning many words were introduced into the English language and even the construction of phrases arranged after classic models. It cannot be denied, that in this manner the language has been greatly enriched with many new expressions, but there is on the other side observable a want of smoothness, which is principally offensive in epistolary diction. The prose of this time is not enervated, we may call it even energetical, but it is irregular, implicated and unmelodious. The more however we approach the eighteenth century, the more the traces of roughness and inaccuracy fade away, and the style becomes elegant and harmonious. Even those writers, who lived at the restoration and the second revolution, however deficient their works may be in many other respects, were not unsuccessful in refining and embellishing the style:<sup>1)</sup>

These few remarks will be sufficient to characterise the English prose before the eighteenth century. It is obvious, that the influence of Greek and Roman learning was less favourable to prose than to poetry. For whilst poetry saw at the time of Queen Elisabeth its golden age, there were in prose no works, which equal the great poetical productions of this century. Also the epistolary literature of this period is not rich, but it exhibits writers, who distinguished themselves by their virtues, and whose memory will always shine in English history. We here mention the names of Walter Raleigh, Philip Sidney, Bacon, Howell, Locke, Bentley, Temple, Clarendon and Lady Russell as letter-writers. Many of them have left but few letters, all however have treated in them matters of such common interest, that the reader will easily forget the difficulties of the language, in which they are composed. Here it may not be superfluous, to add the most momentous events of every writer's life. —

Walter Raleigh was a celebrated seaman. He undertook several, though fruitless voyages of discovery to North-America. There he also founded Virginia. Under the reign of King James I. he was accused of conspiracy against the life of the King, in consequence of which he was imprisoned and after twelve years' suffering executed. We cite here a passage of a letter, which he wrote to the King from prison:

„For myself, I protest before almighty God, and I speak it to my master and sovereign, that I never intended treason against him; and yet I know, I shall fall in manibus eorum, a quibus non possum evadere, unless by Your Majesty's gracious compassion I be sustained. Our law therefore, most merciful prince, knowing her own cruelty, and knowing that she is wont to compound treason out of presumptions and circumstances, doth give this charitable advice to the King, her supreme: Non solum sapiens esse sed et misericors etc. Cum tutius sit reddere rationem misericordiae quam iudicii. I do therefore on the knees of my

<sup>1)</sup> Conf. Edingburgh Review, vol XVIII. p. 275.

heart beseech Your Majesty, from your own sweet and comfortable disposition, to remember, that I have served Your Majesty twenty years, for which Your Majesty hath yet given me no reward; and it is fitter, I should be indebted into my sovereign lord, than the King to his poor vassal. Save me therefore, most merciful prince, that I may owe Your Majesty my life itself, than which there cannot be a greater debt.“

Philip Sidney is a member of that reputable Sidney family, which appears to have been at the time of Queen Elisabeth the most enlightened, polished and virtuous, of which the English nation can boast. As regards himself, he was an excellent statesman and the favourite of the Queen. Amidst his public affairs he did not neglect his literary occupations and created in his „Arcadia“ a poetical work, which secures for ever his reputation as a poet. His letters are instructive and amusing. Here follows a passage from a letter, which he wrote to Queen Elisabeth, and in which he persuades her, not to marry the duke of Anjou:

„Monsieur's desires and yours, how they shall meet in public matters, I think no oracle can tell; for as the geometricians say, that paralels, because they maintain divers lines, can never join: so truly two, having in the beginning contrary principles, to bring forth one doctrine, must be some doctrine. He of the Romish religion; and if be a man, must needs have that manlike property, to desire, that all men be of his mind: you the erector and defender of the contrary, and the only sun that dazzleth their eyes: he French and desiring to make France great: your Majesty English, and desiring nothing less than that France should not grow great: he, both by own fancy and his youthful governors, embracing all ambitious hopes; having Alexander's image in his head, but perhaps evil painted; your Majesty with excellent virtue, taught what you should hope and by no less wisdom, what you may hope; with a council renowned over all Christendom for their well-tempered minds, having set the utmost of their ambition in your favour, and the study of their souls in your safety.“

Bacon and Locke introduced into the epistolary literature a more philosophic style. Their letters are less familiar than those of Sidney, but they are more exact in words and phrases. In both writers the terms are simple, clear and precise, but in Locke they are unpolished and in Bacon stiff. Friendship and love are here but coldly treated, and the sound advices, with which these letters abound, are written in a style, which becomes more a scientific treatise than a familiar intercourse. As effusions of good nature and common sense these letters may be admired, but cordiality and familiarity, which so well become the conversational style, are wanting in them. The character and merits of both men, who are to be regarded as founders of a new philosophical direction, opposite the scholastic philosophy of the middle age, are well known and are thoroughly explained by Macaulay,<sup>1)</sup> the greatest historian of our age. We give here a passage of one of Bacon's letters to Lord Edward Coke.

„Thirdly yov converse with books not men, and books specially human, and have no excellent choice with men, who are the best books: for a man of action and employment yov seldom converse with, and then but with yovr underlings; not freely, but as a school-master with his scholars, ever to teach, never to learn. But if sometimes yov would in your familiar discourse hear others and make election of such as know, what they speak, yov

<sup>1)</sup> Macaulay, Essays II, 15; history III, 115.



ould know many of these tales you tell to be but ordinary, and many other things, which you delight to repeat, and serve in for novelties, to be but stale.“

The same didactic acuteness, which already appears in these words, is also conspicuous in the letters of Locke. What this learned man principally distinguished from his contemporaries, was the generous feeling of toleration, which he recommended and defended in three letters at a time, when the religious parties of England eagerly persecuted each other.<sup>1)</sup>

We now come to Howell and Clarendon, two authors, who have acquired a literary reputation both by their historical works and their letters.

Howell was the first Englishman, who wrote the history of his own nation; but as a letter-writer he is more known and esteemed. Both in composition and matter his letters have reached a high degree of perfection. As to the style, the only unfavourable remark, which can be made, is, that his phrases are often too long and too much elaborated, and that it is coloured too often with French and Latin citations. In general his language is concise and clear. By nervous force of diction and nicety of expression he makes a near approach to that elegance in choice and arrangement of words, which characterises the prose style of the eighteenth century. Respecting the matter of his letters, we may call it excellent. Howell displays here the whole treasure of knowledge, which he had gained in public life, in studies and long travels. The following part of a letter, which he wrote from Rouen in the year 1619, may be a specimen of the elegance of his style and the richness of his ideas:

„I am now upon the fair continent of France, one of nature's choicest masterpieces; one of Ceres' chiefest barns for corn; one of Bacchus's prime wine-cellars and of Neptune's best salt-pits; a complete self-sufficient country, where there is rather a superfluity than defect of any thing, either for necessity or pleasure, did the policy of the country correspond with the bounty of nature in the equal distribution of the wealth amongst the inhabitants; for I think there is not upon the earth a richer country and poorer people. It is true, England hath a good repute abroad for her fertility, yet be our harvests never so kindly, and our crops never so plentiful; we have every year commonly some grain from thence or from Dantzick and other places, imported by the merchant: besides, there be many more heaths, commons, bleak barren hills and waste grounds in England, by many degrees, than I here find.“<sup>2)</sup>

The other writer, whose name is renowned by his historical works, is Lord Clarendon. In his letters he is much inferior to Howell in beauty of style, but there is an interest of matter in them, which renders them remarkable. The greatest part are addressed to those men, who in the turbulent age of the first English revolution had the courage to plead

<sup>1)</sup> Bibliothèque de Leclerc 1687, 1688, 1689.

<sup>2)</sup> The following is the opinion of Morhof, a learned critic, concerning the Letters of Howell:

Non debent hic quoque omitti Jacobi Howell, equitis Angli, et Secretarii Regii epistolae familiares . . . Mixta hic sunt negotiis civilibus litteraria, magnaue illa rarissimarum rerum varietas mirifice legentem delectat. Agitur hic de rebus Anglicis, Gallicis, Italicis, Germanicis, Hispanicis, Belgicis, Danicis, Suevicis, unde multa ad historiam eorum temporum observari possunt. Inspurguntur nonnumquam poetici sales et facetiae. Physica et medica non omittuntur. De rebus litterariis disquiritur. Historiae rariores narrantur. Characteres et lineamenta vivorum illustrium et doctorum tam in Anglica quam in aliis locis ab illo proponuntur. Elucet senique ex stylo varia et elegans eruditio. Polyhistor. Litt. lib. II cap. 24.

openly the cause of oppressed monarchy.<sup>1)</sup> Nor can here be omitted the letters of Bentley,<sup>2)</sup> the first critical philologist of England and the founder of that celebrated philological school, which by severe but sound criticism diffused a more profound knowledge of the classic antiquity. As in those days there did not yet exist journals or reviews, learned men were obliged to perform a great part of their criticism by epistolary writing and to lay down in letters those researches, which now are communicated in literary magazines. In this respect the letters of Bentley deserve our intimate acquaintance. They are written partly in English, partly in Latin, and addressed to Hemsterhusius, Graevius, Bernard, Burmannus, Clericus and to many other men, who were at that time the supporters of learning. A philologist will read them with great advantage; for nowhere will he find better information of this man's character and talents. —

The letters of William Temple will fix our attention nearly in the same manner. He was a celebrated statesman, as renowned by the management of the first public offices in England as by leading foreign affairs on those embassies, with which he was trusted, when the peace of Europe was troubled by French ambition. He wrote many letters to his friends on public affairs, which have been preserved; whereas his correspondence with Dorothy Osborne, a lady, who became afterwards his wife, has been lost, which Courtenay, his biographer and Macaulay bear witness.<sup>3)</sup> His letters excel by richness of ideas and soundness of judgment. —

In our treatise we meet now with the first female letter-writer, with Lady Russell. The letters of this lady, says Chambers, have secured her a place in literature not much less elevated than that niche in history, which she has won by heroism and conjugal attachment. Lord William Russell, her husband, led at first a very dissipated life, but by the loveliness of his wife's character he was brought back to a more glorious career. He then entered into connexion with the Whigs and died a victim to this political party. Just at that time the Whigs had conspired against the life of the King and his brother. This bloody design seems however to have been known to Russell who was to feel its dreadful consequences. For this conspiracy was soon discovered, and the principal members of the Whigs were condemned to death. Lord Russell was of their number. His wife accompanied him on his last way to the scaffold and kept his memory always alive in her heart. Every letter bears witness, how much she loved him. Nowhere piety and conjugal affection find a language so pure and so proper. Nowhere are we more touched, than by the merciful words of her despair, into which the execution of her husband had driven her:

„Lord,<sup>4)</sup> let me understand the reason of these dark and wounding providences, that I sink not under the discouragements of my own thoughts; I know, I have deserved my punishment and will be silent under it, but yet secretly my heart mourns too sadly. I fear and cannot be comforted, because I have not the dear companion and sharer of all my joys and sorrows.“

We condole with her, when broken by affliction she expostulates with the severe and terrible Providence and admire her, when consoled by religion she yields to the uninvestigable decrees of God:

<sup>1)</sup> Conf. History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars of England by Lord Clarendon. Macaulay, history I, 171.

<sup>2)</sup> Richardi Bentleii et doctorum virorum epistolae partim mutuae. Lipsiae 1825 ed. Friedemannus.

<sup>3)</sup> Macaulay, Essays III, p. 6.

<sup>4)</sup> Letter to Dr. Fitzwilliam.



„Can I regret his quitting a lesser good for a bigger? O! if I did steadfastly believe, I could not be dejected. For I will not injure myself to say, I offer my mind any inferior consolation to supply this loss. No, I most willingly forsake this world, this vexatious troublesome world, in which I have no other business but to rid my soul from sin; secure by faith and a good conscience my eternal interests; with patience and courage bear my eminent misfortunes; and ever hereafter be above the smiles and frowns of it: and when I have done the remnant of the work appointed me on earth, then joyfully wait for the heavenly perfection in God's good time, when by his infinite mercy I may be accounted worthy to enter into the same place of rest and repose, where he is gone, for where only I grieve, I do — — — fear.“

These remarks will be sufficient to give us an idea of the epistolary literature before the eighteenth century. There are still some distinguished letter-writers as Shenstone and Tillotson; but the few we have examined, are characteristic enough for this first period. We now come to the eighteenth and the following century.

## CHAPTER II.

### On the epistolary literature of modern age.

The literary, religious and political life was during the eighteenth century in a great movement. Learned men as Pope, Addison, Steele, Swift wrote numerous essays in the periodical publications of the Spectator, Guardian and Tatler. Their essays produced not only an excellent effect upon the art of writing but improved also the taste of the English. Religion was eagerly attacked by that sect of philosophers, who are known in history under the name of English Deists, and who by debilitating those principles, on which our morals are founded, produced in England that wantonness of manners, by which the French have become famous. The whole society was divided into political factions and distracted by many internal quarrels. This improvement of taste, this universal movement, which electrified the whole nation, was favourable to epistolary literature. Letters came the more into use, the more a frequent communication of ideas was required. Friendship and love continued to be the principal subjects for them. But a considerable part of criticism was carried on by letters, and the great travels on the Continent and in the East afforded very amusing and instructive matters for them. At the same time an innovation took place in the epistolary literature quite contrary to the original nature of letters. For till this time letters performed the private correspondance of families and friends; but now matters of common interest were treated by letters before the public. Thus political questions were examined by Swift and Junius, and even novels were composed in the epistolary style by Richardson.

The letters written in this direction highly excel in elegance and force of diction. In general we shall observe, that from the beginning of the eighteenth century the prose style was more cultivated. The authors were successful in imitating the polished style of the French and gave their diction a conciseness and elegance of expression by which they assured to their works the admiration of the people. We need only to cite the works of Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, Johnson and Goldsmith to prove the high degree of perfection, which had been imparted to the language by these celebrated authors.

The epistolary literature of this period is so excellent, that the greatest part of those letters, which have been published, have lost nothing of their former reputation; it is at the same time so rich, that it will be necessary to leave the chronological order of letter-writers and to classify them after the subjects they have treated. We can divide the letter-writers of this period into three different classes. The first class would contain those authors, whose letters form a friendly and scientific intercourse. In this particular we have to consider the letters of Addison, Pope, Swift, Sterne, Bolingbroke, Richardson and Chesterfield. —

The second place is to be attributed to those writers, who give in their letters descriptions of nations and countries. Here we have to mention the names of Gilbert White, Gray and Lady Montague. —

The third class comprises the letters of those men, who examined political affairs in them. Letter-writers of this kind are Walpole, Junius, Swift and Burke. —

On the frontier, which severs the epistolary literature of modern times from the preceding period, we find the Earl of Shaftesbury. To him we are indebted for a collection of familiar letters, in which subjects of religious, moral and literary interest are treated. The rich store of knowledge, which the author had collected by his studies of ancient and modern literature and on the travels, which he had made in France and Italy, are here laid down in a flourishing and eloquent style. At the same time they prove him to be a despiser of materialism, but a warm adherent to the protestant church and a great admirer of the philosophy of Plato. —

The letters of Addison, Pope, Swift and Sterne are remarkable both for form and matter. These authors have exercised a great influence on the taste of their age by the works they have published. They must all be counted as the greatest writers of this period, and Pope was no doubt its greatest poet. His letters will principally fix our attention. He had a lively correspondance with Sterne and Steele and kept besides an epistolary intercourse with the most celebrated men of his country. In their letters matters of great importance are treated; they usually speak of the literary occupations of these learned men and give partly criticisms of their works, partly philosophical reflections on human life, religion, public and private affairs. Pope, as in all his other writings, also in his letters was not content to satisfy, he desired to excel and therefore endeavoured to do his best. He examined lives and words with minute and punctilious observation and retouched every part, still he had left nothing to be forgiven. Therefore his style is always smooth but uniform, learned but clear and precise, though enriched by many metaphors and images. In his letters every thing is art. Every observation on learning, literature and the familiar interests of life is truly and profoundly studied. There is perhaps no other English letter-writer, who so much enriches our mind by just reflections and good ideas as Pope. In this particular he surpasses all his literary friends. We can only afford room for a single quotation of a letter, which contains remarks on his „Essay on Criticism.“

„Our friend the Abbé is not of that sort, who with the utmost candour and freedom has modestly told me, what others thought, and shewn himself one (as he very well expressed) rather of a number than a party. The only difference between us in relation to the monks is, that he thinks most sorts of learning flourished among them, and I am of opinion, that only some sort of learning was barely kept alive by them: he believes that



in the most natural and obvious sense, that line — a second deluge learning overrun — will be understood of learning in general; and I fancy 'twill be understood only (as 'tis meant) of polite learning, criticism, poetry etc. which is the only learning concerned in the subject of the Essay. It is true, that the monks did preserve what learning there was about Nicholas the fifth's time; but those who succeeded, fell into the depth of barbarism or at least stood at a stay, while others arose from thence, insomuch, that even Erasmus and Reuchlin could hardly laugh them out of it." —

Swift has left a great number of letters. Besides his correspondance with his friends and the Drapier's Letters, which will be examined afterwards in this treatise, there still exists from him a collection of letters, which are known in the English literature under the name of „Journal to Stella.“ Swift describes here in a series of letters all he had seen and experienced during his residence in England. —

Sterne owes his literary reputation to a small number of letters, which are entitled „Letters from Yorick to Eliza,“ and which are admired in every country. They are addressed to Miss Draper, a lady born and married in India. She was sent by her husband to England, in order to strengthen her health and here made the acquaintance of Sterne, who paid her a tender but somewhat excentric attention. For this acquaintance soon grew into mutual affection and platonic love. The enthusiastical feelings of Sterne are described in these letters in the sweetest expressions. Inimitable ease and colloquial freedom give them a peculiar charm. —

Bolingbroke's letters are the fruits of intense labour and long studies, which he had made in history. He was secretary of state in the reign of king George I. and lost this place by his passionate attachment to the Tories. As writer he has got some reputation; for though his poetical treatises have no more the same interest, which they enjoyed at the time of their appearance, his letters have preserved their original renown. They excel by richness of ideas and conciseness and clearness of diction. In the collection of his works the following letters are found: Letters on the study and use of history, Letters on history, Letters to Sir William Windham.

We quote here a passage of one of his letters:

„Julius Africanus, Eusebius and George, the monk, opened the principal sources of all this science; but they corrupted the waters. Their point of view was to make profane history and chronology agree with sacred, though the latter chronology is very far from being established with the clearness and certainty necessary to make it a rule. For this purpose the ancient monuments, that these writers conveyed to posterity, were digested by them according to the system they were to maintain, and none of these monuments were delivered down in their original form and genuine purity. The Dynasties of Manetho, for instance, are broken to pieces by Eusebius; and such fragments of them, as suited his design, are struck into his work. We have, we know, no more of them. The Codex Alexandrinus we owe to George, the monk. We have no other authority for it, and we cannot see without amazement such a man as Sir John Marsham undervaluing this authority in one page and building his system upon it in the next.“ —

We come now to the letters of two men in whose writings the influence of French

taste is observable. This innovation may be characterized by a few words. The authors of this period abandoned the irregularity and energetical uncouthness of the language, which they had inherited from their parents and wrote in exact, delicate and polished expressions. Also the state of manners was changed in England. The custom was to strive less for real virtues than to affect a tinge of morality. Therefore the manners were more artificial and refined, but less natural and less moral than before. This alteration of language and manners is visible in the celebrated letters of Richardson and Chesterfield.

Richardson was the son of a joiner. His father not having the means to give him a learned education, apprenticed him to a printer. Here he had an opportunity of reading and studying many books. He soon evinced a great skillfulness in writing letters. A bookseller, who discovered his talents in this direction, engaged him to write a collection of familiar letters. Richardson embraced this proposal and published in the year 1740 a book of letters entitled „Pamela“ in which moral and sentimental reflections and stories are connected and arranged in such a manner as to form a complete novel. No sooner had this book been published, than it attracted the attention of the people; but it also found a great many detractors, who attacked it very eagerly. Nevertheless Richardson succeeded so much with these letters, that he wrote two other novels in the same style and taste, which have been published under the titles of „History of Miss Clarissa Harlowe“ and „History of Sir Charles Grandison.“ By these works a new kind of novel was introduced into the English literature; for till now there existed in England neither novels in letters nor family-novels in general. They had also a good effect and bear a moral character, if we except those passages, in which vice is somewhat too freely denudated. Still they are offensive by a certain prolixity of matter and affectation of sensibility. Notwithstanding these faults we must admire the author's skillfulness in inventing situations and describing characters.

Lord Chesterfield's letters have perhaps a greater reputation than the letters of any other man known in history. He is, as Schlosser, <sup>1)</sup> says one of those authors, who without displaying great virtues in their works, have become renowned and found innumerable imitators in Germany and France. We shall find the reasons of it partly in the conformity of his own principles and ideas with those, which reigned at this time in every enlightened country, partly in his dexterity of writing. Indeed only to these two exterior reasons we must attribute the good reception, which his letters of advice to his son have found in every country. For his maxims, though apparently advantageous are really false. Chesterfield proves, that polite manners and exterior dexterity are more essential to a man of quality than real virtues. These doctrines were explained in a flourishing, we may call it even, a luxurious style and defended with all those rich and exact observations, which Chesterfield derived from an intimate knowledge of human character. —

The second class of English letter-writers comprises those authors who have left in their letters descriptive sketches of people and countries. They deserve our attention the more, since not only the Continent, but also the East and a great part of Asia are described. As it is the custom of almost every well-bred Englishman to travel on the Continent and in our days

<sup>1)</sup> Schlosser, Geschichte des XVIII. und XIX. Jahrhunderts.



the East and South are more visited by Englishmen than by travellers of other nations, we could here cite many authors, who laid down in their letters interesting remarks on these countries. But we shall here only deal with White, Gray and Lady Montague. —

Gilbert White published a collection of letters, written to his friends Pennant and Barrington, which contain lively descriptions of his parish Selborne and Hampshire, and which betray the author's genius in depicting landscapes. The elegance and simplicity of diction have rendered this book popular in England. —

Gray's letters have got a greater reputation than those of White, we may say even, that besides the letters of Chesterfield, they are the most celebrated in England. A great many of them exhibit descriptions and remarks of all the author had seen on a journey to Italy, and are written partly in a picturesque, partly in a simple language.

Lady Montague's letters are very interesting. By her learning as well as by her great travels she was enabled to relate instructive and amusing stories in them. Her parents gave her a good education, which she completed by frequent intercourse with the most celebrated learned men of that time, with Addison, Steele, Pope and Young. She also made long journeys in Holland, France, Germany and Turkey, of which her letters furnish very remarkable sketches. They are not only descriptions of countries given in easy, fluent and elegant style, but add also many just observations on the manners of the nations. She described, what she saw and heard, clearly and truly, and mingled with the subject so much of her own ideas, as good understanding and rich experience could afford. Her strong mind overpowered her rich experience, and her lively imagination served merely to make her witty and serious observations more striking and effective. Sometimes she forgets in her natural ingenuousness the rules of decency, which by convention are laid upon her sex, and many remarks will accuse her of want of feminine softness and delicacy. Yet notwithstanding this fault we cannot place her below any letter-writer, that England has produced. The following part of a letter may prove the above-mentioned qualities of style and matter:

„This little digression has interrupted my telling you, we passed over the field of Carlowitz, where the last great victory was obtained by Prince Eugene over the Turks. The marks of that glorious bloody day are yet recent, the field being yet strewed with the skulls and carcasses of unburied men, horses and camels. I could not look, without horror, on such numbers of mangled human bodies, nor without reflecting on the injustice of war, that makes murder not only necessary, but meritorious. Nothing seems to be a plainer proof of the irrationality of mankind — whatever fine claims we pretend to reason — than the rage with which they contest for a small spot of ground, when such vast parts of fruitful earth lie quite uninhabited.“ —

Till now we have studied a great many of English letter-writers in their qualities as friends and travellers. In this part of our inquiry it will be our endeavour to regard some few authors in their qualities as statesmen and letter-writers on public affairs. The public mind of this period was in a state of great excitement, produced partly by the abuses of the government, partly by many exterior wars, which the English had to make on the Continent, in America and against the French republic. Distinguished men as Swift, Junius, Walpole and Burke tried to explain in their letters the complaints of the people and the dangers, by which the whole state was threatened. Their ideas will clear up our information

of this troublesome time. This principally may be said with regard to Lord Burke. Concerning the other writers we may allow, that they were instructed in the real situation of affairs, but suspect, that sometimes truth has been sacrificed to the effect they wished to produce. We have reasons to doubt, whether Walpole in those passages, where he tries to defend his father's conduct, and Swift and Junius in their letters, which were addressed to the whole nation, have not exaggerated the encroachments of the government and the sufferings of the people. Yet notwithstanding this, their basis is true, and their ideas are so excellent, that both in England and in other countries they have preserved an undiminished reputation. We enter therefore a severer examination of these letters and begin with those of Swift. —

A collection of his letters bear the title „The Drapier's Letters.“ We shall but imperfectly understand them, if we do not refer to the political affairs of Ireland in the eighteenth century. Since Cromwell this unhappy country had suffered very much by the pressure of the English government. Nowhere in the world the difference of religion created such hatred between two countries as between Ireland and England. This aversion still increased in Ireland by those violent measures, which the English employed to oppress this people. Here many noble families had been deprived of their possessions during the civil wars; their estates came into the hands of Englishmen, who were odious in Ireland for their political and religious differences. Even the renowned cloth-manufacturies of Ireland, which made up the most important part of the income of its inhabitants, were not free from the encroachments of the English government, which by checking Irish commerce intended to enhance the value of English manufacturies. Those illegal measures were eagerly attacked by Swift in a libel, which insured him at first the popularity of his countrymen. How great it was, soon appeared in the year 1729. At this time a want of copper-coin in Ireland was grievously felt. To redress this complaint, the English government authorised a certain Wood, merchant of Wolverhampton, to make a great many of copper-coins for Ireland. These new coins being however of bad metal, Swift published under the fictitious name of Drapier a series of letters, in which he evinced, that it would be very disadvantageous, nay even foolish to accept such coins. A universal fermentation followed the first publication of these letters, and these new coins were refused everywhere. The Irish parliament also designated him a betrayer of his country, who only tried to give them currency. The British government however soon issued another manifest in favour of these coins and sharply censured that declaration of the Irish parliament. But the public mind was so much prejudiced against the introduction of these coins, that in the following year the English were obliged to take them back. —

The language, in which these letters are written, is clear and energetical; now and then there are even passages of great eloquence, as the following quotation will prove:

„Were not the people of Ireland born as free as those of England? How have they forfeited their freedom? Is not their parliament as fair a representative of the people as that of England, and has not their privy-council as great or a greater share in the administration of the public affairs? Are they not subjects of the same king? Does not the same sun shine upon them, and have they not the same God for their protector? Am I a freeman in England and do I become a slave in six hours by crossing the channel?“



Horace Walpole's letters <sup>1)</sup> are the best of all the works of this author. They are composed in that refined and conceited tone, which pervaded at that time among the upper classes of society. This manner of writing is less offensive in letters than in other works. His style is well studied and clear, though many ideas may accuse the author of wantonness and inconsequence. But even these faults give but little harm in letters. As for the matter they are very instructive. We may regard them as a Diary, in which every subject of consequence of the last twenty years of king George's II. government, and all those quarrels in the English parliament are treated, and in consequence of which his father, Sir Robert Walpole, the minister, retired from his public office. —

Junius' letters will fix our attention in a still higher degree. In consequence of many violent debates in the English parliament at the time of king George III. there appeared in the Public Advertiser a series of letters written by a man, who was perfectly acquainted with the affairs of the court and the ministers of the king, and who knew exactly all the public and private laws of England. In these letters he clearly showed, that the English people had lost a great many of their ancient liberties, whereas the English nobility had slyly augmented their privileges. At the same time he hardily unveils the politics of the government and attacks them in the most violent expressions. By energy and conciseness of diction these letters have found the same admiration as the speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero and the letters of Lessing and Rousseau. As they are found and read everywhere, we may omit them without giving here a quotation. —

In the examination of the most remarkable English letter-writers we come now to one of the greatest English orators of the last century, Edmund Burke. — All his writings, his philosophical as well as his political, display the author's gift of eloquence, which he had cultivated by studying and imitating the classic models of antiquity. He soon found a subject worthy of his talents. The revolution of 1789 broke out. Monstrous evils and bloody wars followed in its course. Divine and human rights were violated with the same insolence. Burke, a warm adherent to the Christian church and a veritable patriot, seeing the dangers, which threatened his country, began to plead the cause of English liberty and that of oppressed mankind. He attacked the French revolution in those memorable speeches, which he kept in parliament; he explained its dreadful consequences in political treatises upon French affairs and principally in a series of letters which he wrote to his friends, and which have founded his literary reputation. We may quote one of those excellent passages, with which these letters abound:

„If a war made to prevent the union of two crowns upon one head was a just war, this, which is made to prevent the tearing all crowns from all heads, which ought to wear them, and with the crowns to smite off the sacred heads themselves, this is a just war. —

„If a war to prevent Louis the XIV. from imposing his religion was just, a war to prevent the murderers of Louis the XVI. from imposing their irreligion upon us, is just; a war to prevent the operation of a system, which makes life without dignity and death without hope, is a just war. —

<sup>1)</sup> Letters of Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Man, British envoy at the court of Tuscany, edited by Lord Dover, London 1833. Conf. Macaulay, Essays II. p. 194.

„If to preserve political independence and civil freedom to nations, was a just ground of war; a war to preserve national independence, property, liberty, life and honour from certain, universal havock, is a war just, necessary, manly, pious; and we are bound to persevere in it by every principle divine and human, as long as the system, which menaces them all, and all equally, has an existence in the world. —

„You, who have looked at this matter with as fair and impartial an eye, as can be united with a feeling heart, you will not think it an hardy assertion, when I affirm, that it were far better to be conquered by any other nation, than to have this faction for a neighbour. Before I felt myself authorised to say this, I considered the state of all the countries in Europe for these last three hundred years, which have been obliged to submit to a foreign law. In most of those I found the condition of the annexed countries even better, certainly not worse, than the lot of those which were the patrimony of the conqueror. They wanted some blessings--but they were free from many very great evils. They were rich and tranquil. Such was Artois, Flanders, Lorraine, Alsatia, under the old government of France. Such was Silesia under the king of Prussia. They who are to live in the vicinity of this new fabric are to prepare to live in perpetual conspiracies and seditions; and to end at last, in being conquered, if not to her dominion, to her resemblance. But when we talk of conquest by other nations, it is only to put a case. This is the only power in Europe by which it is possible we should be conquered. To live under the continual dread of such immeasurable evils is itself a grievous calamity. To live without the dread of them is to turn the danger into the disaster. The influence of such a France is equal to a war; its example, more wasting than an hostile irruption. The hostility with any other power is separable and accidental; this power, by the very condition of its existence, by its very essential constitution, is in a state of hostility with us and with all civilized people.“

