

But how are we to account for this state of things? If we censure the modern versifier for not reaching the Emersonian ideal, we would do him an injustice if we were to overlook the qualities of the perfection to which he has brought his art, such as it is. The list of minor poets is large; and the choir is strong and tuneful. But the masters of song are few. As Stedman has said the present is "the twilight of the poets." It undoubtedly is "the age of Minnesingers." How is this to be accounted for? There is one reason which is suggested by a study of the history of literature. The student of literature will doubtless have noticed that an extreme development of any special literary characteristic almost invariably leads to a degeneracy in thought and power, which may or may not be, though it usually is not, accompanied with degeneracy of expression. This leads to a revolt of taste, and to the ascendancy of some other type. Thus the sentiment and passion of Byron, which gave way in his imitators to weak sentimentality and licentiousness, led to the final ascendancy of a pure and romantic school. The brilliant but artificial school of Pope found its antithesis in the poetry of Wordsworth. The classic school of Keats and Landor gave way to what an eminent critic, before quoted, has very felicitously called, the "composite, or art school," represented in its highest development by Tennyson.

But even now there are not wanting signs of a revolution in taste. The almost absolute perfection to which the Laureate has brought his art has given an undue prominence to mere literary finish. The poetry of the followers of Tennyson is chiefly noted for irreproachable form and style, and the cultivation of technical finish and variety. In these characteristics our modern verse is unsurpassed. But almost everything is sacrificed to the craving for the perfection of *technique*; and the Emersonian idea is lost sight of. Tennyson and Swinburne are finished masters of form and style. To the younger poets this is all in all. The literature of all ages is ransacked to give point to their effusions. The metrical forms of foreign languages are appropriated and initiated. Elaborate structures of musical verse are built up around fantastic ideas, dainty conceits, or trivial fancies. The result is a perfect flood of *Villanelles*, *Rondeaux*, *Ballades*, and the like; but the scaffolding is of more apparent importance than the building itself!

*Vers de Société* is rampant and is driving all before it. Beautiful, clever, and metrically perfect, as all these are—and no one will deny them these qualities—one is tempted to think that they shew a diseased poetical temperament, or display a consciousness of impotence, or a *blase* indifference to the higher and more serious functions of the poetic art. These graceful notes embellish the score, and indicate flexibility of voice, but they are, at best, somewhat meretricious garniture or *fiorituri* which one listens to and likes, but which one would never applaud. In