

## THE MODERN MODE IN LITERATURE

BY MARY M. COLUM

I SHOULD like to give as a sub-title to the one above, *The Characteristic Literature of Our Age and How to Understand It*. But before getting to the core of the subject I have a few general observations to make which may seem platitudinous, but which, unfortunately, are not part of the consciousness of the publishing and book-reviewing worlds.

We have in contemporary writing two classes of product: one belongs to the art of literature and the other to the trade of writing. Naturally very little contemporary writing belongs to the art of literature. The bulk of it belongs to the trade of writing, and that includes nearly all the books you find reviewed in the literary supplements—novels by people with a competent, or even mild narrative gift, verses by people with a talent for making syllables at the ends of lines rhyme together, treatises on the lungs and liver by

doctors, works concocted out of information dug up in a library, biographies and histories, books written by people who have to employ their time somehow or to get a Ph.D. or a raise of salary in a college.

The art of literature is something else altogether. Art of any kind—music, literature, painting or sculpture, belongs to the intellectual and spiritual capital of the world; it has always been a rare product of the human spirit, and a product of the rare human spirit. Now when we discuss the Modern Mode in writing we naturally mean the writing that belongs to the art of literature, that belongs to the spiritual and intellectual capital to which our age has contributed and is contributing. In spite of the confusion, and indeed I might say, the scrambling of standards that exists in our day, almost unconsciously when it comes to conferring a reputation, it is the artist writers who are placed on the pinnacle while the others have a different influence and a different position. Publicity and fame are not the same thing and are not conferred by the same public.

I do not imagine that any of you confound books that belong to the art of literature with the lasting books. A book or a poem may be a work of art and not live so very long; it can be simply something that has great significance for its own day. A great work of art, of course, has significance for a very long time, for all time maybe. On

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MARY M. COLUM, the wife of the Irish author and poet, Padraic Colum, to whom she was married in 1912, was born in Ireland. She is a graduate of the National University of Ireland and the Dominican College, Dublin, and came to United States in 1914. For some years she was literary critic of THE FORUM and CENTURY MAGAZINE, as well as a contributor to many other magazines and reviews. She was awarded the John Guggenheim fellowship in literary criticism in 1930, and again in 1938. Her book *From These Roots*, was published in 1937. The accompanying article by Mrs. Colum formed the annual Hopwood address delivered before the candidates for the Hopwood prizes and their friends on May 19, 1943.

the other hand, now and again a book survives that has little or no relation to art—I am not here referring to the jumble of books dealt with in histories of literature not because of their connection with literature but because of their scientific, political or social revelation—a book, say, like *The Origin of Species*, or Newton's *Principia*; I mean books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which has importance through its association with history rather than through its kinship with art. Let me follow up what I have said by stating that the work of our time that belongs to literature may not belong to lasting literature, but that its distinctiveness lies in its being the aesthetic expression of our age. The characteristic literature of any age, let me emphasize, represents the expression peculiar to that age, an expression which did not evidence itself in that particular way in any other age. And so, as we have a modern mode in painting, a modern mode in architecture, a modern mode in warfare, we have a modern mode in literature—a literature peculiar to the period of the last three decades, or the period, roughly speaking between the last great war and this one.

When we moderns look back at other centuries we can readily see what was the characteristic literary expression of each period. Of the sixteenth century in England and the seventeenth century in France, we say it was the poetic drama; of the seventeenth century in England, the prose comedy; in the eighteenth century, the characteristic literary expression was the essay in prose and verse, for poets of that time often called their poetry 'essays'—the "Essay on Man," the "Essay on Criticism," and so on. In the eighteenth century we had poetry in rhymed couplets which ran like this:

Eternal blessings crown my earliest friend,  
 And round his dwelling guardian saints attend.  
 Blessed be that spot where cheerful guests  
 retire  
 To pause from toil and trim their evening fire.

Of course there was far better poetry than this written in the eighteenth century, even far better by the same poet, Goldsmith, but I quote these lines on purpose, for when the characteristic literature of any age shows itself getting obvious and facile like this, we know the change is due, even though it does not show itself for a while longer. The end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century brought the change, as we know.

When we look back on the nineteenth century we see that the characteristic production nearly everywhere was the novel in prose and the lyric in poetry, but especially characteristic of the nineteenth century was the realistic novel; the lyric, of course, had occurred before. Now realism in literature is the revelation of the ordinary man in everyday life, in everyday surroundings. These two literary forms, realism in the novel and also, in some countries, realism in the drama, and lyricism in poetry, so gripped the general imagination that actually many readers and writers have difficulty in realizing that these are not the perennial modes in literature, that they do not give perpetual laws of literary expression. Neither of them, in fact, is the fitting expression of the present age at all.

The realistic novel is the expression in fictional prose of the nineteenth century when science and the methods of science came into civilization and when literature began to be written from facts, from observation and documentation, when the novelist, instead of drawing primarily upon his imagination, set down what his eyes saw and his ears heard, set down what he observed in everyday life of the everyday people around him.

Taine, the great literary critic and psychologist of the period, supplied the writers with what I might call the literary slogan; he announced that the matter of all knowledge of any kind *was little facts, well chosen, important, significant, amply circumstantiated, and minutely noted.* If

anybody wants to write a realistic novel he should head his first page with that sentence of Taine's. Even poetry according to this critic was made up of little facts, *les petits faits sensibles*, which may be translated as the "little facts of emotion."

## II

The formula of the realistic novel had a sort of scientific preciseness: the author picked out characters from the life around him, then he imposed a story on them with a theme and a problem; there were ideas associated with each character that tied up with the plot; then the chief character went through a mental, spiritual, and emotional stress which first of all helped to build up the story and then carried it on to a conclusion. It is easy to find this formula at the back of the great realistic novels like *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Esther Waters*, *Sister Carrie*, *Of Human Bondage*, *Old Wives' Tale*, and the great realistic plays like Ibsen's *Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*. It is also, of course, the formula at the back of a multitude of lesser novels and plays. Some remarkable works were produced by this method, and looking back on them we see how characteristic they were of the nineteenth century and what a genuine expression of the age they were. The realistic novel then was a characteristic expression of the nineteenth century as it could not have been an expression of any other age, for it was in line with the scientific discoveries, the social and political outlook of the period.

Now how are we to know what is the characteristic literary expression of our age, what is the modern mode? What are we producing that our descendants will think of as the distinctive expression of our age which is different from the expression of any other age? Let us take a look at some of the novels everybody was reading in the last few years. First, let us take *The Grapes of Wrath*, a very widely read book.

It opens with a description on familiar lines:

To the red country and part of the grey country in Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. . . . The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the road so that the grey country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try anymore. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread anymore. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country, and white in the grey country.

Where have we read this sort of description before? We have read it in every realistic novel whether English, American, French, or German. Was there ever a time when this sort of description was fresh and new and done with rousing art? Yes, it was done exquisitely in the first realistic novel, in the novel that supplied the design for almost all realistic novels, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and as in every novel of the type, the description comes in one of the first couple of pages:

The rain no longer fell; the day was beginning to dawn, and on the branches of the leafless apple-trees birds were perched motionless, shaking their slight feathers in the cold air of the morning. The flat country stretched away until lost from view, and the clumps of trees around the farms made at long intervals dark violet stains on the great grey surface which became lost in the horizon and one with the gloomy tone of the sky. The warm odor of plaster was mingled with the odor of the morning dew on the grass.

You can easily see now how the Flaubertian manner became the model for all such descriptions. And now I want to give you a

sample of the dialogue in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

The six cars stopped. Two bookkeepers moved from car to car. "Want to work?"

Tom answered, "Sure, but what is this?"

"That's not your affair. Want to work?"

"Sure we do."

"Name?"

"Joad."

"How many men?"

"Four."

"Women?"

"Two."

"Kids?"

"Two."

"Can all of you work?"

"Why—I guess so."

"O. K. Find house sixty-three. Wages five cents a box. No bruised fruit. All right, move along now. Go to work right away."

The cars moved on. On the door of each square red house a number was painted. "Sixty," Tom said. "There's sixty. Must be down that way. There, sixty-one, sixty-two—There she is."

Al parked the truck close to the door of the little house. The family came down from the top of the truck and looked about in bewilderment. Two deputies approached. They looked closely into each face.

"Name?"

"Joad," Tom said impatiently. "Say, what is this here?"

One of the deputies took out a long list. "Not here. Ever see these here? Look at the license. Nope. Ain't got it. Guess they're O.K."

This conversation is typical of the conversations in *The Grapes of Wrath*: they all might have been taken down on gramophone records; they have none of the overtones of emotion of characterization that the great realists have in their conversations. A book like *The Grapes of Wrath*, in my estimation, is realism in its decline and petering out into sterility. If I had space I should compare what I have quoted with a conversation out of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or out of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and then you would see the difference between a master novelist who

could make every line of conversation vibrate with the emotions behind it, who could show you the interior lives of the people who spoke the words, and a very competent, very intelligent trade novelist who really only got down the external and automatic life of his people. This is not to say but that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a good sociological study in narrative and fictional form, but it simply does not belong to the art of literature. Even as sociology, or representation, better results might have been obtained by a movie camera screening the life of the Joads, the scenes they pass through, and the camps in which they lived, and with a voice-recording machine to take down the conversations.

Let us see if another widely read book of the last few years, *Gone With the Wind*, belongs to the characteristic literature of our age. We look at the opening. Here is a description of the heroine on the very first page:

Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were. In her face were too sharply blended the delicate features of her mother, a Coast aristocrat of French descent, and the heavy ones of her florid Irish father. But it was an arresting face, pointed of chin, square of jaw. Her eyes were pale green without a touch of hazel, starred with bristly black lashes and slightly tilted at the ends. Above them, her thick black brows slanted upward, cutting a startling oblique line in her magnolia-white skin. . . . The green eyes in the carefully sweet face were turbulent, wilful, lusty with life, distinctly at variance with decorous demeanor. Her manners had been imposed upon her by her mother's gentle admonitions and the sterner discipline of her mammy; her eyes were her own.

Now this sort of writing has the charm of the familiar; you have read, more or less, that description of the heroine in many novels. About a hundred and fifty years ago Jane Austen did it first in *Emma*. Here is what she wrote:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and

rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and lived nearly twenty years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. The real evils . . . of Emma's situation were the power of having too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; there were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The dangers, however, were at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.

You see that Jane Austen manages to tell you a great deal about her heroine without the cluttered detail that is in *Gone With the Wind*. The clutter got in through novelist after novelist, for a century and a half, trying to imitate Jane Austen and improve on her. Of course, *Gone With the Wind* is an entertaining and readable novel, and it saved multitudes of people from ennui and from the trouble of trying to decide what to do with their leisure hours. Of course, *The Grapes of Wrath* is interesting and informing, but both these types of writing are, in one way or another, a hang-over from the nineteenth century.

What is really new in our time, what is really characteristic of our time, has not found expression in these typical and widely read books. We find in them no expression of the new discoveries about the nature of man or the range of his emotions, or the workings of his mind and his memory. For if the nineteenth century was the century of scientific discovery and scientific procedure which naturally found their echo and reflection in literature, the twentieth century has been the century of psychological discovery, of new conceptions of the universe, new conceptions of history, and these, too, are making their entrance into art and literature.

### III

When did the characteristic literature of our time begin to show itself? It began in about the second decade of this century when a writer named Marcel

Proust realized that the influence of Time on people had never been really expressed in literature, and he wrote a long novel with Time as the hero or protagonist, showing Time as the most influential of all things in human life. He was given a clue as to how to reveal this discovery through the studies in the nature of time of the twentieth century philosophers and scientists. He learned a great deal from the lectures and writings of Bergson, and he learned not only about time, but he learned about memory, which Bergson called the direct intuition of the past; and he saw how it was all connected with the new studies concerning the nature of man, with the new discoveries in psychology, especially those concerning the importance of the subconscious. His mind fertilized by this sort of knowledge, he set out to write a novel of a kind that had never been written before, and he revealed people in a way that had never been revealed before. He gave us a whole gallery of personages, all under the domination of ever transforming Time, characters whom his readers got to know more intimately than the people they knew in everyday life. This long novel in different parts was entitled, as you know, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, (*The Search for Lost Time*). The title, as given in English by its distinguished translator, is *Remembrance of Things Past*, from Shakespeare's sonnet, actually misrepresents Proust's intention.

And the characteristic literature of our age had another beginning when a writer named James Joyce, under the influence of Freud's and Jung's discoveries in connection with the subconscious, realized that he could reveal the whole past of people by showing everything they did and everything that passed through their minds in a few hours of time. In *Ulysses*, he took about eighteen hours in the lives of a few characters in Dublin, and by representing all their actions in this period and the sights they saw on the streets, in houses, saloons,

newspaper offices, hospitals, brothels, and by digging up the content of their subconscious he was able to evoke the whole past of his characters and suggest their future. He broke down that old stereotyped form, with its beginning, middle, and end; he threw away the opening description of the *mise-en-scène*; all that description of the exterior appearance of the characters, and without any exposition he plunged right into the middle of the action. Here is the opening of *Ulysses*, and how different it is from the openings of those books which belonged to the realistic literature of the nineteenth century and which no matter how expert are now just hang-overs. This is the first page of *Ulysses*—doubtless many of you are familiar with it:

Stately plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

“Introibo ad altare Dei.”

Halted, he peered down the dark winding stairs and called up coarsely:

“Come up, Kinch, come up, you fearful Jesuit.”

Solemnly he came forward and mounted the round gun-rest. He faced about and blessed gravely thrice the tower, the surrounding country and the awaking mountains. Then, catching sight of Stephen Daedalus, he bent towards him and made rapid crosses in the air, gurgling in his throat and shaking his head. Stephen Daedalus, displeased and sleepy, leaned his arms on the top of the staircase, and looked coldly at the shaking gurgling face that blessed him, equine in its length, and at the light untensored hair, grained and hued like pale oak.

Buck Mulligan peeped an instant under the mirror and then covered the bowl smartly.

“Back to barracks,” he said sternly.

He added in a preacher’s tone:

“—For this, O dearly beloved, is the genuine Christine, body and soul and blood and ouns. Slow music, please. Shut your eyes, gents. One

moment. A little trouble about those white corpuscles. Silence all.”

A book like *Ulysses*, when it first came out twenty years ago, was very difficult for the reader, for not only was the old logical form and matter of the novel displaced, but the reader had to know something about the new discoveries concerning the subconscious and the association of ideas. Something similar could be said about T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*, which came out within a year or two of *Ulysses*. These and certain other modern writers made a different kind of demand on the reader than previous writers did: it was as if they said to the reader, “Your mind is composed, not only of the hereditary ideas and emotions common to large sections of mankind, not only of the common physical experiences; it is made up of the books you have read, the music you have heard, the pictures you have seen, the countries you have traveled in, the history you have understood. It is made up of all these in addition to what beliefs you have been taught, the nervous organism you have inherited or that your environment has given you. Your personality at any moment of duration is really composed of everything that has impinged on your consciousness.” Until a reader understands the approach a good deal of modern writing will be obscure and may give the impression of a man talking to himself of some experience inside himself of which he alone has the key. But if an intelligent reader with a good training in literature finds after careful attention that a piece of contemporary writing has no meaning for him, it may mean there is no meaning in it, anyway, for as well as serious work a monstrous lot of humbug is being turned out in what purports to be the modern mode.

#### IV

Joyce’s method is far different from Proust’s, but both reveal many of the same things: people affected by time, people

urged by unconscious and uncontrollable forces within them, people dominated by memory, personal memory and racial memory. As the realistic novel of the nineteenth century was affected by scientific discoveries and scientific procedure, this new writing in prose and verse is affected by psychological and philosophical discoveries. These, as translated into literature, might be summed up as follows:

(1). Time is felt duration. We do not think real time, we live it; it is the very stuff of which psychic life is made.

(2). In every moment of action there is the influence of our entire past—our character or actions have been shaped by everything that has gone before.

(3). Our consciousness is memory; mind is memory; therefore these new novels and much of the new poetry are all a sort of autobiography. This is true, not only of Joyce and Proust, but of Thomas Wolfe, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and many others.

(4). We change without ceasing; as long as we are alive, we change from moment to moment, but time and memory remain as paramount factors in our existence. The psychic life of an adult human being is a conglomeration of memories though at any one moment our conscious memory picks out for immediate use only a few odd recollections. Life, indeed, might be said to be a continuous process in which new memories are superimposed on already existing ones. And this explains why modern authors do not engage themselves in telling a story; they present the stream of events, thoughts, and emotions that make up the lives of their characters.

I should have to give many lectures to explain in any detail the evolution of the novel from *Madame Bovary* to *Finnegans Wake*, and of poetry from Shelley to our time. It is my business now to give you in one paper some idea of how we have arrived at writing such as in *Finnegans Wake* and which is beginning to influence all

other kinds of writing; you can see its influence not only in the last play of Thornton Wilder's, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, in the last book of poems by T. S. Eliot, but even in up-to-date advertising.

Now, as realistic literature—the realistic novel—had its beginning in France, so the reaction against it started in France. It became not only a reaction against the expression of ordinary everyday life, but a reaction against the use of ordinary everyday language. A poet like Rimbaud, whose name you so often see now mentioned in the literary reviews, declared that literature should not be about external life at all: a writer should force himself outside ordinary experience; the external world, the everyday world, was a receiving world; there was no reality to it. Now one must remember that these ideas represent very old beliefs of the human race and are at the back of many religions. These ideas later were further developed by Stephane Mallarmé who insisted that the world which real writers should express is very different from the world in which one lives, eats, sleeps; true reality, interior reality, is in visions, dreams, even in hallucinations. Literature should express the interior life of man, the interior life of the world, not those physical and material conditions such as our contemporary realistic literature insists on expressing. Mallarmé, like Rimbaud, insisted that in the future writers would have to give their energies to the problems of language, for ordinary language had been developed by the practical intelligence for the needs of everyday life and was of little use any more for high literary expression; words would have to be used with new meanings, for every word had many meanings, not only its objective dictionary meaning—it might even have, according to Rimbaud, a color meaning—words especially had an association interior meaning. It is the use of words in their association interior meaning that has made so much of modern poetry difficult.

The discoveries of the new psychologists and philosophers helped all the new literary ideas along, for they declared that the ordinary everyday man who eats, drinks, and sleeps is only part of the whole man, a small part of him at that. The mind of man was compared by the psychologists to an iceberg of which only about a third or fourth is visible above water and about three-fourths is below water. Now the advanced writers, the characteristic twentieth century writers, said, "Let us express this part of man, this greater part that is, as it were below water, below consciousness." So writers like Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry in France, Stefan George in Germany, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, to some extent Thomas Wolfe, also to some extent W. B. Yeats, the greatest poet of our time, tried to express both the little bit of man that is the everyday man and the large part of him that is not everyday but that is submerged in the subconscious. Finally, James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* threw over the idea of expressing the everyday man in everyday surroundings at all, and devoted himself completely to man in his unconscious or subconscious, man wholly in his interior workings, in his memories racial and personal. To do this he took over all the ideas of those who were in reaction against the methods of realism—the ideas of Rimbaud on the insignificance of everyday life and on the necessity of using words in many different meanings, the ideas of Verlaine that the musical sound of words and not their logical meanings were important, the ideas of Mallarmé that literature should not explain but suggest, that the theme in a piece of literature might have to be orchestrated as in music, that the logical development might have to be stopped in the middle of a sentence to take up some accessory theme, that a writer might even, to express all this, have to create his own vocabulary and his own language.

Every one of these ideas, plus the ideas and discoveries of the psychologists, plus

the ideas and discoveries of the philosophers and philosophic historians are in *Finnegans Wake*. Some of you who have looked into this book may have thought it too cryptic for perusal, or even a hodge-podge that no one could understand, written by a person who did not know what he was doing. But Joyce knew exactly what he was doing, and his book is bound to have greater influence on writers, even though it can never have an extensive popularity among ordinary readers. Now I am going to open this cryptic book and quote a certain passage. It ought to be read aloud because the sound conveys part of the meaning. The passage that I give here has but little to do with the objective world; it describes the effect of twilight falling on a flowing river and on its banks, the river in this case being the river Liffey in Dublin but becoming the representative of all rivers and the symbol of all life. Now I must ask you to allow your logical intelligence to remain in abeyance as in life it so often does, and allow your imagination, your emotions, your sense of the sounds of words to take in the meaning:

Can't hear with the waters of. The chittering waters of. Flittering bats, field mice bawk talk. Ho! are you not gone home? What, Tom Malone? Can't hear with bawk of bats, all of them liffeying waters of. Ho! talk save us! My foos on't moos. I feel as old as yonder elm. A tale told of Shaun or Shem? All Livia's daughter-sons. Dark hawks hear us. Night! Night! my ho head halls. I feel as heavy as yonder stone. Tell me John or Shaun? Who were Shem and Shaun the living sons or daughters of? Night now. Tell me, tell me, tell me, elm! Night, Night. Tell me tale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night.

In the ending of the book the river, the symbol of life and history flows into the sea, in a passage about Death and Resurrection. There passes through the group subconsciousness echoes of all that people have heard of dying and resurrection,



angels coming to take the soul away, then the belief that some beloved person, father or mother, husband or wife, son or daughter, comes at the moment of death to greet the dying. Faint memories of childhood and of his past come before the dying one. Then there comes the memories of stories of the end of the world, of parables about the keys of heaven and the twilight of the gods. The image of the river is always present, the river flowing on forever, flowing into the sea, always beginning again so that the very first words in *Finnegans Wake* are a continuation of the very last words. All these ideas, feelings, and associations represent the effort on the part of literature to be an interpretation of life and not simply a record of everyday objective happenings and emotions.

The following passage from a recent poem by T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, also treats of Death and Resurrection in a way which shows a strong influence from *Finnegans Wake*.

We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And know the place for the first time.  
 Through the unknown, remembered gate  
 When the last of earth left to discover  
 Is that which was the beginning;  
 At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall  
 And the children in the apple-tree  
 Not known, because not looked for  
 But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
 Between two waves of the sea.  
 Quick now, here, now, always—  
 A condition of complete simplicity  
 (Costing not less than everything)  
 And all shall be well and  
 All manner of thing shall be well  
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
 Into the crowned knot of fire  
 And the fire and the rose are one.

A comparison of the end of *Finnegans Wake* and the end of *Little Gidding* with the lyrics in Yeats' remarkable play, *Resurrection*, will be very revelatory of the concern of the most characteristic modern literature with Death and Resurrection, with the end of one civilization and the beginning of a new one.

In conclusion I feel that it is necessary to say that not all the real literature produced in any age belongs to the characteristic literature of the age. There is always an amount of great literature produced that has not the special characteristic of any age. But that is a very different thing from the stale continuation of a worn out form. The writing I have discussed here as characteristic, as of the modern mode, is the special aesthetic expression of this age and could not be produced in any other age.