

OUR NOVEL LITERATURE.

WHAT are the most influential writings of the present time, —the writings that tell with most effect on public opinion? Not certainly the graver or more elaborate productions of the press. Some of these in former times exerted a prodigious influence: there were four great works, in especial, that appeared at wide intervals during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,—the last of their number about eighty years ago,—that revolutionized, on their respective subjects, the thinking of all Europe; and these were, the “Laws of Peace and War,” the “Essay on the Human Understanding,” the “Spirit of Laws,” and the “Wealth of Nations,”—all works of profound elaboration, that contain the thinking of volumes condensed into single pages. At an earlier period there were theological works that stirred men’s minds to their utmost depths, and changed the political relations of states and kingdoms, over all Christendom. Such was the influence exerted by the treatises of Luther, whose written “words were half-battles;” and by those “Institutes of Calvin” that gave form and body to the thinking of half the religious world. But whether it be that we live in an age too superficial to produce, or too busy to read, such works, or at once superficial and busy both, without either the works to read or the time to read them in, it is certain that almost all power has passed away from the grave and the elaborate to the light and the clever, and that what would have been pronounced about a century ago the *least* influential kinds of writing must now be recognised as by far the *most* influential. Had one said to a literary man in the early days of Johnson, “Pray, what do you regard as the least important departments of your literature, both in themselves and their effects, and that tell