

THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN THE COLLEGE COURSE.*

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WE are met at the outset with the inquiry, What is literature? In its broadest sense, of course, it includes the whole body of written and printed matter. We soon discover, however, that the great mass of such productions has no claim whatever upon our attention. A dozen topics every hour, a thousand every month, a million every age, occupy brief attention, are perhaps of temporary importance, but quickly pass, first into insignificance and then into oblivion. We enter a great library. With pride, at the accumulated evidences of mental activity, but with despair at the utter hopelessness of an attempt to read even a single page in every one of the volumes, we sigh for the pleasures of Methusaleh, that we might revel in these riches. We promise ourselves that in the next, the immortal life, we shall have time for all! But the moment we look inside the covers of most, the illusion begins to vanish. Hardly two grains of wheat in two bushels of chaff! Books of pettiest rhymes and blankest verse, books of science falsely so called, of philosophies long since dead, forgotten subtleties of the schoolmen, wranglings of nameless politicians, barren controversies in physics and metaphysics; books of feeble fiction, of travels in which the travellers saw nothing, genealogies of kings and horses, unmeaning statistics piled mountain high, speeches in which nothing was said, meditations in which nothing was thought—even the good books, litigation, navigation, and all the others that end in *-ation*; tribal

autonomy, dismal economy, infant astronomy, and all the others that end in *-onomy*; bibliography, cosmography, geography, stenography, and all the others that end in *-ography*; mysticism, asceticism, Millerism, Mormonism, transcendentalism, and all the others that end in *-ism*; astrology, hippology, phrenology, necrology, ecclesiology, demonology, and all the others that end in *-ology*;—these had their day, perhaps served a useful purpose, but they are superseded, the new *-ology*, *-ism*, etc., expels the old, the life goes out, they pass over to the majority in the catacombs of the great library. Some Caliph Omar makes them useful in after ages as kindling wood, with the remark that if they reproduce the Koran, they are useless; if they antagonize the Koran, they are pernicious. Or, unearthed by antiquaries after hundreds of years, the fossil may catch the eye of an occasional dry-as-dust pedant, or mousing antiquary, or special investigator; like marks in desert sand or on a pebbly beach, that tell where wind once blew or water flowed; but of the half million books in a great library to-day, not one in a hundred, perhaps not one in a thousand, has more nutriment for the average reader than have the winds and the clouds.

The reason is, they take no hold of man as man, and therefore they deal with the transient, not the permanent, and are themselves passing phases, not substantial forms. As Milton declared the squabbles of the Saxon Heptarchy to be of no more value to us than the battles of kites and crows, we may for our present purposes reject as not included under our definition four hundred and ninety-nine out

* Read at the session of the Department of Higher Instruction in the National Educational Association at Chicago, July 13, 1887.