Why a Decline in Literature

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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 center of origin. The alleged causes of decay are certainly operating in our own country as well as in France; and, if it is true that the French are producing no worthy successors to the critics of the past generation, 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 prose should ever lack for amusement, they might...
studies of the fact. They might show their penetration and their genuine enthusiasm by evoking some genius whose 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 organism, 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 Byronic and Bennie period, who was content to point out that Shakespeare neglectedunities, and smile 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 "Tweedledum" garden. But this was in early times, when Coleridge
and Wordsworth and Lamb were assailing
one tyranny to restore the preceding di-
nasty, as have now reached a wider and
more cosmopolitan point of view. Justice
can be meted out to Pepys as well as to the
Elizabethans. We are neither classicalists
nor romanticists, as some one has said, but
magnificent eccentrics, who can assign
to every man his proper place, and pro-
ounce every literary species to be good
of its kind. With scientific impartiality.
So 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-
chor of the world-spirit; and we lay down the
river firm and invincible as those of the physi-
call sciences and yet leave full play for all intelligent enthusiasm. It cannot
read any modern criticism, for it has of late raised its aims and improved its meth-
ods, without perceiving that it rest upon in-
vestigation incomparably more minute
and careful than was formerly thought
necessary. Criticism has become more sci-
entific, but less delicate and less really syn-
pathetic. 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 built
upon and not the individual. 'Chee Lamb tells
nothing about the organism and the environ-
ment, or the influence of climate upon char-
acter. But of what he speaks within his own
sphere he speaks of as an expert. Because he
speaks as an enthusiast. He was opaqueness
itself, to all kinds of excellence but one. Yet
when treating of congenial objects, he expose-
ed in a few more of the true secrets than is contained in volumes of ponderous treatises of philosophy or brilliant French science. The decay in criticism of which our French writers complain, 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 retained certain traditions, traditions which, while representing a vast amount of clear good sense had still an 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, evinces 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 obliterations degeneracy. Though there may be a dearth of geniuses, 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, 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 outgoing than to the incoming 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 from man? No, we think not. Nearly all writers have followed some illustrious predecessor, have assimilated more or less of their thought, character and style from one or from several of the earlier authors. Whosoever we admire, we unconsciously imitate. To illustrate the Sages of Chelsea, has many followers. Carlyle's style has been condemned by literary purists; and those who object to a free use of this
grotique or the overstrain 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. Here he 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. The 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 appreciations so 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. So 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 dialectician, like Hobbes, apt in arranging ideas, but a reasoner 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 sub-
its insight and cosmopolitan breadth. Those
whose temperament put them outside the
charmed circles of Carlyle and Emerson found
a more temperate and peaceful leader in Mill.
And, even now, there is a tendency to modify if
not radically alter his teachings. Of all the pre-
temper of Mill, not one has arisen amongst them
who can be compared in a literary sense to the
great philosophes. There have been those who
dispute with him in many respects; those
who were more accurate, more minute and
more comprehensiveness, but they have not exull
ed in books at all comparable in point of
style, or as models of literary composition, those
of Mill's in which he showed his vigor as a
thinker, his extraordinary fulness of mind and his fascinating power of imparting 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, whose 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 Newcomes," and "Esmond." A foolish and useless controversy, still sometimes continued, was raging as to the rival merits of their author and the contemporary 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, and since equalled except by the sudden apparition of "Jane Eyre." A greater writer was winning fame by a more gradual approach in the publication of "Scenes of Clerical Life." Hawthorne was giving to the public "Blithedale Romance", "House of Seven Gables" and "G scape Letter". And besides Thackeray, Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Mrs. Eliott and Hawthorne a number of writers as Mrs. Gore, Jane Austen, Miss Edgeworth, Fieldings, Smollett and Defoe, provided agreeable entertainment in the intervals and might be regarded as at least worthy of recognition. Lord Lytton was publishing "My Ideal" and "The Bartons," which are certainly excellent specimens of literary effort. Mrs. Gaskell produced "Ruth," and "Mary Barton," and "Kinsley 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 novels now? But, permitting anyone to select his favorite or pair of favorites, to be worthy champions of mediocre, 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 advance. The Anglo-Saxon and Charlemagne have been
nearly abolished; and that it 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 offensive glitter of his style. Yet when we carefully examined the 'Essay' 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, Baines, 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 back 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 triumph. 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 living leaf to bequeath the torch of intellectual light into worthy hands. Yet complementing the times, we must confess that we are, indeed, passing
once a华 was gone, which shows at present no signs of a more promising future.

A self-appointed prophet has given this excuse for the scarcity of great men, 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 certain order, of a select circle educated in accepted traditions of refinement, able to perceive and appreciate delicate shades of meaning, and revolt instinctively by the coarse and glaring. How can such plants thrive in the social milieu of today? Says one writer, as well expect a candidate of a popular constituency to attract notice by the grace of a courtier and for his 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 Peacock and a Tuf-fer? The finest production, like the covers will at last gain fine animadversion 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 Peacock. 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 elegies. For the fine critic, we have the exquisite connoisseurs who value mere technical quality at the expense of personal abundance. If the opposite faults are prevalent in this period, we must not overlook the 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 blue-
liations. 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 critic having been for a time 'sunk' aside.

Somewhere we have read that revolutions in thought as in politics, bring great ease to the learnt by sheer force of contagious enthusiasm. It may be regretted that Shakespeare neglected to grasp and Scott's style was not admired. Some might prefer a Lamb to a Scott, a Gray or Keats to a Shakespeare. Still the ultimate judgment of the world is for those who poured their edifying rivers or for those who created lovely verse for a select few. But we have neither Scott, Byron, Lamb or Keats. 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
or fleeting passing fancies of art. It is not because the intellect of today has become frivolous or superficial. If there is a scarcity of great men, this was never a time at which more serious and discriminating intellects labor has been bestowed upon extending and modifying thoughts upon all topics in which thought can be expressed. 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? An answer is frequently given by saying that the society is but the counterpart of a spiritual class: that great minds are not cultivated on all topics: that every division is die-paled and divorced and that in many of the settled 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 artist is a cultivated person who has sought a kind of artistic indifference. They have learned to sympathize with so many form
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, imitative the medieval and the Renaissance, and even the "Queen Anne" period, with earnestness enough for marquises and, and the architect, 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 mistake 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 virtue...
sal condition of excellence in any form of art. We change reluctantly; 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 fear 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 exasperation to anything which implies thought in the writer and requires it from the reader. Roscielo, 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 friskity and littleness. This is too sick 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 but 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 genius 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 hibernating 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
taste of the first magnitude, studying those
of passages, believing, that so long as the
energy of the race continues unabated, it
will, sometime, though often we cannot
say, show out again, as of old, a group
of dazzling luminaries.

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