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OBSTACLES TO AMERICAN LITERATURE.

BY TIMOTHY FLINT.

OUR views upon this subject, we are aware, will be little likely to accord with popular opinion, and bear small resemblance to the hackneyed vaunting of the unparalleled illumination of our country, put forth in fourth of July orations. We are sorry that, in declaring them, we may seem to have caught the spirit of those reviling and fault finding English travellers, with whose books of travels our countrymen have been so much annoyed. But if any part of their charge is true, it would be better, as well as more magnanimous, to remove the causes of their censure, than be angry with them for declaring the truth. It is only the petulant and little minded, who are revolted by the truth. Generous and gifted minds cultivate courage to hear it declared, as well as moral determination to find in it a guide and a remedy.

With more writers than any other people, in proportion to our numbers, with innumerable aspirants after the fame of literature, with nearly two thousand editors, with poets to fill the corners of our fifteen hundred periodicals, with American books to endanger the bookseller's shelves with their weight, why have we not a national literature? Aiming only at simplicity and the force and influence of truth, we shall mention a few of these obstacles, as they strike our mind. The common solution consists only of apologies. We are a people too young to have a literature. Our people are too intensely engrossed with the pursuit of wealth, and the scramble of professional competition, to possess the aptitude, quietness of thought, and leisure for pursuits, that strike the great mass as aimless and without utility. These solutions are in some degree just, and these apologies furnish some excuse. But there are many other obstacles, obvious, inexcusable, and removable.

I. Our national and state governments do little or nothing for literature by furnishing example, premiums, excitement, money. They have taken no pains to inspire a taste for it, or to cause it to become part and parcel of the national glory. To produce a rail road, a canal, a joint stock company, is felt to confer more national renown, as well as advantage, than to rear a Milton, Burke, or Wal-

ter Scott. We hardly retain our West Point. Beside the solemn farce of sending among the few respectable examiners, a large proportion of ignorant and incompetent men to examine the pupils, legislators have not been found wanting, who, availing themselves of the miserable appeal of demagogues, to the sordid appetite, miscalled economy, have wished to put forth their unhalloved hands to demolish this only vestige of national show of a disposition to foster the sciences. Profound respect for our country interdicts the thoughts that arise to our mind upon this head. Literature, science, what are they at Washington, more than they would have been in the day of Attila? The members of the legislature have more than they can do to write letters to their constituents, and secure the means of a future election, and to make excuses for refusing their names to the thousand applicants for patronage to new books and periodicals.

In reply to all this we are sometimes asked, what a government with the genius and limitations of ours could do to foster literature? Every one must be aware, that if the constituent parts that compose the government, felt keenly and saw clearly that advances in science and literature constituted the true interest and glory of the country, they would be at no loss to apply the adequate excitement. Had they the strong impulse, the inward perception, the munificent and fostering spirit, we should discover what they could do. The feeling, the will, and not the means, are wanting. The single solitary expedition of Lewis and Clark twinkles, as a kind of evening star above the western mountains, in the midst of the darkness of our efforts for science and letters. That single mission gained the administration of Jefferson more true glory abroad and at home, than any single act of that or any subsequent administration; and every village orator annually announces, that Athens, of amaranthine and imperishable memory, was less extensive and less populous than one of our states of the second class, and assigns as the cause of this freshness and perpetuity of her fame nothing but intellectual pre-eminence. But the people and the rulers have alike waxed too gross and sordid, too blind and hardened to every impulse but personal aggrandizement and the love of money, to perceive or regard what constitutes national glory.

II. We have no literary metropolis, no central point, from which information, excitement and emulation might radiate in every direction, so as to fill the whole circumference of our land. The interests and tastes of our numerous literary capitals not only have no decided concurrence, but clash and oppose each other. The favorite author, poet, editor of one capital glides in the steam boat, and whirls on the rail way in a few hours out of the orbit of his own little universe, and is surprised to find himself in a new planet, as little known as the man in the moon. There is no common point

of union for literary men, where they may meet and replenish their oil from each other's lamps, guide and encourage each other, review and pass upon the books and literary efforts of the past year, and impart counsels touching their own embryo projects for the coming one. A censure thus constituted would be able to do much toward breaking down sectional and building up in its stead a national literature. Hundreds of trumpery books on which so much paper and ink are wasted, would in this case hereafter cease to see the light; and much talent, that is now as an unwrought gem in the mines, would be brought to view. We shall be told, that there would be infinite jealousy, rivalry, clanship, envy, intrigue. Perhaps there might. But political associations are not abandoned, because the same evil attaches to them. Such meetings have long been practised in Germany, and have proved remarkable for their amenity, courtesy, and good fruits. Men, especially intellectual men, when brought together, mutually catch the spirit of their station. Envy and jealousy are the natural heritage of ignorance. Intellectual men, if proverbially irritable, have been in all countries and all times proverbially generous, kind hearted, beneficent. Such men would feel themselves impelled to act according to their station and responsibility, and would have a noble disdain at the idea of bringing a stain upon their escutcheon. These men, being charged that the republic of letters should receive no detriment, would scorn prejudiced, narrow, and illiberal views, and would promulgate generous thoughts and broad principles. The books which they patronised would be received by the public with confidence, while those to which they affixed their veto would cease to circulate; and thus transfer more than half the patronage of literature, which is now thrown away upon worthless books and periodicals, to such as are important and useful.

III. The remaining slavery of our colonial literary dependence upon Great Britain. It is humiliating to reflect, that a great nation, sometimes not a little tempted to bluster about its greatness and independence, notwithstanding all the taunts and reproaches we have received from the writers of that nation for our servility, and imbecile dependence upon it for our literary opinions, as well as our books, should still look beyond the seas for literary fame. But every one knows, that an American writer must delve on uncheered and unblest, until he has contrived to get an echo of his name from beyond the Atlantic. What efforts, what arts, what servility to obtain it? This is not all. In the greedy competition of the press, the books of that country, the great estimated mart of fame, can be republished here without copy right. On this head, there is no need, as we have no space to enlarge. Every one can see that American writers have no adequate incitement to put forth

their powers, while obliged to work up against such a wind and tide opposed to them.

IV. The spirit of the age and country is opposed to the progress of literature. It is pre-eminently an age of gross and absorbing avarice, in which the love and the pursuit of money have extinguished those aspirings and tastes, which impel the mind in the direction of literature. The estimated value of every thing is just what it will bring in money. Love, matrimony, religion, all is a matter of speculation, reduced to the simplicity of the decimal scale of dollars and eagles. The physical improvements of the country have infinitely outbalanced the advance in morals. The abstract, bloodless and soulless spirit of corporate associations has merged private affections, charities, and that reflecting individuality, which leads man to commune with his own spirit. The same evil, resulting from similar causes in a higher degree, is said to exist in England. Such a spirit is adverse to meditation, the making of books, and still more to buying them.

V. The number of writers, periodicals, and books that, notwithstanding all these discouragements, are continually emerging to the light. Literature seems likely to perish under a deluge of its own exuberance. But a very small portion of it is worthy of patronage, and destined to survive the present. Many, who would otherwise purchase and read books, refuse, alleging as their grand excuse, that among the numberless claimants for public favor, they have no means of discriminating those they ought to patronise; and because some trouble is requisite to sift out the valuable from the vile, and because they cannot purchase all, they excuse themselves for purchasing none.

VI. This brings to view another obstacle, upon which we shall dwell in more detail. It is the vile spirit and fashion of puffing and reviewing, which spreads, as a taint of mildew, over our whole literature. Of all the practices of our parent country, there is none, in which we more basely and servilely imitate her, than in this habit of puffing. Yet, in most instances, it is in editors a sin without any considerable temptation. They sell themselves, as the agents of booksellers, or the instruments of the ill feeling of a clan, without compensation. In England, however, the country from which we have copied the vile practice, so complete is the concentration, and so rapid the interchange of public sentiment, that when bad books are puffed, or good ones condemned, the wrong doing soon comes back in its reaction, to plague the perpetrator. The evil soon corrects itself. But here, from the number of our capitals, from the immense extent of our country, from the comparative sparseness of our population, from the intense absorption of the people in gain, and, we much fear, from want of independent

thinking, from the clanship of friendship, and the bitter assiduity of enemies, it so happens, that books of no intrinsic value often acquire an extensive reputation with the public.

If it were not in its nature a serious evil, the American system of puffery would be a source of amusement. If we may credit the public press and the reviewers, never went there by an age, when there was such a prodigious number not only of good books and periodicals, but of the very best, that ever were or could be written. Every possible form of eulogy is exhausted; and yet so numerous are the works, and so nearly similar the requisite forms of eulogy, that it would be easy to achieve the sort of aid in this species of writing, that has become in fact a trade by itself, which Sir Walter Scott is said to have invented, in regard to the innumerable dedication of books, addressed to him. Finding it troublesome to invent the variety of phrase and style, which the case seemed to call for, and that the occasions and expectations were very similar, he procured a stock of answers to be lithographed, and had always a supply on hand, in anticipation of the occasion. It would not be difficult for a writer, tolerably acquainted with this mode of writing, to lithograph a thousand puffs anticipatory, and to preserve them on hand for the publisher's use; and every intelligent reader will agree, that such might be furnished quite as suitable to the books and works published, as those which appear after the publication, and purport to be reviews. It is very true, that with the reflecting portion of readers, these sorts of puffs have no manner of influence whatever in regard to their estimate of the books reviewed. These puffs are regarded as the vocation of the writers, and the natural fruit of their relation to the reviewers. But it is far otherwise with the million, who have little time or capability for correcting, by their own judgment, the errors of the reviewers. As these puffs ordinarily cost something, if they were not found by experiment to have their value, the publishers would no longer pay for them. How much injustice has been effected in this way, how many have become unworthy favorites of the public, how many meritorious, because they would not submit to such measures, have never emerged to public favor, we have no disposition to calculate. It is an enormous evil, and the enginery so coarse, that one would think it impossible, that any party could be deceived or misled, that any writer could receive pleasure or pain, from such venal and monotonous reviews. Yet they do cause the unfortunate author, in innumerable instances, the most vivid enjoyment or the bitterest pain, according to the tenor of the notices. The incense, when there is praise, is snuffed, however strong the odor, with infinite satisfaction.

The consequence is, that all efforts are confounded. The gifted and worthy hear their works lauded or condemned in the same un-

distinguishing tenor with the most worthless; and by thus laying on the same thick coat of plaster upon every thing, all faith in what is publicly said of books is destroyed. All the editors of a party follow suit. Were there of the number an editor of higher principle, surer judgment, and better taste, disposed to declare of the works, he noticed, the simple truth according to his judgment, he would have the poor consolation of being considered arrogant and ill-natured, and would be sacrificed for his integrity. We have few editors, who are disposed to be buffeted for conscience sake. To avoid being thought insolent, cynical, and disposed to know more than the rest, they are compelled by moral considerations to chime in with their file leaders, and to echo the same unmeaning eulogy or censure.

We are well aware, that there are many honorable exceptions. We have the good fortune to know many men of this vocation equally amiable and high minded, who have the integrity and good feeling to say what their conscience dictates, and are of sufficient mental enlargement to be able, uninfluenced by envy or temper, to do justice even to an enemy. But we have been compelled to know but too many of this fraternity, who discharge their function with no more knowledge, honor, or conscience, than bad boys who throw stones in the streets. Too ignorant and unfeeling to be aware that others may have more feeling than themselves, they avail themselves of their bad facility to inflict pain and mischief, and think they are witty in the same proportion, as they can utter abuse. They equally distinguish themselves by a fulsome and nauseous praise, a mawkish mixture of rain water and treacle, and furious and undistinguishing censure, a sort of flat vinegar, not deeming it all essential to the work lauded or condemned, to have read a word of it. It is necessary, that some more industrious and malicious blockhead, than the rest, should now and then start a somewhat more appropriate and original analysis of the work lauded or condemned. Tray, Blanche, and Sweetheart, the whole pack open upon the same key note. Varying a little the phraseology of the model, but adopting all its essential points, they can practise toad-eating or abuse, without the labor of reading or investigation, and be regarded by the multitude as witty and original reviewers. Another class, equally mischievous in intention, but somewhat more emulous of the character of justice, courtesy, and moderation, repair to the original model, and copy one part of the abuse and another of mawkish praise, and lo! they are judicious reviewers, who weigh praise and blame in the scales of equity. The mixture gains them the reputation of being discriminating, and above the meanness of flattery. We have no doubt, that nine tenths of the notices of books in the United States are compounded in this way, without the trouble to the writers of having read a line of the

books purporting to be reviewed. Yet it is by these notices, so got up, that the estimate of books is formed by the million. The influence of the reviews, properly so called, is to that of these newspaper notices, in forming the public literary opinion, probably not as one to a hundred.

These reviews are somewhat more formal, learned and moderate; and the writers have generally read the books reviewed. But on the safe non-committal principle, they generally find in the books reviewed no more than a text for an abstract discussion, a thousand leagues from any analysis or review of the book, that shall enable the purchaser to determine whether to possess himself of it or not. Then, when they speak of the book, it is in point no point phrase; ambiguous, careful, capable, like the Delphic response, of receiving the interpretation of the author's wishes. We are well aware, that they contain many sensible and eloquent articles; but we could wish, that they were more direct, laconic, downright, fearless, and just; and especially that all reviews were, what they purport to be, analyses and fair awards of the high court of literature of the books reviewed.

Reviews certainly might be conducted upon the same principles of honor and truth, that are supposed to govern the decisions of the courts of justice. The judgment of a competent reviewer would then be some clue to determine the purchaser, in regard to the merits of the book. But the greater part of the self appointed judges in this court, so essential to the public morals and well, think themselves absolved from all obligations of kindness, justice, and truth; and so that they can pass for witty, wield their reviewing pen as recklessly as the drunken savage does his tomahawk. Wit, true genuine wit, the offspring of beneficent genius, is like true poetry, a rare commodity. But abuse, which the public have unhappily come to receive for it, is a cheap, abundant, and universal article. Hence of our abusive reviews, passing with the public for witty, the inspiration is, for the most part, inflated self-importance, the genius malignity, the coloring envy, and victory having the last word. With such, the unfortunate author, upon whom they fasten, has no chance. Discussion with them reduces him to their level. They will always have the advantage of him in perseverance and copiousness; and he has no other resource but with what patience he may to bridle his pen and tongue in silence, aware at the same time, that these instruments, vile and unjust as they are, are the engines that settle public opinion, and hold his fame and the fruit of his labors at their disposal.

VII. But the most formidable impediment to American literature of all, is the coarse and absorbing appetite of the great mass of the community for politics. It is difficult to say, whether it is most lamentable or ludicrous to observe, what infinite importance

the American people attach to what is said and done at Washington. The most stupid private citizen becomes an oracle, as soon as he is elected a member of Congress. And then at the public house, in steam-boats, in private circles, what a yawning, tedious, dull business is this doomsday discussion of politics, that fills every mouth, and apparently every thought! How painful to be obliged to discuss in the everlasting common places this hackneyed theme! But we soon see, that, dull and spiritless as it is to us, it is all in all to the people. Who thinks of literature in the scramble of the *outs* to get in, and push the *ins* out? Who can afford space in his thoughts for literature, that can converse at home and abroad about nothing but speeches, elections, caucusses, and the miserable and paltry intrigues of ambitious demagogues? Can the still voice, the quiet, but satisfying and elevating thoughts of literature, make their way in a community which hungers only after the husks of politics, which feeds on nothing but long dull speeches? While this rabid appetite pervades our public, we can never expect to have a higher national literature, than that of newspapers.

True, the broad and general principles of legislation and government furnish an elevating and interesting study and theme; but certainly far inferior, in these respects, to those of morals and literature. But it is inconceivable to us, how men, claiming to be high minded and reflecting, can find the interest, which they seem to possess in discussing the unimportant and passing politics of the day, the last speech, or the result of the last scramble and intrigue. Lyceums and debating societies and the thousand engines of the boasted march of mind, instead of remedying this morbid appetite, seem to us to have increased it. They furnish another valve for the escape of the gas of ambition and self-importance. All their discipline, influence and excitement flow finally into the dead flat sea of politics.

But we are admonished to bring to a close remarks, which, true and important as we feel them to be, may seem tinged with querulousness. So long as it remains the predominant opinion, that England alone can furnish good books and settle fame; so long as publishers can deluge the country with republications of English books without copy right; so long as every boy, too lazy to cultivate the land, and too stupid to earn a subsistence in any other way, can purchase a press on credit, and become editor, critic, poet, politician, moralist, philosopher, and divine, and add another furious political newspaper to the thousands that deluge the country; so long as the people have no taste for any higher discussions, than those of politics, or idle polemical debates, which are only another form of the acting of the political appetite, so long we shall remain without a national literature.

We close by suggesting, what seems to us, one grand and efficient mean of raising such a literature from the dust of poverty, neglect, or what is worse, the mildew of puffery, and the suffocating lumber of pamphlets, poems, souvenirs, and family libraries. It is, that the men of talents, the gifted minds, in great numbers spread over the surface of our country, who are now either indolent, or wasting their powers in catering for the coarse appetite for politics, should feel, that they have a ministry, a function, a high responsibility, and a call from Providence to exercise it; that they should shake themselves from the dust, rise above the petty jealousy of fearing to make the first advances, and that they should know each other; for they will then esteem and respect each other. Real endowment, true genius, always has been, as it now is, utterly incompatible with the baseness of envy. Let him who feels this venom burning in his bosom, be aware that the mark of Cain, of a stunted and mean mind is upon him, and know that he has neither part nor lot in this matter. Not only would the highest and most valuable friendships thus be formed, but in every civilized country, such a union must have, and would have an immense influence. It is shyness, distance, jealousy, perhaps worse, a reckless and proud disregard of the responsibility attached to the possession of talents, which cause that our literary men, dispersed over a vast surface, do not know each other, have no concert, or worse, attempt to thwart and belittle each other, and thus lose all their legitimate influence upon opinions, manners, and morals. Could they join hands, could they act in concert, they would soon find, that self-love and sociality were the same, that in proportion as they acted in concert for the public welfare, they would actually strengthen each others hands, and benefit each other.

To be able to form and pass an accurate judgment upon books, is neither an easy or common endowment. The common estimate seems to be, that the three essential ingredients to form a reviewer are impudence, malignity, and self-consequence. Horace said truly, *Haud ex quolibet ligno Hercules fit*. Few people possess the tact to discriminate the true from the seeming, eloquence from verbiage, and the real ability to write from the plodding mechanical dullness, which measures out sentences with the exactness of machinery, wit from flippant malignity, sophistry from sound logic, and talent from self-confident emptiness. Of those who possess some of these attributes, a great portion exercise them marred by some obliquity in the brain, envy, devotion to clanship, and want of integrity to rise above interest, ill temper, or the solicitation of friends. If a review could be established, capable, fair, impartial, dignified, and adequate to anticipate the judgment of posterity, it would be, in various respects, an invaluable tribunal.

Merit accompanied by industry, would be lifted up from the dust, and a veto would be put upon the thousand worthless books and publications, which by the efforts of clanship, and the concurrence of fortunate accidents, are now palmed upon the public, not only depraving the public taste, rendering the mind callous to the interests of literature, and indifferent alike to bad and good books, but squandering in this way the very means that ought to be applied to the purchase of good books. Such a review would act with all possible indulgence and gentleness towards the nerves of those who have no other pretensions to interest than its irritability. But above all, aware that the heartfelt praise of a discriminating mind is of all cordials the most exciting to a similar mind, such a review would not bestow the poor, stinted, measured praise of a pinched and little mind, but would be honest, warm-hearted, and amiable, awarding that sort of praise, which a generous mind puts forth, when reading what pleases him in the privacy and among the inmates of the parlour. Have we such a review? Let the public feeling decide. Might such an one be established? Unquestionably, for the talent is not wanting. Why do not such reviews exist? Because reviewers have not magnified their office, nor thought it necessary to bring to it that honesty and impartiality, without which a judge in a matter of dollars and cents, would be despised. All that has been thought requisite for a reviewer, is to consult his interest, and be gracious to friends, and terrible to enemies.

WHEN THOU HAST LEFT THE LIGHTED HALL.

BY THE LATE MRS. DUNCAN.

When thou hast left the lighted hall
 To seek thy chamber dear,
 And Music's sad and dying fall,
 Still lingers on thine ear.

When the soft moon-ray pours a stream,
 Of silver light o'er thee;
 And woos thee with a pleasant dream
 Of magic memory.

When thou art gazing on that light,
 We both have loved so well;
 And solitude, and peaceful night,
 Bring back my last farewell.

Then in thy calm and tranquil rest,
 Sweet sister, think of me;
 And keep kind thoughts within thy breast,
 Unworthy, though I be.