

THE  
[MAGNIFICENT  
ACTIVIST]

*The Writings of  
Thomas Wentworth Higginson  
(1823-1911)*

EDITED BY  
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A LETTER TO A YOUNG  
CONTRIBUTOR

My dear young gentleman or young lady,—for many are the Cecil Dreemes of literature who superscribe their offered manuscripts with very masculine names in very feminine handwriting,—it seems wrong not to meet your accumulated and urgent epistles with one comprehensive reply, thus condensing many private letters into a printed one. And so many of those who read the “Atlantic Monthly” have at times the impulse to write for it also, that this epistle will be sure of perusal, though Mrs. Stowe remain uncut and the Autocrat go for an hour without readers.

Far from me be the wild expectation that every author will not habitually measure the merits of a periodical by its appreciation of his or her last manuscript. I should as soon ask a young lady not to estimate the management of a ball by her own private luck in respect to partners. But it is worth while at least to point out that in the treatment of every contribution the real interests of editor and writer are absolutely the same, and any antagonism is merely traditional, like the supposed hostility between France and England, or between England and Slavery. No editor can ever afford the rejection of a good thing, and no author the publication of a bad one. The only difficulty lies in drawing the line. Were all offered manuscripts unequivocally good or bad, there would be no great trouble; it is the vast range of mediocrity which perplexes: the majority are too bad for blessing and too good for banning; so that no conceivable reason can be given for either fate, save that upon the destiny of any single one may hang that of a hundred others just like it. But whatever

be the standard fixed, it is equally for the interest of all concerned that it be enforced without flinching.

Nor is there the slightest foundation for the supposed editorial prejudice against new or obscure contributors. On the contrary, every editor is always hungering and thirsting after novelties. To take the lead in bringing forward a new genius is as fascinating a privilege as that of the physician who boasted to Sir Henry Halford of having been the first man to discover the Asiatic cholera and to communicate it to the public. It is only stern necessity which compels the magazine to fall back so constantly on the regular old staff of contributors, whose average product has been gauged already; just as every country lyceum attempts annually to arrange an entirely new list of lecturers, and ends with no bolder experiment than to substitute Gough and Beecher in place of last year's Beecher and Gough.

Of course no editor is infallible, and the best magazine contains an occasional poor article. Do not blame the unfortunate conductor. He knows it as well as you do,—after the deed is done. The newspapers kindly pass it over, still preparing their accustomed opiate of sweet praises, so much for each contributor, so much for the magazine collectively,—like a hostess with her tea-making, a spoonful for each person and one for the pot. But I can tell you that there is an official person who meditates and groans, meanwhile, in the night-watches, to think that in some atrocious moment of good-nature or sleepiness he left the door open and let that ungainly intruder in. Do you expect him to acknowledge the blunder, when you tax him with it? Never,—he feels it too keenly. He will rather stand up stoutly for the surpassing merits of the misshapen thing, as a mother for her deformed child; and as the mother is nevertheless inwardly imploring that there may never be such another born to her, so be sure that it is not by reminding the editor of this calamity that you can allure him into risking a repetition.

An editor thus shows himself to be but human; and it is well enough to remember this fact, when you approach him. He is not a gloomy despot, no Nemesis or Rhadamanthus, but a bland and virtuous man, exceedingly anxious to secure plenty of good subscribers and contributors, and very ready to perform any acts of kindness not inconsistent with this grand design. Draw near him, therefore, with soft approaches and mild persuasions. Do not treat him like an enemy, and insist on reading your whole manuscript aloud to him, with appropriate gestures. His time has some value, if yours has not; and he has therefore educated his eye till it has become microscopic, like a naturalist's, and can classify

nine out of ten specimens by one glance at a scale or a feather. Fancy an ambitious echinoderm claiming a private interview with Agassiz, to demonstrate by verbal arguments that he is a mollusk! Besides, do you expect to administer the thing orally to each of the two hundred thousand, more or less, who turn the leaves of the magazine? You are writing for the average eye, and must submit to its verdict. "Do not trouble yourself about the light on your statue; it is the light of the public square which must test its value."

Therefore do not despise any honest propitiation, however small, in dealing with your editor. Look to the physical aspect of your manuscript, and prepare your page so neatly that it shall allure instead of repelling. Use good pens, black ink, nice white paper and plenty of it. Do not emulate "paper-sparing Pope," whose chaotic manuscript of the "Iliad," written chiefly on the backs of old letters, still remains in the British Museum. If your document be slovenly, the presumption is that its literary execution is the same, Pope to the contrary notwithstanding. An editor's eye becomes carnal, and is easily attracted by a comely outside. If you really wish to obtain his good-will for your production, do not first tax his time for deciphering it, any more than in visiting a millionaire to solicit a loan you would begin by asking him to pay for the hire of the carriage which takes you to his door.

On the same principle, send your composition in such a shape that it shall not need the slightest literary revision before printing. Many a bright production dies discarded which might have been made thoroughly presentable by a single day's labor of a competent scholar, in shaping, smoothing, dovetailing, and retrenching. The revision seems so slight an affair that the aspirant cannot conceive why there should be so much fuss about it.

"The piece, you think, is incorrect; why, take it;  
I'm all submission; what you'd have it, make it."

But to discharge that friendly office no universal genius is salaried; and for intellect in the rough there is no market.

Rules for style, as for manners, must be chiefly negative: a positively good style indicates certain natural powers in the individual, but a merely unexceptionable style is only a matter of culture and good models. Dr. Channing established in New England a standard of style which really attained almost the perfection of the pure and the colorless, and the disciplinary value of such a literary influence, in a raw and crude nation, has been very great; but the defect of this standard is that it ends in

utterly renouncing all the great traditions of literature, and ignoring the magnificent mystery of words. Human language may be polite and prosaic in itself, uplifted with difficulty into expression by the high thoughts it utters, or it may in itself become so saturated with warm life and delicious association that every sentence shall palpitate and thrill with the mere fascination of the syllables. The statue is not more surely included in the block of marble than is all conceivable splendor of utterance in "Worcester's Unabridged." And as Ruskin says of painting that it is in the perfection and precision of the instantaneous line that the claim to immortality is made, so it is easy to see that a phrase may outweigh a library. Keats heads the catalogue of things real with "sun, moon, and passages of Shakespeare"; and Keats himself has left behind him winged wonders of expression that were not surpassed by Shakespeare, nor by any one else who ever dared touch the English tongue. There may be phrases which shall be palaces to dwell in, treasure-houses to explore; a single word may be a window from which one may perceive all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them. Oftentimes a word shall speak what accumulated volumes have labored in vain to utter: there may be years of crowded passion in a word, and half a life in a sentence.

Such being the majesty of the art you seek to practise, you can at least take time and deliberation before dishonoring it. Disabuse yourself especially of the belief that any grace or flow of style can come from writing rapidly. Haste can make you slipshod, but it can never make you graceful. With what dismay one reads of the wonderful fellows in fashionable novels, who can easily dash off a brilliant essay in a single night! When I think how slowly my poor thoughts come in, how tardily they connect themselves, what a delicious prolonged perplexity it is to cut and contrive a decent clothing of words for them, as a little girl does for her doll,—nay, how many new outfits a single sentence sometimes costs before it is presentable, till it seems at last, like our army on the Potomac, as if it never could be thoroughly clothed,—I certainly should never dare to venture into print, but for the confirmed suspicion that the greatest writers have done even thus. Do you know, my dear neophyte, how Balzac used to compose? As a specimen of the labor that sometimes goes to make an effective style, the process is worth recording. When Balzac had a new work in view, he first spent weeks in studying from real life for it, haunting the streets of Paris by day and night, note-book in hand. His materials gained, he shut himself up till the book was written, perhaps two months, absolutely excluding everybody but his publisher. He emerged pale and thin, with the complete manuscript in his hand,—not only written, but almost rewritten, so thoroughly was the original

copy altered, interlined, and rearranged. This strange production, almost illegible, was sent to the unfortunate printers; with infinite difficulty a proof-sheet was obtained, which, being sent to the author, was presently returned in a condition almost as hopeless as that of the manuscript. Whole sentences were erased, others transposed, everything modified. A second and a third proof followed, alike torn to pieces by the ravenous pen of Balzac. The despairing printers labored by turns, only the picked men of the office being equal to the task, and they relieving each other at hourly intervals, as beyond that time no one could endure the fatigue. At last, by the fourth proof-sheet, the author too was wearied out, though not contented. "I work ten hours out of the twenty-four," said he, "over the elaboration of my unhappy style, and I am never satisfied, myself, when all is done."

Do not complain that this scrupulousness is probably wasted, after all, and that nobody knows. The public knows. People criticise far beyond what they can attain. When the Athenian audience hissed a public speaker for a mispronunciation, it did not follow that any one of the malcontents could pronounce as well as the orator. In our own lyceum-audiences there may not be a man who does not yield to his own private eccentricities of dialect, but see if they do not appreciate good English from Sumner or Phillips! Men talk of writing down to the public taste who have never yet written up to that standard. "There never yet was a good tongue," said old Fuller, "that wanted ears to hear it." If one were expecting to be judged by a few scholars only, one might hope somehow to cajole them; but it is this vast, unimpassioned, unconscious tribunal, this average judgment of intelligent minds, which is truly formidable. It is something more undying than senates and more omnipotent than courts, something which rapidly cancels all transitory reputations, and at last becomes the organ of eternal justice and awards posthumous fame.

The first demand made by the public upon every composition is, of course, that it should be attractive. In addressing a miscellaneous audience, whether through eye or ear, it is certain that no man living has a right to be tedious. Every editor is therefore compelled to insist that his contributors should make themselves agreeable, whatever else they may do. To be agreeable, it is not necessary to be amusing; an essay may be thoroughly delightful without a single witticism, while a monotone of jokes soon grows tedious. Charge your style with life; and the public will not ask for conundrums. But the profounder your discourse, the greater must necessarily be the effort to refresh and diversify. I have observed, in addressing audiences of children in schools and elsewhere, that there is

no fact so grave, no thought so abstract, but you can make it very interesting to the small people, if you will only put in plenty of detail and illustration; and I have not observed that in this respect grown men are so very different. If, therefore, in writing, you find it your mission to be abstruse, fight to render your statement clear and attractive, as if your life depended on it: your literary life does depend on it, and, if you fail, relapses into a dead language, and becomes, like that of Coleridge, only a *Biographia Literaria*. Labor, therefore, not in thought alone, but in utterance; clothe and reclothe your grand conception twenty times, if need be, until you find some phrase that with its grandeur shall be lucid also. It is this unwearied literary patience that has enabled Emerson not merely to introduce, but even to popularize, thoughts of such a quality as never reached the popular mind before. And when a writer, thus laborious to do his utmost for his disciples, becomes after all incomprehensible, we can try to believe that it is only that inevitable obscurity of depth which Coleridge calls a compliment to the reader.

In learning to write availably, a newspaper-office is a capital preparatory school. Nothing is so good to teach the use of materials, and to compel to pungency of style. Being always at close quarters with his readers, a journalist must shorten and sharpen his sentences, or he is doomed. Yet this mental alertness is bought at a severe price; such living from hand to mouth cheapens the whole mode of intellectual existence, and it would seem that no successful journalist could ever get the newspaper out of his blood, or achieve any high literary success.

For purposes of illustration and elucidation, and even for amplitude of vocabulary, wealth of accumulated materials is essential; and whether this wealth be won by reading or by experience makes no great difference. Coleridge attended Davy's chemical lectures to acquire new metaphors, and it is of no consequence whether one comes to literature from a library, a machine-shop, or a fore-castle, provided he has learned to work with thoroughness the soil he knows. Remember, however, that copious preparation has its perils also, in the crude display to which it tempts. The object of high culture is not to exhibit culture, but its results. You do not put guano on your garden that your garden may blossom guano. Indeed, even for the proper subordination of one's own thoughts the same self-control is needed; and there is no severer test of literary training than in the power to prune out your most cherished sentence, when you find that the sacrifice will help the symmetry or vigor of the whole.

Be noble both in the affluence and the economy of your diction; spare no wealth that you can put in, and tolerate no superfluity that can be

struck out. Remember the Lacedemonian who was fined for saying that in three words which might as well have been expressed in two. Do not throw a dozen vague epithets at a thing, in the hope that some one of them will fit; but study each phrase so carefully that the most ingenious critic cannot alter it without spoiling the whole passage for everybody but himself. For the same reason do not take refuge, as was the practice a few years since, in German combinations, heart-utterances, soul-sentiments, and hyphenized phrases generally; but roll your thought into one good English word. There is no fault which seems so hopeless as commonplaceness, but it is really easier to elevate the commonplace than to reduce the turgid. How few men in all the pride of culture can emulate the easy grace of a bright woman's letter!

Have faith enough in your own individuality to keep it resolutely down for a year or two. A man has not much intellectual capital who cannot allow himself a brief interval of modesty. Premature individualism commonly ends either in a reaction against the original whims, or in a mannerism which perpetuates them. For mannerism no one is great enough, because, though in the hands of a strong man it imprisons us in novel fascination, yet we soon grow weary, and then hate our prison forever. How sparkling was Reade's crisp brilliancy in "Peg Woffington!"—but into what disagreeable affectations it has since degenerated! Carlyle was a boon to the human race, amid the tameness into which English style was declining; but who is not tired of him and his catchwords now? Now the age has outgrown him, and is approaching a mode of writing which unites the smoothness of the eighteenth century with the vital vigor of the seventeenth, so that Sir Thomas Browne and Andrew Marvell seem quite as near to us as Pope or Addison,—a style penetrated with the best spirit of Carlyle, without a trace of Carlylism.

Be neither too lax nor too precise in your use of language: the one fault ends in stiffness, the other in slang. Some one told the Emperor Tiberius that he might give citizenship to men, but not to words. To be sure, Louis XIV in childhood, wishing for a carriage, called for *mon carrosse*, and made the former feminine a masculine to all future Frenchmen. But do not undertake to exercise these prerogatives of royalty until you are quite sure of being crowned. The only thing I remember in our college text-book of Rhetoric is one admirable verse of caution which it quoted:—

"In words, as fashions, the same rule will hold,  
Alike fantastic, if too new or old;  
Be not the first by whom the new are tried,  
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside."

Especially do not indulge any fantastic preference for either Latin or Anglo-Saxon, the two great wings on which our magnificent English soars and sings; we can spare neither. The combination gives us an affluence of synonymes and a delicacy of discrimination such as no unmixed idiom can show.

While you utterly shun slang, whether native or foreign born,—at present, by the way, our popular writers use far less slang than the English,—yet do not shrink from Americanisms, so they be good ones. American literature is now thoroughly out of leading-strings; and the nation which supplied the first appreciative audience for Carlyle, Tennyson, and the Brownings, can certainly trust its own literary instincts to create the new words it needs. To be sure, the inelegancies with which we are chiefly reproached are not distinctively American: Burke uses "pretty considerable"; Miss Burney says, "I trembled a few"; the English Bible says "reckon," Locke has "guess," and Southey "realize," in the exact sense in which one sometimes hears them used colloquially here. Nevertheless, such improprieties are of course to be avoided; but whatever good Americanisms exist, let us hold to them by all means. The diction of Emerson alone is a sufficient proof, by its unequalled range and precision, that no people in the world ever had access to a vocabulary so rich and copious as we are acquiring. To the previous traditions and associations of the English tongue we add resources of contemporary life such as England cannot rival. Political freedom makes every man an individual; a vast industrial activity makes every man an inventor, not merely of labor-saving machines, but of labor-saving words; universal schooling popularizes all thought and sharpens the edge of all language. We unconsciously demand of our writers the same dash and the same accuracy that we demand in railroading or dry-goods jobbing. The mixture of nationalities is constantly coining and exchanging new felicities of dialect: Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Africa, are present everywhere with their various contributions of wit and shrewdness, thought and geniality; in New York and elsewhere one finds whole thoroughfares of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal; on our Western railways there are placards printed in Swedish; even China is creeping in. The colonies of England are too far and too provincial to have had much reflex influence on her literature, but how our phraseology is already amplified by our relations with Spanish America! The life-blood of Mexico flowed into our newspapers while the Mexican war was in progress; and the gold of California glitters in our primers. Many foreign cities may show a greater variety of more national costumes, but the representative value of our immigrant tribes is far greater from the very fact that they merge their mental costume in ours. Thus the American writer finds himself among his phrases

like an American sea-captain amid his crew: a medley of all nations, waiting for some organizing mind to mould them into a unit of force.

There are certain minor matters, subsidiary to elegance, if not elegancies, and therefore worth attention. Do not habitually prop your sentences on crutches, such as Italics and exclamation-points, but make them stand without aid; if they cannot emphasize themselves, these devices are commonly but a confession of helplessness. Do not leave loose ends as you go on, straggling things, to be caught up and dragged along uneasily in foot-notes, but work them all in neatly, as Biddy at her bread-pan gradually kneads in all the outlying bits of dough, till she has one round and comely mass. Reduce yourself to short allowance of parentheses and dashes; if you employ them merely from clumsiness, they will lose all their proper power in your hands. Economize quotation-marks also, clear that dust from your pages, assume your readers to be acquainted with the current jokes and the stock epithets: all persons like the compliment of having it presumed that they know something, and prefer to discover the wit or beauty of your allusion without a guide-board.

The same principle applies to learned citations and the results of study. Knead these thoroughly in, supplying the maximum of desired information with a minimum of visible schoolmaster. It requires no pedantic mention of Euclid to indicate a mathematical mind, but only the habitual use of clear terms and close connections. To employ in argument the forms of Whately's Logic would render it probable that you are juvenile and certain that you are tedious; wreath the chain with roses. The more you have studied foreign languages, the more you will be disposed to keep Ollendorff in the background: the proper result of such acquirements is visible in a finer ear for words; so that Goethe said, the man who had studied but one language could not know that one. But spare the raw material; deal as cautiously in Latin as did General Jackson when Jack Downing was out of the way; and avoid French as some fashionable novelists avoid English.

Thus far, these are elementary and rather technical suggestions, fitted for the very opening of your literary career. Supposing you fairly in print, there are needed some further counsels.

Do not waste a minute, not a second, in trying to demonstrate to others the merit of your own performance. If your work does not vindicate itself, you cannot vindicate it, but you can labor steadily on to something which needs no advocate but itself. It was said of Haydon, the English artist, that, if he had taken half the pains to paint great pictures that he took to persuade the public he had painted them, his fame would have

been secure. Like his was the career of poor Horne, who wrote the farthing epic of "Orion" with one grand line in it, and a prose work (without any), on "The False Medium excluding Men of Genius from the Public." He spent years in ineffectually trying to repeal the exclusion in his own case, and has since manfully gone to the grazing regions in Australia, hoping there at least to find the sheep and the goats better discriminated. Do not emulate these tragedies. Remember how many great writers have created the taste by which they were enjoyed, and do not be in a hurry. Toughen yourself a little, and accomplish something better. Inscribe above your desk the words of Rivarol, "Genius is only great patience." It takes less time to build an avenue of shingle palaces than to hide away unseen, block by block, the vast foundation-stones of an observatory. Most bygone literary fames have been very short-lived in America, because they have lasted no longer than they deserved. Happening the other day to recur to a list of Cambridge lyceum-lecturers in my boyish days, I find with dismay that the only name now popularly remembered is that of Emerson; death, oblivion, or a professorship has closed over each of the others, while the whole standard of American literature has been vastly raised meanwhile, and no doubt partly through their labors. To this day, some of our most gifted writers are being dwarfed by the unkind friendliness of too early praise. It was Keats, the most precocious of all great poets, who declared that "nothing is finer for purposes of production than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers."

Yet do not be made conceited by obscurity, any more than by notoriety. Many fine geniuses have been long neglected; but what would become of us, if all the neglected were to turn out geniuses? It is unsafe reasoning from either extreme. You are not necessarily writing like Holmes because your reputation for talent began in college, nor like Hawthorne because you have been before the public ten years without an admirer. Above all, do not seek to encourage yourself by dwelling on the defects of your rivals: strength comes only from what is above you. Northcote, the painter, said, that, in observing an inferior picture, he always felt his spirits droop, with the suspicion that perhaps he deceived himself and his own paintings might be no better than that; but the works of the mighty masters always gave him renewed strength, in the hope that perhaps his own had in their smaller way something of the same divine quality.

Do not complacently imagine, because your first literary attempt proved good and successful, that your second will doubtless improve upon it. The very contrary sometimes happens. A man dreams for years

over one projected composition, all his reading converges to it, all his experience stands related to it, it is the net result of his existence up to a certain time, it is the cistern into which he pours his accumulated life. Emboldened by success, he mistakes the cistern for a fountain, and instantly taps his brain again. The second production, as compared with the first, costs but half the pains and attains but a quarter part of the merit; a little more of fluency and facility perhaps,—but the vigor, the wealth, the originality, the head of water, in short, are wanting. One would think that almost any intelligent man might write one good thing in a lifetime, by reserving himself long enough: it is the effort after quantity which proves destructive. The greatest man has passed his zenith, when he once begins to cheapen his style of work and sink into a book-maker: after that, though the newspapers may never hint at it, nor his admirers own it, the decline of his career has begun.

Yet the author is not alone to blame for this, but also the world which first tempts and then reproves him. Goethe says, that, if a person once does a good thing, society forms a league to prevent his doing another. His seclusion is gone, and therefore his unconsciousness and his leisure; luxuries tempt him from his frugality, and soon he must toil for luxuries; then, because he has done one thing well, he is urged to squander himself and do a thousand things badly. In this country especially, if one can learn languages, he must go to Congress; if he can argue a law-case, he must become agent of a factory: out of this comes a variety of training which is very valuable, but a wise man must have strength to call in his resources before middle life, prune off divergent activities, and concentrate himself on the main work, be it what it may. It is shameful to see the indeterminate lives of many of our gifted men, unable to resist the temptations of a busy land, and so losing themselves in an aimless and miscellaneous career.

Yet it is unjust and unworthy in Marsh to disfigure his fine work on the English language by traducing all who now write that tongue. "None seek the audience, fit, though few, which contented the ambition of Milton, and all writers for the press now measure their glory by their gains," and so indefinitely onward,—which is simply cant. Does a man who honestly earns his annual ten thousand dollars by writing "dime novels," take rank as head of American literature by virtue of his salary? Because the profits of true literature are rising,—trivial as they still are beside those of commerce or the professions,—its merits do not necessarily decrease, but the contrary is more likely to happen; for in this pursuit, as in all others, cheap work is usually poor work. None but gentlemen of fortune can enjoy the bliss of writing for nothing and paying their own

printer. Nor does the practice of compensation by the page work the injury that has often been ignorantly predicted. No contributor need hope to cover two pages of a magazine with what might be adequately said in one, unless he assumes his editor to be as foolish as himself. The Spartans exiled Ctesiphon for bragging that he could speak the whole day on any subject selected; and a modern periodical is of little value, unless it has a Spartan at its head.

Strive always to remember—though it does not seem the plan of the universe that we should quite bring it home to ourselves—that "To-Day is a king in disguise," and that this American literature of ours will be just as classic a thing, if we do our part, as any which the past has treasured. There is a mirage over all literary associations. Keats and Lamb seem to our young people to be existences as remote and legendary as Homer, yet it is not an old man's life since Keats was an awkward boy at the door of Hazlitt's lecture-room, and Lamb was introducing Talfourd to Wordsworth as his own only admirer. In reading Spence's "Anecdotes," Pope and Addison appear no further off; and wherever I open Bacon's "Essays," I am sure to end at last with that one magical sentence, annihilating centuries, "When I was a child, and Queen Elizabeth was in the flower of her years."

And this imperceptible transformation of the commonplace present into the storied past applies equally to the pursuits of war and to the serenest works of peace. Be not misled by the excitements of the moment<sup>1</sup> into overrating the charms of military life. In this chaos of uniforms, we seem to be approaching times such as existed in England after Waterloo, when the splenetic Byron declared that the only distinction was to be a little undistinguished. No doubt, war brings out grand and unexpected qualities; and there is a perennial fascination in the Elizabethan Raleighs and Sidneys, heroes of pen and sword. But the fact is patent, that there is scarcely any art whose rudiments are so easy to acquire as the military; the manuals of tactics have no difficulties comparable to those of the ordinary professional text-books; and any one who can drill a boat's crew or a ball club can learn in a very few weeks to drill a company or even a regiment. Given in addition the power to command, to organize, and to execute,—high qualities, though not rare in this community,—and you have a man needing but time and experience to make a general. More than this can be acquired only by an exclusive absorption in this one art; as Napoleon said, that, to have good soldiers, a nation must be always at war.

<sup>1</sup>Written early in 1862.

If, therefore, duty and opportunity call, count it a privilege to obtain your share in the new career; throw yourself into it as resolutely and joyously as if it were a summer campaign in the Adirondack, but never fancy for a moment that you have discovered any grander or manlier life than you should have been leading every day at home. It is not needful here to decide which is intrinsically the better thing, a column of a newspaper or a column of attack, Wordsworth's "Lines on Immortality" or Wellington's Lines of Torres Vedras; each is noble, if nobly done, though posterity seems to remember literature the longest. The writer is not celebrated for having been the favorite of the conqueror, but sometimes the conqueror only for having favored or even for having spurned the writer. "When the great Sultan died, his power and glory departed from him, and nothing remained but this one fact, that he knew not the worth of Ferdousi." There is a slight delusion in this dazzling glory. What a fantastic whim the young lieutenants thought it, when General Wolfe, on the eve of battle, said of Gray's "Elegy," "Gentlemen, I would rather have written that poem than have taken Quebec." Yet, no doubt, it is by the memory of that remark that Wolfe will live the longest,—aided by the stray line of another poet, still reminding us, not needlessly, that "Wolfe's great name's cotemporal with our own."

Once the poets and the sages were held to be pleasing triflers, fit for hours of relaxation in the lulls of war. Now the pursuits of peace are recognized as the real, and war as the accidental. It interrupts all higher avocations, as does the cry of fire: when the fire is extinguished, the important affairs of life are resumed. A few years ago the London "Times" was bewailing that all thought and culture in England were suspended by the Crimean War. "We want no more books. Give us good recruits, at least five feet seven, a good model for a floating-battery, and a gun to take effect at five thousand yards,—and Whigs and Tories, High and Low Church, the poets, astronomers, and critics, may settle it among themselves." How remote seems that epoch now! and how remote will the present erelong appear! while art and science will resume their sway serene, beneath skies eternal. Yesterday I turned from treatises on gunnery and fortification to open Milton's Latin Poems, which I had never read, and there, in the "Sylvarum Liber," I came upon a passage as grand as anything in "Paradise Lost,"—his description of Plato's archetypal man, the vast ideal of the human race, eternal, incorrupt, coeval with the stars, dwelling either in the sidereal spaces, or among the Lethean mansions of souls unborn, or pacing the unexplored confines of the habitable globe. There stood the majestic image, veiled in a dead language, yet still visible; and it was as if one of the poet's own sylvan groves had been

suddenly cut down, and opened a view of Olympus. Then all these present fascinating trivialities of war and diplomacy ebbed away, like Greece and Rome before them, and there seemed nothing real in the universe but Plato's archetypal man.

Indeed, it is the same with all contemporary notorieties. In all free governments, especially, it is the habit to over-rate the *dramatis personæ* of the hour. How empty to us are now the names of the great American politicians of the last generation, as Crawford and Lowndes!—yet it is but a few years since these men filled in the public ear as large a space as Clay or Calhoun afterwards, and when they died, the race of the giants seemed ended. The path to oblivion of these later idols is just as sure; even Webster will be to the next age but a mighty tradition, and all that he has left will appear no more commensurate with his fame than is his statue by Powers. If anything is to give longer life to the statesmen of today, it is only because we are engaged in a contest of more vital principles, which may better embalm the men. Of all gifts, eloquence is the most short-lived. The most accomplished orator fades forgotten, and his laurels pass to some hoarse, inaudible Burke, accounted rather a bore during his lifetime, and possessed of a faculty of scattering, not convincing, the members of the House. "After all," said the brilliant Choate, with melancholy foreboding, "a book is the only immortality."

So few men in any age are born with a marked gift for literary expression, so few of this number have access to high culture, so few even of these have the personal nobleness to use their powers well, and this small band is finally so decimated by disease and manifold disaster, that it makes one shudder to observe how little of the embodied intellect of any age is left behind. Literature is attar of roses, one distilled drop from a million blossoms. Think how Spain and Portugal once divided the globe between them in a treaty, when England was a petty kingdom of illiterate tribes!—and now all Spain is condensed for us into Cervantes, and all Portugal into the fading fame of the unread Camoens. The long magnificence of Italian culture has left us only *I Quattro Poeti*, the Four Poets. The difference between Shakespeare and his contemporaries is not that he is read twice, ten times, a hundred times as much as they: it is an absolute difference; he is read, and they are only printed.

Yet, if our life be immortal, this temporary distinction is of little moment, and we may learn humility, without learning despair, from earth's evanescent glories. Who cannot bear a few disappointments, if the vista be so wide that the mute inglorious Miltons of this sphere may in some other sing their Paradise as Found? War or peace, fame or forgetfulness, can bring no real injury to one who has formed the fixed purpose to live



nobly day by day. I fancy that in some other realm of existence we may look back with a kindly interest on this scene of our earlier life, and say to one another, "Do you remember yonder planet, where once we went to school"? And whether our elective study here lay chiefly in the fields of action or of thought will matter little to us then, when other schools shall have led us through other disciplines.