

THE WEEK.

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THE STATUS OF THE WRITER.

SOMEBODY has somewhere said that the writer of anything, no matter how trifling or worthless, is by that very fact the superior of one who has never appeared in print; a statement which, while strongly impregnated with the usual hyperbole of aphorism, is yet not to be taken as the direct reverse of the truth. Yet, how many are there who hold tacitly, if not avowedly, the exact opposite of this—who believe that he who writes is *ipso facto* to be classed amongst a lower order of creatures, who are incapacitated for a place with the active workers and producers, and whose efforts are, in the language of Iago, "Mere prattle, without practice." The writer, whether he be journalist, fictionist, essayist, philosopher, or what you will, is regarded by the public at large, whose literary ignorance is notoriously marvellous, with a sort of complacency, which, if not pitying, is distinct from pity without conspicuous difference. Of course reference is not here made to those famous in letters, to be one of whom makes one cry, *Sublimi feriam sidera vertice*. Such are treated by society at large with very much the same kind of wondering admiration, tinged perhaps with a modicum of respect, that is extended to a visitor from semi-civilized parts of the world. We cannot explain this popular estimate of the writer by attributing it to the present much-deprecated depravity of journalism and literature; rather just now the man of letters has a larger audience than ever before the offspring of a prolific universal education. Years ago Emerson wrote: "There is a certain ridicule, among superficial people, thrown on the scholars or clerisy. . . . In this country the emphasis of conversation, and of public opinion, commends the practical man." To the pachydermatous writer all the slings and arrows of an inappreciative public are simply unconsidered trifles, and to him whose society is of his own kind, laughter at the popular ignorance comes readily; but when one who lives by his pen, or who even makes it his occasional means of amusement, is thrown among the Philistines who are steeped in commercial occupation, and could not write a grammatical sentence, then has he cause to summon to his aid all the gods and muses to help him hold his peace where resentment would be scattered to the four winds of heaven. But not to spend more time in lugubrious "obvious and ancient observations," and not forgetting that authorship has its brilliant aspect, let us glance for a moment at some of the most getatable causes which affect the popular estimate of the new profession; and if, in disclosing the sources of the aspersion, we are unable to dam the outflow in fact, we may at least see our justification for doing so in metaphorical objugation.

Foremost among the influences at work in depreciating the estimate of literary work is the almost universal belief (amongst those who have never tried it) that anybody can write; that to be a successful member of the profession of letters, one need but to climb the hillocks of the three R's, from which points of observation any ordinarily endowed person can observe enough to be interesting or instructive, or both, to the reading public—all of which is a gigantic mistake. Again, a would-be writer may be equipped, to all outward seeming, with every article necessary for literary success; he may have knowledge, intelligence, culture, and, above

all, the *cacoethes scribendi*, and yet not be able to make his salt even in the lowest departments of journalistic ink-slinging. There is a vague, indefinable something, the possession of which in literary effort is absolutely the pre-requisite to production of any sort. We are not all of us like the novelist Cooper, whose literary career was instigated by his disgust with the poorness of a book he chanced to be reading. We may be thoroughly disgusted with a large proportion of the mediocrity or worse offered for our delectation by the press, the magazine, and the bibliopolist; but don't let us calumniate the writers as creatures of approximate idiocy before we have proven our own ability to do better. Let us take the advice of one of our most illustrious littérateurs, when he forefends the sneer by telling us to "But try and do something like it." Indeed this very prevalence of worthlessness (which heaven forbid that I should defend in itself) should incontestably prove to the public how superlatively difficult a thing it is to write; for of all alert, anxious, and eagle-eyed men in the world, editors are the most so, and their endeavours to secure productions of a superior order are unceasing. How puerile, therefore, is it to suppose that these editors content themselves with printing the worst they have offered to them. The critical faculty by no means implies the co-existence of the constructive. One may be able to instantly point out the weakness of a production without being able to write one half so good. As Dr. Johnson was fond of saying, it is one thing to see how imperfect is the manufacture of a table, but an entirely different thing to be able to make one oneself. Without, therefore, curbing in any way the severity of his criticism of what is published, let him who is inclined to belittle the literary profession remember that this profession is culled from the brainiest men the world contains, not from the weaklings of earth; that competition in the world of letters is perhaps greater than in any other profession; and, finally, that the mediocrity of to-day is attributable, in the first place, to the rarity of great minds and geniuses, which alone can achieve literary greatness, and, in the second place, to the fact that the writer must write on the level of his readers. If the public could only appreciate better writing and wanted it, they would not have to ask in vain, for the writer of this age seldom pens a page of manuscript that the fear of writing "over the heads of the people" does not influence.

In penetrating to the foregoing source of the general depreciation of the writer—using here as elsewhere the word in its widest significance of original composition—we cannot fail to discover the adjacent idea that writing entails comparatively little labour; that it involves about as much effort as a fluent talker exerts in monologue. Now putting aside all preparatory education for literary work, and assuming that one has acquired facility in production, the mere mechanical labour in writing is by no means despicable. The more convincing proof of this to the sceptical reader who has himself no experience in the production of manuscript and copy, is the transcribing of a column or so of a newspaper, a few pages of a magazine article, or a chapter of a duodecimo of ordinary print. The work of the scribe or copyist is considered, by the public, laborious in the extreme, and yet that of the professional man of letters, who not only writes as many or more words a day, but who evolves from his own brain the matter, which is many times more exhausting, is considered lazier. The plain, unvarnished fact is that no profession is more jammed with the solidity of work, or stretched to a higher pitch of mental tension, than that of letters. Listen to the testimony of Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose easy, colloquial style is suggestive of anything but effort. "It," he writes, referring to a meeting held in aid of the American Copyright League, "will be a grand rally in the cause of one of the hardest workers of the labouring classes,—a meeting of the soft-handed sons of toil, whose tasks are more trying than those of the roughest day-labourer, though his palms might shame the hide of a rhinoceros. How complex, how difficult is the work of the brain operative! He employs the noblest implement which God has given to mortals." Why then should an age and country which is incessantly chanting pæans to Labour refuse honour to whom honour is due, and revile rather than praise their own chief priests?

Still another tributary to the depreciation of the writer is the relatively small compensation his labour brings; for, as a class, literature is more poorly paid than any other occupation of corresponding intelligence and concentration of toil. It were idle to either discuss or lament this condition, as it is the result of the inexorable law of supply and demand; and we here are concerned to note only its obvious consequential influence upon the