As our knowledge of literature expands, we realize more clearly that the best which has been thought and said in the world is not limited to our own bewildered generation, and to our tense and colorful American language. We become aware, not only of the best-sellers of today, but of those perennial good-sellers which are called the classics. Some day Homer swims into our ken; and Dante's Divine Comedy, and Goethe's Faust, and Tolstoy's War and Peace. Ignore these summits of human achievement, or grant them grudgingly a subordinate place, and you will stunt and warp the growth of your mind. This is not true only of the classics which rose to fame ages ago; anyone genuinely interested in contemporary literature has to get acquainted with Anatole France, Marcel Proust, Pirandello; with d'Annunzio, Gorky, Maeterlinck; with André Gide, Thomas Mann, Unamuno; and Jules Romains, Stefan Zweig, Ortega y Gasset.

From these plain facts, a plain conclusion must be drawn. Literature should be taught as Literature in English, not as English Literature. A selection there must be, but the basis of our selection should be excellence. It is far more important for us to know world masterpieces than to clutter up our minds with the names of local masterpieces. In the self-education which should continue throughout adult life, it would be wise to be guided by the same rule: let us read and enjoy the best, wherever the best may be found.

This simple suggestion may strike some readers as a willful paradox. We are used to a fairly rigid division into self-contained departments—English, Classical Languages, Modern Languages, History, Philosophy; and the disruption of these time-honored boundaries strikes us as a major heresy, like the confusion of the Three Powers in the Constitutional State. It would be well to remember that departments were made for man, and not man for departments. Above all, we should bear in mind that "time-honored" divisions are, in certain cases, surprisingly recent. In the long perspective of history, the study of literature from a strictly national point of view is a thing of yesterday. For centuries, the accepted approach was through the Humanities, that is to say, through the Greek and Latin classics. When the present wave of the high-school boy in France, the same master taught French, Latin and Greek: the three formed a single whole. This long tradition is fading, but it has not completely disappeared. If Latin is still so extensively studied in America, it is not for utilitarian purposes, and not even for its very great intrinsic merits, but as the keystone of our culture. Latin may no longer be the indispensable bond among the nations; but few will deny that the disruption of Europe's spiritual unity involves a tragic loss.

The division of literature into separate language departments is defended on the plea that definite knowledge demands specialization. It is hard enough to know, accurately and intently, a single literature, and that our own; it is out of the question even for a prodigy to take all literature as his domain. Such an attempt can lead only to shallowness, concealed at best under a pleasing film of generalities. As Professor C. H. C. Wright of Harvard put it with good-humored baiter, the study of World Literature is apt to be "a breathless attempt to keep up with God and H. G. Wells."

This indicates a danger, not a radical impossibility. I agree with the professional scholars: the age of encyclopedic geniuses is past. But we must specialize far more than the departmental division would indicate. It is in fact impossible to know everything about a single literature. No man is expected to be a first-hand authority on Beowulf and James Joyce, extreme links in an enormous chain. In all cases, there must be selection, renunciation, and finally a confession of ignorance. We move in a little circle of trembling light; beyond that, a brief penumbra; and then, darkness absolute.

But, however limited our field may be, if we want to investigate it with any degree of thoroughness, we shall not be able to restrict it to national boundaries. Every great English writer had foreign ancestors in the spirit; more important in shaping his art than the influence of his English predecessors and contemporaries. No one could be a Chaucer scholar without some knowledge of Chaucer's French and Italian sources. A student of Milton will have to peer into Hebraic, Greek, Latin and Italian literatures. This is true even of our own darkly nationalistic age. We cannot fully understand Arnold Bennett without a knowledge of the influence of Maupassant, Edith Wharton without Paul Bourget, Katherine Mansfield without Chekhov, James Branch Cabell without Anatole France, George Bernard Shaw without Ibsen and Voltaire.

It may be contended, however, that foreign influences act only as modifiers of the national tradition, which remains the fundamental element. An Anglomaniac Frenchman like Voltaire remains a Frenchman all the same; a Gallophone and Gallicized Briton like Gibbon is none the less a thorough Briton. One man or one nation may borrow from another a set of terms, a doctrine, a technique, perhaps a new shade of thought or feeling; but this underlying reality is unchanged. There are few things in literary history more dramatic than the success of Lord Byron on the Continent. Poets everywhere forsook their national masters to follow the lead of the prestigious English rebel. But Byron was so successful only because the Continent, through Racine, through Goethe and Schiller in their earliest works, through Chateaubriand, had independently reached the stage of Byronism.

Granted; but this only brings out the fact that all great literatures go through very much the same phases, almost at the same time. In other words, this emphasizes the unity of European culture. Within that unity, there are two sets of differences. The first are historical, and are manifested in the period: the second are geographical, and separate the nations.

Between these two sets, nationality has the advantage of possessing a definite legal existence. Every man is registered as belonging to a nation; whereas the "spirit of the time" is but a shadowy sovereignty. So we think more naturally of Edmund Spencer, for instance, as "an Englishman of the Renaissance" as much as he was a "man of the Renaissance who happened to live in England." Yet, in the one case, the influence of a certain culture, the period may actually be more real, more significant than the nation. There is greater resemblance among the European literatures of a given age, such as the Enlightenment, than between a medieval Englishman and his distant and Victorian posterity. If you examine an old portrait, you will first of all be conscious of the period to which it belongs. It is only on closer scrutiny that you may be able to detect the nationality of the subject. There are fashions in clothes, but also fashions in expression and in modes of thought, which sweep the whole Western world. The proper unit for detailed study, then, would be a phase of civilization—the Romantic Revolt, for instance, or the Realistic Reaction—rather than any national group.

Nur should we fail to take into account, in pre-war Europe at any rate, the existence of class distinctions more rigid than national boundaries. For frontiers, now so sharply drawn, were long uncertain, and seems to us to a vestige of at best under a plebeianism whose origin, we believe, was rooted in the French crown and yet remain connected in many ways with the Holy Roman Empire. Less than a hundred years ago, Neuchâtel was still both a Prussian principality and a part of republican Switzerland. But, if a member of the nobility might hesitate about his national allegiance, he had no doubt whatever about his own rank, and the abyss that separated him from a commoner. Traces of such a state of mind can be found even in our own days. On the battlefield, all classes will fight with equal heroism for king and country. On the morrow, an aristocrat will give his daughter in marriage to a foreign aristocrat rather than to a plebeian of his own country.

This condition has a bearing upon literature. Members of the upper class, because they lived the same kind of life, inspired and enjoyed everywhere the same kind of art. Chrétiens de Troyes, master of chivalric romance in the second half of the twelfth century, provided all of Troyes with patterns of refined love. Early in the sixteenth century, it was not Lorenzo de' Medici who, in his Cantigas, defined the aristocratic ideal, for Englishmen and Frenchmen as well as for Italians. The spread of French literature under Louis XIV and Louis XV was due,