

for us all criticism does not entail a comparison with the works of other nations, but the survey of the literature of a country cannot but be treated in this manner, and it is in such a review that one has especially to make allowance for the bias of patriotism.

A survey of the literature of a country by one presumably free from such a bias, by a foreigner who will refrain from invidious comparison with the prose and poetry of his mother-land, gives promise of impartiality and therefore of interest. Such a review of American poetry is offered in a recent number of the *Nuova Antologia* by an Italian, and freedom from comparisons, the justice of which will be interfered with by patriotic prejudices, is almost assured by the nationality of the author. Italy has at the present day no distinctive school of poetry, no sufficiently characteristic poetic principles, no marked peculiarity of poetic style, to which her sons may be inclined to adhere, and which they may feel bound to uphold. The land of Petrarca, Boccaccio, Dante, Tasso, Alfieri and Manzoni has produced no great poet within a time sufficiently near to induce a bias in favour of his style and method when comparisons with other national literatures are being made.

In characterizing American poetry our reviewer speaks as follows:—"The poets genuinely American have all a character of personality, of democracy, of originality, and, strange to say, of mysticism—a mysticism of a new kind, at once poetic and positive, with something of precision, something mathematical, and, as it were, in the more extraordinary fancies, a little of Legendre in the dreams of Swedenborg." It was not our intention to criticise, but we cannot refrain from pointing out that mysticism can hardly be considered a characteristic of American poetry, that new peculiar mysticism being exemplified in a recognizable degree in Edgar Allan Poe alone. Putting aside this mysticism, the rest of the definition quoted above applies with peculiar force to the writings of such authors as Bret Harte, Lowell, Joaquin Miller, Poe, and Walt Whitman. These poets, inasmuch as they illustrate with remarkable perspicuity and poetic force the idiosyncrasies of the nation, and exemplify most correctly the ideas and sentiments of the people, are typically national, and their poetry, in contradistinction to that of such writers as Whittier, Bryant, and Longfellow, may be termed *genre* poetry. The distinction is in a word between localism and cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitans do not evidence any peculiar national ideas; they want the rugged strength which characterizes the localists, and their verses show more of the smooth, polished rhythm of the poesy of the old world and more of its careful choice of epithets and metaphors. Our author perceiving clearly this difference in American authors separates the cosmopolitans, and dismisses them from consideration; they are *ex limine*, accordingly nothing do we hear of the beauty and simplicity of the poetry of Whittier, Bryant, or Longfellow. Oliver Wendell Holmes does not appear to have been known to our author, although his poetic reputation is not inferior to that of many of those discussed; but he, too, would have to be classed with the cosmopolitans, since, as Sala has said, "His humour, perhaps, is more thoroughly *English* than that of any of his contemporaries, and this is most strongly exemplified in his poems."

Of the American poets thus limited our reviewer considers Poe and Walt Whitman to be the most essentially American. That they are the greatest will perhaps be acknowledged, but that they exhibit any peculiarities more typically American than do the others is open to question. The great characteristic of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry—its combined beauty and horror, its morbid sensitiveness, and its charming pathos—is only greater in degree and in richness of expression than that of Heine and other writers of the morbid-melancholy school. Whitman's ideas, almost obtrusively democratic and humanitarian, are his in common with Shelley, Victor Hugo, and Swinburne; his naturalistic tendencies he shares with Swinburne and Rossetti; while his peculiar rhythm, his most striking characteristic, cannot be called American—it is Whitmanian *et praterea nihil*.

But we are again flying off at a critical tangent from the orbit of plain exposition which we intended to traverse; let us now return as best we may to our orbit, and conclude by quoting some of our author's opinions of Poe and Whitman.

Of the former he says:—"The poesy of Edgar Poe resembles certain tropical flowers, large, splendid, metallic, at once beautiful and terrible, brilliant and envenomed." "The idea the most melancholy, the idea of death, becomes in the poesy of Poe essentially poetic and pathetic, and therefore always combined with the idea of beauty (*teste* "The Raven," "Annabel Lee," "For Annie"). The style of Poe is admirable on account of its plastic perfection and its crystalline transparency. What dreamer has had the idea of form like Foscolo or Keats? But in certain subtle oscillations of thought, in certain accents which, thinking of the time when

they were expressed, may be called *prophetically* modern, in certain ineffable shades of colour and sound, in the *curiosa felicitas* with which he translates sensations and sentiments which were supposed to be inexpressible, he is, of the American poets, alone comparable to the divine, the unique Shelley."

Of his especial favourite, Whitman, he speaks in glowing language. "The man and the poet are one in Walt Whitman. His poesy is his life; his life is a genuine American poem. Whitman has suppressed rhyme and regular metre, adopting a rhythm of a new kind which is of a penetrating efficacy. His strophe is a poetic period of grand and musical structure in which seem to echo the wild tumult of the virgin forests, the winds from the prairies, the grand waves of the Mississippi and of the Ohio." "He who has comprehended most liberally the whole humanity, and has perceived with most prophetic look its future destiny—the pioneer, the prophet of a new society and of a new art—the most audacious and radical poet, æsthetically and socially speaking, he who has sent to the masses a word of fire, is Walt Whitman." McM.

### THE PLACE AND FUNCTION OF A WEEKLY PRESS.

IN one of the chapters of "The Intellectual Life," Mr. Hamerton sums up the respective benefits and evils of newspaper reading, and renders judgment in favour of the practice upon the grounds that, with all its defects, the modern newspaper offers the completest and least wasteful way of keeping touch of human life and tendency, and that such alignment with the daily step of the world is indispensable to everybody who does not wish to spend a barren career in the clouds of abstraction.

Granting, then, that the average man ought, upon principle, to continue to do the thing which he has done, and is likely to largely do in future, without much thought of causation or consequence, it follows that rational rules should govern the expenditure of time and faculty upon this work of necessity. How to avoid waste in these particulars is at least suggested by the clear enumeration, by Mr. Hamerton, of the defects of the typical daily newspaper, which consist in the space occupied by prediction of events which can well be awaited, triviality of subject, transiency in point of importance, imposture of fiction as matter of fact, distortion of relations of things by undue weight given to mere novelty, incomplete presentation of topics needing time for development, sensational treatment of sober facts and political partisanship.

Are not these defects constitutional and therefore persistent? The simple existence of a successful daily journal implies two things, as, firstly, the possession of a large constituency, representing amongst them every interest and taste compatible with civilization, and, secondly, a ceaseless competition with rival journals for the retention and enlargement of such constituency. Again, the man of to-day is more alive to and interested in the events of to-day than in any other events, past or future; to him the term news means novelty, and, influenced by habit and by limitation of time, he seeks to combine mental entertainment with the acquisition of information. Outside his own range he desires that his newspaper shall discharge oracular functions, and when he first begins to read newspapers he is already possessed of a bias which does not permit him to hear, comfortably or patiently, the other side of current politics. Going originally to the newspaper for matters pertaining to his tastes and interests, his appetite is under constant stimulation for news fresher, more abundant, more exclusive and more tingling to the nerves.

From the standpoint of the newspaper, pecuniary success and political usefulness depend upon the degree in which it can control the reason, fill the imagination, gratify the taste and satisfy the news-hunger of the reader. It has no time to be complete, accurate, or grammatical. Steam and electricity move and notify events too rapidly for reporters and commentators to examine or reflect deeply. Furthermore, a newspaper is the product of many hands and brains, working, in one sense, to a common end; but, in another, separately struggling for precedence. That indispensable functionary, the managing or the night editor, hurried in his work as are all the rest of the staff, kills or maims "copy" or "proofs" much after the fashion of a trooper beset by savage spearmen. President Lincoln knew the effect, if not the cause, of the hotchpot arrangement of a daily newspaper when he said that it took an expert to find anything in a newspaper otherwise than by accident.

Each issue of a daily journal aims to be, and substantially is, an encyclopædia, and the reader, frugal of his time and mental faculties, recognizes this by first scanning the summary of contents, or the head-lines, and then confining himself to his own proper share of what is provided. In this way he gets the worth of his money and whatsoever truly ministers to his profit or pleasure. It must be in this sense that Mr. Hamerton gives his persuasive voice in support of the daily newspaper.