

# Why a Decline in Literature

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Project

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A distinguished French writer, not long since, voiced a lamentation over the decline of criticism. Such a phenomena does not concern one country alone. Changes in the world of thought are rapidly propagated beyond the centre of origin. The alleged causes of decay are certainly operative in our own country as well as in France; and, if it be true that the French are producing no worthy successors to the critics of the past generations, we may well ask whether we can see reason for more cheerful anticipations in England or America? The complaint would seem at first to be ill-directed, as we are often told that this is pre-eminently an age of criticism. Frequently a proclivity to criticism is given as some explanation of other deficiencies. If modern should ever lack for amusement they might

studies of the past. They might show their penetration and their genuine enthusiasm by exalting some genius whom his innocent contemporaries had always taken for a simpleton. And then criticism hath arrayed itself in some of the dignity of a science. It can discourse on the different phases of development, of social organization, of differentiation, of the evolutionary theory, and the spirit of the age as learnedly as "sociology" itself. It ridicules the old-fashioned critic, of the Rymers and Dennis period, who was content to point out that Shakespeare neglected unities; and smiles at the judicious Addison, who tested "Paradise Lost", by the canons of Aristotle. Modern criticism began by an attack upon the rule of Pope, that wicked and narrow-minded person who wished that all the trees of the forest should be cut and trimmed to suit the neat little "Twickenham" garden. But this was in early times, when Coleridge

and Wordsworth and Lamb were assailing  
one tyranny to restore the preceding dy-  
nasty, we have now reached a wider and  
more cosmopolitan point of view. Justice  
can be meted out to Pope as well as to the  
Elizabethans. We are neither classicists nor  
romanticists, as some one has said, but  
magnificent eclectics, who can assign  
to every man his proper place, and pro-  
nounce every literary species to be good  
of its kind. With scientific impartiality  
do we survey the whole field of human  
achievement; our specimens are labeled  
as of the age of iron; as of the medieval period;  
as of the Renaissance, and fill our museums  
with the spoils of all ages. A prominent  
writer a few years since said 'Each great au-  
thor takes his proper place as one special a-  
partment of the world-spirit; and we lay down theo-  
ries firm and irrevocable as those of the physi-

cal sciences and yet leave full play for all intelligent enthusiasm. We can not read any modern criticism, for it has of late raised its aims and improved its methods, without perceiving that it rests upon investigation incomparably more minute and careful than was formerly thought necessary. Criticism has become more scientific, but less delicate and less really sympathetic. For example, read Taine's brilliant account of English literature. It is forcible and comprehensive; lays down broad and sound principles, and shows the special case in its larger details. It is the type that is dwelt upon and not the individual; Chas. Lamb tells nothing about the organism and the environment, or the influence of climate upon character. But of what he speaks within his own sphere he speaks of as an expert, because he speaks as an enthusiast. He was open to all kinds of excellence but one. Yet, when treating of congenial objects, he ex-press-

ed in a few more of the true secret than is contained in volumes of ponderous German philosophy or brilliant French science. The decay in criticism of which our French writer complains, is due to the fact that we have become so philosophical, and so fond of generalizations that we have partly lost our instinct, and are incapable of perceiving the individual. The criticism of which the former writer alludes, was the criticism of those who did not concern themselves about science, were not cosmopolitan, but, who retain certain traditions, traditions which, while representing a vast amount of clear good sense had still, instinct enough to judge dogmatically, quickly, and with real perceptions of the qualities concerned. To say that this is an age of criticism is to say that it is an age of science. The latter has flourished alongside of art in past periods;

and to say it, will not in the future, evince a lack of faith in the essential unity of all intellectual development. Does the change in criticism manifest itself in other departments of literature? Can we mention a decay of criticism without noting one much wider - that of literature itself? It is a delicate subject to discuss, for, as some writer has suggested, "we would not shock living sensibilities by quoting them as examples of obnoxious degeneracy". Though there may be a dearth of genius, we are not wanting in talented men and women and it would be ungrateful to reproach a genuine poet because he is not one of the brilliant lights for all time. But, would anyone maintain that we are in a great poetical epoch - such as of the seventeenth century? that our poets will be studied a century hence, as we study Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Byron, Coleridge and Keats, Wordsworth or Scott? True we have several gifted poets of later date,



Whittier, Browning, Longfellow, Lord Lytton and Tennyson, but they seem to belong to the out-going than to the in-coming age. He would, indeed, be a courageous man who could say that he saw indications of a ripe intellectual harvest in the future as has been in the past. Let anyone compare some of the earlier prophets with some of those of more recent date. Could he after making the comparison, say with any semblance of fairness, that he could snatch man for man? No, we think not. Nearly all writers have followed some illustrious predecessor, have assimilated more or less of their thoughts, character and style from one or from several of the earlier authors. "Whomsoever we admire, we unconsciously imitate." To illustrate, the Sage of Chelsea has many followers. Carlyle's style has been condemned by literary purists; and those who object to a free use of the

grotesque or the overstained can show abundant reasons for not accepting him as a model. It is not from that point of view that he can be adequately judged. Never has an author swept through the souls of a generation with such power, though like every one eminently original and aggressive, he fought hard to obtain pardon for his originality. His influence over congenial minds was, and continues to be, through his works, a great intellectual stimulus. One might scan the "French Revolution" or "Sartor Resartus" and be either revolted or fascinated; but to read them with appreciation is to go through an intellectual crisis, and to enter into their spirit, is to experience something like a religious conversion. You are not the same person afterwards. No one exercised a more potent sway over the inmost being of his disciple. Another representative author with whom there were many points of resemblance as well as divergence was Emerson. He was

not a dilectitian, like Hobbs, apt in arranging ideas, but a revealer like Bacon; not a discursive thinker like Locke or Hume, not a clear and graduated logician, like Mill, nor a pure classifier, like Spencer; but he had subtle insight and cosmopolitan breadth. Those whose temperament put them outside the charmed circles of Carlyle and Emerson found a more temperate and prosaic leader in Mill. And, even now, there is a tendency to modify if not radically alter his teachings. Of all the followers of Mill, not one has arisen amongst them who can be compared in a literary sense to the great philosopher. There have been those who differed with him in many respects; those who were more accurate, more minute and more comprehensive, but they have not excelled in books at all comparable in point of style, or as models of literary composition, those of Mill's in which he showed his rigor as a

thinker, his extraordinary fulness of mind, and his fascinating power of impasting at least apparent lucidity into the darkest and most perplexed subjects. Are there, at present, any indications of leaders so capable of erecting permanent literary landmarks?

A little more than a quarter of a century since there were novelists of the first-rank; writers such that the announcement of new publication by them was heralded throughout every nook and corner not inaccessible to circulating libraries. The literary world was startled, nearly fifty years since, by a new power revealed, though not for the first time, in "Vanity Fair"; and had eagerly welcomed, "Pendennis", "The Newcombs", and "Esmond". A foolish and useless controversy, still sometimes continued, was raging as to the rival merits of their author and the cotemporary author of "Old Curiosity Shop", and "David Copperfield". The more erudite enjoyed both; the frequent appearance of a number of one serial in the

familiar yellow and another in the equally familiar green were greeted with intense delight. The whole literary world had just been thrown into excitement, not since equalled except by the sudden apparition of "Jane Eyre". A greater writer was winning fame by a more gradual approach in the publications of "Scenes of Clerical Life". Hawthorne was giving to the public "Blithedale Romance", "House of Seven Gables" and "Scarlet Letter". And besides Thackeray, Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Geo. Eliot and Hawthorne a number of writers as Mrs. Gore, Jane Austen, Miss Edgeworth, Fielding, Smollet and Defoe, provided agreeable entertainment in the intervals and might be regarded as at least worthy subordinates. Lord Lytton was publishing "My Novel" and "The Caxtons", which are certainly excellent specimens of literary effort; Mrs. Gaskell produced "Ruth", and "Mary Barton"; and Kingsley wrote

"Alton Locke", and "Hypatia",— books which if they will not bear the closest inspection in all respects, show no dearth of vigor and originality for which it would be hard to produce a later parallel. Is it not rather venturesome to inquire whether we have such novelists now?

But, permitting anyone to select his favorite, or pair of favorites, to be worthy champions of moderns, he will find it hard to fill up a list capable of battling with some of our predecessors.

Can we offer any counterbalancing considerations? Is there any department of literature in which we can claim a preponderance as distinct in this direction? In poetry, philosophy and fiction, we seem unable to successfully cope with our renowned predecessors.

There is yet one direction in which a stand might be taken. History might be a strong point, for in history we are approaching the scientific field; and in history no one can doubt that we have made enormous advances. The Anglo-Saxon and Charlemagne have been

nearly abolished; and that is understood to mean that we have made a great advance in accuracy of research. Yet from a literary point of view it might be questioned whether we could meet without some misgivings such a champion as Macaulay. It is possible to point out Macaulay's glaring defects; the limitation of his political views; the obtrusive glitter of his style. Yet when we carefully examined the "Essays" and the first part of the History we feel less confident. The extraordinary fulness of knowledge, the command of materials, the power of grouping events and forming them into a clear and flowing narrative, are so undeniable that we are inclined to admit, that with all his shortcomings that he is unapproached by his successors in the power which goes to make a monumental work. Other historians as Hume, Gibbon, Grote, Bancroft, Arnold, Hallam and Von Ranke - (recently deceased)

have won laurels for themselves and left to all posterity a magnificent heritage. Writers of the present era seem tempted to tack together a series of brilliant pamphlets, and trust to fortune, or something else, to make it a history. They forget that there is a distinction between persons who write books and writers whose books belong to literature. Still there are many who are achieving good work, and, at least, accumulating materials for literary triumphs. The literary like the natural, has been blighted and scanty. As Johnson said when he went from England to Scotland, 'we see the flower dying away to the stalk'. We have made progress from a utilitarian and scientific point of view; in the regions of artistic and imaginative achievement — at least regarding literature — we have been progressing backwards. Great names are few; hardly a leader left to bequeath the torch of intellectual light into worthy hands. Not complementing the times, we must confess that we are, indeed, passing



over a barren zone, which shows at present no signs of a more promising future. A self-appointed prophet has given this excuse for the scarcity of great names, that it is all the fault of "Democracy". How can culture, refinement and polish, be appreciated in art when they fail to govern society? They are the results of a sealed order, of a select circle educated in accepted traditions of refinement, able to perceive and appreciate delicate shades of manner and meaning, and revolted instinctively by the coarse and glaring. How can such plants thrive in the social hubbub of today? Says one writer, as well expect a candidate of a popular constituency to attract voters by the grace of a courtier under the old regime as expect a modern writer to emulate the polish of his forefathers. What encouragement is there in doing anything with delicacy when you work for the thousands who prefer noise to harmony, and are unable

to distinguish between a Tennyson and a Tupper? The finest production, like the coarsest, will at best gain five minutes attention between a fine literary article and the last-sensational novel. Little probability of appreciation. It will be admitted that every social order has its characteristic dangers. Let us clear our minds of cant, and above all, of the cant of the Pessimists. In periods of calm and refinement the danger is unproductiveness. The artist becomes over-critical. He becomes like the poet Gray, so sensitive that it takes him two years to write a score of delicate stanzas. For the true critic we have the exquisite connoisseur who values mere technical quality at the expense of power and abundance. If the opposite faults are prevalent in this period we must not overlook our advantages. The greatest writers have been the most luminous. They were so full of energy that they dashed off their productions, now making a blunder, now achieving a masterpiece — Scott and Shakespeare are often quoted as illu-

trations. These men are only representatives of a large class who write impulsively and to meet the needs of the times, and also at periods passionately exciting; — the old school of refined critics having been for a time thrust aside.

Somewhere we have read that revolutions in thought as in politics, bring great men to the front by sheer force of contagious enthusiasm. It may be regretted that Shakespeare neglected to erase and Scott's style was not overmeat. Some might prefer a Landor to a Scott, a Gray or Keat to a Shakespeare. Will the ultimate judgement of the world be for those who roused their contemporaries or for those who created lovely gems for a select few? But we have neither Scotts, Byrons, Landors or Keates. Tennyson is one of the most exquisite artists, and there are some other instances. One noticeable tendency of the most popular school now, is the tendency to an excessive appreciation of the more delicate and

voluptuous forms of art. It is not because the intellect of today has become frivolous or superficial. If there is a scarcity of great names, there was never a time when more serious and strenuous intellectual labor has been bestowed upon extending and modifying thoughts upon all topics in which thought can be exercised. The world has not produced more competent and thorough-going students of philosophy, history and science. Yet why do they not produce great leaders as of old? Answer is frequently given by saying that the social is but the counterpart of a spiritual class; that great minds are unutilized on all topics; that every opinion is disputed and discussed and that even those of select connections are chilled and paralyzed by the absence of general sympathy. It might be added that it is as applicable to artistic as to philosophical movements. A true aristocrat is a cultivated person who has reached a kind of artistic indifference. They have learned to sympathize with so many forms

of art that they really sympathize with none. As knowledge has extended all forms of the beautiful have become familiar; revivals of various kinds have in turn been indulged in, classical and romantic, imitated the medieval and the Renaissance, and even the "Queen Anne" period, with earnestness enough for masqueraders, and the aesthete, bewildered and worn, has concluded that, on the whole, there is no principle at all; that every artistic creed has pleased in succession; that none can be said to be essentially right or particularly wrong; that whatever pleases is therefore right; and consequently that the only principle is to have as many and as keen tastes as possible. The misfortune is that we, in this hopeless chaos of tastes and fashions, lose sight of the one important thing, ourselves; that our tastes are becoming affectations, and that we have lost precisely that spontaneity which is the univer-

sal condition of excellence in any form of art. We change restlessly; we have a taste (or think we have) for everything and a genuine enthusiasm for nothing; all our work is more or less a sham; and our poets, who can turn off a pretty ballad or medieval romance, or Elizabethan Drama or classical idyl, somehow find one thing impossible to voice the hope and fears and aspirations of living beings. But why is it, if old ideals are discordant that new ones have not been framed? Why should we not take refuge in downright realism? Life, surely, is as interesting now as ever: the same impulses move men and convulse the whole social order, and are manifested as clearly to a reflective mind. At present it would seem that not only is any high aim become almost inconceivable, but that there is an express aversion to anything which implies thought in the writer and requires it from the reader. Rossetti who makes any demands upon the

reader's attention must generally be content to go unread. The inference has been drawn that our age is marked by frivolity and littleness. This is too rash and too harsh a conclusion and evidently untenable. It is so far from being true that the absence of great elevations implies a decline of the general standard that the reverse is in many instances demonstrable. If we have not great torches, it is not because there is not that earnest inquiry - steadfastness of research as formerly, whatever else may be the cause. It is merely the coincidence between the marked increase of intellectual activity and appreciation of the beautiful in some directions, and the absence of great artists and great leaders of thought, which makes the problem really curious and interesting. Is an explanation sought? Two suggest themselves - that we do not know,

and that it does not greatly matter. The most  
glorious of all the expressions of the English  
mind, like every other outburst of national  
genius, it is essentially inexplicable in itself.  
It occurred, but why it occurred we can answer  
only approximately. We can trace some of  
the influences which operated on Spenser,  
Sidney, Shakespeare, Bacon and Raleigh, but  
the genesis of their genius is beyond our  
criticism. The possession of their power is  
an ultimate fact, and defies elucidation.  
One cannot tell why in one age there arise  
a group of eminent composers producing  
masterpieces for all time, why, when that  
group passes away, leaving no worthy  
successors. Only in the vaguest way can we  
say that there are times of blossoming in  
the mental as in the physical world and  
after fulfilling their mission disappear.  
But, says a recent writer, "so long as there is  
no reason for inferring that a temporary  
obscurity will not be followed by new flashes



of light", we can live, for a time, without  
stars of the first magnitude, studying those  
of past ages, believing, that so long as the  
energy of the race continues unabated, it  
will, sometime, though when we cannot  
say, throw out again, as of old, a group  
of dazzling luminaries.

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