

This commonplace must be reiterated time and again, for it is ever in danger of being ignored by a multitude prone to mistake appearance for reality. For the excellence of a poem or of any work of art, does not lie in subject but in treatment. The most commonplace and lowly things in life and nature are as much the materials of art as things conventionally sublime. The treatment, as I have said, is everything, and we should as vainly attempt to extract sunbeams from turnips as a great work of art from an essentially prosaic mind. The latter when it turns to art generally shelters itself in 'the ideal' and 'the grand.' But, as the power of execution is in exact proportion to the power of intellect, the treatment necessarily fails, and the work fails with it. In a word, the painter who paints nothing but seraphs, or mountains, may be a daub; the painter of guttersnipes and dunghills may have genius and paint them divinely. So rare indeed is the poetic faculty that all nations, even in their primitive state, have given it the place of honour; and, in the fierce conflict of present-day civilization and attainment it is more and more looked upon as a pervasive spirit which blends with man's inner consciousness, and, like the beauty of external nature, weans him from himself. It is not surprising, therefore, that Canada should yearn for a literature worthy of the name, and should cast eager glances upon the nascent generation to scan, if possible, a 'rising star,' or to recognize some coming seer, or high priest in the world of art or letters. And now, being at home, and in our own country, I may say at the outset that the word 'poet' is much misused both in Canada and the United States. The title is not reserved solely for the possessor of the poetic faculty, but is conferred indiscriminately upon people of poetic feeling; upon cock-sure critics, male and female, who make occasional excursions into the domain of poetry, and despite the creaking of their ropes and pullies deceive themselves; upon highly cultivated men and women, who, by their finish and finesse, and by their remarkable cleverness in handling poetic material, deceive others. The productions which flow from such source are lauded as the fruits of culture, which, it is assumed, covers faculty; and, no doubt, they betoken much reading and honest labour, just as the dilettante's strained and startling use of adjectives is evidence of a severe study of the dictionary. In this way the poet's name is legion, and one ceases to wonder that several magazines on this continent are devoted entirely to 'poetry.' But in spite of all this, and although poetic feeling is spreading with the spread of education throughout the land, yet the poetic faculty is as rare as ever, and is indeed to all appearance threatened with extinction. Bearing in mind, then, that it is not the feeling but the faculty which is the formative spirit of poetry, it becomes a question for consideration whether any Canadian author possesses it, or has ever possessed it, and, therefore, whether there is such a thing as Canadian literature at all. We have had, and still have, many excellent people in Canada who have given a portion of their days to literature; people of taste and refinement and of affectionate disposition. But tender susceptibilities, a gentle spirit, communion with nature, a love of flowers, sympathy with the lower animals, with suffering and with sorrow, though they constitute a fine nature, do not constitute a poet. Something more is required;

that mysterious *something* which distinguishes him from his affectionate versifying kind, which differentiates him from the cultivated and literary herd. Poe possessed it, and is immortal. Longfellow and Whittier, though the beatitudes were theirs, in spite of their corks and canvas, will sink into the waters of oblivion. Viewed from this standpoint, if asked whether there is such a thing as Canadian poetry, but for a few exceptions, in all honesty, I should be forced to say no! But it does not follow that there has not been written a great deal of admirable verse in Canada, verse which has done its duty, which has cheered many a heart, quickened many a pulse, and roused generous emotions. Metrical prose it may be—sometimes musical, sometimes sonorous, and always the echo of some stronger voice—yet it is well put together, and it serves. To single out individuals from the groups of such Canadian writers, past and present, would tend to no good purpose, since, with few exceptions, a high standard of excellence has been attained, and a style so free from individuality that one author might sign the productions of another's without fear of detection. Work of this kind has its billet in human hearts else it would not be bought and read. But it is not poetry, no matter how artistic its form or how musical its utterance. Indeed form and word-music are the hall-marks of such compositions, the brands by which they are known at their best.

"I have spoken of exceptions, and it is well for Canadian literature that there are exceptions. There are differences in degree, of course, in the poetic faculty, but there can be no gainsaying the assertion that Canada has been, and is to-day, the home of more than one man of genius. Who can dispute its possession, not to speak of others, by Heavysege amongst the dead, or by Roberts amongst the living? Differences may mar the work of the first—crudity, harshness, lack of form, lack of learning—but the indefinable *something* is there, and it would be strange indeed if his name should perish. With regard to the other poet, it is difficult to speak of a living man as one would wish. To Mr. Roberts the first place in lyrical poetry must, I think, be unhesitatingly assigned. It is not by his classical imitations that he has put himself forward as a candidate for the foremost place, but rather by his later work, and particularly by his magnificent Canadian lyrics, which communicate the flame of his genius to our own imagination, and yet bear evidence of that severe restraint which is one of the truest tests of poetic power. In the best of his Canadian pieces, Mr. Roberts' meaning has, I think, been curiously misapprehended by divers journalists who make frequent reference to the poem when treating editorially of our Canadian future. The independence which Mr. Roberts advocates is not, I have reason to think, a severance of the tie which binds us, however lightly, to Great Britain, and the consequent establishing of a Canadian Republic, but that independence of thought and feeling which becomes a nation—that emancipation from dwarfing conceptions which have been our stumbling-blocks, and which have blinded us to our true destiny as a potent and co-ordinate factor in a great Empire. His idea is in fact the idea of the 'Canada First' party as propounded nearly thirty years ago by Foster and his followers in their notable revolt from an arid and barren provincialism. With the dig-

nity of nationhood opening before them, the thoughtful Canadians of that day could no longer endure the 'bated breath and whispering humbleness' of a moribund regime. They had too much spring, too much energy to tolerate its narrow bounds, and, quickened by a noble imagination, Mr. Roberts gives inspired expression to ideas which have not yet triumphed, but which are slowly lifting up the public mind to a point of view at once Imperial, generous and lofty. This is a very different thing from the reckless humor of the Separatist who, in quoting Mr. Roberts, adheres to the letter, and ignores the spirit of his verse. This provincialism has indeed weighed with heavy hand upon the literary life of Canada, and weighs upon it still, though with a more and more relaxing grasp. The Canadian administrator, in direct antagonism to the traditions and custom of every other civilized nation, still looks askance at men of letters as dangerous candidates for civil office; and, so long as provincialism is the popular ideal in Canadian politics, so long will such inferior men bear sway, and reserve exclusively for their own kind those public places a due share of which is the right of men and women who deserve well of their country either by reason of their literary promise, or as the reward of indisputable and meritorious service. There are marked evidences that a new era is dawning upon our beloved Canada, an era in which the impulses begot of the richly endowed imagination of our orators and poets will be transferred to public conduct; an era in which the bats and vampires of provincialism shall have become things of the past, or be remembered only with astonishment and shame."

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I have been asked to "say something on French poetry and prose in Canada."

How could I treat in a short letter of a subject which of late has attained to considerable dimensions—a subject of aspects varied and, I venture to say, extremely interesting! Should you desire my opinion as to those among my literary compatriots who hold the highest place, by the atticism of their style and loftiness of their sentiments, Francois Xavier Garneau (1809-66) the historian, in my opinion, is *facile princeps* and Etienne Parent, the essayist, comes next. I have profound admiration for that pundit, Abbé Faillon, who recently expired in France after a long residence in Montreal; his history of the French colony is a grand monument of scientific research; unfortunately, out of the ten quarto volumes three only have yet been issued. Sulte, Casgrain, Bitaud Ferland rank high as historians. This subject I treated, in 1882, in presence of our Royal Society at Ottawa. French Canada claims some distinguished scientists: Abbés Begin, Hamel, Laflamme, Chevalier Baillarge. La Nouvelle France, is rich in poets, novelists, *chroniqueurs*. Cremazie and Frechette are stars of the first magnitude on our Parnassus. Chauveau, LeMay, Lenoir, Chapman, Sulte, Le Gendre radiate as a brilliant constellation, under the divine afflatus of Pææus Apollo.

Space precludes my entering into the specific merits of our successful novelists: Marmette, Faucher de Saint Maurice, Laperance. For pleasant glimpses of the budding career of some of our *litterateurs* I may refer you to a chapter in point, pp. 49-66 of *Picturesque Quebec*, on the occasion of a public banquet given to our laureate, L. H. Frechette.