

THE CONTROVERSIALIST

by

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AN INSURRECTION OF THE PEASANTRY

(From *"The Cosmopolitan" Magazine, December, 1907*)

WHEN a man of genius who is not famous writes a notable poem he must expect one or two of three things: indifference, indignation, ridicule. In commending Mr. George Sterling's "A Wine of Wizardry," published in the September number of this magazine, I had this reception of his work in confident expectation and should have mistrusted my judgment if it had not followed. The promptitude of the chorus of denunciation and scorn has attested the superb character of the poet's work and is most gratifying.

The reason for the inevitable note of dissent is not far to seek; it inheres in the constitution of the human mind, which is instinctively hostile to what is "out of the common"—and a work of genius is pretty sure to be that. It is by utterance of uncommon thoughts, opinions, sentiments and fancies that genius is known. All distinction is difference, unconformity. He who is as others are—whose mental processes and manner of expression follow the familiar order—is readily acceptable because easily intelligible to those whose narrow intelligence, barren imagination, and meager vocabulary he shares. "Why, that is great!" says that complacent dullard, "the average man," smiling approval. "I have thought that a hundred times myself!"—thereby providing abundant evidence that it is not great, nor of any value whatever. To "the average man" what is new is inconceivable, and what he does not understand affronts him. And he is the first arbiter in letters and art. In this "fierce democracie" he dominates literature with a fat and heavy hand—a hand that is not always unfamiliar with the critic's pen.

In returning here to the subject of Mr. Sterling's poem I have no intention of expounding and explaining it to persons who know nothing of poetry and are inaccessible to instruction. Those who, in the amusing controversy which I unwittingly set raging round Mr. Sterling's name, have spoken for them are in equal mental darkness and somewhat thicker moral, as it is my humble hope to show.

When the cause to be served is ignorance, the means of service is invariably misrepresentation. The champion of offended Dullness falsifies in statement and cheats in argument, for he serves a client without a conscience. A knowledge of right and wrong is not acquired to-day, as in the time of Adam and Eve, by eating an apple; and it is attained by only the highest intelligences.

But before undertaking the task of pointing out the moral unworth of my honorable opponents, it seems worth while to explain that the proponent of the controversy has had the misfortune to misunderstand the question at issue. He has repeatedly fallen into the error of affirming, with all the emphasis of shouting capitals, that "Ambrose Bierce says it ["A Wine of Wizardry"] is the greatest poem ever written in America," and at least once has declared that I pronounced it "the only great poem ever written in America." If the dispute had been prolonged I shudder to think that his disobedient understanding might have misled him to say that I swore it was the only great poem ever written, in all the world.

To those who know me it is hardly needful, I hope, to explain that I said none of the words so generously put into my mouth, for it is obvious that I have not seen, and could not have seen, all the poems that have been written in America. To have pronounced such a judgment without all the evidence would have been to resemble my opponents—which God forbid! In point of fact, I do not consider the poem the greatest ever written in America; Mr. Sterling himself, for example, has written a greater. Exposed to so hardy and impenitent misrepresentation I feel a need of the consolations of religion: I should like positively to know where my critics are going to when they die. From my present faltering faith in their future I derive an imperfect comfort.

Naturally, not all protagonists of the commonplace who have uttered their minds about this

matter are entitled to notice. The Baseball Reporter who, says Mr. Brisbane, "like Mr. Sterling, is a poet," the Sweet Singer of Slang, the Simian Lexicographer of Misinformation, and the Queen of Platitudinaria who has renounced the sin-and-sugar of youth for the milk-and-morality of age must try to forgive me if I leave them grinning through their respective horse-collars to a not unkind inattention.

But Deacon Harvey is a person of note and consequence. On a question of poetry, I am told, he controls nearly the entire Methodist vote. Moreover, he has a notable knack at mastery of the English language, which he handles with no small part of the ease and grace that may have distinguished the impenitent thief carrying his cross up the slope of Calvary. Let the following noble sentences attest the quality of his performance when he is at his best:

A natural hesitation to undertake analysis of the unanalyzable, criticism of the uncriticizable, or, if we may go so far, mention of the unmentionable, yields to your own shrewd forging of the links of circumstance into a chain of duty. That the greatest poem ever written on this hemisphere, having forced its way out of a comfortable lodgment in the brain of an unknown author, should be discovered and heralded by a connoisseur whose pre-eminence is yet to be established, is perhaps in itself not surprising, and yet we must admit that the mere rarity of such a happening would ordinarily preclude the necessity, which otherwise might exist, of searching inquiry as to the attributed transcendentalism of merit.

Surely a man who habitually writes such prose as that must be a good judge of poetry or he would not be a good judge of anything in literature. And what does this Prince Paramount of grace and clarity find to condemn in poor Mr. Sterling's poem? Listen with at least one ear each:

We are willing to admit at the outset that in the whole range of American, or, for that matter, English, poetry there is no example of a poem crowded with such startling imagery, ambitiously marshaled in lines of such lurid impressiveness, all of which at once arrest attention and would bewilder the esthetic sensibility of a Titan. The poem is made up of an unbroken series of sententious and striking passages, any one of which would have distinguished a whole canto of Dante or Keats, neither of whom would have ventured within that limit to use more than one—such was their niggardly economy.

Here is something "rich and strange" in criticism. Heretofore it has been thought that "wealth of imagery" was about the highest quality that poetry could have, but it seems not; that somewhat tiresome phrase is to be used henceforth to signify condemnation. Of the poem that we wish to commend we must say that it has an admirable poverty of imagination. Deacon Harvey's notion that poets like Dante and Keats deliberately refrained from using more than one "sententious and striking passage" to the canto "goes neare to be fony." They used as many as occurred to them; no poet uses fewer than he can. If he has only one to a canto, that is not economy; it is indigence.

I observe that even so good a poet and so appreciative a reader of Mr. Sterling as Miss Ina Coolbrith has fallen into the same error as Deacon Harvey. Of "the many pictures presented in that wondrous 'Wine of Wizardry,'" this accomplished woman says: "I think it is a 'poem'—a great poem—but one which, in my humble estimate, might have been made even greater could its creator have permitted himself to drop a little of what some may deem a weakening superfluity of imagery and word-painting."

If one is to make "pictures" in poetry one must do so by word-painting. (I admit the hatefulness of the term "word-painting," through overuse of the name in praise of the prose that the thing defaces, but it seems that we must use it here.) Only in narrative and didactic poetry, and these are the lowest forms, can there be too much of imagery and word-painting; in a poem essentially graphic, like the one under consideration, they are the strength and soul of the work. "A Wine of Wizardry" is, and was intended to be, a series, a succession, of unrelated pictures, colored

(mostly red, naturally) by what gave them birth and being—the reflection of a sunset in a cup of ruddy wine. To talk of too much imagery in a work of that kind is to be like Deacon Harvey.

Imagery, that is to say, imagination, is not only the life and soul of poetry; it is the poetry. That is what Poe had in mind doubtless, when he contended that there could be no such thing as a long poem. He had observed that what are called long poems consist of brief poetical passages connected by long passages of metrical prose—*recitativo*—of oases of green in deserts of gray. The highest flights of imagination have always been observed to be the briefest. George Sterling has created a new standard, another criterion. In “A Wine of Wizardry,” as in his longer and greater poem, “The Testimony of the Suns,” there is no *recitativo*. His imagination flies with a tireless wing. It never comes to earth for a new spring into the sky, but like the eagle and the albatross, sustains itself as long as he chooses that it shall. His passages of poetry are connected by passages of poetry. In all his work you will find no line of prose. Poets of the present and the future may well “view with alarm” as Statesman Harvey would say—the work that Sterling has cut out for them, the pace that he has set. Poetry must henceforth be not only qualitative but quantitative: it must be all poetry. If wise, the critic will note the new criterion that this bold challenge to the centuries has made mandatory. The “long poem” has been shown to be possible; let us see if it become customary.

In affirming Mr. Sterling’s primacy among living American poets I have no apology to offer to the many unfortunates who have written to me in the spirit of the man who once said of another: “What! that fellow a great man? Why, he was born right in my town!” It is humbly submitted, however, that unless the supply of great men is exhausted they must be born somewhere, and the fact that they are seen “close to” by their neighbors does not supply a reasonable presumption against their greatness. Shakspeare himself was once a local and contemporary poet, and even Homer is known to have been born in “seven Grecian cities” through which he “begged his bread.” Is Deacon Harvey altogether sure that he is immune to the popular inability to understand that the time and place of a poet’s nativity are not decisive as to his rating? He may find a difficulty in believing that a singer of supreme excellence was born right in his country and period, but in the words that I have quoted from him he has himself testified to the fact. To be able to write “an unbroken series of sententious and striking passages”; to crowd a poem, as no other in the whole range of our literature has done, with “startling imagery” “in lines of impressiveness,” lurid or not; to “arrest attention”; to “bewilder the Titans,” Deacon Harvey at their head—that is about as much as the most ambitious poet could wish to accomplish at one sitting. The ordinary harpist harping on his Harpers’ would be a long time in doing so much. How any commentator, having in those words conceded my entire claim, could afterward have the hardihood to say, “The poem has no merit,” transcends the limits of human comprehension and passes into the dark domain of literary criticism.

Nine in ten of the poem’s critics complain of the fantastic, grotesque, or ghastly nature of its fancies. What would these good persons have on the subject of wizardry?—sweet and sunny pictures of rural life?—love scenes in urban drawing-rooms?—beautiful sentiments appropriate to young ladies’ albums?—high moral philosophy with an “appeal” to what is “likeliest God within the soul”? Deacon Harvey (O, I cannot get away from Deacon Harvey: he fascinates me!) would have “an interpretation of vital truth.” I do not know what that is, but we have his word for it that nothing else is poetry. And no less a personage than Mrs. Gertrude Atherton demands, instead of wizardry, an epic of prehistoric California, or an account of the great fire, preferably in prose, for, “this is not an age of poetry, anyway.” Alas, poor Sterling!—damned alike for what he wrote and what he didn’t write. Truly, there are persons whom one may not hope to please.

It should in fairness be said that Mrs. Atherton confesses herself no critic of poetry—the only

person, apparently, who is not—but pronounces Mr. Sterling a “recluse” who “needs to see more and read less.” From a pretty long acquaintance with him I should say that this middle-aged man o’ the world is as little “reclusive” as any one that I know, and has seen rather more of life than is good for him. And I doubt if he would greatly gain in mental stature by unreading Mrs. Atherton’s excellent novels.

Sterling’s critics are not the only persons who seem a bit blinded by the light of his genius: Mr. Joaquin Miller, a born poet and as great-hearted a man as ever lived, is not quite able to “place” him. He says that this “titanic, magnificent” poem is “classic” “in the Homeric, the Miltonic sense.” “A Wine of Wizardry” is not “classic” in the sense in which scholars use that word. It is all color and fire and movement, with nothing of the cold simplicity and repose of the Grecian ideal. Nor is it Homeric, nor in the Miltonic vein. It is in no vein but the author’s own; in the entire work is only one line suggesting the manner of another poet—the last in this passage:

Who leads from hell his whitest queens, arrayed
In chains so heated at their master’s fire
That one new-damned had thought their bright attire
Indeed were coral, till the dazzling dance
So terribly that brilliance shall enhance.

That line, the least admirable in the poem, is purely Byronic. Possibly Mr. Miller meant that Sterling’s work is like Homer’s and Milton’s, not in manner, but in excellence; and it is.

Mr. Sterling’s critics may at least claim credit for candor. For cause of action, as the lawyers say, they aver his use of strange, unfamiliar words. Now this is a charge that any man should be ashamed to make; first, because it is untrue; second, because it is a confession of ignorance. There are not a half-dozen words in the poem that are not in common use by good authors, and none that any man should not blush to say that he does not understand. The objection amounts to this: that the poet did not write down to the objector’s educational level—did not adapt his work to “the meanest capacity.” Under what obligation was he to do so? There are men whose vocabulary does not exceed a few hundreds of words; they know not the meaning of the others because they have not the thoughts that the others express. Shall these Toms, Dicks and Harrys of the slums and cornfields set up their meager acquirements as metes and bounds beyond which a writer shall not go? Let them stay upon their reservations. There are poets enough, great poets, too, whom they can partly understand; that is, they can understand the simple language, the rhymes, the meter—everything but the poetry. There are orders of poetry, as there are orders of architecture. Because a Grecian temple is beautiful shall there be no Gothic cathedrals? By the way, it is not without significance that Gothic architecture was first so called in derision, the Goths having no architecture. It was named by the Deacon Harveys of the period.

The passage that has provoked this class of critics to the most shameless feats of self-exposure is this:

Infernal rubrics, sung to Satan’s might,
Or chanted to the Dragon in his gyre.

Upon this they have expended all the powers of ridicule belonging to those who respect nothing because they know nothing. A person of light and leading in their bright band¹ says of it:

“We confess that we had never before heard of a ‘gyre.’ Looking it up in the dictionary, we find that it means a gyration, or a whirling round. Rubrics chanted to a dragon while he was whirling ought to be worth hearing.”

Now, whose fault is it that this distinguished journalist had never heard of a gyre? Certainly not the poet's. And whose that in very sensibly looking it up he suffered himself to be so misled by the lexicographer as to think it a gyration, a whirling round? Gyre means, not a gyration, but the path of a gyration, an orbit. And has the poor man no knowledge of a dragon in the heavens?—the constellation Draco, to which, as to other stars, the magicians of old chanted incantations? A peasant is not to be censured for his ignorance, but when he glories in it and draws its limit as a dead line for his betters he is the least pleasing of all the beasts of the field.

An amusing instance of the commonplace mind's inability to understand anything having a touch of imagination is found in a criticism of the now famous lines:

The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.

"Somehow," says the critic, who, naturally, is a book-reviewer, "one does not associate blue eyes with a vampire." Of course it did not occur to him that this was doubtless the very reason why the author chose the epithet—if he thought of anybody's conception but his own. "Blue-eyed" connotes beauty and gentleness; the picture is that of a lovely, fairhaired woman with the telltale blood about her lips. Nothing could be less horrible; nothing more terrible. As vampires do not really exist, everyone is at liberty, I take it, to conceive them under what outward and visible aspect he will; but this gentleman, having standardized the vampire, naturally resents any departure from the type—his type. I fancy he requires goggle-eyes, emitting flame and perhaps smoke, a mouth well garnished with tusks—long claws, and all the other appurtenances that make the conventional Chinese dragon so awful that one naturally wishes to meet it and kick it.

Between my mind and the minds of those whom Mr. Sterling's daring incursions into the realm of the unreal do not affect with a keen artistic delight there is nothing in common—except a part of my vocabulary. I cannot hope to convince nor persuade them. Nevertheless, it is no trouble to point out that their loud pretense of being "shocked" by some of his fancies is a singularly foolish one. We are not shocked by the tragic, the terrible, even the ghastly, in literature and art. We do not flee from the theater when a tragedy is enacting—the murder of Duncan and the sleeping grooms—the stabbing and poisoning in "Hamlet." We listen without discomposure to the beating to death of Nancy Sykes behind the scenes. The Ancient Mariner's dead comrades rise and pull at the ropes without disturbing the reader; even the "slimy things" "crawl with legs upon a slimy sea" and we do not pitch the book into the fire. Dante's underworld, with all its ingenious horrors, page after page of them, are accounted pretty good reading—at least Dante is accounted a pretty good poet. No one stands forth to affirm his distress when Homer's hero declares that

Swarms of specters rose from deepest hell
With bloodless visage and with hideous yell.
They scream, they shriek; sad groans and dismal sounds
Stun my scared ears and pierce Hell's utmost bounds.

Literature is full of pictures of the terrible, the awful, the ghastly, if you please; hardly a great author but has given them to us in prose or verse. They shock nobody, for they produce no illusion, not even on the stage, or the canvases of Vereshchagin. If they did they would be without artistic value.

But it is the fashion to pretend to be horrified—when the terrible thing is new and by an unfamiliar hand. The Philistine who accepts without question the horrors of Dante's Hell professes himself greatly agitated when Sterling's

Satan, yawning on his brazen seat,
Fondles a screaming thing his fiends have flayed.

In point of fact, the poor Philistine himself yawns as he reads about it; he is not shocked at all. It is comprehensible how there may be such a thing as a mollycoddle, but how one can pretend to be a mollycoddle when one is not—that must be accepted as the most surprising hypocrisy that we have the happiness to know about.

Having affirmed the greatness of Mr. Sterling, I am austere reminded by a half hundred commentators, some of whom profess admiration for “A Wine of Wizardry,” that a single poem, of whatever excellence, does not establish the claim. Like nearly all the others, these gentlemen write without accuracy, from a general impression. They overlook the circumstance that I pointed out a book by Sterling, published several years ago, entitled *The Testimony of the Suns, and Other Poems*. What, then, becomes of the “single poem” sneer? To its performers nothing that they have not seen exists.

That book is dedicated to me—a fact that has been eagerly seized upon by still another class of critics to “explain” my good opinion of its author; for nothing is so welcome to our literary hill-tribes as a chance to cheat by ascription of a foul motive. But it happens, unhappily for the prosperity of their hope, that the dedication was made in gratitude for my having already set the crown of praise upon its author’s head. I will quote the first lines of the dedication, not only in proof of this, but to show the noble seriousness and sincerity with which a great poet regards his ministry at the altar of his art:

Ah! glad to thy decree I bow,
From whose unquestioned hand did fall,
Beyond a lesser to recall,
The solemn laurels on my brow.

I tremble with the splendid weight.
To my unworth ’tis given to know
How dread the charge I undergo
Who claim the holy Muse as mate.

It is to be hoped that Mr. Sterling’s reverent attitude toward his art has suffered no abatement from his having been thrown to the swine for allegiance to an alien faith hateful to his countrymen.

MONTAGUES AND CAPULETS

I HAVE not the happiness to know if Mr. George Bernard Shaw has ever written as good a play as “As You Like It.” He says he has, and certainly he ought to be able to remember what plays he has written. I don’t know that blank verse is, as Mr. Shaw declares, “a thing that you could teach a cat if it had an ear.” My notion is that blank verse—good blank verse—is the most difficult of all metrical forms, and that among English poets Milton alone has mastered it. I don’t know that Mr. Shaw is right in his sweeping condemnation of the blank verse of that indubitable “master of tremendous prose,” Shakspeare. As a critic, Mr. Shaw ought to know that Shakspeare wrote very little blank verse, technically and properly so called, his plays being, naturally, mostly in what the prosodian knows, and what as a playwright Mr. Shaw might be expected to know, as dramatic blank, a very

different thing.

But this I know, and know full well—

that in ridiculing the blind, unreasoning adoration of Shakspeare as an infallible and impeccable god in whose greater glory all *dii minores* must hide their diminished heads and pale their uneffectual fires, Mr. Shaw does well and merits sympathetic attention. Without going so far as Voltaire, one may venture without irreverence to hold an opinion of one's own as to the great Englishman's barbarous exuberance of metaphor, pure and mixed, his poverty of invention in the matter of plots, his love of punning, his tireless pursuit of a quibble to the ultimate ramifications of its burrow, and a score of other faults which in others his thick-and-thin protagonists freely condemn. Many of these sins against art were doubtless the offspring of a giant indolence, and sole desire to draw the rabble of the streets into his theater. For literature he cared nothing, of literary ambition knew nothing—just made plays, played them and flung away the manuscript. Even the sonnets were left unsigned—which is fortunate, for his unearthly signature would have misled the compiler.

Whatever may be the other qualities of "As You Like It," Mr. Shaw will perhaps admit that in point of mere decency it is pretty fair, which is more than any but a Shakspearolater will say of "Romeo and Juliet," for example. Not greatly caring for the theater, I am not familiar with "acting versions," but this play as it came from the hand of its author is, in a moral sense, detestable. All its men are blackguards, all its women worse, and worst of all is Juliet herself, who makes no secret of the nature of her passion for Romeo, but discloses it with all the candor of a moral idiot insensible to the distinction between propensity and sentiment. Her frankness is no less than hideous. Yet one may read page after page by reputable authors in praise of her as one of the sweetest of Shakspeare's fascinating heroines. Babes are named for her and drawing-room walls adorned with ideal portraits of her, engraved from paintings of great artists. One has only to read Taine's description of an Elizabethan theater audience to understand why dramatists of those "spacious times" did not need seriously to concern themselves with morality; but that Shakspeare's wit, pathos and poetry can make such characters as those of this drama acceptable to modern playgoers and readers is the highest possible attestation of the man's consummate genius.

A DEAD LION

I

IN the history of religious controversy it has sometimes occurred that a fool has risen and shouted out views so typical and representative as to justify a particular attention denied to his less absurd partisans. That was the situation relative to the logomachy that raged over the ashes of the late Col. Robert Ingersoll. Through the ramp and roar of the churches, the thunder of the theological captains and the shouting, rose the penetrating treble of a person so artlessly pious, so devoid of knowledge and innocent of sense, that his every utterance credentialed him as a child of candor, and arrested attention like the wanton shrilling of a noontide locust cutting through the cackle of a hundred hens. That he happened to be an editorial writer was irrelevant, for it was impossible to suspect so ingenuous a soul of designs upon what may be called the Christian vote; he simply poured out his heart with the unpremeditated sincerity of a wild ass uttering its view of the Scheme of Things. I take it the man was providentially "raised up," and spoke by inspiration of the Spirit of

Religion.

“Robert G. Ingersoll,” says this son of nature, “was not a great atheist, nor a great agnostic. Dissimilar though they are, he aspired in his published lectures and addresses to both distinctions.”

As it is no distinction to be either atheist or agnostic, this must mean that Col. Ingersoll “aspired” to be a great atheist and a great agnostic. Where is the evidence? May not a man state his religious or irreligious views with the same presumption of modesty and mere sincerity that attaches to other intellectual action? Because one publicly affirms the inaccuracy of Moses must one be charged with ambition, that meanest of all motives? By denying the sufficiency of the evidences of immortality is one self-convicted of a desire to be accounted great?

Col. Ingersoll said the thing that he had to say, as I am saying this—as a clergyman preaches his sermon, as an historian writes his romance: partly for the exceeding great reward of expression, partly, it may be, for the lesser profit of payment. We all move along lines of least resistance; because a few of us find that this leads up to the temple of fame it does not follow that all are seeking that edifice with a conscious effort to achieve distinction. If any Americans have appraised at its true and contemptible value the applause of the people Robert Ingersoll did. If there has been but one such American he was the man.

Now listen to what further this ineffable dolt had to say of him:

His irreverence, however, his theory of deistical brutality, was a mere phantasy, unsustained by scholarship or by reason, and contradicted by every element of his personal character. His love for his wife and his children, his tenderness towards relatives and friends, would have been spurious and repulsive if in his heart he had not accepted what in speech he derided and contemned.

Here’s richness indeed! Whatever maybe said by scholarship and reason of a “theory of deistical brutality,” I do not think—I really have not the civility to admit—that it is contradicted by a blameless life. If it were really true that the god of the Christians is not a particularly “nice” god the love of a man for wife and child would not necessarily and because of that be spurious and repulsive. Indeed, in a world governed by such a god, and subject therefore to all the evils and perils of the divine caprice and malevolence, such affection would be even more useful and commendable than it is in this actual world of peace, happiness and security. As the stars burn brightest in a moonless night, so in the gloom of a wrath-ruled universe all human affections and virtues would have an added worth and tenderness. In order that life might be splended with so noble and heroic sentiments as grow in the shadow of disaster and are nourished by the sense of a universal peril and sorrow, one could almost wish that some malign deity, omnipotent and therefore able to accomplish his purposes without sin and suffering for his children, had resisted the temptation to do so and had made this a Vale of Tears.

The Nineteenth Century has produced great agnostics. Strauss the German and Renan the Frenchman were specimens of this particular cult. But Robert G. Ingersoll belonged to a lower range of scholarship and of thought. He had never studied the great German and French critics of the Bible. His “Mistakes of Moses” were pervaded by misapprehensions of the text of the Pentateuch.

It is indubitably true that Ingersoll was inferior in scholarship to Strauss and Renan, and in that and genius to the incomparable Voltaire; but these deficiencies were not disabilities in the work that he undertook. He knew his limitations and did not transgress them. He was not self-tempted into barren fields of scholastic controversy where common sense is sacrificed to “odious subtlety.” In the work that he chose he had no use for the dry-as-dust erudition of the modern German school of Biblical criticism—learned, ingenious, profound, admirable and futile. He was

accomplished in neither Hebrew nor Greek. Aramaic was to him an unknown tongue, and I dare say that if asked he would have replied that Jesus Christ, being a Jew, spoke Hebrew. The “text of the Pentateuch” was not “misapprehended” by him; he simply let it alone. What he criticised in “The Mistakes of Moses” is the English version. If that is not a true translation let those concerned to maintain its immunity from criticism amend it. They are not permitted to hold that it is good enough for belief and acceptance, but not good enough to justify an inexpert dissent. Ingersoll’s limitations were the source of his power; at least they confined him to methods that are “understood of the people”; and to be comprehended by the greatest number of men should be the wish of him who tries to destroy what he thinks a popular delusion. By the way, I observe everywhere the immemorial dog’s-eared complaint that he could “tear down” (we Americans always prefer to say this when we mean pull down) but could not “build up.” I am not aware that he ever tried to “build up.” Believing that no religion was needful, he would have thought his work perfect if all religions had been effaced. The clamor of weak minds for something to replace the errors of which they may be deprived is one that the true iconoclast disregards. What he most endeavors to destroy is not idols, but idolatry. If in the place of the image that he breaks he set up another he would be like a physician who having cured his patient of a cramp should inoculate him with an itch. It is only just to say that the devout journalist whose holy utterance I am afflicting myself with the unhappiness of criticising nowhere makes the hoary accusation that Ingersoll could “tear down” but not “build up.” He must have overlooked it.

What Ingersoll attacked was the Bible as we have it—the English Bible—not the Bible as it may, can, must, might, would or should be in Hebrew and Greek. He had no controversy with scholars—not only knew himself unable to meet them on their own ground (where is plenty of room for their lonely feet) but was not at all concerned with their faiths and convictions, nor with the bases of them. Hoping to remove or weaken a few popular errors, he naturally examined the book in which he believed them to be found—the book which has the assent and acceptance of those who hold them and derive them from it. He did not go behind the record as it reads—nobody does excepting its advocates when it has been successfully impugned. What has influenced (mischievously, Ingersoll believed) the thought and character of the Anglo-Saxon race is not the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek Testament, but the English Bible. The fidelity of that to its originals, its self-sufficiency and independence of such evidences as only scholarship can bring to its exposition, these, as Aristotle would say, are matters for separate consideration. If God has really chosen to give his law to his children in tongues that only an infinitesimal fraction of them can hope to understand—has thrown it down amongst them for ignorant translators to misread, interested priesthoods to falsify and hardy and imaginative commentators to make ridiculous—has made no provision against all this debauching of the text and the spirit of it, this must be because he preferred it so; for whatever occurs must occur because the Omniscience and Omnipotence permitting it wishes it to occur. Such are not the methods of our human legislators, who take the utmost care that the laws be unambiguous, printed in the language of those who are required to obey them and accessible to them in the original text. I’m not saying that this is the better and more sensible way; I only say that if the former is God’s way the fact relieves us all of any obligation to “restore” the text before discussing it and to illuminate its obscurities with the side-lights of erudition. Ingersoll had all the scholarship needful to his work: he knew the meaning of English words.

Says the complacent simpleton again:

It was idle for a man to deny the existence of God who confessed and proclaimed the principle of fraternity. . . . The hard conception of annihilation had no place in sentences that were infused with the heat of immortality.

As logic, this has all the charm inhering in the syllogism, All cows are quadrupeds; this is a quadruped; therefore, this is a cow. The author of that first sentence would express his thought, naturally, something like this: All men are brothers; God is their only father; therefore, there is a God. The other sentence is devoid of meaning, and is quoted only to show the view that this literary lunatic is pleased to think that he entertains of annihilation. It is to him a "hard conception"; that is to say, the state of unconsciousness which he voluntarily and even eagerly embraces every night of his life, and in which he remained without discomfort for countless centuries before his birth, is a most undesirable state. It is, indeed, so very unwelcome that it shall not come to him—he'll not have it so. Out of nothingness he came, but into nothingness he will not return—he'll die first! Life is a new and delightful toy and, faith! he means to keep it. If you'd ask him he would say that his immortality is proved by his yearning for it; but men of sense know that we yearn, not for what we have, but for what we have not, and most strongly for what we have not the shadow of a chance to get.

II

Mr. Harry Thurston Peck is different: he is a scholar, a professor of Latin in a leading college, an incisive if not very profound thinker, and a charming writer. He is a capable editor, too, and has conducted one of our foremost literary magazines, in which, as compelled by the nature of the business, he has commonly concerned himself mightily with the little men capering nimbly between yesterday the begetter and to-morrow the destroyer. Sometimes a larger figure strides into the field of his attention, but not for long, nor with any very notable accretion of clarity in the view. The lenses are not adjusted for large objects, which accordingly seem out of focus and give no true image. So the observer turns gladly to his ephemera, and we who read him are the gainers by his loyalty to his habit and to his public who fixed it upon him. But he so far transcended his limitations as to review in the late Col. Ingersoll's the work of a pretty large man. The result is, to many of Prof. Peck's admirers, of whom I am one, profoundly disappointing. In both spirit and method it suggests the question, Of what real use are the natural gifts, the acquirements and opportunities that do so little for the understanding? Surely one must sometimes dissent from the generally accepted appraisal of "the things we learn in college," when one observes a man like Prof. Peck (a collegian down to the bone tips) feeling and thinking after the fashion of a circuit-riding preacher in Southwestern Missouri. Let us examine some of his utterances about the great agnostic. Speaking of the purity of his personal character, this critic says:

No one has questioned this; and even had it been so questioned the fact could not be pertinent to our discussion. Indeed, it is not easy to perceive just why his private virtues have been so breathlessly brought forward and detailed with so much strenuous insistence; for surely husbands who are faithful, fathers who are loving, and friends who are generous and sympathetic are not so rare in this our world as to make of them phenomena to be noted in the annals of the age.

It seems to me entirely obvious why Ingersoll's friends and supporters have persisted in putting testimony on these matters into the forefront of the discussion; and entirely relevant such testimony is. Churchmen and religionists in all ages and countries have affirmed the necessary and conspicuous immorality of the irreligious. No notable unbeliever has been safe from the slanders of the pulpit and the church press. And in this country to-day ninety-nine of every one hundred

“professing Christians” hold that public and personal morality has no other basis than the Bible. In this they are both foolish and wise: foolish because it is so evidently untrue, and wise because to concede its untruth would be to abandon the defense of religion as a moral force. If men can be good without religion, and scorning religion, then it is not religion that makes men good; and if religion does not do this it is of no practical value and one may as well be without it as with it, so far as concerns one’s relations with one’s fellow men. We are told that Christianity is something more than a body of doctrine, that it is a system of ethics, having a divine origin; that it has a close and warm relation to conduct, generating elevated sentiments and urging to a noble and unselfish life. If in support of that view it is relevant to point to the blameless lives of its “Founder” and his followers it is equally relevant in contradiction to point to the blameless lives of its opponents. If Prof. Peck finds it “not easy to perceive” this he might profitably make some experiments in perception on a big, red Pennsylvanian barn.

Prof. Peck tries to be fair; he concedes the honesty of Ingersoll’s belief and acknowledges that

It is entitled to the same respect that we accord to the unshaken faith of other men. Indeed, for the purpose of the moment we may even go still further and assume that he was right; that Christianity is in truth a superstition and its history a fable; that it has no hold on reason; and that the book from which it draws in part its teaching and its inspiration is only an inconsistent chronicle of old-world myths. Let us assume all this and let us still inquire what final judgment should be passed upon the man who held these views and strove so hard to make them universal.

Prof. Peck is not called upon to make any such concessions and assumptions. As counsel for the defense, I am as willing to make admissions as he, and “for the sake of argument,” as the meaningless saying goes, to confess that the religion attacked by my client is indubitably true. His justification depends in no degree upon the accuracy of his judgment, but upon his honest confidence in it; and that is unquestioned; that is no assumption; it is not conceded but affirmed. If he believed that in these matters he was right and a certain small minority of mankind, including a considerable majority of his living countrymen, wrong it was merely his duty as a gentleman to speak his views and to strive, as occasion offered or opportunity served, to “make them universal.” In our personal affairs there is such a thing as righteous suppression of the truth—even such another thing as commendable falsehood. In certain circumstances avowal of convictions is as baleful and mischievous as in other circumstances dissimulation is. But in all the large matters of the mind—in philosophy, religion, science, art and the like, a lesser service to the race than utterance of the truth as he thinks he sees it, leaving the result to whatever powers may be, a man has no right to be content with having performed, for it is only so that truth is established. It was only so that Prof. Peck’s religion was enthroned upon the ruins of others—among them one so beautiful that after centuries of effacement its myths and memories stir with a wonderful power the hearts of scholars and artists of the later and conquering faith. Of that religion it might once have been said in deprecation of St. Paul, as, in deprecation of Ingersoll, Prof. Peck now says of religion in general:

Its roots strike down into the very depths of human consciousness. They touch the heart, the sympathies and the emotions. They lay strong hold on life itself, and they are the chords to which all being can be made to vibrate with a passionate intensity which nothing else could call to life.

I have said that Prof. Peck tries to be fair; if he had altogether succeeded he would have pointed out, not only that Ingersoll sincerely believed the Christian religion false, but that he believed it mischievous, and that he was persuaded that its devotees would be better off with no religion than with any. Had Prof. Peck done that he could have spared himself the trouble of

writing, and many of his admirers the pain of reading, his variants of the ancient and discreditable indictment of the wicked incapable who can “tear down,” but not “build up.” Agnosticism may be more than a mere negation. It may be, as in Ingersoll it was, a passionate devotion to Truth, a consecration of self to her service. Of such a one as he it is incredibly false to say that he can only “destroy” and “has naught to give.” As well and as truthfully could that be said of one who knocks away the chains of a slave and goes his way, imposing no others. One may err in doing so. There are as many breeds of men as of dogs and horses; and as a cur can not be taught to retrieve nor herd sheep, nor a roadster to hunt, so there are human tribes unfit for liberty. One’s zeal in liberation may be greater than one’s wisdom, but faith in all mankind is at least an honorable error, even when manifested by hammering at the shackles of the mind. What Ingersoll thought he had to “give” was Freedom—and that, I take it, is quite as positive and real as bondage. The reproach of “tearing down” without “building up” is valid against nobody but an idolatrous iconoclast. Ingersoll was different.

Prof. Peck has a deal to say against Ingersoll’s methods; he does not think them sufficiently serious, not to say reverent. This objection may be met as Voltaire met it—by authorizing his critic to disregard the wit and answer the argument. But Prof. Peck will not admit that Ingersoll was witty. He sees nothing in his sallies but “buffoonery,” a word meaning wit directed against one’s self or something that one respects. This amazing judgment from the mouth of one so witty himself could, but for one thing, be interpreted no otherwise than as evidence that he has not read the works that he condemns. That one thing is religious bigotry which, abundantly manifest everywhere in the article under review, is nowhere so conspicuous as in the intemperate, not to say low, language in which the charge of “buffoonery” is made. Who that has an open mind would think that it was written of Robert Ingersoll that he “burst into the sacred silence of their devotion with the raucous bellowing of an itinerant stump-speaker and the clowning of a vulgar mountebank”? To those who really know the character of Robert Ingersoll’s wit—keen, bright and clean as an Arab’s scimitar; to those who know the clear and penetrating mental insight of which such wit is the expression and the proof; to those who know how much of gold and how little of mud clung to the pebbles that he slung at the Goliaths of authority and superstition; to those who have noted the astonishing richness of his work in elevated sentiments fitly expressed, his opulence of memorable aphorism and his fertility of felicitous phrase—to these it will not seem credible that such a man can be compared to one who, knowing the infidelity of a friend’s wife, would “slap his friend upon the back and tell the story with a snicker, in the coarsest language of the brothel, interspersed with Rabelaisian jokes.” It is of the nature of wit mercifully to veil its splendors from the eyes of its victim. The taken thief sees in his captor an unheroic figure. The prisoner at the bar is not a good judge of the prosecution. But it is difficult distinctly to conceive a scholar, a wit, a critic, an accomplished editor of a literary magazine, committing himself to such judgments as these upon work accessible to examination and familiar to memory. To paraphrase Pope,

Who would not laugh if such a man there be?
Who would not weep if Harry Peck were he?

Another “point” that Prof. Peck is not ashamed to make is that Ingersoll lectured on religion for money—“in the character of a paid public entertainer, for his own personal profit.” And in what character, pray, does anybody lecture where there is a charge for admittance? In what character have some of the world’s greatest authors, scientists, artists and masters of crafts generally lectured when engaged to do so by “lyceums,” “bureaus,” or individual “managers”? In what character does Prof. Peck conduct his valuable and entertaining magazine for instruction and amusement of those

willing to pay for it? In what character, indeed, does the Defender of the Faith put upon the market his austere sense of Ingersoll's cupidity?

Obviously the agnostic's offence was not lecturing for pay. It was not lecturing on religion. It was not sarcasm. It was that, lecturing for pay on religion, his sarcasm took a direction disagreeable to Prof. Peck, instead of disagreeable to Prof. Peck's opponents. As a ridiculer of infidels and agnostics Ingersoll might have made a great fame and not one of his present critics would have tried to dim its lustre with a breath, nor "with polluted finger tarnish it."

Religions are human institutions; at least those so hold who belong to none of "the two-and-seventy jarring sects." Religious faiths, like political and social, are entitled to no immunity from examination and criticism; all the methods and weapons that are legitimate against other institutions and beliefs are legitimate against them. Their devotees have not the right to shield themselves behind some imaginary special privilege, to exact an exceptional exemption. A religion of divine origin would have a right to such exemption; its devotees might with some reason assist God to punish the crime of *lèse majesté*; but the divinity of the religion's origin is the very point in dispute, and in holding that it shall be settled his way as an assurance of peace its protagonist is guilty of a hardy and impenitent impudence. Blasphemy has been defined as speaking disrespectfully of *my* phemy; one does not observe among the followers of one faith any disposition to accord immunity from ridicule to the followers of another faith. The devoutest Christian can throw mud at Buddha without affecting his own good standing with the brethren; and if Mahomet were hanged in effigy from the cross of St. Paul's, Protestant Christianity would condemn the act merely as desecration of a sacred edifice.

Here is one more quotation from Prof. Peck, the concluding passage of his paper:

Robert Ingersoll is dead. Death came to him with swiftness and without a warning. Whether he was even conscious of his end no man can say. It may be that before the spark grew quite extinct there was for him a moment of perception—that one appalling moment when, within a space of time too brief for human contemplation, the affrighted mind, as it reels upon the brink, flashes its vivid thought through all the years of its existence and perceives the final meaning of them all. If such a moment came to him, and as the light of day grew dim before his dying eyes his mind looked backward through the past, there can have been small consolation in the thought, that in all the utterances of his public teaching, and in all the phrases of his fervid eloquence, there was nothing that could help to make the life of a man on earth more noble, or more spiritual, or more truly worth living.

This of a man who taught all the virtues as a duty and a delight!—who stood, as no other man among his countrymen has stood, for liberty, for honor, for good will toward men, for truth as it was given to him to see it, for love!—who by personal example taught patience under falsehood and silence under vilification!—who when slandered in debate answered not back, but addressed himself to the argument!—whose entire life was an inspiration to high thought and noble deed, and whose errors, if errors they are, the world can not afford to lose for the light and reason that are in them!

The passage quoted is not without eloquence and that literary distinction which its author gives to so much of what he writes. Withal it is infinitely discreditable. There is in it a distinct undertone of malice—of the same spirit which, among bigots of less civility and franker speech, affirms of an irreligious person's sudden death that it was "a judgment of Heaven," and which gloats upon the possibility that he suffered the pangs of a penitence that came, thank God! too late to command salvation. It is in the same spirit that conceived and keeps in currency the ten-thousand-times-disproved tales of the deathbed remorse of Thomas Paine, Voltaire and all the great infidels. Indubitably posterity will enjoy the advantage of believing the same thing of Ingersoll; and I can not help thinking that in suggesting his remorse as only a possibility, instead of relating it as a fact at-

tested by piteous appeals for divine mercy, Prof. Peck has committed a sin of omission for which on his own deathbed he will himself suffer the keenest regret.

1899.

THE SHORT STORY

“THE short story is always distinctly a sketch. It can not express what is the one greatest thing in all literature—intercommunion of human characters, their juxtapositions, their contrasts. . . . It is not a high form of art, and its present extreme popularity bespeaks decadence far more than advance.”

So said Edgar Fawcett, an author of no small note and consequence in his day. The one-greatest-things-in-all-literature are as plentiful and obvious, apparently, as the sole causes of the decline of the Roman power, yet new ones being continually discovered, it is a fair presumption that the supply is inexhaustible; and Fawcett, an ingenious man, could hardly have failed to find one and catalogue it. The one that he would discover was pretty sure to be as good as another and to abound in his own work—and Fawcett did not write short stories, but exceedingly long ones. So “the intercommunion of human characters,” and so forth, stands. Nevertheless, one fairly great thing in all literature is the power to interest the reader. Perhaps the author having the other thing can afford to forego that one, but its presence is observable, somehow, in much of the work that is devoid of that polyonymous element noted by Messrs. Fawcett, Thomas, Richard and Henry. Having that fact in mind, and the added fact that in his own admirable sonnets (for example) the intercommunion is an absent factor, I am disposed to think that Edgar was facetious.

The short story, quoth’a, “is not a high form of art”; and inferably the long story—the novel—is. Let us see about that. As all the arts are essentially one, addressing the same sensibilities, quickening the same emotions and subject to the same law and limitations of human attention, it may be helpful to consider some of the arts other than literary and see what we can educe from the comparison. It will be admitted, I hope, that even in its exterior aspect St. Peter’s Church is a work of high art. But is Rome a work of high art? Was it ever, or could it by rebuilding be made such? Certainly not, and the reason is that it can not all take attention at once. We may know that the several parts are coordinated and interrelated, but we do not discern and feel the coordination and interrelation. An opera, or an oratorio, that can be heard at a sitting may be artistic, but if in the manner of a Chinese play it were extended through the evenings of a week or a month what would it be? The only way to get unity of impression from a novel is to shut it up and look at the covers.

Not only is the novel, for the reason given, and for others, a faulty form of art, but because of its faultiness it has no permanent place in literature. In England it flourished less than a century and a half, beginning with Richardson and ending with Thackeray, since whose death no novels, probably, have been written that are worth attention; though as to this, one can not positively say, for of the incalculable multitude written only a few have been read by competent judges, and of these judges few indeed have uttered judgment that is of record. Novels are still produced in suspicious abundance and read with fatal acclaim but the novel of to-day has no art broader and better than that of its individual sentences—the art of style. That would serve if it had style.

Among the other reasons why the novel is both inartistic and impermanent is this—it is mere reporting. True, the reporter creates his plot, incidents and characters, but that itself is a fault, putting the work on a plane distinctly inferior to that of history. Attention is not long engaged by what could, but did not, occur to individuals; and it is a canon of the trade that nothing is to go into the novel that might not have occurred. “Probability”—which is but another name for the

commonplace—is its keynote. When that is transgressed, as in the fiction of Scott and the greater fiction of Hugo, the work is romance, another and superior thing, addressed to higher faculties with a more imperious insistence. The singular inability to distinguish between the novel and the romance is one of criticism's capital ineptitudes. It is like that of a naturalist who should make a single species of the squirrels and the larks. Equally with the novel, the short story may drag at each remove a lengthening chain of probability, but there are fewer removes. The short story does not, at least, cloy attention, confuse with overlaid impressions and efface its own effect.

Great work has been done in novels. That is only to say that great writers have written them. But great writers may err in their choice of literary media, or may choose them willfully for something else than their artistic possibilities. It may occur that an author of genius is more concerned for gain than excellence—for the nimble popularity that comes of following a literary fashion than for the sacred credentials to a slow renown. The acclamation of the multitude may be sweet in his ear, the clink of coins, heard in its pauses, grateful to his purse. To their gift of genius the gods add no security against its misdirection. I wish they did. I wish they would enjoin its diffusion in the novel, as for so many centuries they did by forbidding the novel to be. And what more than they gave might we not have had from Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Camoëns and Milton if they had not found the epic poem ready to their misguided hands? May there be in Elysium no beds of asphodel and moly for its hardy inventor, whether he was Homer or "another man of the same name."

The art of writing short stories for the magazines of the period can not be acquired. Success depends upon a kind of inability that must be "born into" one—it does not come at call. The torch must be passed down the line by the thumbless hands of an illustrious line of prognathous ancestors unacquainted with fire. For the torch has neither light nor heat—is, in truth, fireproof. It radiates darkness and all shadows fall toward it. The magazine story must relate nothing; like Dr. Hern's "holes" in the luminiferous ether, it is something in which nothing can occur. True, if the thing is written in a "dialect" so abominable that no one of sense will read, or so unintelligible that none who reads will understand, it may relate something that only the writer's kindred spirits care to know; but if told in any human tongue action and incident are fatal to it. It must provoke neither thought nor emotion; it must only stir up from the shallows of its readers' understandings the sediment which they are pleased to call sentiment, murking all their mental pool and effacing the reflected images of their natural environment.

The master of this school of literature is Mr. Howells. Destitute of that supreme and almost sufficient literary endowment, imagination, he does, not what he would, but what he can—takes notes with his eyes and ears and "writes them up" as does any other reporter. He can tell nothing but something like what he has seen or heard, and in his personal progress through the rectangular streets and between the trim hedges of Philistia, with the lettered old maids of his acquaintance curtseying from the doorways, he has seen and heard nothing worth telling. Yet tell it he must and, having told, defend. For years he conducted a department of criticism with a purpose single to expounding the after-thought theories and principles which are the offspring of his own limitations.

Illustrations of these theories and principles he interpreted with tireless insistence as proofs that the art of fiction is to-day a finer art than that known to our benighted fathers. What did Scott, what did even Thackeray know of the subtle psychology of the dear old New England maidens?

I want to be fair: Mr. Howells has considerable abilities. He is insufferable only in fiction and when, in criticism, he is making fiction's laws with one eye upon his paper and the other upon a catalogue of his own novels. When not carrying that heavy load, himself, he has a manly enough mental stride. He is not upon very intimate terms with the English language, but on many subjects, and when you least expect it of him, he thinks with such precision as momentarily to subdue a

disobedient vocabulary and keep out the wrong word. Now and then he catches an accidental glimpse of his subject in a sidelight and tells with capital vivacity what it is not. The one thing that he never sees is the question that he has raised by inadvertence, deciding it by implication against his convictions. If Mr. Howells had never written fiction his criticism of novels would entertain, but the imagination which can conceive him as writing a good story under any circumstances would be a precious literary possession, enabling its owner to write a better one.

In point of fiction, all the magazines are as like as one vacuum to another, and every month they are the same as they were the month before, excepting that in their holiday numbers at the last of the year their vacuity is a trifle intensified by that essence of all dullness, the "Christmas story." To so infamous a stupidity has popular fiction fallen—to so low a taste is it addressed, that I verily believe it is read by those who write it!

As certain editors of newspapers appear to think that a trivial incident has investiture of dignity and importance by being telegraphed across the continent, so these story writers of the Reporter School hold that what is not interesting in life becomes interesting in letters—the acts, thoughts, feelings of commonplace people, the lives and loves of noodles, nobodies, ignoramuses and millionaires; of the village vulgarian, the rural maiden whose spiritual grace is not incompatible with the habit of falling over her own feet, the somnolent nigger, the clay-eating "Cracker" of the North Carolinian hills, the society person and the inhabitant of southwestern Missouri. Even when the writers commit infractions of their own literary Decalogue by making their creations and creationesses do something picturesque, or say something worth while, they becloud the miracle with such a multitude of insupportable descriptive details that the reader, like a tourist visiting an artificial waterfall at a New England summer place of last resort, pays through the nose at every step of his way to the Eighth Wonder. Are we given dialogue? It is not enough to report what was said, but the record must be authenticated by enumeration of the inanimate objects—commonly articles of furniture—which were privileged to be present at the conversation. And each dialogian must make certain or uncertain movements of the limbs or eyes before and after saying his say. All this in such prodigal excess of the slender allusions required, when required at all, for *vraisemblance* as abundantly to prove its insertion for its own sake. Yet the inanimate surroundings are precisely like those whose presence bores us our whole lives through, and the movements are those which every human being makes every moment in which he has the misfortune to be awake. One would suppose that to these gentry and ladyry everything in the world except what is really remarkable is "rich and strange." They only think themselves able to make it so by the sea-change that it will suffer by being thrown into the duck-pond of an artificial imagination and thrown out again.

Amongst the laws which Cato Howells has given his little senate, and which his little senators would impose upon the rest of us, is an inhibitory statute against a breach of this "probability"—and to them nothing is probable outside the narrow domain of the commonplace man's most commonplace experience. It is not known to them that all men and women sometimes, many men and women frequently, and some men and women habitually, act from impenetrable motives and in a way that is consonant with nothing in their lives, characters and conditions. It is known to them that "truth is stranger than fiction," but not that this has any practical meaning or value in letters. It is to him of widest knowledge, of deepest feeling, of sharpest observation and insight, that life is most crowded with figures of heroic stature, with spirits of dream, with demons of the pit, with graves that yawn in pathways leading to the light, with existences not of earth, both malign and benign—ministers of grace and ministers of doom. The truest eye is that which discerns the shadow and the portent, the dead hands reaching, the light that is the heart of the darkness, the sky "with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms." The truest ear is that which hears

Celestial voices to the midnight air,
Sole, or responsive each to the other's note,
Singing—

not “their great Creator,” but not a negro melody, either; no, nor the latest favorite of the drawing-room. In short, he to whom life is not picturesque, enchanting, astonishing, terrible, is denied the gift and faculty divine, and being no poet can write no prose. He can tell nothing because he knows nothing. He has not a speaking acquaintance with Nature (by which he means, in a vague general way, the vegetable kingdom) and can no more find

Her secret meaning in her deeds

than he can discern and expound the immutable law underlying coincidence.

Let us suppose that I have written a novel—which God forbid that I should do. In the last chapter my assistant hero learns that the hero-in-chief has supplanted him in the affections of the hero. He roams aimless about the streets of the sleeping city and follows his toes into a silent public square. There after appropriate mental agonies he resolves in the nobility of his soul to remove himself forever from a world where his presence can not fail to be disagreeable to the lady's conscience. He flings up his hands in mad disquietude and rushes down to the bay, where there is water enough to drown all such as he. Does he throw himself in? Not he—no, indeed. He finds a tug lying there with steam up and, going aboard, descends to the fire-hold. Opening one of the iron doors of the furnace, which discloses an aperture just wide enough to admit him, he wriggles in upon the glowing coals and there, with never a cry, dies a cherry-red death of unquestionable ingenuity. With that the story ends and the critics begin.

It is easy to imagine what they say: “This is too much”; “it insults the reader's intelligence”; “it is hardly more shocking for its atrocity than disgusting for its cold-blooded and unnatural defiance of probability”; “art should have some traceable relation to the facts of human experience.”

Well, that is exactly what occurred once in the stoke-hold of a tug lying at a wharf in San Francisco. *Only* the man had not been disappointed in love, nor disappointed at all. He was a cheerful sort of person, indubitably sane, ceremoniously civil and considerate enough (evidence of a good heart) to spare whom it might concern any written explanation defining his deed as “a rash act.”

Probability? Nothing is so improbable as what is true. It is the unexpected that occurs; but that is not saying enough; it is also the unlikely—one might almost say the impossible. John, for example, meets and marries Jane. John was born in Bombay of poor but detestable parents; Jane, the daughter of a gorgeous hidalgo, on a ship bound from Vladivostok to Buenos Aires. Will some gentleman who has written a realistic novel in which something so nearly out of the common as a wedding was permitted to occur have the goodness to figure out what, at their birth, were the chances that John would meet and marry Jane? Not one in a thousand—not one in a million—not one in a million million! Considered from a view-point a little anterior in time, it was almost infinitely unlikely that any event which has occurred would occur—any event worth telling in a story. Everything being so unearthly improbable, I wonder that novelists of the Howells school have the audacity to relate anything at all. And right heartily do I wish they had not.

Fiction has nothing to say to probability; the capable writer gives it not a moment's attention, except to make what is related *seem* probable in the reading—*seem* true. Suppose he relates the impossible; what then? Why, he has but passed over the line into the realm of romance, the kingdom of Scott, Defoe, Hawthorne, Beckford and the authors of the *Arabian Nights*—the land of

the poets, the home of all that is good and lasting in the literature of the imagination. Do these little fellows, the so-called realists, ever think of the goodly company which they deny themselves by confining themselves to their clumsy feet and pursuing their stupid noses through the barren hitherland, while just beyond the Delectable Mountains lies in light the Valley of Dreams, with its tall immortals, poppy-crowned? Why, the society of the historians alone would be a distinction and a glory!

1897.

WHO ARE GREAT?

THE question having been asked whether Abraham Lincoln was the greatest man this country ever produced, a contemporary writer signifies his own view of the matter thus:

“Abraham Lincoln was a great man, but I am inclined to believe that history will reckon George Washington a greater.”

But that is an appeal to, an incompetent arbiter. History has always elevated to primacy in greatness that kind of men—men of action, statesmen and soldiers. In my judgment neither of the men mentioned is entitled to the distinction. I should say that the greatest American that we know about, if not George Sterling, was Edgar Allan Poe. I should say that the greatest man is the man capable of doing the most exalted, the most lasting and most beneficial intellectual work—and the highest, ripest, richest fruit of the human intellect is indubitably great poetry. The great poet is the king of men; compared with him, any other man is a peasant; compared with his, any other man’s work is a joke. What is it likely that remote ages will think of the comparative greatness of Shakespeare and the most eminent of all Britain’s warriors or statesmen? Nothing, for knowledge of the latter’s work will have perished. Who was the greatest of Grecians before Homer? Because you are unable to mention offhand the names of illustrious conquerors or empire-builders of the period do you suppose there were none? Their work has perished, that is all—as will perish the work of Washington and Lincoln. But the Iliad is with us.

Their work has perished and our knowledge of it. Why? Because no greater man made a record of it. If Homer had celebrated their deeds instead of those of his dubious Agamemnon and impossible Achilles, we should know about them—all that he chose to tell. For a comparison between their greatness and his the data would be supplied by himself. Men of action owe their fame to men of thought. The glory of the ruler, the conqueror or the statesman belongs to the historian or the poet who made it. He can make it big or little, at his pleasure; he upon whom it is bestowed is as powerless in the matter as is any bystander. If there were no writers how would you know that there was a Washington or a Lincoln? How would you know that there is a Joseph Choate, who was American Ambassador to Great Britain, or a Nelson Miles, sometime Commander of our army? Suppose the writers of this country had in 1896 agreed never again to mention the name of William J. Bryan; where would have been his greatness?

Great writers make great men or unmake them—or can if they like. They kindle a glory where they please, or quench it where it has begun to shine. History’s final judgment of Washington and Lincoln will depend upon the will of the immortal author who chooses to write of them. Their deeds, although a thousand times more distinguished, their popularity, though a thousand times greater, can not save from oblivion even so much as their names. And nothing that they built will abide. Of the “topless towers” of empire that the one assisted to erect, and the other to buttress, not a vestige will remain. But what can efface “The Testimony of the Suns”? Who can unwrite “To Helen”?

If there had been no Washington, American independence would nevertheless have been won and the American republic established. But suppose that he alone had taken up arms. He was neither indispensable nor sufficient. Without Lincoln the great rebellion would have been subdued and negro slavery abolished. What kind of greatness is that—to do what another could have done, what was bound to be done anyhow? I call it pretty cheap work. Great statesmen and great soldiers are as common as flies; the world is lousy with them. We recognize their abundance in the saying that the hour brings the man. We do not say that of a literary emergency. There the demand is always calling for the supply, and usually calling in vain. Once or twice in a century, it may be, the great man of thought comes, unforeseen and unrecognized, and makes the age and the glory thereof all his own by saying what none but he could say—delivering a message which none but he could bear. All round him swarm the little great men of action, laying sturdily about them with mace and sword, changing boundaries which are afterward changed back again, serving fascinating principles from which posterity turns away, building states that vanish like castles of cloud, founding thrones and dynasties with which Time plays at pitch-and-toss. But through it all, and after it all, the mighty thought of the man of words flows on and on with the resistless sweep of “the great river where De Soto lies”—an unchanging and unchangeable current of eternal good. But the courts that Omar reared still stand, perfect as when he “hewed the shaft and laid the

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep;
And Bahram, that great Hunter—the wild ass
Stamps o'er his Head, but can not break his sleep.

the architrave.” Not the lion and the lizard—we ourselves keep them and glory in them and drink deep in them, as did he. O'er his head, too; that good man and considerable poet, Mr. Edgar Fawcett, stamped in vain; but a touch on a book, and lo! old Omar is broad awake and with him wakens Israfel, “whose heart-strings are a lute.”

Art and literature are the only things of permanent interest in this world. Kings and conquerors rise and fall; armies move across the stage of history and disappear in the wings; mighty empires are evolved and dissolved; religions, political systems, civilizations flourish, die and, except in so far as gifted authors may choose to perpetuate their memory, are forgotten and all is as before. But the thought of a great writer passes from civilization to civilization and is not lost, although his known work, his very name, may perish. You can not unthink a thought of Homer, but the deeds of Agamemnon are long undone, and the only value that he has, the only interest, is that he serves as material for poets. Of Caesar's work only that of the pen survives. If a statue by Phidias, or a manuscript by Catullus, were discovered today the nations of Europe would be bidding against one another for its possession to-morrow—as one day the nations of Africa may bid for a newly discovered manuscript of some one now long dead and forgotten. Literature and art are about all that the world really cares for in the end; those who make them are not without justification in regarding themselves as masters in the House of Life and all others as their servitors. In the babble and clamor, the pranks and antics of its countless incapables, the tremendous dignity of the profession of letters is overlooked; but when, casting a retrospective eye into “the dark backward and abysm of time” to where beyond these voices is the peace of desolation, we note the majesty of the few immortals and compare them with the pigmy figures of their contemporary kings, warriors and men of action generally—when across the silent battle fields and hushed *fora* where the dull destinies of nations were determined, nobody cares how, we hear,

like ocean on a western beach,

The surge and thunder of the Odyssey—

then we appraise literature at its true value; and how little worth while seems all else with which Man is pleased to occupy his fussy soul and futile hands!

1901.

POETRY AND VERSE

LOVE of poetry is universal, but this is not saying much; for men in general love it not as poetry, but as verse—the form in which it commonly finds utterance, and in which its utterance is most acceptable. Not that verse is essential to poetry; on the contrary, some of the finest poetry extant (some of the passages of the Book of Job, in the English version, for familiar examples) is neither metric nor rhythmic. I am not quite sure, indeed, but the best test of poetry yet discovered might not be its persistence or disappearance when clad in the garb of prose. In this opinion I differ, though with considerable reluctance, with General Lucius Foote, who asserts that “every feature which makes poetry to differ from prose is the result of expression.” This dictum he has fortified by but a single example: he puts a stanza of Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” into very good prose. Now, for one who has at times come so perilously near to writing genuine poetry as has General Foote, this is a little too bad. Surely no man of so competent literary judgment ever before affected to believe that Tennyson’s resonant patriotic lines were poetry, in any sense. They are, however, a little less distant from it in General Foote’s prose version—“There were some cannons on the right, and some on the left, and some in front, and they fired with a great noise”—than they are in the original. And I have the hardihood to add that as a rule the “old favorites” of the lyceum—the ringing and rhetorical curled darlings of the public—the “Address to the American Flag,” “The Bells,” the “Curfew Must Not Ring To-night,” and all the ghastly lot of them, are very rubbishy stuff, indeed. There are exceptions, unfortunately, but to a cultivated taste—the taste of a mind that not only knows what it likes, but knows and can definitely state why it likes it—nine in ten of them are offensive. I say it is unfortunate that there are exceptions. It is unfortunate as impairing the beauty and symmetry of the rule, and unfortunate for the authors of the exceptional poems, who must endure through life the consciousness that their popularity is a cruel injustice.

Far be it from me to underrate the value of the delicate and difficult art of managing words. It is to poetry what color is to painting. The thought is the outline drawing, which, if it be great, no dauber who stops short of actually painting it out can make wholly mean, but to which the true artist with his pigments can add a higher glory and a new significance. No one who has studied style as a science and endeavored to practice it as an art; no one who knows how to select with subtle skill the word for the place; who balances one part of his sentence against another; who has an alert ear for the harmony of stops, cadences and inflections, orderly succession of accented syllables and recurrence of related sounds—no one, in short, who knows how to write prose can hold in light esteem an art so nearly allied to his own as that of poetic expression, including as it does the intricate one of versification, which itself embraces such a multitude of dainty wisdoms. But expression is not all; while, on the one hand, it can no more make a poetic idea prosaic than it can make falsehood of truth, so, on the other, it is unable to elevate and beautify a sentiment essentially vulgar or base. The experienced miner will no more surely detect the presence of gold in the rough ore than a trained judgment the noble sentiment in the crude or ludicrous verbiage in which ignorance or humor may have cast it; and the terrier will with no keener nose penetrate the disguise of the rat that has rolled in a bed of camomile than the practiced intelligence detect the

pauper thought masquerading in fine words. The mind that does not derive a quiet gratification from the bald statement that the course of the divine river Alph was through caves of unknown extent, whence it fell into a dark ocean, will hardly experience a thrill of delight when told by Coleridge that

Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea.

Nor would one who is capable of physically feeling the lines,

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,

have disdained to be told by some lesser Shakspeare that he had observed mornings so fine that the mountains blushed with pleasure to be noticed by them. Poetry is too multiform and many-sided for anyone to dogmatize upon single aspects and phases of it as if they were the whole; it has as many shapes as Proteus, and as many voices as a violin. It sometimes thunders and sometimes it prattles; it shouts and exults, but on occasion it can whisper. Crude and harsh at one time, the voice of the muse is at another smooth, soft, exquisite, luxurious; and again scholarly and polite. There is ornate poetry, like the façade of a Gothic cathedral, and there is poetry like a Doric temple. Poems there are which blaze like a parterre of all brilliant flowers, and others as chaste and pallid as the white lily. It is all good (though I hasten to explain with some alarm that I do not think all verse is good) but the best minds are best agreed in awarding the palm to poetry that is most severely simple in diction—in which are fewest “inversions”—from which words of new coinage and compounding are rigorously excluded, and the old are used in their familiar sense; poetry, that is to say, that differs least in expression from the best prose. A truly poetic line—a line that I never tire of repeating to myself—is this from Byron:

And the big rain comes dancing to the earth.

It is from the description of a storm in the Alps, in “Childe Harold.” I will quote the whole stanza in order that the reader may be reminded how much of the excellence of this line depends upon its context:

And this is in the night—most glorious night!
Thou wert not sent for slumber! let me be
A sharer in thy fierce and far delight—
A portion of the tempest and of thee!
How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,
And the big rain comes dancing to the earth!
And now again 'tis black—and now the glee
Of the loud hills shakes with its mountain-mirth,
As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquake's birth.

It would not be difficult, were it worth while, to point out in this stanza almost as many faults as it has lines; after the “lit lake” the “phosphoric sea”—a simile that repeats the image and debauches it—is singularly execrable, and the “young earthquake's birth” is almost as bad; but all the imperfections of the stanza count for nothing, for they are redeemed by its merits, and particularly

by that one splendid line. Yet how could the thought it holds be more baldly stated? I only stipulate that the rain shall be “big,” and “dancing” seem to be the manner of its approach. With these not very hard, and perfectly fair, conditions let ingenuity do its malevolent worst to vulgarize that thought. These few instances prove, I hope, that poetry, whatever it is, is something more than “words, words, words”—that there is such a thing as poetry of the thought.

But let us take a different kind of example. If poetry is all in the manner, as General Foote avers, expression must be able to create poetry out of anything; at least, no line has been drawn between the prosaic ideas upon which expression can work its miracle and those upon which it can not. I am, therefore, justified by a familiar law of logic in assuming that it is meant that expression, by the mere magic of method, can make any idea poetical. Now, I beg most respectfully to submit the following problems to be “worked out” by believers in that dictum: Make poetry of the thought that—

(1) Glue is made from the hoofs of cattle, and (2) silk purses by macerating the ears of sows in currant jelly.

If anyone will build a superstructure of poetry upon either of those “ideas” as a foundation I will be first and loudest in calling attention to the glory of the edifice.

I have said that men in general do not love poetry as poetry, but as verse. They are pleased with verse, but if the verse contain poetry they like it none the better for that. To the vast majority of the readers of even the higher class newspapers, verse and poetry are terms strictly synonymous. The pleasure they get from metre and rhyme is merely physical or sensual. It is much the same kind of pleasure as that derived from the clatter of a drum and the rhythmic clash of cymbals, and altogether inferior to the delight that the other instruments of a band produce. Emerson, I believe, accounts for our delight in metrical composition by supposing metre to have some close relation to the rhythmical recurrences within our physical organization—respiration, the pulse-beat, etc. No doubt he is right, and if so we need not take the trouble to deride the easy-going intellect that is satisfied with sound for sentiment whenever the sound is in harmony with the physical nature that perceives it, for in such sounds is a natural charm. The old lady who found so much Christian comfort in pronouncing the word “Mesopotamia” was no body’s fool; the word consists of two pure dactyls.

For an example of the satisfaction the ordinary mind takes in mere metre there is nothing better than the senseless refrains of popular songs—things which make not even the pretense of containing ideas. From the “hey ding a ding” of Shakspeare and the “luddy, fuddy,” etc., of Mr. Lester Wallace’s famous thieves’ song in “Rosedale,” to the “whack fol-de-rol” of inferior and less original composers, they are all alike in appealing to nothing in the world but the sense of time. And in this they differ in no essential particular from the verses in the newspapers; for such ideas as these contain—and God knows they are harmless;—are probably never perfectly grasped by the reader, who, when he has finished his “poem,” is very sure to be unable to tell you what it is all about. I have proved this by repeated experiments, and I believe I am not far wrong on the side of immoderation in saying that of every one hundred adults who can read and write with ease, there are ninety and nine to whom poetry is a sealed book—who not only do not recognize it when read, but do not understand it when pointed out. There is hardly any subject on which the ignorance of educated persons is more deep, dark and universal. And in one sense it is hopeless. By no set instruction can a knowledge of poetry be gained. It is (to those having the capacity) a result of general refinement—the fruit of a taste and judgment that come of culture. The difficulty of imparting it is immensely enhanced by the want of a definition. If one have gift and knowledge it is easy enough to say what is poetry, but not so easy to say what poetry is.

Hunters have a saying that a deer is safe from the man that never misses. Likewise it may be

said that the faultless poet gets no readers; for, as the hunter can never miss only by never firing, so the poet can avoid faults only by not writing. There is no such thing in art or letters as attainable perfection; the utmost that any man can hope to do is to make the sum and importance of his excellences so exceed the sum and importance of his faults that the general impression shall seem faultless—that the good shall divert attention from the bad in the contemplation and efface it in the recollection. In considering the character of a particular work and assigning it to its true place amongst works of similar scope and design, we must, indeed, balance merits against demerits, endeavoring in such a general way as the nature of the problem permits, to say which preponderate, and to what extent, making allowance in censure and modification in praise. But the author of the work is to be rightly judged by a different method, and he who has done great work is great, despite the number and magnitude of his failures and imperfections. These may serve to point a moral or illustrate a principle by its violation, but they do not and can not dim the glory of the better performance. Is he not a strong man who can lift a thousand pounds, notwithstanding that in acquiring the ability he failed a hundred times to lift the half of it? Who was the strongest man in the world—he who once lifted the greatest weight, or he who twice lifted the second greatest? The author of “Paradise Lost” wrote afterward “Paradise Regained.” He who wrote a poem called “In Memoriam” wrote a thing called “The Northern Farmer.” Of what significance is that? Shall we count also a man’s washing-list against him? Suppose that Byron had not written the “Hours of Idleness”—would that have enhanced the value of “Childe Harold”? Is our hoard of Shakspearean pure gold the smaller because from the mine whence it came came also some of the base metal of “Titus Andronicus”? Surely it does not matter whether the hand that at one time wrote the lines “To Helen” was at another time writing “The Bells” or whittling a pine shingle. Literature is not like a game of billiards, in which the player is rated according to his average. In estimating the relative altitudes of mountain peaks we look no lower than their summits.

In judging men by this broader method than that which we apply to their work we do but practice that method whereby posterity arrives at judgments so just and true that in their prediction consists the whole science of criticism. To anticipate the verdict of posterity—that is all the most daring critic aspires to do, and to do that he should strive to exclude the evidence that posterity will not hear. Posterity is a tribunal in which there will be no testimony for the prosecution except what is inseparable from the strongest testimony for the defence. It will consider no man’s bad work, for none will be extant. Nay, it will not even attend to the palliating or aggravating circumstances of his life and surroundings, for these too will have been forgotten; if not lost from the records they will be whelmed under mountains of similar or more important matter—Pelion upon Ossa of accumulated “literary materials.” These are points to which the critics do not sufficiently attend—do not, indeed, attend at all. They endeavor to anticipate the judgment of posterity by a method as unlike posterity’s as their judgment and ingenuity can make it. They attentively study their poet’s private life and his relation to the time and its events in which he lived. They go to his work for the key to his character, and return to his character for the key to his work, then ransack his correspondence for side-lights on both. They paw dusty records and forgotten archives; they thumb and dog’s-ear the libraries; and he who can turn up an original document or hitherto unnoted fact exults in the possession of an advantage over his fellows that will justify the publication of another volume to befog the question. Then comes posterity, calmly overlooks the entire mass of ingenious irrelevance, fixes a tranquil eye upon those lines which the poet has inscribed the highest, and determines his mental stature as simply, as surely and with as little assistance as Daniel discerning the hand of God in the letters blazing upon the palace wall.

II

The world is nearly all discovered, mapped and described. In the hot hearts of two continents, and the “thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice” about the poles, uncertainty still holds sway over a lessening domain, and there Fancy waves her joyous wing unclipped by knowledge. As in the material world, so in the world of mind. The daring incursions of conjecture have been followed and discredited by the encroachments of science, whereby the limits of the unknown have been narrowed to such mean dimensions that imagination has lost her free, exultant stride, and moves with mincing step and hesitating heart.

I do not mean to say that to-day knows much more that is worth knowing than did yesterday, but that with regard to poetry’s materials—the visible and audible without us, and the emotional within—we have compelled a revelation of Nature’s secrets, and found them uninteresting to the last degree. To the modern “instructed understanding” she has something of the air of a detected impostor, and her worshipers have neither the sincerity that comes from faith, nor the enthusiasm that is the speech of sincerity. The ancients not only had, as Dr. Johnson said, “the first rifling of the beauties of Nature”; they had the immensely greater art advantage of ignorance of her dull, vulgar and hideous processes, her elaborate movements tending nowhither, and the aimless monotony of her mutations. The telescope had not pursued her to the heights, nor the microscope dragged her from her ambush. The meteorologists had not analyzed her temper, nor constructed mathematical formulae to forecast her smiles and frowns. Mr. Edison had not arrived to show that the divine gift of speech (about the only thing that distinguishes men, parrots, and magpies from the brutes) is also an attribute of metal. In the youth of the world they had, in short, none of the disillusionizing sciences with which a critical age, delving curiously about the roots of things, has sapped the substructure of religion and art alike. I do not regret the substitution of knowledge for conjecture, and doubt for faith; I only say that it has its disadvantages, and among them we reckon the decay of poesy. In an enlightened age, Macaulay says,

Men will judge and compare; but they will not create. They will talk about the old poets, and comment on them, and to a certain extent enjoy them. But they will scarcely be able to conceive the effect which poetry produced on their ruder ancestors, the agony, the ecstasy, the plenitude of belief. The Greek rhapsodists, according to Plato, could scarce recite Homer without falling into convulsions. The Mohawk hardly feels the scalping-knife while he shouts his death-song. The power which the ancient bards of Wales and Germany exercised over their auditors seems to modern readers almost miraculous. Such feelings are very rare in a civilized community, and most rare among those who participate most in its improvements. They linger among the peasantry.

While it is true in a large sense that the world’s greatest poets have lived in rude ages, when their races were not long emerged from the night of barbarism—like birds the poets sing best at sunrise—it must not be supposed that similarly favorable conditions are supplied to a rude individual intelligence in an age of polish. With a barbarous age that had recently set its face to the dawn a Joaquin Miller would have been in full sympathy, and might have interpreted its spirit in songs of exceeding splendor. But the very qualities that would have made him *en rapport* with such an era make him an isolated voice in ours; while Tennyson, the man of culture, full of the disposition of his time—albeit the same is of less adequate vitality—touches with a valid hand the harp which the other beats in vain. The altar is growing cold, the temple itself becoming a ruin; the divine mandate comes with so feeble and faltering a voice that the priest has need of a trained and practiced ear to catch it and the gift of tongues to impart its meaning to a generation concerned with the unholy things whose voice is prose. As a poetical mental attitude, that of doubt is meaner than that of faith, that of speculation less commanding than that of emotion; yet the poet of to-day

must assume them, and "In Memoriam" attests the wisdom of him who "stoops to conquer"—loyally accepting the hard conditions of his epoch, and bending his corrigible genius in unquestioning assent to the three thousand and thirty-nine articles of doubt.

As inspiration grows weak and acceptance disobedient, form of delivery becomes of greater moment; in so far as it can, the munificence of manner must mitigate the poverty of matter; so it occurs that the poets of later life excel their predecessors in the delicate and difficult arts and artifices of versification as much as they fall below them in imagination and power.

1878.

THOUGHT AND FEELING

"WHAT is his idea?—what thought does he express?" asks—loftily—a distinguished critic and professor of English literature to whom I submitted a brief poem of Mr. Loveman. I had not known that Mr. Loveman (of whom, by the way, I have not heard so much as I expect to) had tried to express a thought; I had supposed that his aim was to produce an emotion, a feeling. That is all that a poet—as a poet—can do. He may be philosopher as well as poet—may have a thought, as profound a thought as you please, but if he do not express it so as to produce an emotion in an emotional mind he has not spoken as a poet speaks. It is the philosopher's trade to make us think, the poet's to make us feel. If he is so fortunate as to have his thought, well and good; he can make us feel, with it as well as without—and without it as well as with.

One would not care to give up the philosophy that underruns so much of Shakspeare's work, but how little its occasional absence affects our delight is shown by the reading of such "nonsense verses" as the song in "As You Like It," beginning:

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino.

One does not need the music; the lines sing themselves, and are full of the very spirit of poetry. What the dickens they may chance to mean is quite another matter. What is poetry, anyhow, but "glorious nonsense"? But how very glorious the nonsense happens to be! What "thought" did Ariel try to express in his songs in "The Tempest"? There is hardly the tenth part of a thought in them; yet who that has a rudimentary, or even a vestigial, susceptibility to sentiment and feeling, can read them without the thrill that is stubborn to the summoning of the profoundest reflections of Hamlet in his inkiest cloak?

Poetry may be conjoined with thought. In the great poets it commonly is—that is to say, we award the palm to him who is great in more than one direction. But the poetry is a thing apart from the thought and demanding a separate consideration. The two have no more essential connection than the temple and its granite, the statue and its bronze. Is the sculptor's work less great in the clay than it becomes in the hands of the foundry man?

No one, not the greatest poet nor the dullest critic, knows what poetry is. No man, from Milton down to the acutest and most pernicious lexicographer, has been able to define its name. To catch that butterfly the critic's net is not fine enough by much. Like electricity, it is felt, not known. If it could be known, if the secret were accessible to analysis, why, one could be taught to write poetry without having been "born unto singing."

So it happens that the most penetrating criticism must leave eternally unsaid the thing that is most worth saying. We can say of a poem as of a picture, an Ionic column, or any work of art: "It

is charming!" But why and how it charms—there we are dumb, its creator no less than another.

What is it in art before which all but the unconscious peasant and the impenitent critic confess the futility of speech? Why does a certain disposition of words affect us deeply when if differently arranged to mean the same thing they stir no emotion whatever? He who can answer that has surprised the secret of the Sphinx, and after him shall be no more poetry forever!

Expound who is able the charm of these lines from "Kubla Khan:"

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw.
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.

There is no "thought" here—nothing but the baldest narrative in common words arranged in their natural order; but upon whose heart-strings does not that maiden play?—and who does not adore her?

Like the entire poem of which they are a part, and like the entire product of which the poem is a part, the lines are all imagination and emotion. They address, not the intellect, but the heart. Let the analyst of poetry wrestle with them if he is eager to be thrown.

1903

¹Mr. Arthur Brisbane.