

ON THE  
LITERATURE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

*To Christopher North, Esq. the Editor of Blackwood's Magazine.*

MY DEAR CHRISTOPHER,

Excuse me for addressing you by so endearing a term, as I have had neither the pleasure nor the displeasure of being ever acquainted with you; but as I understand that you intend putting down all the literary ideots in Athens and Babel, by which cities I suppose you mean London and Westminster, and as I have formed an intention of doing the same myself, surely you and I should be *dear* to each other, engaged as we are in the same cause. Pope, it is true, put down all the scribblers of his age single-handed, but would he have done so had you or I been alive at the time to become their advocates, and prove that he himself was a mere rhymor, a creature who had "learned to crawl upon poetic feet," and merely fit to write such doggrel as "Number a hundred," prefixed to the last number of your Magazine. But, pardon me, my dear fellow, I forgot that this doggrel was written by yourself. But let this pass—Homer himself has nodded, and you who write such an enormous mass of matter every month, must surely write some portion of it half asleep. Besides the high bumpers, which it appears you were gulping at the moment, have a most somniferous effect. But to the point. You have determined to crush all the literary ideots in London and Westminster, for thus I interpret your meaning, and I have determined to do the same. Now we must either go hand in hand or oppose each other; for though my motto is not, *Aut Caesar aut nullus*, though I can endure an equal on the throne, I cannot endure a superior. If, therefore, you will not admit me as a partner in the great work of literary purgation and reformation, I am determined, like *Rollo*, to act single-handed, and prove that you belong to the very race of *quack* words which you intend to extinguish. I am taking it for granted that you

are too wise or too cautious to refuse acceding to the friendly offer which I now make to you, I feel it necessary to ascertain the principles by which you intend to be guided in this grand affair, for unless you and I agree upon principles of a fixed and definite character, we shall be eternally at loggerheads, and instead of proving others to be dunces, our want of harmony may prove us dunces ourselves.) At least the world may laugh at us for uniting in a design where one of us is eternally overturning the superstructure which the other has laid. A divided house cannot stand, and if it fall, we may be both buried under the ruins. I shall, therefore, propose to you what I consider most likely to promote the interest of literatures, and the extinction of that brood of scribblers, who infest the literary world, and who, while they corrupt good taste and good morals, create in their stead that intellectual anarchy which now extends the empire of dullness to vast and fearful limits. There are now, as there ever have been, three distinct species of writers. The first have instruction only for their object;—the second, according to the precept of Horace, love to mingle instruction with delight;—and the third, incapable of imparting any species of instruction or knowledge that ranks above truisms or commonplace observations, or, in other words, any thing that is worth the ink with which it is printed, seek merely to make you laugh at their namby-pamby, clap-trap, buffoonery and literary swaggering. To the first of these classes belong all writers on science and the useful arts. To this class of writers we owe not only the progress of science; but that refined and mental luxury, that *otium cum dignitate*, which the useful arts have introduced into social and domestic life. These writers cannot do harm, while they are certain of doing much good. They cannot vitiate public taste, like

the two latter classes, because their writings, inventions, and discoveries, are addressed to the understanding, reasoning, and perceptive faculties alone; neither can they pervert the understanding, because whatever powers, energies, abstractions, or combinations of ideas they may be obliged to exercise, before they can produce any contemplated effect, through the agency of art, or the instrumentality of the laws of nature; we know instantly, when we see the effect produced, whether it be just as they describe it to be, or not, because in these cases, we are always guided by the testimony of the senses, which can no more deceive the savage than the philosopher. There is no reasoning on matters of fact, so that neither he who has produced the fact, can convince us, by any power of reasoning, that he has not produced it, nor can he who has not produced it, persuade us that he has. We have no interest in deceiving ourselves in matters of science and experimental discoveries; and even if we had, the testimony of our senses is too powerful for the doubts and hesitations of scepticism. We must believe, whether we will or will not. This class of writers, then, is always harmless, to say the worst that can be said of them; for they cannot, like poets and orators, obtain a usurped reputation: they cannot convince the world that they have discovered what they have not discovered, nor produced what they have not produced. Neither can they vitiate public taste, either in writing or in the arts, for in neither are they looked upon as models, nor do they affect it. With this class of writers, then, we have nothing to do, as the interests of literature have nothing to fear from them. If they don't do good, they cannot possibly do harm. It is true that the same cause which prevents them from vitiating public taste, prevents them also from improving it. This is reserved for the second and third classes above.

The second class, as I have observed, seek to mingle pleasure with instruction, and so far they are all engaged in a laudable object, for instruction, devoid of pleasure, cannot properly be called instruction, as the object of instruction itself is to create

and promote our social happiness and mental delight. But how is this pleasure communicated? It is in the resolution of this question that the great secret of writing consists. Things are sometimes pleasing in their own nature, sometimes from the manner, in which they are presented to us. Where the things described are extremely pleasing in themselves, the only art required is to paint them simply as they are, without addition or subtraction. Beauty, when unadorned is adorned the most. Who can improve the Apollo of Belvidere, or the Venus de Medicis, by giving them a new attitude or a new expression? Who would not diminish their effect by removing any ideal blemish which his imagination may discover in them? What is then already beautiful, requires neither the clothing of art, nor the imagery of fancy, to give it new charms; it is only where we describe objects that are not perfectly beautiful in themselves, or where the beauty is veiled by some accidental disguise, that we are obliged to have recourse to the aid of art, in order to remove the disguise, or in the former case to steal from some other portion of nature—from some beings of kindred mould, but of more beautiful form or delicate hue, that grace or attraction which gives the object we would paint, all the elegance and simplicity which had been denied to it by nature. Hence it is, that the *dulce*, the pleasure, imparted by writers, consists sometimes in the simple idea or conception, and sometimes in the mode or manner of describing it; so that elegance of style, whatever some John Bull writers, who look to the substance and not to the dress, may think to the contrary, is as essentially necessary to produce that pleasure, that *dulce* which Horace prized not less than the *utile*, as beauty of conception or sublimity of idea. Indeed beauty of conception will always lead to beauty of expression, though there are instances of writers, whose style and sentiments do not appear in perfect harmony with each other.

I should not detain you so long, Kit, on the subject of grace, elegance, and beauty, if I really imagined that you were yourself the author of *number one hundred*, for I know how in some all refined subjects are to be

grel writers. They are always sick of good company; but whether you are weary of me or not, I will dismiss this second class of writers by saying, that while they succeed in producing that pleasure and instruction which they seek to produce, they are, in my opinion, not only a legitimate class of writers, but the most agreeable companions which we meet with in our wanderings through the moral and intellectual world. They are not, therefore, proper game for us: let us turn to the third class, and we shall find that they are the hornets who consume the honey without collecting the sweets, and who consequently ought to be all laid prostrate long before the destroying angel of number two hundred, brandishes his flaming sabre over their devoted heads.

This class, as I have already observed, seek merely to make you laugh at their clap-traps, and buffoonery. The pleasure they impart is not the handmaid of instruction, and consequently they please only the canaille, who throw instruction to the dogs. Hence, like the butterfly, they are only beings of a day. Their gaudy colours attract for a moment, and the next moment they are cast aside, and generally perish in the fall. But even while their novelty gives them a factitious interest and importance, they are pleasing only to children and fools. The delicate eye of taste can never rest upon their productions, and it views them with averted glance, or philosophic pity. But these gentlemen are not to be mortified by contempt. No, no, they are better versed in the tactics of literary warfare and literary cunning. They have always the laugh on their own side. They attempt to say something clever, and imagining they have succeeded; they stare at you like the clown, with a foolish face, if not of praise, at least of laudatory expectation. They laugh at their very attempt at excellence, and expect you will laugh also to keep them in countenance. This is the utmost height of their ambition. If you laugh they know you are pleased; and if you are pleased, they are satisfied. This was all they aimed at. They imagine that every man who laughs is naturally pleased, with-

out reflecting that there are different modes and species of pleasure, and that the man who laughs at their folly to-day, will turn from it to-morrow with disgust; whilst he always returns to the refined pleasures of taste and fancy with renewed delight. Your money is all they want, and they have philosophy enough, or cunning enough, to know that no man but a fool parts with his money without some equivalent. Accordingly, feeling their own inability to make you more wise, or more learned than you are already, or rather afraid of exposing their own absurdity by making the attempt, the only equivalent they can give you for your two and sixpence, or three and sixpence, is that of making you laugh at their own absurdity, literary capers, and high-sounding pretensions. Is not this a truth, Kit, which you know by experience? Do you not know that more than half the world are fools, and derive more pleasure from laughing at each others' folly, than from imbibing the wisdom of Solomon, or the philosophy of Socrates.

Tous les hommes sont fous  
Et malgré tout leur soin,  
Ils ne diffèrent entre eux,  
Que du plus ou du moins.

Now, my dear Kit, is it to be endured that these literary jack puddings, who live solely by exposing their own folly, should succeed better than you or I, who look down from the proud eminence to which we have exalted ourselves, not only by those stores of acquired and treasured knowledge, which have been so industriously collected, and so prudently dispensed, but also by the bold, restless, and daring energies of our native genius, a genius that moulded into grace and elegance those rough masses of shapeless, crude, and unmodified knowledge which we had so laboriously and tardily collected from the rust and dregs of antiquity. We only look to the praise and esteem of those whose esteem is worthy our ambition, but they seek the applause of the canaille. They are willing to be looked upon as fools, provided they gain more by their folly than we do by our wisdom. Now this is the brood of scribbles, which I intend to extinguish, not because they are the most stupid of the literary tribe, but because they are the

most impudent, and you know better than I do the irresistible and magic effect of impudence. Demosthenes was aware of its power, and Bacon attributes to its potent spell all the triumphs of oratory. All pretenders to literature, and to that species of knowledge which is just placed beyond the ken of vulgar apprehension, are perfectly harmless, however ignorant, unless these pretensions be supported by their impudence and buffoonery. The reason is very obvious: the greater portion of mankind are naturally ignorant, at least the fancied perfectability of human reason is yet a mere speculative hypothesis, for the radiance of science and of universal knowledge sends forth as yet no dawning rays, no auspicious and welcome harbingers of its dazzling, cloud compelling, and irradiating influence. As the great bulk of mankind are therefore ignorant, partly from native indolence and mental imbecility, partly from the sources of, and avenues to, knowledge being placed beyond their reach, and partly from their avocations in life requiring an exclusive appropriation of their time and labour, we are not to be surprised that they are more liable to attend to those literary quacks, who are placed just one degree above themselves, and who, from a knowledge of their credulity, know they believe every thing that is dogmatically and unhesitatingly stated, without ever enquiring into the grounds of their belief, than to writers who forget their existence altogether, and address themselves solely to minds of a higher and sublimer order. It is then our duty, as well as our interest, to extirpate this brood of literary heretics from the face of the earth, for you know well that dulness will preserve her ancient right while they are suffered to exist; and what is worse, Kit, you and I must slumber in the shade, while they are permitted to vitiate public taste and public morals; for you know we have too much genius to write nonsense, and too much greatness of soul and stubbornness of principle to prostrate those higher faculties with which providence ~~and mother nature~~ has endowed us before the reptile taste of congregated dulness,—before those to whom our sublimer and diviner mu-

sings will appear the frenzied ebullitions of insanity. It is then only by extirpating this class of writers that we can ever hope to gain the ear of the public. By the public I mean the majority of readers, for all men are now-a-days readers of books, however ignorant of their contents. These readers must naturally turn over to us the moment their present favourites are extinguished; and the consequence will be, that they must either learn good sense, good taste, good manners, and good morals, or lay down their books, and rest content with their native ignorance. Now this will be as it ought to be, for it is much safer to study from the book of nature, than from the crazy productions of those scribblers whom we purpose to extinguish. But here I should apologize for using the plural pronoun *we*, for as yet I am ignorant of the class of writers who are to fall victims to the lightnings of your fulminating wrath. I merely suppose them to be the class whom I have just described, for against what other class could my worthy friend turn his potent arms. It is true, indeed, that I should not hesitate to rank you with this doomed and devoted tribe of scribblers, were I to judge of you by the character of the magazine which you conduct; but as you tell us yourself that no person has ever doubted your literary prowess, or your ability to strangle all literary pretenders, I can easily perceive that having once secured immortality by your writings, you now take your rest, and leave the conduct of your magazine to undisciplined and uninitiated understrappers, who travel in the same road to fame with the scribblers whom I have just described. Let me tell you, however, that highly as I value your aid, and redoubtable as I esteem you, no partnership shall ever be formed between you and me, unless you discharge those miscreants, and evince your zeal for the extirpation of dunces and the reformation of literature by putting your own shoulders to the wheel. I really think, Kit, that so far from attending to the editorship of your magazine, you do not even read it after it is published. It is, in real truth, as stupid, as laboured, and as farcical as the *New Monthly*. You know,

Kit, the New Monthly is like the mountain in labour. If it cannot get hold of any thing great in nature, it flies to Baker-street, or some of the squares, and lays hold of something great in art. Mr. Campbell, however, should recollect that, according to Mr. Bowles, there is nothing great or sublime in art, and Mr. Bowles's theory should hold good until the contrary is proved. Now Mr. Campbell has attempted to prove the contrary, but he has not succeeded, even aided as he was by the genius of Lord Byron, and a host of some other ten or a dozen writers and reviewers. Mr. Campbell then, for decency's sake, should avoid all commerce with art. Such a commerce must always be attended with disagreeable associations, and remind him not only of Bowles's triumph, but teach him that while he draws his images from art, he sinks from the lofty regions to which the descriptive and pathetic muse had been supposed to elevate him, and mingle with the creatures of every day life. Mr. Campbell, however, seems to have entirely altered his opinion on the subject of the controversy between him and Mr. Bowles, and to think at present that it matters not a rush where or from what source we derive our images, provided they are in themselves, or by some kind of association connected with the bon ton of fashionable life. He who is always talking of high life is supposed to associate only with people in the highest circles; and, as the language of this circle is the language of art and disguise, as nature is a bore to them, and the sublimer images and conceptions of the muse absolutely unintelligible, so neither can they endure any novel or periodical that is not stuffed with balls, operas, masquerades, the theatre, Vauxhall, Carlton-house, Regent-street, Baker-street, and by way of contrast, and as a fall to greatness, all the petty resorts of the petty nobility. Thus is nature sacrificed to art in the New Monthly; and instead of being permitted to wander with Goldsmith, or with Thomson, through the softer scenes and calmer retreats of nature, we are thrust into a drawing room, or an opera box, to listen to the intolerable loquacity of Lady Fudge, or the

scrapes, contortions, and elegant prostrations of Monsieur ———, the devil knows who, some French or Italian protégée of the Duchess ———, but we must not use real names, and we hate mystery. If we cannot speak out, we choose not to speak at all. What a pity, Kit, that the New Monthly should thus forsake all commerce with nature, and the human mind, as it exists in rational and natural society, to play such tricks, if not before high heaven, at least before high people, as to make any person who is acquainted with Tom Campbell lament his fate, and those who are not, to conceive him a dancing master, or a master of ceremonies.

But is there not in the whole range of fashionable life, and in all the varied scenes of dissipation, affluence, wretchedness, and reverses of fortune that follow in its train, any thing to relieve the tedium and nausea of the hours that the distempered fop and the fashionable profligate take to recover the exhaustion of their physical and mental energies, but a dry catalogue of fashionable and unfashionable streets and squares? Is there nothing to amuse them but the residence of the great? Or is the object of the Editor merely to shew that he is intimate with all the dashing, and fashionable people in London? If so, I regret it on his own account, both as an editor and as a poet. Such an intimacy cannot exist without a complete sacrifice of his time; and, perhaps, it is to this sacrifice, not to his unconquerable laziness, as is generally supposed, that we should attribute the late poverty of his muse, a poverty that extends, not only to the quantity of his productions, but to their quality also.

If literature is to be thus sacrificed to fashionable follies and perverted tastes, what will be the result? Why, that neither those who write to instruct, nor those who love to mingle pleasure with instruction, will be read, and the republic of letters will be laid open to the devastations and impurities of scribblers alone. Science must stand still for a moment.

"Yet, yet a moment one dim ray of light,  
And then hail to great chaos and eternal night."

With regard to instruction, with regard to principles of reasoning and deduction, with regard to invention, discovery, and every thing that expands and imbues the mind with moral, physical, and intellectual knowledge, where are we to look for it? Why in those few works that frequently perish as soon as they make their appearance, because their fame and circulation depends, in the first instance, on the periodical works of the day, whether *Reviews, Magazines, Journals, Chronicles, Gazettes, Albums, Magnets*, or call them by whatever name or denomination you will, for they all occasionally take upon themselves the office of reviewers. Now, Kit, need we tell you, that when works of profound erudition are sent afloat into the world, they must sail between Scylla and Charybdis, while their fame rests upon the periodical press, where, if they be not engulfed, they rise, not by the press, but in the very teeth of its censure, or amid the affected slumbers of its neglect and silence. And how could it be otherwise?

Suppose a new work is published, of very extraordinary merit; the subject is language, style, oratory, philosophy, physics, metaphysics, mathematics, the sublime, the beautiful, the picturesque, or any other subject that requires profound thinking and extensive reading. Suppose the author of this work to be unknown to the public; for if he be not we must form either an erroneous estimation, or a right one by chance, of the influence of the review, in extending the circulation of the book and the fame of the author, as a writer once celebrated by his former writings or unpublished discoveries is certain of having his works known and appreciated without any aid from the reviewers. Let this unknown author, then, send forth this work of extraordinary merit, and what will the reviewer do with it? Why, if it be too profound for him, he seals his lips and says nothing; writes nothing, never saw or heard any thing about

it. He says nothing about it, lest he should expose his own ignorance by commenting upon a subject which he does not understand. If, on the contrary, there be some points or passages in this work, as there must be in every work of any length, which comes within the little range of his nicely selected and sprucely decorated knowledge, he lays his claws on it with all the voracity of a cat, and seeks, with all the toil of laborious dullness, to prove that this point of this passage is either below mediocrity in style or in argument, or, at least, not equal to what might be expected from a writer who ventured on so hazardous and arduous an undertaking. And why does he so? Why, forsooth, because if he can convince you that he is acquainted with any part of the work, he thinks you have a right to take it for granted that he is acquainted with the whole, and could analyse its most knotty and profound points with equal ease. What, then, has such a work to gain by the cooperation of the reviewers, who either totally neglect it, or raise their own reputation at its expense. Had there been no reviews, no literary periodicals, this would not be the case. The public would then be obliged to judge and examine for themselves, and the result would always be favourable to works of merit. But it is now late, and I must take my leave of you, hoping to convince you in my next letter, that it is only works of merit that suffer by the reviewers; that works of no merit would die a natural death, had there not been a reviewer in existence; and that works of merit have nothing to fear, except from ignorant, superficial reviewers, and the periodical press. Until then, believe me to be as zealous in the cause of literary reformation, and as replete with the hope of, and distinguishing that brood of scribbles, who have neither drunk deep, nor even tasted the Pierian spring, as you are yourself.

MARTIN M'DERMOTT