

Commencement Thesis -

"Notes on American Poetry."

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Notes on American Poetry.

"Poetry is the rythmical expression of beauty or imagination, the verbal utterance of the ideal, and therefore the highest and most permanent form of literature."

According to this definition, even the most liberal minded must admit that there was no poetry produced in America before eighteen hundred. Since then however, it must be granted - even by the most conservative - that America has enjoyed a period of poetical production of which she may in no wise feel ashamed.

It may be and often is questioned whether this form of literature has reached as high a standard as some others, such as the essay, history and perhaps the novel. We may truthfully say that we have essayists as great, at least, as any the world has yet produced. We may also assert that we have historians, the superiority of whose researches and literary worth can not be questioned. And

many of us are ready to say that we have novelists of as great power and finish as those of any other country.

Have we then any poets or poets to complete our crown of literary genius, or must we wait for a new outburst of song before we can challenge the world to exhibit a coronet of as great purity, brilliance, and endurance as our own?

This is a question upon which critics differ, but one which should not on that account be avoided. When we consider the list of what are called "Greater Poets", Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Milton; or even a class of lesser merit - Heine, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning; it seems to us that patriotic sentiment will have to bow down before the self-evident however unpleasant fact that we can not compete, as yet, with the more mature and powerful poetry of the Old World.

The first question that arises on beginning a very brief review of American poetry, is that of a national school. Is there an American school? The essential qualities of any national school depend not so much on the types, personages, and localities - these are local - but upon the spirit. We pay our regard to the character rather than to the speech and aspects of our friends. So, unless the feeling, the spirit of our home poets is fresh and radically different from the French, the German, or even the English feeling and spirit - our American school is not yet developed.

This is another adamantine rock which divides the stream of critics and criticism. Richard Grant White is very strong in his claim that we are still essentially English and will remain so for a long period of years to come - until Anglo-Saxon and Hollander and German and Irishman and negro and Chinese shall have so blended their blood

that from the fusion a new race shall have sprung.

On the other hand, E. C. Stedman is just as strong in denying this claim. He says that inasmuch as an American is instantly recognized among Englishmen just so far has his nationality manifested itself and just so far must it manifest itself in his literary work as well as in his appearance, modes of thought and of looking at things. He further claims that the fusion which White places so far in the future has already taken place to some extent and that from it, the beginnings, however incomplete, of a broadly national school of poetry has proceeded.

In those portions of the country which have been least affected by the restlessness of the heterogeneous elements of our nationality, or in which these elements have blended most completely, the sentiment and life of the people has been fairly expressed in poetry and prose romance. This national

character has been more rapidly developed as we break away from European models, and assert our independence by starting out on fresh lines of thought and feeling. The incompleteness of this national school is acknowledged by all, but is said to be rapidly giving way before a feeling of greater breadth as the different races become more thoroughly harmonized.

American poetry, as all other literary work, is best studied in periods. These periods are not arbitrarily laid down but are permanent and essential. Each period is the harvest of what has been sown in the sentiments and life of the people, and as feelings fluctuate and conditions change, the harvests will differ materially from each other, so that however they may overlap they may be easily distinguished.

For the first two hundred years of literary history in America, we find no poetry worthy of the name. Curiosities

they may be, but poems - never. The country was too unsettled. Men were needed for the more practical affairs of life. The struggle of the colonies to maintain themselves put them far behind their mothercountry in literary production.

With the beginning of this century, begins the first period of American poetry. Of the many singers who come in here, but a few of the best can be considered.

Probably our first real poet was William Cullen Bryant, who like so many of our poets was prose writer as well. Of Puritan extraction, his life as well as his poetry was devoid of passion, of imagination, of any of the lighter graces so sorely needed to make this life seem worth the living. He was a strong thoughtful man - the "Poet of Nature" - the American Wordsworth. A peculiarity of his work is that he learned nothing in later life that he did not know in youth; his writing was as mature at twenty one as at eighty. His fame

rests almost entirely on a few poems of which "Thanatopsis" written in youth, and "The Flood of Years", in old age are perhaps the best.

John Greenleaf Whittier is a poet of an entirely different order. He was a humble retiring Quaker whose heart was stirred to the depths by the horrors of slavery, in which he recognized no redeeming feature. By his poems on slavery and war he had quite an influence on public sentiment. These poems are not his best, however. When he attempted to give a stirring thought in verse, he all too often sacrificed form to thought - thus producing a ragged and unfinished effect. In the quieter poems of simple life he succeeded best and in the lowly field which was his, he certainly reigns supreme. Whittier is thoroughly American in both thought and feeling - taking even his illustrations and figures from American life and scenes - he knew no other.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, principally remembered for his essays, has written a volume of very characteristic poems-poems which could not have been written except in America, so thoroughly republican are they in thought and spirit.

Whether he did not have his gift well developed or whether he simply ~~chose~~ not to make use of it, is a mooted question - certain it is, however, that he sometimes touched a higher strain than has been reached by any other American. His poetry lacks action and fire and sometimes artistic finish.

He has been paralleled with Browning, and in one respect at least they are alike. They are both unpopular among the crowd, but both beloved by the few who study and know them.

Perhaps the most popular poet of America is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His easy, pleasant, though sometimes monotonous verse, treating subjects within the comprehension of almost everyone - makes him the poet of the people. Longfellow is a poet of

the world rather than of America. He studied other languages so unceasingly and travelled so much, that his work takes on the cosmopolitan character of the man himself. With the exception of "Hiawatha", "Evangeline", and a few others, his work might have been done anywhere.

That the world appreciates this is shown by the fact that his poems have been translated into almost every language and his name is honored by foreigners as well as Americans. His principal fault is that he tells everything, leaving nothing for the thought or imagination of the reader. When he died he was mourned as a familiar, a fireside friend - always simple - never passionate.

Perhaps the one poet whose work shows any depth of passion or emotion is Edgar Allan Poe. Some of his lyrics are as perfect as any that have yet been written. It is safe to say that had he been as strong physically as he was

mentally, his name would stand today at the head of the lyric realm of poetry. He was the poet of romance, of mystery, of the grotesque, the horrible.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose satirical prose works are so much read, succeeded quite as well in putting his dashing witty satire into verse. He is not strictly an American poet, for while some of his poems are highly characteristic, a large majority are not. His style is pure and classical, and when he leaves off the satire, his lyrics are as perfect as can be desired.

Another essayist and critic who has won equal laurels in the Music Court, is James Russell Lowell. He stands as our foremost and representative man of letters - the type of Republican culture. In his poetical writings we find the life and passion of New England and the spirit of the people at large. He has written some of the most touching of lyrics - "The Changeling" and "She Came and Went."

It is with great hesitancy that we approach the topic of Walt Whitman. It seems that his work has received a greater amount of praise and blame than it warrants. The greater share of his poems will perish with his time, and in fifty years, Walt Whitman will be simply remembered as an eccentric man and the author of a few good poems.

Among a younger generation, we find the names of Bayard Taylor, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and Sidney Lanier—all poets of exquisite beauty rather than of power. Lanier especially is interesting because of his sad life, and the promise in his early writings of a leading poet. As he himself said, he did not write for his time, but for all time.

After this short review of what America has produced, it must be seen that the higher forms of poetry, the drama, the epic, et cetera have not been developed to any great extent.

At present we are in what has been called the "twilight of the facts," the seeding time for a harvest that must correspond to the future of the land itself, - "of America now wholly free and interblending, with not one but a score of civic capitals, each an emulative centre of taste and invention, a focus of energetic life, ceaseless in action, radiant with the glow of beauty and creative power."