

Fashions in Literature eBook

Fashions in Literature by Charles Dudley Warner

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INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago and more those who read and valued good books in this country made the acquaintance of Mr. Warner, and since the publication of "My Summer In a Garden" no work of his has needed any other introduction than the presence of his name on the title-page; and now that reputation has mellowed into memory, even the word of interpretation seems superfluous. Mr. Warner wrote out of a clear, as well as a full mind, and lucidity of style was part of that harmonious charm of sincerity and urbanity which made him one of the most intelligible and companionable of our writers.

It is a pleasure, however, to recall him as, not long ago, we saw him move and heard him speak in the ripeness of years which brought him the full flavor of maturity without any loss of freshness from his humor or serenity from his thought. He shared with Lowell, Longfellow, and Curtis a harmony of nature and art, a unity of ideal and achievement, which make him a welcome figure, not only for what he said, but for what he was; one of those friends whose coming is hailed with joy because they seem always at their best, and minister to rather than draw upon our own capital of moral vitality.

Mr. Warner was the most undogmatic of idealists, the most winning of teachers. He had always some thing to say to the ethical sense, a word for the conscience; but his approach was always through the mind, and his enforcement of the moral lesson was by suggestion rather than by commandment. There was nothing ascetic about him, no easy solution of the difficulties of life by ignoring or evading them; nor, on the other hand, was there any confusion of moral standards as the result of a confusion of ideas touching the nature and functions of art. He saw clearly, he felt deeply, and he thought straight; hence the rectitude of his mind, the sanity of his spirit, the justice of his dealings with the things which make for life and art. He used the essay as Addison used it, not for sermonic effect, but as a form of art which permitted a man to deal with serious things in a spirit of gayety, and with that lightness of touch which conveys influence without employing force. He was as deeply enamored as George William Curtis with the highest ideals of life for America, and, like Curtis, his expression caught the grace and distinction of those ideals.

It is a pleasure to hear his voice once more, because its very accents suggest the most interesting, high-minded, and captivating ideals of living; he brings with him that air of fine breeding which is diffused by the men who, in mind as in manners, have been, in a distinctive sense, gentlemen; who have lived so constantly and habitually on intimate terms with the highest things in thought and character that the tone of this really best society has become theirs. Among men of talent there are plebeians as well as patricians; even genius,

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which is never vulgar, is sometimes unable to hide the vulgarity of the aims and ideas which it clothes with beauty without concealing their essential nature. Mr. Warner was a patrician; the most democratic of men, he was one of the most fastidious in his intellectual companionships and affiliations. The subjects about which he speaks with his oldtime directness and charm in this volume make us aware of the serious temper of his mind, of his deep interest in the life of his time and people, and of the easy and natural grace with which he insisted on facing the fact and bringing it to the test of the highest standards. In his discussion of "Fashions in Literature" he deftly brings before us the significance of literature and the signs which it always wears, while he seems bent upon considering some interesting aspects of contemporary writing.

And how admirably he has described his own work in his definition of qualities which are common to all literature of a high order: simplicity, knowledge of human nature, agreeable personality. It would be impossible in briefer or more comprehensive phrase to sum up and express the secret of his influence and of the pleasure he gives us. It is to suggest this application of his words to himself that this preparatory comment is written.

When "My Summer In a Garden" appeared, it won a host of friends who did not stop to ask whether it was a piece of excellent journalism or a bit of real literature. It was so natural, so informal, so intimate that readers accepted it as matter of course, as they accepted the blooming of flowers and the flitting of birds. It was simply a report of certain things which had happened out of doors, made by an observing neighbor, whose talk seemed to be of a piece with the diffused fragrance and light and life of the old-fashioned garden. This easy approach, along natural lines of interest, by quietly putting himself on common ground with his reader, Mr. Warner never abandoned; he was so delightful a companion that until he ceased to walk beside them, many of his friends of the mind did not realize how much he had enriched them by the way. This charming simplicity, which made it possible for him to put himself on intimate terms with his readers, was the result of his sincerity, his clearness of thought, and his ripe culture: that knowledge of the best which rids a man forever of faith in devices, dexterities, obscurities, and all other substitutes for the lucid realities of thinking and of character.

To his love of reality and his sincere interest in men, Mr. Warner added natural shrewdness and long observation of the psychology of men and women under the stress and strain of experience. His knowledge of human nature did not lessen his geniality, but it kept the edge of his mind keen, and gave his work the variety not only of humor but of satire. He cared deeply for people, but they did not impose on him; he loved his country with a passion which was

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the more genuine because it was exacting and, at times, sharply critical. There runs through all his work, as a critic of manners and men, as well as of art, a wisdom of life born of wide and keen observation; put not into the form of aphorisms, but of shrewd comment, of keen criticism, of nice discrimination between the manifold shadings of insincerity, of insight into the action and reaction of conditions, surroundings, social and ethical aims on men and women. The stories written in his later years are full of the evidences of a knowledge of human nature which was singularly trustworthy and penetrating.

When all has been said, however, it remains true of him, as of so many of the writers whom we read and love as we read, that the secret of his charm lay in an agreeable personality. At the end of the analysis, if the work is worth while, there is always a man, and the man is the explanation of the work. This is pre-eminently true of those writers whose charm lies less in distinctively intellectual qualities than in temperament, atmosphere, humor-writers of the quality of Steele, Goldsmith, Lamb, Irving. It is not only, therefore, a pleasure to recall Mr. Warner; it is a necessity if one would discover the secret of his charm, the source of his authority.

He was a New Englander by birth and by long residence, but he was also a man of the world in the true sense of the phrase; one whose ethical judgment had been broadened without being lowered; who had learned that truth, though often strenuously enforced, is never so convincing as when stated in terms of beauty; and to whom it had been revealed that to live naturally, sanely, and productively one must live humanly, with due regard to the earthly as well as to heavenly, with ease as well as earnestness of spirit, through play no less than through work, in the large resources of art, society, and humor, as well as with the ancient and well-tested rectitudes of the fathers.

The harmonious play of his whole nature, the breadth of his interests and the sanity of his spirit made Mr. Warner a delightful companion, and kept to the very end the freshness of his mind and the spontaneity of his humor; life never lost its savor for him, nor did his style part with its diffused but thoroughly individual humor. This latest collection of his papers, dealing with a wide range of subjects from the "Education of the Negro" to "Literature and the Stage," with characteristic comments on "Truthfulness" and "The Pursuit of Happiness," shows him at the end of his long and tireless career as a writer still deeply interested in contemporary events, responsive to the appeal of the questions of the hour, and sensitive to all things which affected the dignity and authority of literature. In his interests, his bearing, his relations to the public life of the country, no less than in his work, he held fast to the best traditions of literature, and he has taken his place among the representative American men of Letters.

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Hamilton W. Mabie.

FASHIONS IN LITERATURE

If you examine a collection of prints of costumes of different generations, you are commonly amused by the ludicrous appearance of most of them, especially of those that are not familiar to you in your own decade. They are not only inappropriate and inconvenient to your eye, but they offend your taste. You cannot believe that they were ever thought beautiful and becoming. If your memory does not fail you, however, and you retain a little honesty of mind, you can recall the fact that a costume which seems to you ridiculous today had your warm approval ten years ago. You wonder, indeed, how you could ever have tolerated a costume which has not one graceful line, and has no more relation to the human figure than Mambrino's helmet had to a crown of glory. You cannot imagine how you ever approved the vast balloon skirt that gave your sweetheart the appearance of the great bell of Moscow, or that you yourself could have been complacent in a coat the tails of which reached your heels, and the buttons of which, a rudimentary survival, were between your shoulder-blades—you who are now devoted to a female figure that resembles an old-fashioned churn surmounted by an isosceles triangle.

These vagaries of taste, which disfigure or destroy correct proportions or hide deformities, are nowhere more evident than in the illustrations of works of fiction. The artist who collaborates with the contemporary novelist has a hard fate. If he is faithful to the fashions of the day, he earns the repute of artistic depravity in the eyes of the next generation. The novel may become a classic, because it represents human nature, or even the whimsicalities of a period; but the illustrations of the artist only provoke a smile, because he has represented merely the unessential and the fleeting. The interest in his work is archaeological, not artistic. The genius of the great portrait-painter may to some extent overcome the disadvantages of contemporary costume, but if the costume of his period is hideous and lacks the essential lines of beauty, his work is liable to need the apology of quaintness. The Greek artist and the Mediaeval painter, when the costumes were really picturesque and made us forget the lack of simplicity in a noble sumptuousness, had never this posthumous difficulty to contend with.

In the examination of costumes of different races and different ages, we are also struck by the fact that with primitive or isolated peoples costumes vary little from age to age, and fashion and the fashions are unrecognized, and a habit of dress which is dictated by climate, or has been proved to be comfortable, is adhered to from one generation to another; while nations that we call highly civilized, meaning commonly not only Occidental peoples, but peoples called progressive, are subject to the most frequent and violent changes

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of fashions, not in generations only, but in decades and years of a generation, as if the mass had no mind or taste of its own, but submitted to the irresponsible ukase of tailors and modistes, who are in alliance with enterprising manufacturers of novelties. In this higher civilization a costume which is artistic and becoming has no more chance of permanence than one which is ugly and inconvenient. It might be inferred that this higher civilization produces no better taste and discrimination, no more independent judgment, in dress than it does in literature. The vagaries in dress of the Western nations for a thousand years past, to go back no further, are certainly highly amusing, and would be humiliating to people who regarded taste and art as essentials of civilization. But when we speak of civilization, we cannot but notice that some of the great civilizations; the longest permanent and most notable for highest achievement in learning, science, art, or in the graces or comforts of life, the Egyptian, the Saracenic, the Chinese, were subject to no such vagaries in costume, but adhered to that which taste, climate, experience had determined to be the most useful and appropriate. And it is a singular comment upon our modern conceit that we make our own vagaries and changeableness, and not any fixed principles of art or of utility, the criterion of judgment, on other races and other times.

The more important result of the study of past fashions, in engravings and paintings, remains to be spoken of. It is that in all the illustrations, from the simplicity of Athens, through the artificiality of Louis XIV and the monstrosities of Elizabeth, down to the undescribed modistic inventions of the first McKinley, there is discoverable a radical and primitive law of beauty. We acknowledge it among the Greeks, we encounter it in one age and another. I mean a style of dress that is artistic as well as picturesque, that satisfies our love of beauty, that accords with the grace of the perfect human figure, and that gives as perfect satisfaction to the cultivated taste as a drawing by Raphael. While all the other illustrations of the human ingenuity in making the human race appear fantastic or ridiculous amuse us or offend our taste, —except the tailor fashion-plates of the week that is now,—these few exceptions, classic or modern, give us permanent delight, and are recognized as following the eternal law of beauty and utility. And we know, notwithstanding the temporary triumph of bad taste and the public lack of any taste, that there is a standard, artistic and imperishable.

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The student of manners might find an interesting field in noting how, in our Occidental civilizations, fluctuations of opinions, of morals, and of literary style have been accompanied by more or less significant exhibitions of costumes. He will note in the *Precieux* of France and the *Euphuist* of England a corresponding effeminacy in dress; in the frank paganism of the French Revolution the affectation of Greek and Roman apparel, passing into the Directoire style in the Citizen and the Citizeness; in the Calvinistic cut of the Puritan of Geneva and of New England the grim severity of their theology and morals. These examples are interesting as showing an inclination to express an inner condition by the outward apparel, as the Quakers indicate an inward peace by an external drabness, and the American Indian a bellicose disposition by red and yellow paint; just as we express by red stripes our desire to kill men with artillery, or by yellow stripes to kill them with cavalry. It is not possible to say whether these external displays are relics of barbarism or are enduring necessities of human nature.

The fickleness of men in costume in a manner burlesques their shifty and uncertain taste in literature. A book or a certain fashion in letters will have a run like a garment, and, like that, will pass away before it waxes old. It seems incredible, as we look back over the literary history of the past three centuries only, what prevailing styles and moods of expression, affectations, and prettinesses, each in turn, have pleased reasonably cultivated people. What tedious and vapid things they read and liked to read! Think of the French, who had once had a Villon, intoxicating themselves with somnolent draughts of Richardson. But, then, the French could match the paste euphuisms of Lyly with the novels of Scudery. Every modern literature has been subject to these epidemics and diseases. It is needless to dwell upon them in detail. Since the great diffusion of printing, these literary crazes have been more frequent and of shorter duration. We need go back no further than a generation to find abundant examples of eccentricities of style and expression, of crazes over some author or some book, as unaccountable on principles of art as many of the fashions in social life.—The more violent the attack, the sooner it is over. Readers of middle age can recall the furor over Tupper, the extravagant expectations as to the brilliant essayist Gilfillan, the soon-extinguished hopes of the poet Alexander Smith. For the moment the world waited in the belief of the rising of new stars, and as suddenly realized that it had been deceived. Sometimes we like ruggedness, and again we like things made easy. Within a few years a distinguished Scotch clergyman made a fortune by diluting a paragraph written by Saint Paul. It is in our memory how at one time all the boys tried to write like Macaulay, and then like Carlyle, and then like Ruskin, and we have lived to see the day when all the girls would like to write like Heine.

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In less than twenty years we have seen wonderful changes in public taste and in the efforts of writers to meet it or to create it. We saw the everlastingly revived conflict between realism and romanticism. We saw the realist run into the naturalist, the naturalist into the animalist, the psychologist into the sexualist, and the sudden reaction to romance, in the form of what is called the historic novel, the receipt for which can be prescribed by any competent pharmacist. The one essential in the ingredients is that the hero shall be mainly got out of one hole by dropping him into a deeper one, until—the proper serial length being attained—he is miraculously dropped out into daylight, and stands to receive the plaudits of a tenderhearted world, that is fond of nothing so much as of fighting.

The extraordinary vogue of certain recent stories is not so much to be wondered at when we consider the millions that have been added to the readers of English during the past twenty-five years. The wonder is that a new book does not sell more largely, or it would be a wonder if the ability to buy kept pace with the ability to read, and if discrimination had accompanied the appetite for reading. The critics term these successes of some recent fictions “crazes,” but they are really sustained by some desirable qualities—they are cleverly written, and they are for the moment undoubtedly entertaining. Some of them as undoubtedly appeal to innate vulgarity or to cultivated depravity. I will call no names, because that would be to indict the public taste. This recent phenomenon of sales of stories by the hundred thousand is not, however, wholly due to quality. Another element has come in since the publishers have awakened to the fact that literature can be treated like merchandise. To use their own phrase, they “handle” books as they would “handle” patent medicines, that is, the popular patent medicines that are desired because of the amount of alcohol they contain; indeed, they are sold along with dry-goods and fancy notions. I am not objecting to this great and wide distribution any more than I am to the haste of fruit-dealers to market their products before they decay. The wary critic will be very careful about dogmatizing over the nature and distribution of literary products. It is no certain sign that a book is good because it is popular, nor is it any more certain that it is good because it has a very limited sale. Yet we cannot help seeing that many of the books that are the subject of crazes utterly disappear in a very short time, while many others, approved by only a judicious few, continue in the market and slowly become standards, considered as good stock by the booksellers and continually in a limited demand.

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The English essayists have spent a good deal of time lately in discussing the question whether it is possible to tell a good contemporary book from a bad one. Their hesitation is justified by a study of English criticism of new books in the quarterly, monthly, and weekly periodicals from the latter part of the eighteenth century to the last quarter of the nineteenth; or, to name a definite period, from the verse of the Lake poets, from Shelley and Byron, down to Tennyson, there is scarcely a poet who has attained world-wide assent to his position in the first or second rank who was not at the hands of the reviewers the subject of mockery and bitter detraction. To be original in any degree was to be damned. And there is scarcely one who was at first ranked as a great light during this period who is now known out of the biographical dictionary. Nothing in modern literature is more amazing than the bulk of English criticism in the last three-quarters of a century, so far as it concerned individual writers, both in poetry and prose. The literary rancor shown rose to the dignity almost of theological vituperation.

Is there any way to tell a good book from a bad one? Yes. As certainly as you can tell a good picture from a bad one, or a good egg from a bad one. Because there are hosts who do not discriminate as to the eggs or the butter they eat, it does not follow that a normal taste should not know the difference.

Because there is a highly artistic nation that welcomes the flavor of garlic in everything, and another which claims to be the most civilized in the world that cannot tell coffee from chicory, or because the ancient Chinese love rancid sesame oil, or the Esquimaux like spoiled blubber and tainted fish, it does not follow that there is not in the world a wholesome taste for things natural and pure.

It is clear that the critic of contemporary literature is quite as likely to be wrong as right. He is, for one thing, inevitably affected by the prevailing fashion of his little day. And, worse still, he is apt to make his own tastes and prejudices the standard of his judgment. His view is commonly provincial instead of cosmopolitan. In the English period just referred to it is easy to see that most of the critical opinion was determined by political or theological animosity and prejudice. The rule was for a Tory to hit a Whig or a Whig to hit a Tory, under whatever literary guise he appeared. If the new writer was not orthodox in the view of his political or theological critic, he was not to be tolerated as poet or historian, Dr. Johnson had said everything he could say against an author when he declared that he was a vile Whig. Macaulay, a Whig, always consulted his prejudices for his judgment, equally when he was reviewing Croker's Boswell or the impeachment of Warren Hastings. He hated Croker,—a hateful man, to be sure,—and when the latter published his edition of Boswell, Macaulay saw his opportunity, and exclaimed before

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he had looked at the book, as you will remember, “Now I will dust his jacket.” The standard of criticism does not lie with the individual in literature any more than it does in different periods as to fashions and manners. The world is pretty well agreed, and always has been, as to the qualities that make a gentleman. And yet there was a time when the vilest and perhaps the most contemptible man who ever occupied the English throne,—and that is saying a great deal,—George IV, was universally called the “First Gentleman of Europe.” The reproach might be somewhat lightened by the fact that George was a foreigner, but for the wider fact that no person of English stock has been on the throne since Saxon Harold, the chosen and imposed rulers of England having been French, Welsh, Scotch, and Dutch, many of them being guiltless of the English language, and many of them also of the English middle-class morality. The impartial old Wraxall, the memorialist of the times of George III, having described a noble as a gambler, a drunkard, a smuggler, an appropriator of public money, who always cheated his tradesmen, who was one and sometimes all of them together, and a profligate generally, commonly adds, “But he was a perfect gentleman.” And yet there has always been a standard that excludes George IV from the rank of gentleman, as it excludes Tupper from the rank of poet.

The standard of literary judgment, then, is not in the individual,—that is, in the taste and prejudice of the individual,—any more than it is in the immediate contemporary opinion, which is always in flux and reflux from one extreme to another; but it is in certain immutable principles and qualities which have been slowly evolved during the long historic periods of literary criticism. But how shall we ascertain what these principles are, so as to apply them to new circumstances and new creations, holding on to the essentials and disregarding contemporary tastes; prejudices, and appearances? We all admit that certain pieces of literature have become classic; by general consent there is no dispute about them. How they have become so we cannot exactly explain. Some say by a mysterious settling of universal opinion, the operation of which cannot be exactly defined. Others say that the highly developed critical judgment of a few persons, from time to time, has established forever what we agree to call masterpieces. But this discussion is immaterial, since these supreme examples of literary excellence exist in all kinds of composition,—poetry, fable, romance, ethical teaching, prophecy, interpretation, history, humor, satire, devotional flight into the spiritual and supernatural, everything in which the human mind has exercised itself,—from the days of the Egyptian moralist and the Old Testament annalist and poet down to our scientific age. These masterpieces exist from many periods and in many languages, and they all have qualities in common which have insured their persistence. To discover what these qualities

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are that have insured permanence and promise indefinite continuance is to have a means of judging with an approach to scientific accuracy our contemporary literature. There is no thing of beauty that does not conform to a law of order and beauty—poem, story, costume, picture, statue, all fall into an ascertainable law of art. Nothing of man's making is perfect, but any creation approximates perfection in the measure that it conforms to inevitable law.

To ascertain this law, and apply it, in art or in literature, to the changing conditions of our progressive life, is the business of the artist. It is the business of the critic to mark how the performance conforms to or departs from the law evolved and transmitted in the long-experience of the race. True criticism, then, is not a matter of caprice or of individual liking or disliking, nor of conformity to a prevailing and generally temporary popular judgment. Individual judgment may be very interesting and have its value, depending upon the capacity of the judge. It was my good fortune once to fall in with a person who had been moved, by I know not what inspiration, to project himself out of his safe local conditions into France, Greece, Italy, Cairo, and Jerusalem. He assured me that he had seen nothing anywhere in the wide world of nature and art to compare with the beauty of Nebraska.

What are the qualities common to all the masterpieces of literature, or, let us say, to those that have endured in spite of imperfections and local provincialisms?

First of all I should name simplicity, which includes lucidity of expression, the clear thought in fitting, luminous words. And this is true when the thought is profound and the subject is as complex as life itself. This quality is strikingly exhibited for us in Jowett's translation of Plato—which is as modern in feeling and phrase as anything done in Boston—in the naïf and direct Herodotus, and, above all, in the King James vernacular translation of the Bible, which is the great text-book of all modern literature.

The second quality is knowledge of human nature. We can put up with the improbable in invention, because the improbable is always happening in life, but we cannot tolerate the so-called psychological juggling with the human mind, the perversion of the laws of the mind, the forcing of character to fit the eccentricities of plot. Whatever excursions the writer makes in fancy, we require fundamental consistency with human nature. And this is the reason why psychological studies of the abnormal, or biographies of criminal lunatics, are only interesting to pathologists and never become classics in literature.

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A third quality common to all masterpieces is what we call charm, a matter more or less of style, and which may be defined as the agreeable personality of the writer. This is indispensable. It is this personality which gives the final value to every work of art as well as of literature. It is not enough to copy nature or to copy, even accurately, the incidents of life. Only by digestion and transmutation through personality does any work attain the dignity of art. The great works of architecture, even, which are somewhat determined by mathematical rule, owe their charm to the personal genius of their creators. For this reason our imitations of Greek architecture are commonly failures. To speak technically, the masterpiece of literature is characterized by the same knowledge of proportion and perspective as the masterpiece in art.

If there is a standard of literary excellence, as there is a law of beauty—and it seems to me that to doubt this in the intellectual world is to doubt the prevalence of order that exists in the natural—it is certainly possible to ascertain whether a new production conforms, and how far it conforms, to the universally accepted canons of art. To work by this rule in literary criticism is to substitute something definite for the individual tastes, moods, and local bias of the critic. It is true that the vast body of that which we read is ephemeral, and justifies its existence by its obvious use for information, recreation, and entertainment. But to permit the impression to prevail that an unenlightened popular preference for a book, however many may hold it, is to be taken as a measure of its excellence, is like claiming that a debased Austrian coin, because it circulates, is as good as a gold stater of Alexander. The case is infinitely worse than this; for a slovenly literature, unrebuked and uncorrected, begets slovenly thought and debases our entire intellectual life.

It should be remembered, however, that the creative faculty in man has not ceased, nor has puny man drawn all there is to be drawn out of the eternal wisdom. We are probably only in the beginning of our evolution, and something new may always be expected, that is, new and fresh applications of universal law. The critic of literature needs to be in an expectant and receptive frame of mind. Many critics approach a book with hostile intent, and seem to fancy that their business is to look for what is bad in it, and not for what is good. It seems to me that the first duty of the critic is to try to understand the author, to give him a fair chance by coming to his perusal with an open mind. Whatever book you read, or sermon or lecture you hear, give yourself for the time absolutely to its influence. This is just to the author, fair to the public, and, above all, valuable to the intellectual sanity of the critic himself. It is a very bad thing for the memory and the judgment to get into a habit of reading carelessly

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or listening with distracted attention. I know of nothing so harmful to the strength of the mind as this habit. There is a valuable mental training in closely following a discourse that is valueless in itself. After the reader has unreservedly surrendered himself to the influence of the book, and let his mind settle, as we say, and resume its own judgment, he is in a position to look at it objectively and to compare it with other facts of life and of literature dispassionately. He can then compare it as to form, substance, tone, with the enduring literature that has come down to us from all the ages. It is a phenomenon known to all of us that we may for the moment be carried away by a book which upon cool reflection we find is false in ethics and weak in construction. We find this because we have standards outside ourselves.

I am not concerned to define here what is meant by literature. A great mass of it has been accumulated in the progress of mankind, and, fortunately for different wants and temperaments, it is as varied as the various minds that produced it. The main thing to be considered is that this great stream of thought is the highest achievement and the most valuable possession of mankind. It is not only that literature is the source of inspiration to youth and the solace of age, but it is what a national language is to a nation, the highest expression of its being. Whatever we acquire of science, of art, in discovery, in the application of natural laws in industries, is an enlargement of our horizon, and a contribution to the highest needs of man, his intellectual life. The controversy between the claims of the practical life and the intellectual is as idle as the so-called conflict between science and religion. And the highest and final expression of this life of man, his thought, his emotion, his feeling, his aspiration, whatever you choose to call it, is in the enduring literature he creates. He certainly misses half his opportunity on this planet who considers only the physical or what is called the practical. He is a man only half developed. I can conceive no more dreary existence than that of a man who is past the period of business activity, and who cannot, for his entertainment, his happiness, draw upon the great reservoir of literature. For what did I come into this world if I am to be like a stake planted in a fence, and not like a tree visited by all the winds of heaven and the birds of the air?

Those who concern themselves with the printed matter in books and periodicals are often in despair over the volume of it, and their actual inability to keep up with current literature. They need not worry. If all that appears in books, under the pressure of publishers and the ambition of experimenters in writing, were uniformly excellent, no reader would be under any more obligation to read it than he is to see every individual flower and blossoming shrub. Specimens of the varieties would suffice. But a vast proportion

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of it is the product of immature minds, and of a yearning for experience rather than a knowledge of life. There is no more obligation on the part of the person who would be well informed and cultivated to read all this than there is to read all the colored incidents, personal gossip, accidents, and crimes repeated daily, with sameness of effect, in the newspapers, some of the most widely circulated of which are a composite of the police gazette and the comic almanac. A great deal of the reading done is mere contagion, one form or another of communicated grippe, and it is consoling and even surprising to know that if you escape the run of it for a season, you have lost nothing appreciable. Some people, it has been often said, make it a rule never to read a book until it is from one to five years old, By this simple device they escape the necessity of reading most of them, but this is only a part of their gain. Considering the fact that the world is full of books of the highest value for cultivation, entertainment, and information, which the utmost leisure we can spare from other pressing avocations does not suffice to give us knowledge of, it does seem to be little less than a moral and intellectual sin to flounder about blindly in the flood of new publications. I am speaking, of course, of the general mass of readers, and not of the specialists who must follow their subjects with ceaseless inquisition. But for most of us who belong to the still comparatively few who, really read books, the main object of life is not to keep up with the printing-press, any more than it is the main object of sensible people to follow all the extremes and whims of fashion in dress. When a fashion in literature has passed, we are surprised that it should ever have seemed worth the trouble of studying or imitating. When the special craze has passed, we notice another thing, and that is that the author, not being of the first rank or of the second, has generally contributed to the world all that he has to give in one book, and our time has been wasted on his other books; and also that in a special kind of writing in a given period—let us say, for example, the historico-romantic—we perceive that it all has a common character, is constructed on the same lines of adventure and with a prevailing type of hero and heroine, according to the pattern set by the first one or two stories of the sort which became popular, and we see its more or less mechanical construction, and how easily it degenerates into commercial book-making. Now while some of this writing has an individual flavor that makes it entertaining and profitable in this way, we may be excused from attempting to follow it all merely because it happens to be talked about for the moment, and generally talked about in a very indiscriminating manner. We need not in any company be ashamed if we have not read it all, especially if we are ashamed that, considering the time at our disposal, we have not made the acquaintance

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of the great and small masterpieces of literature. It is said that the fashion of this world passeth away, and so does the mere fashion in literature, the fashion that does not follow the eternal law of beauty and symmetry, and contribute to the intellectual and spiritual part of man. Otherwise it is only a waiting in a material existence, like the lovers, in the words of the Arabian story-teller, "till there came to them the Destroyer of Delights and the Sunderer of Companies, he who layeth waste the palaces and peopleth the tombs."

Without special anxiety, then, to keep pace with all the ephemeral in literature, lest we should miss for the moment something that is permanent, we can rest content in the vast accumulation of the tried and genuine that the ages have given us. Anything that really belongs to literature today we shall certainly find awaiting us tomorrow.

The better part of the life of man is in and by the imagination. This is not generally believed, because it is not generally believed that the chief end of man is the accumulation of intellectual and spiritual material. Hence it is that what is called a practical education is set above the mere enlargement and enrichment of the mind; and the possession of the material is valued, and the intellectual life is undervalued. But it should be remembered that the best preparation for a practical and useful life is in the high development of the powers of the mind, and that, commonly, by a culture that is not considered practical. The notable fact about the group of great parliamentary orators in the days of George III is the exhibition of their intellectual resources in the entire world of letters, the classics, and ancient and modern history. Yet all of them owed their development to a strictly classical training in the schools. And most of them had not only the gift of the imagination necessary to great eloquence, but also were so mentally disciplined by the classics that they handled the practical questions upon which they legislated with clearness and precision. The great masters of finance were the classically trained orators William Pitt and Charles James Fox.

In fine, to return to our knowledge of the short life of fashions that are for the moment striking, why should we waste precious time in chasing meteoric appearances, when we can be warmed and invigorated in the sunshine of the great literatures?