

## THACKERAY'S PLACE IN LITERATURE.

The literary career of William Makepeace Thackeray has not a few special features of its own that it is interesting to note at once. Of all the more eminent writers of the Victorian age, his life was the shortest—he died in 1863 at the age of fifty-two, the age of Shakespeare. His literary career of twenty-six years was shorter than that of Carlyle, of Macaulay, Disraeli, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Froude, or Ruskin. It opened with the reign of the Queen, almost in the very year of "Pickwick," whose author stood beside his grave and lived and wrote for some years more. But these twenty-six years of Thackeray's era of production were full of wonderful activity, and have left us as many volumes of rich and varied genius. And the most striking feature of all is this—that in these twenty-six full volumes in so many modes, prose, verse, romance, parody, burlesque, essay, biography, criticism, there is not one which can be put aside as worthless and an utter failure; not one that falls from his consummate mastery of style; not one that is irksome to read, to re-read and to linger over in the reading.

This mastery over style—a style at once simple, pure, nervous, flexible, pathetic, and graceful—places Thackeray among the very greatest masters of English prose, and undoubtedly as the most certain and faultless of all the prose writers of the Victorian age. Without saying that he has ever reached quite to the level of some lyrical and apocalyptic descants that we may find in Carlyle and in Ruskin, Thackeray has never fallen into the faults of violence and turgidity which their warmest admirers are bound to confess in many a passage from these our two prose-poets. Carlyle is often grotesque; Macaulay can be pompous; Disraeli, Bulwer, Dickens are often slovenly and sometimes bombastic; George Eliot is sometimes pedantic, and Ruskin has been stirred into hysterics. But Thackeray's English from the first page of his first volume to the last page of his twenty-sixth volume, is natural, scholarly, pure, incisive, and yet gracefully and easily modulated—the language of an English gentleman of culture, wit, knowledge of the world, and consummate ease and self-possession.

And what is a truly striking fact about Thackeray's mastery of style is this—that it was perfectly formed from the beginning; that it hardly ever varied, or developed, or waxed in the whole course of his literary career; that his first venture as a very young man is as finished and as ripe as his very latest piece, when he died almost in the act of writing the words: "and his heart throbbled with an exquisite bliss." This prodigious precocity in style, such uniform perfection of exact composition, are perhaps without parallel in English literature. At the age of twenty-six Thackeray wrote "The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the great Hoggarty Diamond." It was produced under very melancholy conditions, in the most unfavourable form of publication, and it was mangled by editorial necessities. And yet it can still be read and re-read as one of Thackeray's masterpieces, trifling and curtailed as it is (for it may be printed in one hundred pages); it is full of wit, humour, scathing insight and fine pathos in the midst of burlesque, as is "Vanity Fair" itself. It is already Thackeray in all his strength, with his "Snobs," his "Nobs," his fierce satire and his exquisite style.

This exquisitely simple, easy, idiomatic and nervous style marks all Thackeray's work for his twenty-six years of activity, and is equally perfect for whatever purpose it is used, and in whatever key he may choose to compose. One is tempted to enlarge at length on the merits of Thackeray's style, because it is in his mastery over all the resources of the English language that he surpasses contemporary prose writers. And it is a mastery which is equally shown in every form of composition. There is a famous bit of Byron's about Sheridan to the effect that he had written the best comedy, made the finest speech, and invented the drollest farce in the English language. And it is hardly extravagant to say of Thackeray that, of all the Englishmen of this century, he has written the best comedy of manners, the best extravaganza, the best burlesque, the best parody, and the best comic song. And to this some of his admirers would add, the best lectures and the best critical essays.

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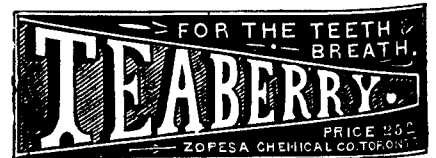
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