

A "CANADIAN LITERATURE."

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Literature! Truly one begins to detest the word. Especially when it is dinned into our ears continually, and especially when to it is added a qualifying, narrowing adjective. And it is so dinned and so qualified week in and week out the year round. In every magazine, in every newspaper, constantly on every hand we see "Have we a Canadian Literature?"—"We have a Canadian Literature!"—"Let us have a Canadian Literature." Especially "Let us have a Canadian Literature." As if forsooth literature were a thing to be deliberately manufactured to order, like boilers or boots. And this too, in a country where Canadian literature is precisely the very last thing in demand. If epics were "up," if there were a run on rondeaux, if ballads were bulled, the cry might be barely excusable. But everybody knows they are not. A Canadian poet the other day published a book, and in response to some two hundred circulars got an order for one copy!

Suppose we ask here, quite simply and briefly, What is literature? Without seeking for that impossible thing, a logical definition, it consists, surely, of those imaginative writings which posterity has declared to be excellent. The phrase "contemporary literature," is all but a contradiction in terms. Else why is the question so often put, Will it live? Only posterity can give final judgment, even on the best of writings—as bullion is not legal tender till it has received the impress of the mint. That fugitive sonnet in last week's *Athenæum*, that ephemeral leader in yesterday's *Times*,—the one may surpass that wonder of Blanco White's, and the other may rival a passage of Milton's, but until

after a certain greater or lesser lapse of time, they are not literature in the true sense of that word. For example, to take a case now before our eyes: certain critics have declared certain of Mr. Kipling's productions unrivalled; others think his popularity is a passing fashion. Which is the truth? We surely must leave that question to the future.

The fact is, literature is a vague and elastic term. The ode on the "Intimations of Immortality" is literature; but is "Vaudracour and Julia"—the one poem of Wordsworth's, which, it is said, Matthew Arnold could not read? And if so, would it have been had not Wordsworth written both? Is all Southey literature? Is "Lost Leaders" literature? And if so, are the leaders Mr. Lang is still writing literature? And if so again, are all the other leaders in the *Daily News* and the *Saturday* literature? Could a *corpus* extracted from the daily press rank as literature? Are there works of mute inglorious Miltons gathering dust amongst consular reports and sessional papers? Who can answer such questions? We can only say that literature is that upon which judgment has been given.

I shall here be reminded perhaps of a certain line of Martial's:

Miraris veteres, Vacerra, solos,

says the epigrammatist, evidently shily taking Vacerra to task for this view. But is it not only when a writer is *vetus*, and by consequence beyond the influence of contemporary sympathies or antipathies, that the claim of his works to the title of "literature" becomes indisputable? True, there seem to be exceptions. The