

SAUNTERINGS.

"EVEN in Shakespeare—the very part of him which is generally admitted to be his true body," Mr. George Parsons Lathrop has been saying in his introduction to Miss Jeannette Gilder's 'Representative Poems of Living Poets,' "may be found an occasional mixture of triviality, doggerel, or bombast, which would not be tolerated in a modern poet of high standing." Quoting this remark, and italicising the revolutionary sentiment with which it closes, Mr. W. D. Howells in last month's *Harper's* indulges in a little playful and excusable reminiscence as follows:

Does Mr. Lathrop perhaps remember how a few years ago the British Isles were shaken to their foundations and their literary dependency here quaked

From one to the other sea,

and all the dead conventionalities rose to a sitting posture in their graves with horror, because some one casually said that the mannerism of Dickens and the confidential attitude of Thackeray would not now be tolerated, "fiction having become a finer art than it was in their day?" Has Mr. Lathrop forgotten that awful moment? Are we to have that day of wrath all over again? Mr. Lathrop is a poet, and at times a very charming one; does he realise that he has placed himself in a position to be asked whether he thinks he writes greater poetry than Shakespeare? Is he aware that to many worthy persons he will actually seem to have said so?

Whether Mr. Lathrop wrote in a state of blissful forgetfulness, or rash defiance, or resigned expectation of being persecuted for righteousness' sake, cannot perhaps be determined without consulting him. But to most of us, whose ears still ring with the journalistic din that assailed the unfortunate novelist upon the publication of the heterodox opinion he quotes, the awful risk of such ignorance, the foolhardiness of such defiance, the unspeakable martyrdom of such resignation is all too apparent. It is not our purpose, however, either to cast the first stone at this self-immolating literary St. Stephen, or to pour balm into the prospective wounds of the missiles that are sure to come. If one agreed with Mr. Howells that the critic of to-day would necessarily find the faults of yesterday in Dickens and Thackeray, even as the critic of to-morrow will find the faults of to-day in Howells and James, and that contemporary fiction is a subtler, and therefore a finer, though not necessarily a stronger art than it ever was before, so one will fall in with Mr. Lathrop in his Shakespearian heresies, although they result from no comparison with the poetry of the present. The frame of mind that accepted the one will not cavil at the other. In considering the opinions of these gentlemen, however, it is the attitude from which they are dictated, rather than the statements themselves that is especially worthy of attention.

A CERTAIN, or rather an uncertain, disquietude in critical circles has been manifest so long that one hesitates to call it a sign of the times, even the times of the world of literature—a world so much smaller than it seems, and so much more important in the general solar system than it appears to be. The self-governing spirit of the age has invaded letters, autocracy's last stronghold, and from Walt Whitman in his unbound metres to Harrison Posnett in his careful propositions, the inhabitants of that little sphere that swings concentric with our own are beginning to question with vague discontent, why they, of all people, should be governed by crowned skeletons, and own such strict allegiance to the sceptred hands of Westminster Abbey. This disaffection is by no means general. There is a strong faction for authority, the leaders of which will easily be recognised in Mr. Matthew Arnold, Mr. James Russell Lowell, Mr. Ruskin, and others. As these gentlemen are very reasonably entitled to an expectation of post-mortem dominion, however, their motives are open to a broad suspicion in the eyes of the literary democracy, who insist that the divine right of classics is an exploded doctrine, and our submission to their decision in disputed matters a form of civilised fetichism. There is but one god in literature they say, and his name is Truth, who reveals himself in a different form to every generation; there is but one supreme authority, and that is Webster's Unabridged.

Naturally enough this tendency begets some disrespect for these ancient monarchs; and we find a strong disposition to point out the patches in their royal robes and the jewels of paste in their diadems, and even, in some extreme cases of democratic audacity, to pluck their white beards in a derisive ecstasy of anti-monarchical enthusiasm. The critics are growing bold. Perhaps this is not altogether an evil feature of the times; though those of us who cannot so much as dust the morocco backs of the dignitaries on our library shelves without an accession of reverence for them are more than inclined to cry "Anarchy!" aghast; to say that it is part of the puerile impatience of the age—of the feverish desire to pull down, without the ability to build again—which is so characteristic of this generation. Having made this charge, however, many things remain to be

said. If progress means anything, it means increased ability to discriminate. That the age is able and unafraid to winnow the false from the true, surely shows a new confidence arising from wider knowledge and more trustworthy ideals; surely means that our power to cast away the chaff is proof of a higher valuation of the wheat.

Accompanying this tendency to carp at the great people of a literary age that is past—which, after all, reminds one irresistibly of that futile canine exercise, baying the moon—we find another more entirely commendable: an inclination to judge a book by its independent merits, and not by comparison with another book in the same department of literature, written a century or two ago. We are beginning to adjust the work of to-day to the requirements and opportunities of to-day, and to cease insisting that it shall be adjusted to the requirements and opportunities of yesterday. We are beginning to understand that a book may be written bearing the least possible relation to any other, and yet be a very clever book indeed—a book that it may tax our ingenuity to find superlatives for. We are taking it upon ourselves to judge absolute, as well as relative, worth with great gain to our power of judgment.

Unalterable standards in criticism mean that criticism is weak and unwilling to be left to its own responsibility. In literature, as elsewhere, certain fundamental principles do not change. We must have truth of one sort or another—truth to certain values in the ideal, truth to certain actualities in the real. But, while its informing spirit must conform to these principles always, the body of literature is a growth—and growth itself means change—of growing conditions, and is thus doubly subject to alteration. Our literature is the product of ourselves, our physical environment, and the social forces that act upon us. As we change with our conditions and other influences, our literature must change with us. This, as to its matter; its manner is affected by a thousand superficial things. That those who exercise the functions of criticism in our time have become persuaded of this, and render judgment under the influence of such persuasion, is no small gain to contemporary literature, at least to contemporary *littérateurs*, who must be woefully tired of being measured by a standard which, in the very nature of things, no man can hope to stand shoulder to shoulder with. The specialisation of the age has done much to bring this amelioration to the lot of the bookmaker. An author is no longer the well rounded literary entity that he used to be. He is usually developed in one direction. If he is a philosopher, he is not a lyricist; if he writes histories, *vers de société* are not expected of him. It is impossible to compare a part with the whole. The rose our modern poet hands us so gracefully is none the less a perfect rose because one William Shakespeare has given us license of his flower garden.

ALTOGETHER, criticism is becoming, to borrow a Howellsism, "a finer art" than it used to be. The critic is learning to walk humbly and to deal justly, in so far as the qualities of humanity and justice can be assimilated by human nature in the shape of a reviewer. He is less egotistical, less arrogant, less aggressive than of yore. The knowledge that abuse is better relished by the public palate than praise, and that contumely is far easier phrased than adulation, does not seem to weigh with him as it once did. He resists, creditably often, the temptation of the clever sneer, and exerts himself instead to say the best he can without misleading. This temper is accented by a lively consciousness, the result of long and untiring instruction, that, after all, the limit of his knowledge is how not to do it. His conscience is being developed at the expense of his spleen. The myrtle tree is coming up instead of the brier.

And the dividing line between the conclusion of the legitimate critical faculty and the decision of mere illogical, irresponsible taste which lies behind it, is drawn more sharply than it used to be by those who exercise both for public guidance. Time was when these were very much confounded in the critical mind, and we were asked to accept, as absolute, an opinion which was entirely relative, and true for us only if our personal likings and dislikings were those of the critic—usually a remote contingency. Discussing this very point, "H. B.," the *Critic's* clever London letter-writer, affords us an amusing illustration that this confusion is not wholly past and gone:

To some of us, for instance (he says) the plays of Victor Hugo are not plays at all; they are lyrics in five acts, and pretty false at that; and if there is one of them that, in falseness and inhumanity, surpasses the others, that one is "Le Roi s'Amuse." Mr. Roden Noel thinks otherwise; and Mr. Theodore Watts, who has done so much admirable work for *The Athenæum*—without whom, indeed, *The Athenæum*, considered as an organ of literary criticism, would cease to exist—is happy to agree with him. As a rule, he thinks the right thing about his Hugo, and says it in a way there is no mistaking, for which, in these vain Hugolatrous times, it is impossible to be too grateful. But on those "gorgeous unveracities" which compose the "Théâtre" of the master, and particularly on "Le Roi s'Amuse," he is no more to be trusted than Swinburne himself.