

THE OPINIONATOR

by

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THE NOVEL

THOSE who read no books but new ones have this much to say for themselves in mitigation of censure: they do not read all the new ones. They can not; with the utmost diligence and devotion—never weary in ill doing—they can not hope to get through one in a hundred. This, I should suppose, must make them unhappy. They probably feel as a small boy of limited capacity would in a country with all the springs running treacle and all the trees loaded with preserved fruits.

The annual output of books in this country alone is something terrible—not fewer, I am told, than from seven thousand to nine thousand. This should be enough to gratify the patriot who “points with pride” to the fact that Americans are a reading people, but does not point with anything to the quality of what they read. There are apparently more novels than anything else, and these have incomparably the largest sales. The “best seller” is always a novel and a bad one.

In my poor judgment there have not been published in any one quarter-century a half dozen novels that posterity will take the trouble to read. It is not to be denied that some are worth reading, for some have been written by great writers; and whatever is written by a great writer is likely to merit attention. But between that which is worth reading and that which was worth writing there is a distinction. For a man who can do great work, to do work that is less great than the best that he can do is not worthwhile, and novel-writing, I hold, does not bring out the best that is in him.

The novel bears the same relation to literature that the panorama bears to painting. With whatever skill and feeling the panorama is painted, it must lack that basic quality in all art, unity, totality of effect. As it can not all be seen at once, its parts must be seen successively, each effacing the one seen before; and at the last there remains no coherent and harmonious memory of the work. It is the same with a story too long to be read with a virgin attention at a single sitting.

A novel is a diluted story—a story cumbered with trivialities and nonessentials. I have never seen one that could not be bettered by cutting out a half or three-quarters of it.

The novel is a snow plant; it has no root in the permanent soil of literature, and does not long hold its place. It is of the lowest form of imagination—imagination chained to the perch of probability. What wonder that in this unnatural captivity it pines and dies? The novelist is, after all, but a reporter of a larger growth. True, he invents his facts (which the reporter of the newspaper is known never to do) and his characters; but, having them in hand, what can he do? His chains are heavier than himself. The line that bounds his little Dutch garden of probability, separating it from the golden realm of art—the sun and shadow land of fancy—is to him a dead-line. Let him transgress it at his peril.

In England and America the art of novel-writing (in so far as it is an art) is as dead as Queen Anne; in America as dead as Queen Ameresia. (There never was a Queen Ameresia—that is why I choose her for the comparison.) As a literary method it never had any other element of vitality than the quality from which it has its name. Having no legitimate place in the scheme of letters, its end was inevitable.

When Richardson and Fielding set the novel going, hardly more than a century-and-a-half ago, it charmed a generation to which it was new. From their day to ours, with a lessening charm, it has taken the attention of the multitude, and grieved the judicious, but, its impulse exhausted, it stops by its inherent inertia. Its dead body we shall have with us, doubtless, for many years, but its soul “is with the saints, I trust.”

This is true, not only locally but generally. So far as I am able to judge, no good novels are now “made in Germany,” nor in France, nor in any European country except Russia. The Russians are writing novels which so far as one may venture to judge (dimly discerning their quality through the

opacity of translation, for one does not read Russian) are, in their way, admirable; full of fire and light, like an opal. Tourgenieff, Pushkin, Gogol and the early Tolstoi—these be big names. In their hands the novel grew great (as it did in those of Richardson and Fielding, and as it would have done in those of Thackeray and Pater if greatness in that form of fiction had been longer possible in England) because, first, they were great men, and second, the novel was a new form of expression in a world of new thought and life. In Russia the soil is not exhausted: it produces without fertilizers. There we find simple, primitive conditions, and the novel holds something of the elemental passions of the race, unsophisticated by introspection, analysis of motive, problemism, dissection of character, and the other “odious subtleties” that go before a fall. But the blight is upon it even there, with an encroachment visible in the compass of a single lifetime. Compare Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* with his latest work in fiction, and you will see an individual decadence prefiguring a national; just as one was seen in the interval between *Adam Bede* and *Daniel Deronda*. When the story-teller is ambitious to be a philosopher there is an end to good storytelling. Novelists are now all philosophers—excepting those who have “stumbled to eternal mock” as reformers.

With the romance—which in form so resembles the novel that many otherwise worthy persons are but dimly aware of the essential distinction—matters are somewhat otherwise. The romancist has not to encounter at a disadvantage the formidable competition of his reader’s personal experience. He can represent life, not as it is, but as it might be; character, not as he finds it, but as he wants it. His plot knows no law but that of its own artistic development; his incidents do not require the authenticating hand and seal of any censorship but that of taste. The vitality of his art is eternal; it is perpetually young. He taps the great permanent mother-lode of human interest. His materials are infinite in abundance and cosmic in distribution. Nothing that can be known, or thought, or felt, or dreamed, but is available if he can manage it. He is lord of two worlds and may select his characters from both. In the altitudes where his imagination waves her joyous wing there are no bars for her to beat her breast against; the universe is hers, and unlike the sacred bird Simurgh, which is omnipotent on condition of never exerting its power, she may do as she will. And so it comes about that while the novel is accidental and transient, the romance is essential and permanent. The novelist, whatever his ability, writes in the shifting sand; the only age that understands his work is that which has not forgotten the social conditions environing his characters—namely, their own period; but the romancist has cut his work into the living rock. Richardson and Fielding already seem absurd. We are beginning to quarrel with Thackeray, and Dickens needs a glossary. Thirty years ago I saw a list of scores of words used by Dickens that had become obsolete. They were mostly the names of homely household objects no longer in use; he had named them in giving “local color” and the sense of “reality.” Contemporary novels are read by none but the reviewers and the multitude—which will read anything if it is long, untrue and new enough. Men of sane judgment and taste still illuminate their minds and warm their hearts in Scott’s suffusing glow; the strange, heatless glimmer of Hawthorne fascinates more and more; the Thousand-and-One Nights holds its captaincy of tale-telling. Whatever a great man does he is likely to do greatly, but had Hugo set the powers of his giant intellect to the making of mere novels his superiority to the greatest of those who have worked in that barren art might have seemed somewhat less measureless than it is.

ON LITERARY CRITICISM

I

THE saddest thing about the trade of writing is that the writer can never know, nor hope to know, if he is a good workman. In literary criticism there are no criteria, no accepted standards of excellence by which to test the work. Sainte-Beuve says that the art of criticism consists in saying the first thing that comes into one's head. Doubtless he was thinking of his own head, a fairly good one. There is a difference between the first thing that comes into one head and the first thing that comes into another; and it is not always the best kind of head that concerns itself with literary criticism.

Having no standards, criticism is an erring guide. Its pronouncements are more interesting than valuable, and interesting chiefly from the insight that they give into the mind, not of the writer criticised, but of the writer criticising. Hence the greater interest that they have when delivered by one of whom the reader already knows something. So the newspapers are not altogether unwise when asking an eminent merchant to pass judgment on a new poet, or a distinguished soldier to "sit" in the case of a rising young novelist. We learn something about the merchant or the soldier, and that may amuse. As a guide to literary excellence even the most accomplished critic's judgment on his contemporaries is of little value. Posterity more frequently reverses than affirms it.

The reason is not far to seek. An author's work is usually the product of his environment. He collaborates with his era; his coworkers are time and place. All his neighbors and all the conditions in which they live have a hand in the work. His own individuality, unless uncommonly powerful and original, is "subdued to what it works in." But this is true, too, of his critic, whose limitations are drawn by the same iron authority. Subject to the same influences, good and bad, following the same literary fashions, the critic who is contemporary with his author holds his court in the marketplace and polls a fortuitous jury. In diagnosing the disorder of a person suspected of hydrophobia the physician ought not to have been bitten by the same dog.

The taste of the many being notoriously bad and that of the few dubious, what is the author to do for judgment on his work? He is to wait. In a few centuries, more or less, may arise a critic that we call Posterity. This fellow will have as many limitations, probably, as the other had—will bow the knee to as many literary Baals and err as widely from the paths leading to the light. But his false gods will not be those of to-day, whose hideousness will disclose itself to his undevout vision, and in his deviations from the true trail he will cross and chart our tracks. Better than all, he will know and care little about the lives and characters, the personalities, of those of us whose work has lasted till his time. On that coign of vantage he will stand and deliver a juster judgment. It will enable him to judge our work with impartiality, as if it had fallen from the skies or sprung up from the ground without human agency.

One can hardly overrate the advantage to the critic of ignorance of his author. Biographies of men of action are well enough; the lives that such men live are all there is of them except themselves. But men of thought—that is different. You can not narrate thought, nor describe it, yet it is the only relevant thing in the life of an author. Anything else darkens counsel. We go to biography for side lights on an author's work; to his work for side lights on his character. The result is confusion and disability, for personal character and literary character have little to say to each other, despite the fact that so tremendous a chap as Taine builded an entire and most unearthly biography of Shakspeare on no firmer foundation than the "internal evidence" of the plays and sonnets. Of all the influences that make for incapable criticism the biographer of authors is the most pernicious. One needs not be a friend to organized labor to wish that the fellow's working

hours might be reduced from twenty-four to eight.

Neither the judgment of the populace nor that of the critics being of value to an author concerned about his rank in the hierarchy of letters, and that of posterity being a trifle slow, he seems to be reduced to the expedient of taking his own word for it. And his opinion of himself may not be so far out of the way. Read Goethe's conversations with Eckermann and see how accurately the great man appraised himself.

When scratched in a newspaper Heine said: "I am to be judged in the assizes of literature. I know who I am."

About the shrine of every famous author awaits a cloud of critics to pay an orderly and decorous homage to his genius. There is no crowding; if one of them sees that he can not perform his prostration until after his saint shall have been forgotten along with the intellectual miracles he wrought, that patient worshiper turns aside to level his shins at another shrine. There are shrines enough for all, God knows!

The most mischievous, because the ablest, of all this sycophantic crew is Mr. Howells, who finds every month, and reads, two or three books—always novels—of high literary merit. As no man who has anything else to do can critically read more than two or three books in a month—and I will say for Mr. Howells that he is a conscientious reader—and as some hundreds are published in the same period, one is curious to know how many books of high literary merit he would find if he could read them all. But Mr. Howells is no ordinary sycophant—not he. True, having by mischance read a book divinely bad, even when judged according to his own test, and having resolved to condemn nothing except in a general way—as the artillerists in the early days of the Civil War used to "shell the woods"—he does not purpose to lose his labor, and therefore commends the book along with the others; but as a rule he distributes the distinctions that he has to confer according to a system—to those, namely, whose work in fiction most nearly resembles his own. That is his way of propagating the Realistic faith which his poverty of imagination has compelled him to adopt and his necessities to defend. "Ah, yes, a beautiful animal," said the camel of the horse—"if he only had a hump!"

To show what literary criticism has accomplished in education of the public taste I beg to refer the reader to any number of almost any magazine. Here is one, for instance, containing a paper by one Bowker on contemporary English novelists—he novelists and she novelists—to the number of about forty. And only the "eminent" ones are mentioned. To most American readers some of the books of most of these authors are more or less familiar, and nine in ten of these readers will indubitably accept Mr. Bowker's high estimate of the genius of the authors themselves. These have one good quality—they are industrious: most of them have published ten to forty novels each, the latter number being the favorite at this date and eliciting Mr. Bowker's lively admiration. The customary rate of production is one a year, though two are not unusual, there being nothing in the law forbidding. Mr. Bowker has the goodness to tell us all he knows about these persons' methods of work; that is to say, all that they have told him. The amount of patient research, profound thought and systematic planning that go to the making of one of their books is (naturally) astonishing. Unfortunately it falls just short of the amount that kills.

Add to the forty eminent English novelists another forty American, equally eminent—at least in their own country—and similarly industrious. We have then an average annual output of, say, eighty novels which have the right to expect to be widely read and enthusiastically reviewed. This in two countries, in one of which the art of novel writing is dead, in the other of which it has not been born. Truly this is an age of growing literary activity; our novelists are as lively and diligent as maggots in the carcass of a horse. There is a revival of baseball, too.

If our critics were wiser than their dupes could this mass of insufferable stuff be dumped upon

the land? Could the little men and foolish women who write it command the persevering admiration of their fellow-creatures, who think it a difficult thing to do? I make no account here of the mere book-reporters of the newspapers, whose purpose and ambition are, not to guide the public taste but to follow it, and who are therefore in no sense critics. The persons whom I am considering are those ingenious gentlemen who in the magazines and reviews are expected to, and do, write of books with entire independence of their own market. Are there anywhere more than one, two or three like Percival Pollard, with "Gifford's heavy hand" to "crush without remorse" the intolerable rout of commonplace men and women swarming innumerable upon the vacant seats of the dead giants and covering the slopes of Parnassus like a flock of crows?

Your critic of widest vogue and chief authority among us is he who is best skilled in reading between the lines; in interpreting an author's purpose; in endowing him with a "problem" and noting his degree of skill in its solution. The author—stupid fellow!—did not write between the lines, had no purpose but to entertain, was unaware of a problem. So much the worse for him; so much the better for his expounder. Interlinear cipher, purpose, problem, are all the critic's own, and he derives a lively satisfaction in his creation—looks upon it and pronounces it good. Nothing is more certain than that if a writer of genius should "bring to his task" of writing a book the purposes which the critics would surely trace in the completed work the book would remain forever unwritten, to the unspeakable advantage of letters and morals.

In illustration of these remarks and suggesting them, take these book reviews in a single number of *The Atlantic*. There we learn, concerning Mr. Cable, that his controlling purpose in *The Grandissimes* was that of "presenting the problem of the reorganization of Southern society"—that "the book was in effect a parable"; that in *Dr. Sevier* he "essayed to work out through personal relations certain problems [always a problem or two] which vexed him regarding poverty and labor"; that in *Bonaventure* he "sets himself another task," which is "to work out [always something to 'work out'] the regeneration of man through knowledge"—a truly formidable "task." Of the author of *Queen Money*, we are told by the same expounder that she has "set herself no task beyond her power," but "had it in mind to trace the influence of the greed for wealth upon a section of contemporaneous society." Of Mr. Bellamy, author of *Looking Backward* (the heroine of which is not Mrs. Lot) we are confidently assured in ailing metaphor that "he feels intensely the bitter inequalities of the present order" of things and "thinks he sees a remedy,"—our old friends again: the "problem" and the "solution"—both afterthoughts of Mr. Bellamy. The "task" which in *Marzio's Crucifix* Marion Crawford "sets himself" is admirably simple—by a "characteristic outwardness" to protect us against "a too intimate and subtle corrosive of life." As a savior of the world against this awful peril Crawford may justly have claimed a vote of thanks; but possibly he was content with that humbler advantage, the profit from the sale of his book. But (it may be protested) the critic who is to live by his trade must say something. True, but is it necessary that he live by his trade?

Carlyle's prophecy of a time when all literature should be one vast review is in process of fulfillment. Aubrey de Vere has written a critical analysis of poetry, chiefly that of Spenser and Wordsworth. An *Atlantic* man writes a critical analysis of Aubrey de Vere's critical analysis. Shall I not write a critical analysis of the *Atlantic* man's critical analysis of Aubrey de Vere's critical analysis of poetry? I can do so adequately in three words: It is nonsense.

Spenser, also, it appears, "set himself a task," had his "problem," "worked it out." "The figures of his embroidered poem," we are told, "are conceived and used in accordance with a comprehensive doctrine of the nature of humanity, which Spenser undoubtedly meant to enforce through the medium of his imagination." That is to say, the author of *The Faerie Queene* did not "sing because he could not choose but sing," but because he was burdened with a doctrine. He had

a nut to crack and, faith! he must crack it or he would be sick. “Resolved into its moral elements” (whether by Aubrey de Vere or the *Atlantic* man I can only guess without reading de Vere’s work in two volumes, which God forbid!) the glowing work of Spenser is a sermon which “teaches specifically how to attain self-control and how to meet attacks from without; or rather how to seek those many forms of error which do mischief in the world, and to overcome them for the world’s welfare.” Precisely: the animal is a pig and a bird; or rather it is a fish. So much for Spenser, whom his lovers may reread if they like in the new light of this person’s critical analysis. It is rather hard that, being dead, he can not have the advantage of going over his work with so intelligent a guide as Aubrey de Vere. He would be astonished by his own profundity.

How literary reviewing may be acceptably done in Boston may be judged by the following passage from the *Boston Literary Review*:

“When Miss Emma Frances Dawson wrote *An Itinerant House* she was plainly possessed of a desire to emulate Poe and turn out a collection of stories which, once read, the mention of them would make the blood curdle. There is no need to say that Poe’s position is still secure, but Miss Dawson has succeeded in writing some very creditable stories of their kind.”

The reviewer that can discern in Miss Dawson’s work “a desire to emulate Poe,” or can find in it even a faint suggestion of Poe, may justly boast himself accessible to any folly that comes his way. There is no more similarity between the work of the two writers than there is between that of Dickens and that of Macaulay, or that of Addison and that of Carlyle. Poe in his prose tales deals sometimes with the supernatural; Miss Dawson always. But hundreds of writers do the same; if that constitutes similarity and suggests intentional “emulation” what shall be said of those tales which resemble one another in that element’s omission? The truth probably is that the solemn gentleman who wrote that judgment had not read Poe since childhood, and did not read Miss Dawson at all. Moreover, no excellence in her work would have saved it from his disparaging comparison if he had read it. “Poe’s position” would still have been “secure,” for to such minds as his it is unthinkable that an established fame (no matter how, when or where established) should not signify an unapproachable merit. If he had lived in Poe’s time how he would have sneered at that writer’s attempt to emulate Walpole! And had he been a contemporary of Walpole that ambitious person would have incurred a stinging rap on the head for aspiring to displace the immortal Gormley Hobb.

The fellow goes on:

“To one steeped in the gruesome weirdness of a master of the gentle art of blood-curdling the stories are not too impressive, but he who picks up the book fresh from a fairy tale is apt to become somewhat nervous in the reading. The tales allow Miss Dawson to weave in some very pretty verse.”

The implication that Miss Dawson’s tales are intended to be “gruesome,” “blood-curdling,” and so forth, is a foolish implication. Their supernaturalism is not of that kind. The blood that they could curdle is diseased blood which it would be at once a kindly office and a high delight to shed. And fancy this inexpressible creature calling Miss Dawson’s verse “pretty”—the *ballade* of “The Sea of Sleep” “pretty”! My compliments to him:

Dull spirit, few among us be your days,
The bright to damn, the fatuous to praise;
And God deny, your flesh when you unload,
Your prayer to live as tenant of a toad,

With powers direr than your present sort:
Able the wights you jump on to bewart.

The latest author of “uncanny” tales to suffer from the ready reckoner’s short cut to the solution of the problem of literary merit, the ever-serviceable comparison with Edgar Allan Poe, is Mr. W.C. Morrow. Doubtless he had hoped that this cup might pass by him—had implored the rosy goddess Psora, who enjoys the critic’s person and inspires his pen, to go off duty, but it was not to be; that diligent deity is never weary of ill doing and her devotees, pursuing the evil tenor of their way, have sounded the Scotch fiddle to the customary effect. Mr. Morrow’s admirable book, *The Ape, the Idiot and Other People*, is gravely ascribed to the paternity of Poe, as was Miss Dawson’s before it, and some of mine before that. And until Gabriel, with one foot upon the sea and the other upon the neck of the last living critic, shall swear that the time for doing this thing is up, every writer of stories a little out of the common must suffer the same sickening indignity. To the ordinary microcephalous bibliopomps—the book-butchers of the newspapers—criticism is merely a process of marking upon the supposed stature of an old writer the supposed stature of a new, without ever having taken the trouble to measure that of the old; they accept hearsay evidence for that. Does one write “gruesome stories”?—they invoke Poe; essays?—they out with their Addison; satirical verse?—they have at him with Pope—and so on, through the entire category of literary forms. Each has its dominant great name, learned usually in the district school, easily carried in memory and obedient to the call of need. And because these strabismic ataxiates, who fondly fancy themselves shepherding auctorial flocks upon the slopes of Parnassus, are unable to write of one writer without thinking of another, they naturally assume that the writer of whom they write is affected with the same disability and has always in mind as a model the standard name dominating his chosen field—the impeccable hegemon of the province.

II

Mr. Hamlin Garland, writing with the corn-fed enthusiasm of the prairies, “hails the dawn of a new era” in literature—an era which is to be distinguished by dominance of the Western man. That a great new literature is to “come out of the West” because of broad prairies and wide rivers and big mountains and infrequent boundary lines—that is a conviction dear indeed to the Western mind which has discovered that marks can be made on paper with a pen. A few years ago the Eastern mind was waiting wide-eyed to “hail the dawn” of a literature that was to be “distinctively American,” for the Eastern mind in those days claimed a share in the broad prairies, the wide rivers and the big mountains, with all the competencies, suggestions, inspirations and other appurtenances thereunto belonging—a heritage which now Mr. Garland austere denies to any one born and “raised” on the morning side of the Alleghanies. The “distinctively American literature” has not materialized, excepting in the works of Americans distinctively illiterate; and there are no visible signs of a distinctively Western one. Even the Californian sort, so long heralded by prophets blushing with conscious modesty in the foretelling, seems loth to leave off its damnable faces and begin. The best Californian, the best Western, the best American books have the least of geographical “distinctiveness,” and most closely conform to the universal and immutable laws of the art, as known to Aristotle and Longinus.

The effect of physical-geographical environment on literary production is mostly nil; racial and educational considerations only are of controlling importance. Despite Madame de Staël’s engaging dictum that “every Englishman is an island,” the natives of that scanty plot have produced

a literature which in breadth of thought and largeness of method we sons of a continent, brothers to the broad prairies, wide rivers and big mountains, have not matched and give no promise of matching. It is all very fine to be a child o' natur' with a home in the settin' sun, but when the child o' natur' with a knack at scribbling pays rent to Phoebus by renouncing the incomparable advantage of strict subjection to literary law he pays too dearly.

Nothing new is to be learned in any of the great arts—the ancients looted the whole field. Nor do first-rate minds seek anything new. They are assured of primacy under the conditions of their art as they find it—under any conditions. It is the lower order of intelligence that is ingenious, inventive, alert for original methods and new forms. Napoleon added nothing to the art of war, in either strategy or tactics. Shakspeare tried no new meters, did nothing that had not been done before—merely did better what had been done. In the Parthenon was no new architectural device, and in the Sistine Madonna all the effects were got by methods as familiar as speech. The only way in which it is worth while to differ from others is in point of superior excellence. Be “original,” ambitious Westerner—always as original as you please. But know, or if you already know remember, that originality strikes and dazzles only when displayed within the limiting lines of form. Above all, remember that the most ineffective thing in literature is that quality, whatever in any case it may be, which is best designated in terms of geographical classification. The work of whose form and methods one naturally thinks as—not “English”; that is a racial word, but—”American” or “Australian” or (in this country) “Eastern,” “Mid-Western,” “Southern” or “Californian” is worthless. The writer who knows no better than to make or try to make his work “racy of the soil” knows nothing of his art worth knowing.

III

Charles A. Dana held that California could not rightly claim the glory of such literature as she had, for none of her writers of distinction—such distinction as they had—was born there. We were austere reminded that “even the sheen of gold is less attractive than the lustre of intellectual genius.” “California!” cried this severe but not uncompassionate critic—“California! how musical is the word. And again we cry out, California! Give us the letters of high thought: give us philosophy and romance and poetry and art. Give us the soul!”

How many men and women who scorn delights and live laborious days to glorify our metropolis with “the letters of high thought” are on Fame’s muster-roll as natives of Manhattan island? Doubtless the state of New York, as also the city of that name, can make an honorable showing in the matter of native authors, but it has certain considerable advantages that California lacks. In the first place, there are many more births in New York, supplying a strong numerical presumption that more geniuses will turn up there. Second, it has (I hope) enjoyed that advantage for many, many years; whereas California was “settled” (and by the non-genius-bearing sex) a good deal later. In this competition the native Californian author is handicapped by the onerous condition that in order to have his nose counted he must have been born in the pre-Woman period or acquired enough of reputation for the rumor of his merit to have reached New York’s ears, and for the noise of it to have roused her from the contemplation of herself, before he has arrived at middle age. This is not an “impossible” condition; it is only an exceedingly hard one. How hard it is a little reflection on facts will show. The rule is, the world over, that the literary army of the “metropolis” is recruited in the “provinces,” or, more accurately, from the provinces. The difference denoted by the prepositions is important: for every provincial writer who, like Bret Harte, achieves at home enough distinction to be sought out and lured to a “literary metropolis,”

ten unknown ones go there of their own motion, like Rudyard Kipling, and become distinguished afterward. They wrote equally well where they were, but they might have continued to write there until dead of age, and but for some lucky accident or fortuitous concurrence of favoring circumstances they would never have been heard of in the "literary metropolis."

We may call it so, but New York is not a literary metropolis, nor is London, nor is Paris. In letters there is no metropolis. The literary capital is not a mother-city, founding colonies; it is the creature of its geographical environment, giving out nothing, taking in everything. If not constantly fed with fresh brains from beyond and about, its chance of primacy and domination would be merely proportional to its population. This centripetal tendency—this converging movement of provincial writers upon the literary capital, is itself the strongest possible testimony to the disadvantages which they suffer at home; for in nearly every instance it is made—commonly at a great sacrifice—in pursuit of recognition. The motive may not be a very creditable one; I think myself it is ridiculous, as is all ambition, not to excel, but to be known to excel; but such is the motive. If the provincial writer could as easily obtain recognition at home he would stay there.

For my part, I freely admit that "the Golden State can not 'boast' of any native literary celebrities of the first rank," for I do not consider the incident of a literary celebrity of the first rank having been born in one place instead of another a thing to boast of. If there is an idler and more barren work than the rating of writers according to merit it is their classification according to birth-place. A racial classification is interesting because it corresponds to something in nature, but among authors of the same race—and that race the restless Americans, who are about as likely to be born in a railway car as anywhere, and whose first instinct is to get away from home—this classification is without meaning. If it is ever otherwise than capitally impudent in the people of a political or geographical division to be proud of a great writer (as George the Third was of an abundant harvest) it is least impudent in those of the one in which he did his worthiest work, most so in those of the one in which he was born.

STAGE ILLUSION

SUCH to-day is the condition of the drama that the "scenic artist" and the carpenter are its hope and its pride. They are the props and pillars of the theatre, without which the edifice would fall to pieces. But there are "some of us fellows," as a Bishop of Lincoln used to say to his brother prelates, who consider scenery an impertinence and its painter a creature for whose existence there is no warrant of art nor justification of taste.

I am no *laudator temporis acti*, but I submit that in this matter of the drama the wisdom of the centuries is better than the caprice of the moment. For some thousands of years, dramatists, actors and audiences got on very well without recourse to the mechanical devices that we esteem necessary to the art of stage representation. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakspeare—what did they know of scenery and machinery? You may say that the Greeks knew little of painting, so could have no scenery. They had something better—imagination. Why did they not use pulleys, and trap-doors, and real water, and live horses?—they had *them*; and Ben Jonson and Shakspeare could have had painters enow, God knows. Why, in their time the stage was lighted with naked and unashamed candles and strewn with rushes, and favored ones of the audience—"gentlemen of wit and pleasure about town"—occupied seats upon it! If the action was supposed to be taking place in a street in Verona did not the playbill so explain? A word to the wise was sufficient: the gentlemen of wit and pleasure went to the play to watch the actor's face, observe his gestures, critically note his elocution. They would have resented with their handy hangers an attempt to

obtrude upon their attention the triumphs of the “scenic artist,” the machinist and the property-man. As for the “groundlings,” they were there by sufferance only, and might comprehend or not, as it might or might not please their Maker to work a miracle in their stupid nowls.

Now it is all for the groundlings; the stage has no longer “patrons,” and “His Majesty’s Players” are the servants of the masses, to whom the author’s text must be presented with explanatory notes by those learned commentators, Messrs. Daub and Toggle—whom may the good devil besmear with yellows and make mad with a tin moon!

What! shall I go to the theatre to be pleased with colored canvas, affrighted with a storm that is half dried peas and t’other half sheet-iron? Shall I take any part of my evening’s pleasure from the dirty hands of an untidy anarchist who shakes a blue rag to represent the Atlantic Ocean, while another sandlot orator navigates a cloth-yard three-decker across the middle distance? Am I to be interested in the personal appearance of a centre-table and the adventures of half a dozen chairs—albeit they are better than the one given me to sit on?

Shall makers of fine furniture aspire
To scorn my lower needs and feed my higher?
And vile upholsterers be taught to slight
My body’s comfort for my mind’s delight?

Where is the sense of all these devices for producing an “illusion?” Illusion, indeed! When you look at art do you wish to persuade yourself that it is only nature? Take the Laocoön—would it be pleasant or instructive to forget, for even a moment, that it is a group of inanimate figures, and think yourself gazing on a living man and two living children in the folds of two living snakes? When you stand before a “nativity” by some old master, do you fancy yourself a real ass at a real manger? Deception is no part of art, for only in its non-essentials is art a true copy of nature. If it is anything more, why, then the Shah of Persia was a judicious critic. Shown a picture of a donkey by Landseer and told that it was worth five hundred pounds, he contemptuously replied that for five pounds he could buy the donkey. The man who holds that art should be a certified copy of nature, and produce an illusion in the mind, has no right to smile at this anecdote. It is his business in this life not to laugh, but to be laughed at.

Seeing that stage illusion is neither desirable nor attainable, the determined efforts to achieve it that have been making during these last few decades seem very melancholy indeed. It is as if a dog should spin himself sick in pursuit of his tail, which he neither can catch nor could profit by if he caught it. Failure displeases in proportion to the effort, and it would be judicious to stop a little short of real water, and live horses, and trains of cars that will work. Nay, why should we have streets and drawing-rooms (with mantel-clocks and coal scuttles complete) and castles with battlements? Or if the play is so vilely constructed as to require them, why must the street have numbered house-doors, the drawing-room an adjoining library and conservatory, and the battlements a growth of ivy? Of course no sane mind would justify poor Boucicault’s wall that sinks to represent the ascent of the man “climbing it” by standing on the ground and working his legs, but we are only a trifle less ridiculous when we have any scenic effects at all. The difference is one of degree, and if we are to have representations of inanimate objects it is hard to say at what we should stick. Our intellectual gorge may now rise at the spectacle of a battered and blood-stained “Nancy” dragging her wrecked carcass along the stage to escape the club of a “Sykes,” for it is as new as once were the horrible death-agonies constituting the charm of the acting of a Croizette; but the line of distinction is arbitrary, and no one can say how soon we shall expect to see the blood of “Caesar” spouting from his wound instead of being content with “Antony’s” rather graphic description of it. It is of the nature of realism never to stop till it gets to the bottom.

Inasmuch as the actor must wear something—a necessity from which the actress is largely free—he may as well wear the costume appropriate to his part. But this is about as far as art permits him to go in the way of “illusion”; another step and he is on the “un-steadfast footing” of popular caprice and vulgar fashion. Of course if the playwright has chosen to make a window, a coach, a horse, church spire, or whale one of his *dramatis personae* we must have it in some form, offensive as it is; the mistake which was his in so constructing the play is ours when we go to see it. In the old playbooks the “Scene—a Bridge in Venice,” “Scene—a Cottage in the Black Forest,” “Scene—a Battle Field,” etc., were not intended as instructions to the manager, but to the spectator. The author did not expect these things to be shown on the stage, but imagined in the auditorium. They were mere hints and helps to the imagination, which, as an artist, it was his business to stimulate and guide, and the modern playwright, as a fool, decrees it his duty to discourage and repress. The play should require as few accessories as possible, and to those actually required the manager should confine himself. We may grant Shakspeare his open grave in *Hamlet*, but the impertinence of real earth in it we should resent; while the obtrusion of adjacent tombs and headstones at large is a capital crime. If we endure a play in which a man is pitched out of a window we must perforce endure the window; but the cornice, curtains and tassels; the three or four similar windows with nobody pitched out of them; the ancestral portrait on the wall and the suit of armor in the niche; what have these to do with the matter? We can see them anywhere at any time; we wish to know how not to see them. They are of the vulgarities. They distract attention from the actor, and under cover of the diversion he plays badly. Is it any wonder that he does not care to compete with a gilt cornice and a rep sofa?

On the Athenian stage, a faulty gesture, a sin in rhetoric, a false quantity or accent—these were visited with the dire displeasure of an audience in whom the art-sense was sweeter than honey and stronger than a lion; an audience that went to the play to see the play, to discriminate, compare, mark the conformity of individual practice to universal principle: in a word, to criticise. They enjoyed that rarest and ripest of all pleasures, the use of trained imagination. There was the naked majesty of art, there the severe simplicity of taste. And there came not the carpenter with his machines, the upholsterer with his stuffs, nor the painter with blotches of impertinent color, crazing the eye and grieving the heart.

THE MATTER OF MANNER

I HAVE sometimes fancied that a musical instrument retains among its capabilities and potentialities something of the character, some hint of the soul, some waiting echo from the life of each who has played upon it: that the violin which Paganini had touched was not altogether the same afterward as before, nor had quite so fine a fibre after some coarser spirit had stirred its strings. Our language is a less delicate instrument: it is not susceptible to a debasing contagion; it receives no permanent and essential impress but from the hand of skill. You may fill it with false notes, and these will speak discordant when invoked by a clumsy hand; but when the master plays they are all unheard—silent in the quickened harmonies of masters who have played before.

My design is to show in the lucidest way that I can the supreme importance of words, their domination of thought, their mastery of character. Had the Scriptures been translated, as literally as now, into the colloquial speech of the unlearned, and had the originals been thereafter inaccessible, only direct interposition of the Divine Power could have saved the whole edifice of Christianity from tumbling to ruin.

Max Muller distilled the results of a lifetime of study, into two lines:

No Language without Reason.
No Reason without Language.

The person with a copious and obedient vocabulary and the will and power to apply it with precision thinks great thoughts. The mere glib talker—who may have a meagre vocabulary and no sense of discrimination in the use of words—is another kind of creature. A nation whose language is strong and rich and flexible and sweet—such as English was just before the devil invented dictionaries—has a noble literature and, compared with contemporary nations barren in speech, a superior morality. A word is a crystallized thought; good words are precious possessions, which nevertheless, like gold, may be mischievously used. The introduction of a bad word, its preservation, the customary misuse of a good one—these are sins affecting the public welfare. The fight against faulty diction is a fight against insurgent barbarism—a fight for high thinking and right living—for art, science, power—in a word, civilization. A motor without mechanism; an impulse without a medium of transmission; a vitalizing thought with no means to impart it; a fertile mind with a barren vocabulary—than these nothing could be more impotent. Happily they are impossible. They are not even conceivable.

Conduct is of character, character is of thought, and thought is unspoken speech. We think in words; we can not think without them. Shallowness or obscurity of speech means shallowness or obscurity of thought. Barring a physical infirmity, an erring tongue denotes an erring brain. When I stumble in my speech I stumble in my thought. Those who have naturally the richest and most obedient vocabulary are also the wisest thinkers; there is little worth knowing but what they have thought. The most brutish savage is he who is most meagrely equipped with words; fill him with words to the top of his gift and you would make him as wise as he is able to become.

The man who can neither write well nor talk well would have us believe that, like the taciturn parrot of the anecdote, he is “a devil to think.” It is not so. Though such a man had read the Alexandrian library he would remain ignorant; though he had sat at the feet of Plato he would be still unwise. The gift of expression is the measure of mental capacity; its degree of cultivation is the exponent of intellectual power. One may choose not to utter one’s mind—that is another matter; but if he choose he can. He can utter it all. His mind, not his heart; his thought, not his emotion. And if he do not sometimes choose to utter he will eventually cease to think. A mind without utterance is like a lake without an outlet: though fed with mountain springs and unfailing rivers, its waters do not long keep sweet.

Human speech is an imperfect instrument—imperfect by reason of its redundancy, imperfect by reason of its poverty. We have too many words for our meaning, too many meanings for our words. The effect is so confusing and embarrassing that the ability to express our thoughts with force and accuracy is extremely rare. It is not a gift, but a gift and an accomplishment. It comes not altogether by nature, but is achieved by hard, technical study.

In illustration of the poverty of speech take the English word “literature.” It means the art of writing and it means the things written—preferably in the former sense by him who has made it a study, almost universally in the latter by those who know nothing about it. Indeed, the most of these are unaware that it has another meaning, because unaware of the existence of the thing which in that sense it means. Tell them that literature, like painting, sculpture, music and architecture, is an art—the most difficult of arts—and you must expect an emphatic dissent. The denial not infrequently comes from persons of wide reading, even wide writing, for the popular writer commonly utters his ideas as, if he pursued the vocation for which he is better fitted, he would dump another kind of rubbish from another kind of cart—pull out the tailboard and let it go. The

immortals have a different method.

Among the minor trials of one who has a knowledge of the art of literature is the book of one who has not. It is a light affliction, for he need not read it. The worthy bungler's conversation about the books of others is a sharper disaster, for it can not always be evaded and must be courteously endured; and, goodness gracious! how comprehensively he does not know! How eagerly he points out the bottomless abyss of his ignorance and leaps into it! The *censor literarum* is perhaps the most widely distributed species known to zoology.

The ignorance of the reading public and the writing public concerning literary art is the eighth wonder of the world. Even its rudiments are to these two great classes a thing that is not. From neither the talk of the one nor the writing of the other would a student from Mars ever learn, for illustration, that a romance is not a novel; that poetry is a thing apart from the metrical form in which it is most acceptable; that an epigram is not a truth tersely stated—is, in fact, not altogether true; that fable is neither story nor anecdote; that the speech of an illiterate doing the best he knows how is another thing than dialect; that prose has its prosody no less exacting than verse. The ready-made critic and the ready-made writer are two of a kind and each is good enough for the other. To both, writing is writing, and that is all there is of it. If we had two words for the two things now covered by the one word "literature" perhaps the benighted could be taught to distinguish between, not only the art and the product, but, eventually, the different kinds of the product itself. As it is, they are in much the same state of darkness as that of the Southern young woman before she went North and learned, to her astonishment, that the term "damned Yankee" was two words—she had never heard either without the other.

In literature, as in all art, manner is everything and matter nothing; I mean that matter, however important, has nothing to do with the art of literature; that is a thing apart. In literature it makes very little difference what you say, but a great deal how you say it. It is precisely this thing called style which determines and fixes the place of any written discourse; the thoughts may be the most interesting, the statements the most important, that it is possible to conceive; yet if they be not cast in the literary mold, the world can not be persuaded to accept the work as literature. What could be more important and striking than the matter of Darwin's books, or Spencer's? Does anyone think of Darwin and Spencer as men of letters? Their manner, too, is admirable for its purpose—to convince. Conviction, though, is not a literary purpose. What can depose Sterne from literature? Yet who says less than Sterne, or says it better?

It is so in painting. One man makes a great painting of a sheepcote; another, a bad one of Niagara. The difference is not in the subject—in that the Niagara man has all the advantage; it is in the style. Art—literary, graphic, or what you will—is not a matter of matter, but a matter of manner. It is not the What but the How. The master enchants when writing of a pebble on the beach; the bungler wearies us with a storm at sea. Let the dullard look to his theme and thought; the artist sets down what comes. He pickles it sweet with a salt savor of verbal felicity, and it charms like Apollo's lute.

ON READING NEW BOOKS

IT is hereby confessed too—nay, affirmed—that this our time is as likely to produce great literary work as any of the ages that have gone before. There is no reason to suppose that the modern mind is any whit inferior in creative power to the ancient, albeit the moderns have not, as the ancients had, "the first rifling of the beauties of nature." For our images, our metaphors, our similes and what not we must go a bit further afield than Homer had to go. We can no longer—at

least we no longer should, though many there be who do—say “as red as blood,” “as white as snow,” and so forth. Our predecessors harvested that crop and threshed it out before we had the bad luck to be born. But much that was closed to them is open to us, for still creation widens to man’s view.

No; the *laudatores temporis acti* are not to be trusted when they say that the days of great literature are past. At any time a supreme genius may rise anywhere on the literary horizon and, flaming in the sky, splendor the world with a new glory. But the readers of new books need not put on colored spectacles to protect their eyes. It is not they that will recognize him. They will not be able to distinguish him from the little luminaries whose advent they are always “hailing” as the dawn of a new and wonderful day. It is unlikely, indeed, that he will be recognized at all in his own day for what he is. It may be that when he “swims into our ken” we shall none of us eye the blue vault and bless the useful light, but swear that it is a malign and baleful beam. Nay, worse, he may never be recognized by posterity. Great work in letters has no inherent quality, no innate vitality, that will necessarily preserve it long enough to demand judgment from those qualified by time to consider it without such distractions as the circumstances and conditions under which it was produced. And only so can a true judgment be given. It is likely that more great writers have died and been forever forgotten than have had their fame bruited about the world. Ah, well, they must take their chances. I, for my part, am not going to read dozens of the very newest books annually lest I overlook a genius now and then. Dozens are large numbers when it is books that one is talking about. Probably not so many worth reading were written in either half of the Nineteenth Century.

The reader of new books is in the position of one who, having at hand a mine of precious metals, easy of working and by his utmost diligence inexhaustible, suffers it to lie untouched and goes prospecting on the chance of finding another as good. He may find one, though the odds are a thousand to one that he will not. If he does, he will find also that he did not need to be in a hurry about it. Every book that is worth reading is founded on something permanent in human nature or the constitution of things, and constructed on principles of art which are themselves eternal. Whether it is read in one decade or another—even in one century or another—is of no importance; its value and charm are unchanging and unchangeable. Reverting to my simile of the mine, a good book is located on the great mother-lode of human interest; whereas the work that immediately prospers in the praise of the multitude commonly taps some “pocket” in the country rock and the accidental deposit is soon exhausted.

The world is full of great books in lettered languages. If any one has lived long enough, and read with sufficient assiduity, to have possessed his mind of all the literary treasures accessible to him; if he has mastered all the tongues in which are any masterworks of genius yet untranslated; if the ages have nothing more to offer him; if he has availed himself of the utmost advantages that he can derive from the infallible censorship of time and advice of the posterity which he calls his ancestors—let him commit himself to the blind guidance of chance, stand at the tail end of a modern press and devour as much of its daily output as he can. That will, at least, enable him to shine in a conversation; and the social *illuminati* whose achievements in that way are most admired will themselves assure you that such are the purpose and advantage of “literary culture.” And of all drawing-room authorities, he or she is most reverently esteemed who can most readily and accurately say what dullard wrote the latest and stupidest novel, but can not say why.

ALPHABÊTES AND BORDER RUFFIANS

I

IT is hoped that Divine Justice may find some suitable affliction for the malefactors who invent variations upon the letters of the alphabet of our fathers—our Roman fathers. Within the past thirty years our current literature has become a spectacle for the gods. The type-founder, worthy mechanic, has asserted himself with an overshadowing individuality, defacing with his monstrous creations and revivals every publication in the land. Everywhere secret, black and midnight wags are diligently studying the alphabet to see how many of the letters are susceptible to mutation into something new and strange. Some of the letters are more tractable than others: the O, for example, can be made as little as you please and set as far above the line as desired, with or without a flyspeck in the center or a dash (straight or curved) below. Why should one think that O looks better when thrown out of relation to the other letters when Heaven has given him eyes to see that it does not?

Then there is the M—the poor M, who for his distinction as the biggest toad in the alphabetical puddle is subjected to so dreadful though necessary indignity in typoscript—the wanton barbarity of his treatment by the type-founders makes one blush for civilization, or at least wish for it. There are two schools of M-sters; when their warfare is accomplished we shall know whether that letter is to figure henceforth as two sides of a triangle or three sides of a square. In A the ruffians have an easy victim; they can put his cross-bar up or down at will; it does not matter, so that it is put where it was not. For it must be understood that all these alterations are made with no thought of beauty: the sole purpose of the ruffians is to make the letters, as many as possible of them, different from what they were before. That is true generally, but not universally: in the titles of books and weekly newspapers, and on the covers of magazines, there is frequently an obvious revival, not merely of archaic forms, but of crude and primitive printing, as if from wooden blocks. Doubtless it is beautiful, but it does not look so. In our time the reversionaries have so far prevailed against common sense that in several periodicals the long-waisted s is restored, and we have a renewal of the scandalous relations between the c and the t.

The most fantastic and grotesque of these reversions (happily it has not yet affected the text of our daily reading) is the restoration of the ancient form of U, which is now made a V again. This would seem to be bad enough, but it appears that it has not sated the passion for change; so the V also has again become a U! What advantage is got by the transposition those who make it have not condescended to explain. Altogether the unhappy man who conceives himself obliged to read the literature of the day—especially the part that shouts and screams in titles and catalogues, headlines, and so forth—may justly claim remission of punishment in the next world, so poignant are his sufferings in this.

II

Coincidentally in point of time with these indisposing pranks, came in, and has remained in, a companion-fad of the artists who illustrate newspapers, magazines and books. These probably well-meaning but most undesirable persons, who could be spared by even the most unsparing critic, are affected with a weakness for borders to pictures. By means of borders—borders rectangular, borders triangular, borders circular, borders omniform and nulliform they can put pictures into

pictures, like cards in a loose pack, stick pictures through pictures, and so confuse, distract and bewilder the attention that it turns its back upon the display, occupying itself with the noble simplicity and naturalness of the wish that all artists were at the devil. Nor are they satisfied with all that: they must make pictures of pictures by showing an irrelevant background outside their insupportable borders; by representing their pictures as depending from hooks; nailed upon the walls; spitted on pins, and variously served right. And still they are not happy: the picture must, upon occasion, transgress its border—a mast, a steeple, or a tree thrust through and rejoicing in its escape; an ocean spilling over and taking to its heels as hard as ever it can hook it. The taste that accepts this fantastic nonsense is creature to the taste that supplies it; in an age and country having any sense of the seriousness of art the taste could not exist long enough to outlast its victim's examination on a charge of lunacy.

No picture should have a border; that has no use, no meaning, and whatever beauty is given to it the picture pays for through the nose. It is what may be called a contemporary survival: it stands for the frame of a detached picture—a picture on a wall. The frame is necessary for support and protection; but an illustration, like the female of the period, needs neither protection nor support, and the border would give none if it were needed. It is an impertinence without a mandate; its existence is due to unceasing suggestions flowing from the frames into heads where there is plenty of room.

III

Apropos of illustrations and illustrators, I should like to ask what is the merit or meaning of that peculiar interpretation of nature which consists in representing men and women with white clothing and black faces and hands. I do not say that it is not sufficiently realistic—that it is too conventional; I only “want to know.” I should like to know, too, if in illustrating, say, a football match in Ujiji the gentlemen addicted to that method here would show the players in black clothing, with white faces and hands? Or in default of clothing would they be shown white all over? If anybody can endarken my lightness on this subject I shall be glad to hear from him. I am groping in a noonday of doubt and plunged in a gulf of white despair.

Possibly these pictures are called silhouettes—I have heard them called so. Possibly if they were silhouettes they would be acceptable, for the genius of a Kanewka may lift the spectator above such considerations as right and left in the matter of legs and arms. But they are not silhouettes; the faces and hands are in shadow, the clothing in light. The figures are like Tennyson's lotus eaters: “between the sun and moon”; the former has power upon the skin only, the latter upon the apparel. The spectator is supposed to be upon the same side as the moon. That is where the artist is. He draws the figures, the moon draws him, and I draw a veil over the affecting scene.

TO TRAIN A WRITER

THERE is a good deal of popular ignorance about writing; it is commonly thought that good writing comes of a natural gift and that without the gift the trick can not be turned. This is true of great writing, but not of good. Any one with good natural intelligence and a fair education can be taught to write well, as he can be taught to draw well, or play billiards well, or shoot a rifle well, and so forth; but to do any of these things greatly is another matter. If one can not do great work it is

worth while to do good work and think it great.

I have had some small experience in teaching English composition, and some of my pupils are good enough to permit me to be rather proud of them. Some I have been able only to encourage, and a few will recall my efforts to profit them by dissuasion. I should not now think it worth while to teach a pupil to write merely well, but given one capable of writing greatly, and five years in which to train him, I should not permit him to put pen to paper for at least two of them—except to make notes. Those two years should be given to broadening and strengthening his mind, teaching him how to think and giving him something to think about—to sharpening his faculties of observation, dispelling his illusions and destroying his ideals. That would hurt: he would sometimes rebel, doubtless, and have to be subdued by a diet of bread and water and a poem on the return of our heroes from Santiago.

If I caught him reading a newly published book, save by way of penance, it would go hard with him. Of our modern education he should have enough to read the ancients: Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and that lot—custodians of most of what is worth knowing. He might retain what he could of the higher mathematics if he had been so prodigal of his time as to acquire any, and might learn enough of science to make him prefer poetry; but to learn from Euclid that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, yet not to learn from Epictetus how to be a worthy guest at the table of the gods, would be accounted a breach of contract.

But chiefly this fortunate youth with the brilliant future should learn to take comprehensive views, hold large convictions and make wide generalizations. He should, for example, forget that he is an American and remember that he is a Man. He should be neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Buddhist, nor Mahometan, nor Snake Worshiper. To local standards of right and wrong he should be civilly indifferent. In the virtues, so-called, he should discern only the rough notes of a general expediency; in fixed moral principles only time-saving predecisions of cases not yet before the court of conscience. Happiness should disclose itself to his enlarging intelligence as the end and purpose of life; art and love as the only means to happiness. He should free himself of all doctrines, theories, etiquettes, politics, simplifying his life and mind, attaining clarity with breadth and unity with height. To him a continent should not seem wide, nor a century long. And it would be needful that he know and have an ever present consciousness that this is a world of fools and rogues, blind with superstition, tormented with envy, consumed with vanity, selfish, false, cruel, cursed with illusions—frothing mad!

We learn in suffering what we teach in song—and prose. I should pray that my young pupil would occasionally go wrong, experiencing the educational advantages of remorse; that he would dally with some of the more biting vices. I should be greatly obliged if Fortune would lay upon him, now and then, a heavy affliction. A bereavement or two, for example, would be welcome, although I should not care to have a hand in it. He must have joy, too—O, a measureless exuberance of joy; and hate, and fear, hope, despair and love—love inexhaustible, a permanent provision. He must be a sinner and in turn a saint, a hero, a wretch. Experiences and emotions—these are necessities of the literary life. To the great writer they are as indispensable as sun and air to the rose, or good, fat, edible vapors to toads. When my pupil should have had two years of this he would be permitted to try his 'prentice hand at a pig story in words of one syllable. And I should think it very kind and friendly if Mr. George Sylvester Vierick would consent to be the pig.

1899.

AS TO CARTOONING

I

I WISH that the American artists whose lot is cast in the pleasant domain of caricature would learn something of the charm of moderation and the strength of restraint. Their “cartoons” yell; one looks at them with one’s fingers in one’s ears.

Did you ever observe and consider the dragon in Chinese art? With what an awful ferocity it is endowed by its creator—the expanded mouth with its furniture of curling tongue and impossible teeth, its big, fiery eyes, scaly body, huge claws and spiny back! All the horrible qualities the artist knows he lavishes upon this pet of his imagination. The result is an animal which one rather wishes to meet and would not hesitate to cuff. Unrestricted exaggeration has defeated its own purpose and made ludicrous what was meant to be terrible. That is, the artist has lacked the strength of restraint. A true artist could so represent the common domestic bear, or the snake of the field, as to smite the spectator with a nameless dread. He could do so by merely giving to the creature’s eye an expression of malevolence which would need no assistance from claw, fang or posture.

The American newspaper cartoonist errs in an infantile way similar to that of the Chinese; by intemperate exaggeration he fails of his effect. His men are not men at all, so it is impossible either to respect or detest them, or to feel toward them any sentiment whatever. As well try to evoke a feeling for or against a wooden Indian, a butcher’s-block, or a young lady’s favorite character in fiction. His deformed and distorted creations are entirely outside the range of human sympathy, antipathy, or interest. They are not even amusing. They are disgusting and, as in the case of foul names, the object of the disgust which they inspire is not the person vilified, but the person vilifying.

Perhaps I am not the average reader, but it is a fact that I frequently read an entire newspaper page of which one of these cartoons is the most conspicuous object, without once glancing at the picture’s title or observing what it is all about. I have the same unconscious reluctance to see it that I have to see anything else offensive.

I once sat reading a Republican newspaper. The whole upper half of the page consisted of a cartoon by a well-known artist. It represented Mr. Bryan, the Democratic candidate for the Presidency, standing on his head in a crowd (which I think he would do if it would make him President, and I don’t know that it would not) but I did not then observe it. The artist himself sat near by, narrowly watching me, which I did observe. A little while after I had laid down the paper he said carelessly: “O, by the way, what do you think of my cartoon of Bryan with his heels in the air?” And—Heaven help me!—I replied that I had been a week out of town and had not seen the newspapers!

A peculiarity of American caricature is that few of its “masters” know how to draw. They are like our great “humorists,” who are nearly all men of little education and meagre reading. As soon as they have prospered, got a little polish and some knowledge of books, they cease to be “humorists.”

One of the most popular of the “cartoonists” knows so little of anatomy that in most of his work the human arm is a fourth too short, and seems to be rapidly dwindling to a pimple; and so little of perspective that in a certain cartoon one of his figures was leaning indolently against a column about ten feet from where he stood.

A fashion has recently come in among the comic artists of getting great fun out of the lower forms of life. They have discovered and developed a mine of humor in the beasts and the birds,

the reptiles, fishes and insects. Some of the things they make them say and do are really amusing. But here is where they all go wrong and spoil their work: they put upon these creatures some article of human attire—boots, a coat or a hat. They make them carry umbrellas and walking-sticks. They put a lightning rod on a bird's nest, a latch on a squirrel-hole in a tree, and supply a beehive with a stovepipe. Why? They don't know why; they have a vague feeling that incongruity is witty, or that to outfit an animal with human appurtenances brings it, somehow, closer to one's bosom and business. The effect is otherwise.

When you have drawn your cow with a skirt she has not become a woman, and is no longer a cow. She is nothing that a sane taste can feel an interest in. An animal, or any living thing, in its natural state—is always interesting. Some animals we know to have the sense of humor and all probably have language; so in making them do and say funny things, even if their speech has to be translated into ours, there is nothing unnatural, incongruous or offensive. But a cat in a shirtwaist, a rabbit with a gun—ah, me!

Obviously it is futile to say anything to those “dragons of the prime” who draw the combination map-and-picture—the map whereon cities are represented by clusters of buildings, each cluster extending half way to the next. It would be useless to protest that these horrible things are neither useful as maps nor pleasing as pictures. They are—well, to put it quite plainly, they sicken. Sometimes the savages who draw them sketch in a regiment or so of soldiers—this in “war-maps” of course—whose height is about five miles each, except that of the commander, which is ten. And if there is a bit of sea the villain who draws it will show us a ship two hundred miles long, commonly sailing up hill or down. It is useless to remonstrate against this kind of thing. The men guilty of it are little further advanced intellectually than the worthy cave-dweller who has left us his masterpieces scratched on rocks and the shoulder blades of victims of his appetite—the illustrious inventor of the six-legged mammoth and the feathered pig.

II

When in the course of human events I shall have been duly instated as head of the art department of an American newspaper, a decent respect for the principles of my trade will compel me to convene my cartoonists and utter the hortatory remarks here following:

“Gentlemen, you will be pleased to understand some of the limitations of your art, for therein lies the secret of efficiency. To know and respect one's limitations, not seeking to transcend them, but ever to occupy the entire area of activity which they bound—that is to accomplish all that it is given to man to do. Your limitations are of two kinds: those inconsiderable ones imposed by nature, and the less negligible ones for which you will have to thank the tyrant that has the honor to address you.

“Your first and highest duty, of course, is to afflict the Eminent Unworthy. To the service of that high purpose I invite you with effusion, but shall limit you to a single method—ridicule. You may not do more than make them absurd. Happily that is the sharpest affliction that Heaven has given them the sensibility to feel. When one is conscious of being ridiculous one experiences an incomparable and immedicable woe. Ridicule is the capital punishment of the unwritten law.

“I shall not raise the question of your natural ability to make an offender hateful, but only say that it is not permitted to you to do so in this paper. The reason should be obvious: you can not make him hateful without making a hateful picture, and a paper with hateful pictures is a hateful paper. Some of you, I am desolated to point out, have at times sinned so grievously as to make the victim—or attempt to make him—not only hateful but offensive, not only offensive but loathsome.

Result: hateful, offensive, loathsome cartoons, imparting their unpleasant character to the paper containing them; for the contents of a paper are the paper.

“And, after all, this folly fails of its purpose—does not make its subject offensive. An eminently unworthy person—a political ‘boss,’ a ‘king of finance,’ or a ‘gray wolf of the Senate’—is a man of normal appearance; his face, his figure, his postures, are those of the ordinary human being. In the attempt to make him offensive the caricaturist’s art of exaggeration is carried to such an extreme as to remove the victim from the domain of human interest. The loathing inspired by; the impossible creation is not transferred to the person so candidly misrepresented; the picture is made offensive, but its subject is untouched. As well try to hate a faulty triangle, a house upside down, a vacuum, or an abracadabra. Let there be surcease of so mischievous work; it is not desired that this paper shall be prosperous in spite of its artists, but partly because of them.

“True, to make a man ridiculous you must make a ridiculous picture, but a ridiculous picture is not displeasing. If well done, with only the needful, that is to say artistic, exaggeration, it is pleasing. We like to laugh, but we do not like—pardon me—to retch. The only person pleased by an offensive cartoon is its author; the only person pained by a ridiculous one is its victim.”

1900.

THE S.P.W.

WILL not some Christian gentleman of leisure have the benevolence to organize The Society for the Protection of Writers? Its work will be mainly educational; not much permanent good can be done, I fear, by assassination, though as an auxiliary means, that may be worthy of consideration. The public must be led to understand, each individual in his own way, that some part of a writer’s time belongs to himself and has a certain value to him. If the experience of other writers equally ill known is the same as mine the sum of our wrongs is something solemn. Everybody, it would seem, feels at liberty to request a writer to do whatever the wild and wanton requester may wish to have done—to criticise (commend) a manuscript; send his photograph, or a copy of his latest book; write poetry in an album forwarded for the purpose and already well filled with unearthly sentiments by demons of the pit; set down a few rules for writing well, and so forth. It is God’s truth that compliance with one-half of the “requests” made of me would leave me no time for my meals, and no meals for my time.

Of course I speak of strangers—persons without the shadow of a claim to my time and attention, and with very little to those of their heavenly Father. Indeed, they belong, as a rule, to a class that is more profited by escaping divine attention than by courting it: nothing should so fill them with consternation as a glance from the All-seeing Eye—though some of the finer and freer spirits of their bright band would think nothing of inviting the Recording Angel to forsake his accounts and scratch an appropriate sentiment on “the enclosed headstone.”

When Mr. Rudyard Kipling once visited Montreal he gave orders at his hotel that he was not to be disturbed—whereby many worthy persons who called to “pay their respects” were sadly disappointed. One “prominent merchant,” a “great admirer,” took the trouble to introduce himself, and had the infelicitous fate to be informed by Mr. Kipling that he did not wish any new acquaintances—and sorrow perched upon that man’s prominent soul. To a club of “literary” folk and “artists” who “tendered him a reception” he did not deign a reply; and those whose hope construed his silence as assent were made acquainted with the taste of their own teeth. In short, Mr. Kipling seems to have acted in Montreal very much like a modest gentleman desiring to be let alone and having a gentleman’s fine scorn of vulgarity and intrusion.

When, I wonder, will Americans—Canadian Americans and United States Americans—learn that their admiration of a man's work in letters or art gives them no right to occupy his time and lengthen the always intolerably long muster-roll of his acquaintance? One would think that so wholesome a lesson in manners as Dickens gave us during his first visit, and later in the *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, would suffice, and that for lack of students he would have no successor in the Chair of Department. But sycophancy, like hope, springs eternal in the human breast, and, crushed to earth, impudence like truth, will rise again, inviting a fresh humiliation. Well, as the homely proverb hath it, there is no great loss without some small gain—albeit the same usually accrues to the author of the loss. Montreal's Pen and Pencil Club having passed through the fire and been purified of its own respect, is now, by that privation and the affining stress of a common sorrow, fitted to affiliate with the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, which also knows the lift of the Kipling superior lip, and how he kipples.

Mr. Kipling's explanation that he did not desire any new acquaintances goes pretty nearly to the root of the matter. What man of sense does?—unless he is so ghastly unfortunate as to need them in his business. A man of brains has commonly a better use for his head than to make it serve as a rogues' gallery for an interminable succession of mental portraits, each of which he must be prepared to outfit with its appropriate name on demand. One can not, of course, and none but a fool would wish to, go through life without now and again making an acquaintance, even a friendship, as circumstances, civility and character may determine. Even chance may without absolutely uniform disaster play a part in such matters, though, as a rule, persons in whose lives accidental meetings entail lasting social relations are not particularly agreeable to meet. Your man of sense cares to know those whom he daily meets under such circumstances as would make it awkward if he did not know them; and he is accessible to all good souls whose wish to know him is supplemented by the frankness to ask an introduction and the civility to obtain his assent. It is thus that he will himself approach those whom he wishes to know, and in some cases those whom he merely suspects of the wish to know him. As to that invention of the devil, the purposeless and meaningless "chance introduction," it is the hatefulest thing in all the wild welter of social irritants. As a claim to acquaintance it has about the same validity as had, in the case of Kipling, the fact that Montreal's "prominent merchant" was a "great admirer."

If a man, like a red worm, could be multiplied by section he might perhaps undertake to know all whom the irritating freedom of American manners permits to be introduced to him, and, if he is a distinguished writer, all who "greatly admire" him. At least if they were properly brigaded he might undertake to commit to his multiplied memory the names or numerals of the several brigades. Even then it should be understood that failure through preoccupation with his own affairs should not be counted against him as proof of pride and an evil disposition. Some allowance should be made, too, for the probability that a man of letters may be unfitted for prodigious feats of recollection by the necessity of preserving some part of his time for use in—well, for example, in letters. As to "receptions," "banquets," and so forth, "tendered" him, and "calls" "paid" him by strangers not of his profession, unless he is a literary impostor he will not accept the hospitality, nor, unless he is a social coward, submit to the intrusion. He knows that beneath these dreary and dispiriting "attentions" are motives transcending in ugliness a tangle of snakes under a warm rock.

There are other reasons why men of letters are not usually hot to make acquaintances. A good writer is a man of thought, for good writing, whatever else it may be, is, first of all, clear thinking. However much or little of his actual opinions he may choose to put into his work, he necessarily, as a man of thought, has convictions not commonly entertained by "persons whom one meets"—when one must. He is likely to be a dissenter from the established order of things—to hold in scant esteem the institutions, faiths, laws, customs, habits, morals and manners that are the natural

outgrowth and expression of our barbarous race; the enactments of God's governing majority, the rogues and fools. To utter his views in conversation with Philistines and Prudes is to smite them sick with dismay and fill them topful of resentment and antagonism; to incite a contention in which the appurtenant stalled ox itself is imperiled in the bones of it. Yet in making the acquaintance of even a fairly educated person not a vulgarian and having no outward and visible signs of an inner disgrace the chances are ten to one that you are meeting a Philistine and prude by whom natural conduct and rational convictions are accounted immoral, and with whom conversation outside the worn ways of commonplace and platitude is impossible. If it is a woman she will probably insult you, all unconsciously, in a thousand and fifty ways by savage scruples inherited from a long line of pithecan ancestresses eared to hear in the rustle of every leaf the tonguefall of the arboreal Mrs. Grundy. If it is a man there should be no needless delay in insulting *him*.

Another imminent peril to him who travels the hard road of letters lies in the mad desire and iron resolution of his new acquaintances to talk about his work, with, of course, imperfect knowledge, understanding and discretion. This if he will not permit he is accounted proud; if he will, vain. Poor Hawthorne's experience with the worthy person who thought it the proper thing to make a graceful reference to his book, "The Red Letter A," is typical and the record of that dreadful encounter comes home to every author's bosom and business with a peculiar personal interest.

PORTRAITS OF ELDERLY AUTHORS

IF by good or much writing a modest old man have the misfortune to incur the curiosity of the public regarding his personal appearance, how shall he gratify it—and gratified it will somehow be—with the least distress to himself? Every public writer is familiar with the demand, from editor or publisher, "Please send photograph." Of course he may easily decline, but also, alas! editor or publisher may easily decline the work for embellishment or advertisement of which the photograph was sought. So what can the poor man do? And what photograph shall he send—that of yesteryear, or that of a decade or two ago? Concerning this singularly solemn matter I venture to quote from a letter of one who conducts an editorium:

"One sees the printed counterfeit of a dashing young chap whom all know as the distinguished author of 'The Bean Pot,' which, it is true, appeared twenty years ago. But the portrait is the familiar one always used by publishers to herald later books by the same author. One day the author himself calls. You have always thought of him as having a smooth, high brow topped with a fine cluster of coal-black curls, and the devil in his eyes. When this wrinkled, bald, and squeaky old man tells you that he is the author of 'The Bean Pot' you suffer a shock. All your self-restraint is invoked to inhibit contumelious word and inhospitable act."

True, O king, but there is more to the matter. Every writer that is fore and fit cherishes a natural expectation of being known to posterity. If that hope is fulfilled he will be known to posterity by his last portrait. Who knows Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes or Whitman as other than a venerable ruin? Who has in mind a middle-aged Hugo, or a young Goethe? It is with an effort that we grasp the fact that all these excellent gentlemen of letters were not born old. They were merely indiscreet; they sat for their portraits when they could no longer stand. By the happy mischance of early death, Byron, Shelley, Keats and Poe escaped the caricaturing of the years, and can snap their finger-bones at Age, the merciless cartoonist.

The portrait of twenty years ago no more faultily represents the old man as he is than that of yesterday represents him as he was. Either is false to some period of his life, and he may

reasonably enough prefer that posterity shall know how he looked in his prime, rather than that his contemporaries shall know how he looked in his decay. It may be that it was in his prime that he did the characteristic work that begot the desire to know him.

With what portrait, then, shall one well stricken in years meet the contemporary demand? Perhaps it is best, and not unfair, to supply it with one made in one's prime, conscientiously and conspicuously inscribed with its date—and that is what I have usually done myself. But I grieve to observe that the date is, as a rule, ingeniously effaced in the reproduction. But what does posterity find that is peculiarly pleasing in the portrait of a patient in the last stage of his fatal disorder?

WIT AND HUMOR

IF without the faculty of observation one could acquire a thorough knowledge of literature, the *art* of literature, one would be astonished to learn “by report divine” how few professional writers can distinguish between one kind of writing and another. The difference between description and narration, that between a thought and a feeling, between poetry and verse, and so forth—all this is commonly imperfectly understood, even by most of those who work fairly well by intuition.

The ignorance of this sort that is most general is that of the distinction between wit and humor, albeit a thousand times expounded by impartial observers having neither. Now, it will be found that, as a rule, a shoemaker knows calfskin from sole-leather and a blacksmith can tell you wherein forging a clevis differs from shoeing a horse. He will tell you that it is his business to know such things, so he knows them. Equally and manifestly it is a writer's business to know the difference between one kind of writing and another kind, but to writers generally that advantage seems to be denied: they deny it to themselves.

I was once asked by a rather famous author why we laugh at wit. I replied: “We don't—at least those of us who understand it do not.” Wit may make us smile, or make us wince, but laughter—that is the cheaper price that we pay for an inferior entertainment, namely, humor. There are persons who will laugh at anything at which they think they are expected to laugh. Having been taught that anything funny is witty, these benighted persons naturally think that anything witty is funny.

Who but a clown would laugh at the maxims of Rochefoucauld, which are as witty as anything written? Take, for example, this hackneyed epigram: “There is something in the misfortunes of our friends which we find not entirely displeasing”—I translate from memory. It is an indictment of the whole human race; not altogether true and therefore not altogether dull, with just enough of audacity to startle and just enough of paradox to charm, profoundly wise, as bleak as steel—a piece of ideal wit, as admirable as a well cut grave or the headsman's precision of stroke, and about as funny.

Take Rabelais' saying that an empty stomach has no ears. How pitilessly it displays the primitive beast lurk in us all and moved to activity by our elemental disorders, such as the daily stress of hunger! Who could laugh at the horrible disclosure, yet who forbear to smile approval of the deftness with which the animal is unjungled?

In a matter of this kind it is easier to illustrate than to define. Humor (which is not inconsistent with pathos, so nearly allied are laughter and tears) is Charles Dickens; wit is Alexander Pope. Humor is Dogberry; wit is Mercutio. Humor is “Artemus Ward,” “John Phoenix,” “Josh Billings,” “Petroleum V. Nasby,” “Orpheus C. Kerr,” “Bill” Nye, “Mark Twain”—their name is legion; for wit we must brave the perils of the deep: it is “made in France” and hardly bears transportation. Nearly all Americans are humorous; if any are born witty, Heaven help them to emigrate! You

shall not meet an American and talk with him two minutes but he will say something humorous; in ten days he will say nothing witty; and if he did, your own, O most witty of all possible readers, would be the only ear that would give it recognition. Humor is tolerant, tender; its ridicule caresses. Wit stabs, begs pardon—and turns the weapon in the wound. Humor is a sweet wine, wit a dry; we know which is preferred by the connoisseur. They may be mixed, forming an acceptable blend. Even Dickens could on rare occasions blend them, as when he says of some solemn ass that his ears have reached a rumor.

My conviction is that while wit is a universal tongue (which few, however, can speak) humor is everywhere a patois not “understood of the people” over the province border. The best part of it—its “essential spirit and uncarnate self,” is indigenous, and will not flourish in a foreign soil. The humor of one race is in some degree unintelligible to another race, and even in transit between two branches of the same race loses something of its flavor. To the American mind, for example, nothing can be more dreary and dejecting than an English comic paper; yet there is no reason to doubt that *Punch and Judy* and the rest of them have done much to dispel the gloom of the Englishman’s brumous environment and make him realize his relationship to Man.

It may be urged that the great English humorists are as much read in this country as in their own; that Dickens, for example, has long “ruled as his demesne” the country which had the unhappiness to kindle the fires of contempt in him and Rudyard Kipling; that “the excellent Mr. Twain” has a large following beyond the Atlantic. This is true enough, but I am convinced that while the American enjoys his Dickens with sincerity, the gladness of his soul is a tempered emotion compared with that which riots in the immortal part of John Bull when that singular instrument feels the touch of the same master. That a jest of Mark Twain ever got itself all inside the four corners of an English understanding is a proposition not lightly to be accepted without hearing counsel.

1903.

WORD CHANGES AND SLANG

THAT respectable words lose caste, becoming the yellow dogs and very lepers of language, is a familiar fact hospitable to abundant illustration. One of these words has just fallen from my pen; fifty or a hundred years from now it will be impossible, probably, for any writer having a decent regard to the value of words to use the word “respectable” of anything truly meriting respect. For the past half-century it has been taking on a new and opprobrious character. Already the type of the “respectable” man, for example, is the prosperous, wool-witted Philistine, who complacently interlocks his fat fingers under the overhang of his stomach, and surveying the world from the eminence of his own esteem, tries vainly to imagine what it would be without him.

The word “respectable” is indubitably doomed: etymology can not save it, any more than it could save the word “miscreant,” which means by derivation, as at one time it meant actually, infidel, unbeliever. In its present abasement we may hear a faint, far whisper of the old, old days of religious intolerance. It stands in modern speech a verbal monument to the *odium theologicum* reposing beneath in the sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection.

A half-century ago the word “awful” was plumped into the mire of slang, where it has weltered ever since, without actual immersion, but apparently with no hope of extrication. The writer who would use it to-day in a serious sense has need to be well assured of his hold upon the reader’s mood. It may perchance whisk that person away from the sublime to the ridiculous, with the neat-handed nimbleness of Satan snatching a soul from the straight and narrow way, to send it spinning

aslant into the red-and-black billows of everlasting damnation!

There are transformations of a contrary sort—promotions and elevations of words, as from slang to poetry. Between the extremes of speech which are the extremes of thought, for speech is thought—between the upper and the lower deep, the heaven and the earth, is a Jacob's-ladder which these winged messengers of mind ascend and descend.

Grave advocacy of slang is not lacking: Professor Manley, of Harvard, is afield in defence of it. Some slang, he justly says, is "strong and poetical." It is "strong" because graphic and vivid, "poetical" because metaphorical; for the life and soul of poetry is metaphor.

Professor Manley thinks that the story of the Prodigal Son could have been better told this way:

The world gave him the marble heart, but his father extended the glad hand.

Yes, if those phrases had then been first used professors of literature might, as he suggests, be now expatiating on the beautiful simplicity of the diction and bewailing the inferiority of modern speech. But that is no defence of slang. It would not have been slang, any more than avowed or manifest quotations from the Scriptures as we have them are slang.

Professor Manley is especially charmed with the phrase "bats in his belfry," and would indubitably substitute it for "possessed of a devil," the Scriptural diagnosis of insanity. I don't think the good man meant to be irreverent, but I should not care for his Revised Edition.

Somewhat more than a generation ago John Camden Hotten, of London, a publisher of "rare and curious books," put out a slang dictionary. Its editor-in-chief was that accomplished scholar, George Augustus Sala. It was afterward revised by Henry Sampson, famous later as an authority in matters of sport, to whom I gave such assistance as my little learning and no sportsmanship permitted. The volume was a thick one, but contained little that in this country and period we know (and suffer) as "slang." Slang, as the word was then used, is defined in the Century Dictionary thus: "The cant words or jargon used by thieves, peddlers, beggars, and the vagabond classes generally."

To-day we mean by it something different and more offensive. It is no longer the argot of criminals and semi-criminals, "whom one does not meet," and whose distance—when they keep it—lends a certain enchantment to the ear, but the intolerable diction of more or less worthy persons who obey all laws but those of taste. In its present generally accepted meaning the word is thus defined by the authority already quoted: "Colloquial words and phrases which have originated in the cant or rude speech of the vagabond or unlettered classes, or, belonging in form to standard speech, have acquired or have had given them restricted, capricious, or extravagantly metaphorical meanings, and are regarded as vulgar or inelegant."

It is not altogether comprehensible how a sane intelligence can choose to utter itself in that kind of speech, yet speech of that kind seems almost to be driving good English out of popular use. Among large classes of our countrymen, it is held in so high esteem that whole books of it are put upon the market with profit to author and publisher. One of the most successful of these, reprinted from many of our leading newspapers, is called, I think, *Fables in Slang*—containing, by the way, nothing that resembles a fable. This unspeakable stuff made its author rich, and naturally he "syndicated" a second series of the same. Another was entitled *Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum*, and contained not a line of clean English. And it is hardly an exaggeration to say that in this country the writing of humorous and satirical verse is a lost art; slang has taken the place of wit; the jest that smacks not of the slum finds no prosperity in any ear.

Slang has as many hateful qualities as a dog bad habits, but its essential vice is its hideous lack of originality; for until a word or phrase is common property it is not slang. Wherein, then, is the

sense or humor of repeating it? The dullest dunce in the world may have an alert and obedient memory for current locutions. For skill in the use of slang no other mental equipment is required. However apt and picturesque a particular expression may be, the wit of it is his only who invented and first used it: in all others its use is forbidden by the commandment "Thou shalt not steal." A self-respecting writer would no more parrot a felicitous saying of unknown origin and popular currency than he would plagiarize a lively sentiment from Catullus or an epigram from Pope.

THE RAVAGES OF SHAKSPEARITIS

A FAMOUS author says that there is some kind of immoral emanation from the horse, and that it affects the character of every one who has much to do with the animal. I suppose it is something like that which suspires from the earth that is thrown out in digging a canal. Perhaps it is possible to construct a short and shallow waterway without stirring up enough of this badness to corrupt "all those in authority" along the line of it, but if the enterprise is of magnitude, like the Suez or the Panama project, results most disastrous to the morals of all engaged in the work, excepting those who do it, will certainly ensue, as we may soon have the happiness to observe.

A similar phenomenon is seen in the case of Shakspeare, whose resemblance to a horse and a canal has not, I flatter myself, been heretofore pointed out. The subtle suspiration from the work of the great dramatist, however, attacks, not the morals, but the intellect. It does not prostrate the sense of right and wrong, except in so far as this is dependent on mental health; it simply lays waste the judgment by dispersing the faculties, as the shadow of a hawk squanders a flock of feeding pigeons. Some time we shall perhaps have an English-speaking critic who will be immune to Shakspearitis, but as yet Heaven has not seen fit to "raise him up." And when we have him his inaccessibility to the infection will do him no good, for we shall indubitably put him to death.

The temptation to these reflections is supplied by looking into Mr. Arlo Bates's book, *Talks on Writing English*, where I find this passage quoted from Jeffrey:

"Everything in him (Shakspeare) is in unmeasured abundance and unequaled perfection—but everything so balanced and kept in subordination as not to jostle or disturb or take the place of another. The most exquisite poetical conceptions, images and descriptions are given with such brevity and introduced with such skill as merely to adorn without loading the sense they accompany. . . . All his excellences, like those of Nature herself, are thrown out together; and, instead of interfering with, support and recommend each other."

This is so fine as to be mostly false. It is true that Shakspeare throws out his excellences in unmeasured abundance and all together; and nothing else in this passage is true. His poetical conceptions, images and descriptions are not "given" at all; they are "turned loose." They came from his brain like a swarm of bees. They race out, as shouting children from a country school. They distract, stun, confuse. So disorderly an imagination has never itself been imagined. Shakspeare had no sense of proportion, no care for the strength of restraint, no art of saying just enough, no art of any kind. He flung about him his enormous and incalculable wealth of jewels with the prodigal profusion of a drunken youth mad with the lust of spending. Only the magnificence and value of the jewels could blind us to the barbarian method of distribution. They dazzle the mind and confound all the criteria of the judgment. Small wonder that the incomparable Voltaire, French, artistic in every fiber and trained in the severe dignities of Grecian art, called this lawless and irresponsible spendthrift a drunken savage.

Of no cultivated Frenchman is the judgment on Shakspeare much milder; the man's "art," his "precision," his "perfection"—these are creations of our Teutonic imaginations, heritages of the

time when in the rush-strewn baronial hall our ancestors surfeited themselves on oxen roasted whole and drank to insensibility out of wooden flagons holding a gallon each.

In literature, as in all else—in work, in love, in trade, in every kind of action or acquisition the Germanic nations are gluttons and drunkards. We want everything, as we want our food and drink, in savage profusion. And, by the same token, we rule the world.

1903.

ENGLAND'S LAUREATE

DOUBTLESS there are competent critics of poetry in this country, but it is Mr. Alfred Austin's luck not to have drawn their attention. Mr. Austin is not a great poet, but he is a poet. The head and front of his offending seems to be that he is a lesser poet than his predecessor—his immediate predecessor—for his austerest critic will hardly affirm his inferiority to the illustrious Nahum Tate. Nor is Mr. Austin the equal by much of Mr. Swinburne, who as Poet Laureate was impossible—or at least highly improbable. If he had been offered the honor Mr. Swinburne would very likely have knocked off the Prime Minister's hat and jumped upon it. He is of a singularly facetious turn of mind, is Mr. Swinburne, and has to be approached with an orange in each hand.

Below Swinburne the differences in mental stature among British poets are inconsiderable; none is much taller than another, though Henley only could have written the great lines beginning,

Out of the dark that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul—

and he is not likely to do anything like that again; on that proposition

You your existence might put to the hazard and turn of a wager.

I wonder how many of the merry gentlemen who find a pleasure in making mouths at Mr. Austin for what he does and doesn't do have ever read, or reading, have understood, his sonnet on

LOVE'S BLINDNESS.

Now do I know that Love is blind, for I
Can see no beauty on this beauteous earth,
No life, no light, no hopefulness, no mirth,
Pleasure nor purpose, when thou art not nigh.
Thy absence exiles sunshine from the sky,
Seres Spring's maturity, checks Summer's birth,
Leaves linnet's pipe as sad as plover's cry,
And makes me in abundance find but dearth.
But when thy feet flutter the dark, and thou
With orient eyes dawnest on my distress,
Suddenly sings a bird on every bough,
The heavens expand, the earth grows less and less,
The ground is buoyant as the ether now,
And all looks lovely in thy loveliness.

The influence of Shakspeare is altogether too apparent in this, and it has as many faults as

merits; but it is admirable work, nevertheless. To a poet only come such conceptions as “orient eyes” and feet that “flutter the dark.”

Here is another sonnet in which the thought, quite as natural, is less obvious. In some of his best work Mr. Austin runs rather to love (a great fault, madam) and this is called

LOVE'S WISDOM.

Now on the summit of Love's topmost peak
Kiss we and part; no further can we go;
And better death than we from high to low
Should dwindle, and decline from strong to weak.
We have found all, there is no more to seek;
All we have proved, no more is there to know;
And Time can only tutor us to eke
Out rapture's warmth with custom's afterglow.
We cannot keep at such a height as this;
For even straining souls like ours inhale
But once in life so rarefied a bliss.
What if we lingered till love's breath should fail!
Heaven of my earth! one more celestial kiss,
Then down by separate pathways to the vale.

Will the merry Pikes of the Lower Mississippi littoral and the gamboling whale-backers of the Duluth hinterland be pleased to say what is laughable in all this?

It is not to be denied that Mr. Austin has written a good deal of “mighty poor stuff,” but I humbly submit that a writer is not to be judged by his poorest work, but by his best,—as an athlete is rated, not by the least weight that he has lifted, but by the greatest—not by his nearest cast of the discus, but by his farthest. Surely a poet, as well as a racehorse, is entitled to the benefit of his “record performance.”

1903.

HALL CAINE ON HALL CAINING

MR. HALL CAINE once took the trouble to explain that he put in three years of hard work on his novel, *The Christian*, rewriting it many times and submitting the several and various parts of the work to experts. One kind of expert he failed to consult—a person having some knowledge of the English language. Amongst other insupportable characteristics the very first sentence in the book contains twelve prepositions and several clashing relatives and concludes with a sequence of four dactyls! The first sentence is as far as I have gone into the book, of which I know only that the manuscript was sold for a considerable fortune and that by many thousands of my fellow-creatures it is regarded as a distinctly immortal work than the immortalest work of the week immediately preceding the date of its publication. Of Mr. Caine himself I know a little more: for example, that if he were cast away on an island never before seen by a white man, in a few months every native would have a brand-new novel and Mr. Caine all the cowry-shells in the island.

Following a well-established precedent, he was good enough also to impart the secret of his success as a writer of “best-selling” books—novels, of course. The secret is genius That seems simple enough and easy enough, but I submit that it was known before. Every author of a popular novel has been entirely conscious of his genius and the reviewers have known it as well as he. Nevertheless, it is always pleasing to find a workman who not only does not quarrel with his tools,

but exhibits them with pride and affection, for we know then that he is a good workman, or—which means much the same thing—gets a good price for his product. Mr. Caine gets as good a price as any and is therefore as fit as any to expound his methods to the curious.

For it should be said that Mr. Caine does not hold that genius—even such genius as his—will produce so great work as his without some assistance from industry; one must take the trouble to write or dictate the great thoughts that genius inspires. One can not do this without some degree of application to the homely task. Indeed, Mr. Caine explains that he writes his novels twice before he permits us to read them once. One is glad to know that; it shows that, like the country editor, whose burning office attracted a large and intelligent class of spectators, he “strives to please.” He took fourteen months to write *The Eternal City*. That was most commendable, for with him time is money, but his patient diligence was equaled by that of a man that I know, who took fourteen months to read it.

Not only does Mr. Caine work slowly and surely; he advises lesser mortals to do so. “Write only when in the humor,” he says. This is good advice to any man, of whatever degree of genius, who is ambitious to turn out a “best seller,” but better advice would be: Don’t write at all. There are less fame in that, less profit and less taking of one’s self seriously; but there must be a feeling of greater security regarding the next world; for the author of a “best seller” is so conspicuous a figure in this world that he may be very sure that God sees him.

“Some people,” says Mr. Caine, meaning some persons, doubtless—he writes in Bestsellerese—“say that they can work best when they hurry most, but it is not the case with me, and I feel that inspiration does not come to the hurried mind so readily as it does when one is able to ponder deeply and shape one’s thoughts into some truly perfected form.” That is an impressive picture. One can almost see Mr. Caine, sitting at his table, head in hand, pondering profoundly on his inspiration and shaping his thoughts into that truly perfected form demanded by his exacting market. This really great man, with chestnuts in his lap, arointing the designing witch of spontaneity who would abstract them, is a spectacle that will linger long in his own memory. It is one of the most pleasing revelations of self that can be found in the literature of how to do it. Probably it will have the distinction of surviving all Mr. Caine’s other work by as much as six months. If done into bronze by a competent sculptor it may outlast even Mr. Caine himself, delighting and instructing an entire generation of Indiana novelists, the best in the world. Of course it is “on the cards” that he who has given us this solemn picture of himself in the veritable act of literary parturition may “whack up” something even better. He is not so very old, and in the years remaining to him (may they be many and prosperous) he may produce something so incomparably popular that even the greatest of his previous work will be, in the luminous French of John Phoenix, “*frappé parfontment froid!*” Indeed, Mr. Caine himself discerns that possibility very clearly. He says: “I do not believe I have yet produced my best work”—best selling work—“by any means.” It is to be hoped that he has not; yet it is also to be regretted that he has had the cruelty to add a new terror to death by saying so. To one engaged in dying, the thought of what he may be missing by leaving this vale of tears before Mr. Caine has written his *Eternalest City* must generate the wrench and stress of an added pang. It would have been kinder to make that forecast to his publisher only. Even *in articulo mortis* (if he have the bad luck to die first) that gentleman’s tantalizing vision of an unattainable earthly joy will come with enough of healing in its wings partly to salve the smart: coupled with the thought of what he will miss will come the consciousness of what he will not have to pay for it.

VISIONS OF THE NIGHT

I HOLD the belief that the Gift of Dreams is a valuable literary endowment—that if by some art not now understood the elusive fancies that it supplies could be caught and fixed and made to serve we should have a literature “exceeding fair.” In captivity and domestication the gift could doubtless be wonderfully improved, as animals bred to service acquire new capacities and powers. By taming our dreams we shall double our working hours and our most fruitful labor will be done in sleep. Even as matters are, Dreamland is a tributary province, as witness “Kubla Khan.”

What is a dream? A loose and lawless collocation of memories—a disorderly succession of matters once present in the waking consciousness. It is a resurrection of the dead, pell-mell—ancient and modern, the just and the unjust—springing from their cracked tombs, each “in his habit as he lived,” pressing forward confusedly to have an audience of the Master of the Revel, and snatching one another’s garments as they run. Master? No; he has abdicated his authority and they have their will of him; his own is dead and does not rise with the rest. His judgment, too, is gone, and with it the capacity to be surprised. Pained he may be and pleased, terrified and charmed, but wonder he can not feel. The monstrous, the preposterous, the unnatural—these all are simple, right and reasonable. The ludicrous does not amuse, nor the impossible amaze. The dreamer is your only true poet; he is “of imagination all compact.”

Imagination is merely memory. Try to imagine something that you have never observed, experienced, heard of or read about. Try to conceive an animal, for example, without body, head, limbs or tail—a house without walls or roof. But, when awake, having assistance of will and judgment, we can somewhat control and direct; we can pick and choose from memory’s store, taking that which serves, excluding, though sometimes with difficulty, what is not to the purpose; asleep, our fancies “inherit us.” They come so grouped, so blended and compounded the one with another, so wrought of one another’s elements, that the whole seems new; but the old familiar units of conception are there, and none beside. Waking or sleeping, we get from imagination nothing new but new adjustments: “the stuff that dreams are made on” has been gathered by the physical senses and stored in memory, as squirrels hoard nuts. But one, at least, of the senses contributes nothing to the fabric of the dream: no one ever dreamed an odor. Sight, hearing, feeling, possibly taste, are all workers, making provision for our nightly entertainment; but Sleep is without a nose. It surprises that those keen observers, the ancient poets, did not so describe the drowsy god, and that their obedient servants, the ancient sculptors, did not so represent him. Perhaps these latter worthies, working for posterity, reasoned that time and mischance would inevitably revise their work in this regard, conforming it to the facts of nature.

Who can so relate a dream that it shall seem one? No poet has so light a touch. As well try to write the music of an Aeolian harp. There is a familiar species of the genus Bore (*Penetrator intolerabilis*) who having read a story—perhaps by some master of style—is at the pains elaborately to expound its plot for your edification and delight; then thinks, good soul, that now you need not read it. “Under substantially similar circumstances and conditions” (as the interstate commerce law hath it) I should not be guilty of the like offence; but I purpose herein to set forth the plots of certain dreams of my own, the “circumstances and conditions” being, as I conceive, dissimilar in this, that the dreams themselves are not accessible to the reader. In endeavoring to make record of their poorer part I do not indulge the hope of a higher success. I have no salt to put upon the tail of a dream’s elusive spirit.

I was walking at dusk through a great forest of unfamiliar trees. Whence and whither I did not know. I had a sense of the vast extent of the wood, a consciousness that I was the only living thing in it. I was obsessed by some awful spell in expiation of a forgotten crime committed, as I vaguely

surmised, against the sunrise. Mechanically and without hope, I moved under the arms of the giant trees along a narrow trail penetrating the haunted solitudes of the forest. I came at length to a brook that flowed darkly and sluggishly across my path, and saw that it was blood. Turning to the right, I followed it up a considerable distance, and soon came to a small circular opening in the forest, filled with a dim, unreal light, by which I saw in the center of the opening a deep tank of white marble. It was filled with blood, and the stream that I had followed up was its outlet. All round the tank, between it and the enclosing forest—a space of perhaps ten feet in breadth, paved with immense slabs of marble—were dead bodies of men—a score; though I did not count them I knew that the number had some significant and portentous relation to my crime. Possibly they marked the time, in centuries, since I had committed it. I only recognized the fitness of the number, and knew it without counting. The bodies were naked and arranged symmetrically around the central tank, radiating from it like spokes of a wheel. The feet were outward, the heads hanging over the edge of the tank. Each lay upon its back, its throat cut, blood slowly dripping from the wound. I looked on all this unmoved. It was a natural and necessary result of my offence, and did not affect me; but there was something that filled me with apprehension and terror—a monstrous pulsation, beating with a slow, inevitable recurrence. I do not know which of the senses it addressed, or if it made its way to the consciousness through some avenue unknown to science and experience. The pitiless regularity of this vast rhythm was maddening. I was conscious that it pervaded the entire forest, and was a manifestation of some gigantic and implacable malevolence.

Of this dream I have no further recollection. Probably, overcome by a terror which doubtless had its origin in the discomfort of an impeded circulation, I cried out and was awakened by the sound of my own voice.

The dream whose skeleton I shall now present occurred in my early youth. I could not have been more than sixteen. I am considerably more now, yet I recall the incidents as vividly as when the vision was “of an hour’s age” and I lay cowering beneath the bed-covering and trembling with terror from the memory.

I was alone on a boundless level in the night—in my bad dreams I am always alone and it is usually night. No trees were anywhere in sight, no habitations of men, no streams nor hills. The earth seemed to be covered with a short, coarse vegetation that was black and stubbly, as if the plain had been swept by fire. My way was broken here and there as I went forward with I know not what purpose by small pools of water occupying shallow depressions, as if the fire had been succeeded by rain. These pools were on every side, and kept vanishing and appearing again, as heavy dark clouds drove athwart those parts of the sky which they reflected, and passing on disclosed again the steely glitter of the stars, in whose cold light the waters shone with a black luster. My course lay toward the west, where low along the horizon burned a crimson light beneath long strips of cloud, giving that effect of measureless distance that I have since learned to look for in Doré’s pictures, where every touch of his hand has laid a portent and a curse. As I moved I saw outlined against this uncanny background a silhouette of battlements and towers which, expanding with every mile of my journey, grew at last to an unthinkable height and breadth, till the building subtended a wide angle of vision, yet seemed no nearer than before. Heartless and hopeless I struggled on over the blasted and forbidding plain, and still the mighty structure grew until I could no longer compass it with a look, and its towers shut out the stars directly overhead; then I passed in at an open portal, between columns of cyclopean masonry whose single stones were larger than my father’s house.

Within all was vacancy; everything was coated with the dust of desertion. A dim light—the lawless light of dreams, sufficient unto itself—enabled me to pass from corridor to corridor, and from room to room, every door yielding to my hand. In the rooms it was a long walk from wall to

wall; of no corridor did I ever reach an end. My footfalls gave out that strange, hollow sound that is never heard but in abandoned dwellings and tenanted tombs. For hours I wandered in this awful solitude, conscious of a seeking purpose, yet knowing not what I sought. At last, in what I conceived to be an extreme angle of the building, I entered a room of the ordinary dimensions, having a single window. Through this I saw the same crimson light still lying along the horizon in the measureless reaches of the west, like a visible doom, and knew it for the lingering fire of eternity. Looking upon the red menace of its sullen and sinister glare, there came to me the dreadful truth which years later as an extravagant fancy I endeavored to express in verse:

Man is long ages dead in every zone,
The angels all are gone to graves unknown;
The devils, too, are cold enough at last,
And God lies dead before the great white throne!

The light was powerless to dispel the obscurity of the room, and it was some time before I discovered in the farthest angle the outlines of a bed, and approached it with a prescience of ill. I felt that here somehow the bad business of my adventure was to end with some horrible climax, yet could not resist the spell that urged me to the fulfillment. Upon the bed, partly clothed, lay the dead body of a human being. It lay upon its back, the arms straight along the sides. By bending over it, which I did with loathing but no fear, I could see that it was dreadfully decomposed. The ribs protruded from the leathern flesh; through the skin of the sunken belly could be seen the protuberances of the spine. The face was black and shriveled and the lips, drawn away from the yellow teeth, cursed it with a ghastly grin. A fullness under the closed lids seemed to indicate that the eyes had survived the general wreck; and this was true, for as I bent above them they slowly opened and gazed into mine with a tranquil, steady regard. Imagine my horror how you can—no words of mine can assist the conception; the eyes were my own! That vestigial fragment of a vanished race—that unspeakable thing which neither time nor eternity had wholly effaced—that hateful and abhorrent scrap of mortality, still sentient after death of God and the angels, was I!

There are dreams that repeat themselves. Of this class is one of my own, which seems sufficiently singular to justify its narration, though truly I fear the reader will think the realms of sleep are anything but a happy hunting-ground for my night-wandering soul. This is not true; the greater number of my incursions into dreamland, and I suppose those of most others, are attended with the happiest results. My imagination returns to the body like a bee to the hive, loaded with spoil which, reason assisting, is transmuted to honey and stored away in the cells of memory to be a joy forever. But the dream which I am about to relate has a double character; it is strangely dreadful in the experience, but the horror it inspires is so ludicrously disproportionate to the one incident producing it, that in retrospection the fantasy amuses.

I am passing through an open glade in a thinly wooded country. Through the belt of scattered trees that bound the irregular space there are glimpses of cultivated fields and the homes of strange intelligences. It must be near daybreak, for the moon, nearly at full, is low in the west, showing blood-red through the mists with which the landscape is fantastically freaked. The grass about my feet is heavy with dew, and the whole scene is that of a morning in early summer, glimmering in the unfamiliar light of a setting full moon. Near my path is a horse, visibly and audibly cropping the herbage. It lifts its head as I am about to pass, regards me motionless for a moment, then walks toward me. It is milk-white, mild of mien and amiable in look. I say to myself: "This horse is a gentle soul," and pause to caress it. It keeps its eyes fixed upon my own, approaches and speaks to me in a human voice, with human words. This does not surprise, but terrifies, and instantly I return to this our world.

The horse always speaks my own tongue, but I never know what it says. I suppose I vanish from the land of dreams before it finishes expressing what it has in mind, leaving it, no doubt, as greatly terrified by my sudden disappearance as I by its manner of accosting me. I would give value to know the purport of its communication.

Perhaps some morning I shall understand—and return no more to this our world.

*At my suggestion the late Flora Macdonald Shearer put this drama into sonnet form in her book of poems, *The Legend of Aulus*.