

INTRODUCTION.

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DR. JOHN NORTH,¹ a man of some mark in his day, wrote on the first leaf of his notebook these significant words ; — " I beshrew his heart that gathers my opinion from anything wrote here! " As we² seated ourselves to the hard task of writing an introduction for our new literary journal, this sentence arose to our minds. It seemed to us to point clearly at the arch-want of our periodical literature. We find opinions enough and to spare, but scarce any of the healthy, natural growth of our soil. If native, they are seldom more than scions of a public opinion, too often planted and watered by the prejudices or ignorant judgments of individuals, to be better than a upas-tree³ shedding a poisonous blight on any literature that may chance to grow up under it. Or if foreign, they are, to borrow a musical term, "*recollections* " of Blackwood⁴ or the quarterlies, of Wilson, Macauley, or Carlyle—not direct imitations, but endeavors, as it were, to write with their cast-off pens fresh-nibbed for Cisatlantic service.⁵ The whole regiment comes one by one to our feast of letters in the same yellow domino.⁶ Criticism, instead of being governed as it should be by the eternal and unchanging laws of beauty which are a part of the soul's divine nature, seems rather to be a striving to reduce Art to one dead level of conventional mediocrity—which only does not offend taste, because it lacks the life and strength to produce any decided impression whatever.

¹ A surgeon and obstetrician active in London in the early 1800's. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London and a member of the Royal College of Surgeons (North, John).

² The editors of *The Pioneer* were James Russell Lowell and Robert Carter ("The Pioneer").

³ The upas tree, or *Antiaris Toxicaria*, is a tree native to the East Indies and described by Darwin in "Loves of the Plants" as being so poisonous that it would destroy all life within 15 meters ("Upas").

⁴ *Blackwood's Magazine*. Initially published as a Tory periodical to counter the Whig *Edinburgh Review* for literary criticism and articles on foreign affairs, the magazine became known for its fiction pieces, eventually including Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Allingham).

⁵ Scottish essayists. John Wilson was a principal writer for *Blackwood's Magazine*, often under the pseudonym Christopher North ("WILSON"). Thomas Babington Macaulay was associated with the *Edinburgh Review* and known for his essays on the works of Milton and Machiavelli ("MACAULAY"). Thomas Carlyle was a Scottish writer and historian, also associated with the *Edinburgh Review* ("CARLYLE").

⁶ Reference to a story originally published in and 1825 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*. "The Yellow Domino" recounts a myth that, at the wedding feast of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, a man wearing a yellow mask incessantly went back to the buffet for more and more food, only to be later revealed as not one man, but a hundred men from the Swiss Guard trading the mask each time ("DOMINO").

We are the farthest from wishing to see what many so ardently pray for—namely, a *National* literature ; for, the same mighty lyre of the human heart answers the touch of the master in all ages and in every clime, and any literature, as far as it is national, is diseased, inasmuch as it appeals to some climatic peculiarity, rather than to the universal nature. Moreover everything that tends to encourage the sentiment of *caste*, to widen the boundary between races, and so to put farther off the hope of one great brotherhood should be steadily resisted by all good men. But we do long for a *natural* literature. One green leaf, though of the veriest weed, is worth all the crape and wire flowers of the daintiest Paris milliners.⁷ For it is the glory of Nature that in her least part she gives us all, and in that simple love-token of her's we may behold the type of all her sublime mysteries, as in the least fragment of the true artist we discern the working of the same forces which culminate gloriously in a Hamlet or a Faust.⁸ We would no longer see the spirit of our people held up as a mirror to the OLD WORLD ; —but rather lying like one of our own inland oceans, reflecting not only the mountain and the rock, the forest and the red-man, but also the steamboat and the railcar, the cornfield and the factory. Let us learn that romance is not married to the past, that it is not the birthright of ferocious ignorance and chivalric barbarity, — but that it ever was and is an inward quality, the darling child of the sweetest refinements and most gracious amenities of peaceful gentleness, and that it can never die till only water runs in these red rivers of the heart, that cunning adept which can make vague cathedrals with blazing oriels and streaming spires out of our square meeting-boxes

"Whose rafters sprout upon the shady side."

We do not mean to say that our writers should not profit by the results of those who have gone before them, nor gather from all countries those excellencies which are the effects of detached portions of that universal tendency to the Beautiful, which must be centred in the Great Artist.⁹ But let us not go forth to them ; rather let us draw them by sympathy of nature to our own heart, which is the only living principle of every true work. The artist must use the tools of others, and understand their use, else were their lives fruitless to him, and his, in turn, vain to all who came after: but the skill must be of his own toilsome winning, and he must not, like Goethe's magician's apprentice, let the tools become his masters. But it seems the law of our literature to receive its impulses from without rather than from within. We ask oftener than the wise king of Ashantee, " What is thought of us in England ? "¹⁰ We write with the fear of the newspapers before our eyes, every one of which has its critic, the Choragus¹¹ of his little circle, self-elected expounder of the laws of Nature—which he at first blush understands more thoroughly than they whom Nature herself has chosen, and who

⁷ Milliners make women's hats, often utilizing fine straw and fake flowers. The craft came to popularity in Paris in the late 18th and early 19th century, largely due to Marie Antoinette's extravagant headwear constructed by the milliner Madame Rose Bertin (Hopkins).

⁸ *Hamlet*, the tragedy by William Shakespeare, and *Faust*, the German masterpiece by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

⁹ May be a reference to God as the creator of all nature, or to the prototypical "great artist" who is purely inspired by nature.

¹⁰ The Ashantee (also Asante or Ashanti) were an indigenous empire in modern day Ghana. During a series of Anglo-Asante Wars (1823-1901), the British sought to exert control over the Asante and end their practice of slavery. Throughout the wars, the Asante were "fiercely proud and independent and won the respect of the British" ("Anglo-Asante").

¹¹ In ancient Greek theatre, the Choragus was a wealthy citizen who was appointed to support the play financially and act as a producer, but the word more often is used to refer to the leader of a chorus ("Choragus").

have studied them life-long—and who unites at pleasure the executive with the judiciary to crush some offender mad enough to think for himself. Men seem endowed with an insane alacrity to believe that wisdom elects the dullest heads for her confidants, and crowd to burn incense to the hooting owl, while the thoughtful silence of the goddess makes them to mistake her for her bird.¹²

We boast much of our freedom, but they who boast thereof the loudest have mostly a secret sense of fetters.

"License they mean when they cry liberty ;"¹³

and there is among us too much freedom to speak and think ill—a freedom matched with which the lowest of all other slaveries were as the blue tent of Heaven to a dungeon—and too little freedom to think, and speak, and act the highest and holiest promptings of the eternal soul. We cheat to-morrow, to satisfy the petty dunning of to-day ; we bribe ourselves with a bubble reputation, whose empty lightness alone lends it a momentary elevation, and show men our meanest part, as if we could make ourselves base enough to believe that we should offend their vanity, by showing our noblest and highest. Are prejudices to be overcome by grovelling to them? Is Truth any longer worthy of the name, when she stoops to take falsehood by the hand, and caresses her, and would fain wheedle her to forego her proper nature ? Can we make men noble, the aim and end of every literature worthy of the name, by showing them our own want of nobleness ? In the name of all holy and beautiful things at once, no ! We want a manly, straightforward, true literature, a criticism which shall give more grace to beauty, and more depth to truth, by lovingly embracing them wherever they may lie hidden, and a creed whose truth and nobleness shall be ensured, by its being a freedom from all creeds.

The young heart of every generation looks forth upon the world with restless and bitter longing. To it the earth still glitters with the dews of a yet unforfeited Eden, and in the midst stands the untasted tree of knowledge of good and evil. We hear men speak of the restless spirit of the age, as if our day were peculiar in this regard. But it has always been the same. The Young is radical, the Old conservative; they who have not, struggle to get, and they who have gotten, clench their fingers to keep. The Young, exulting in its tight and springy muscles, stretches out its arms to clasp the world as its plaything ; and the Old bids it be a good boy and mind its papa, and it shall have sugar-plums. But still the new spirit yearns and struggles, and expects great things ; still the Old shakes its head, ominous of universal anarchy ; still the world rolls calmly on, and the youth grown old shakes its wise head at the next era. Is there any more danger to be looked for in the radicalism of youth than in the conservatism of age ? Both gases must be

mixt ere the cooling rain will fall on our seedfield. The true reason for the fear which we often see expressed of a freedom which shall be debased into destructiveness and license is to be found in a false judgment of the natural progress of things. Cheerfully will men reverence all that is true, whether in the new or the old. It is only when you would force them to revere falsehoods that they will reluctantly throw off all reverence, without which the spirit of man must languish, and at last utterly die. Truth, in her natural and infinitely various exponents of beauty and love, is all that the soul reverences long ; and, as Truth is universal and absolute, there can never be any balance in the progress of the soul till one law is acknowledged in all her departments. Radicalism has only gone too far when it has hated conservatism, and has despised all reverence because conservatism is based upon it,

¹² Athena, the Greek goddess of reason and war, is often associated with owls ("Athena").

¹³ From "Sonnet 12" by John Milton (Milton).

forgetting that it is only so inasmuch as it is a needful part of nature. To have claimed that reverence should not play at blind-man's-buff¹⁴ had been enough.

In this country, where freedom of thought does not shiver at the cold shadow of Spielberg¹⁵ (unless we name this prison of "public opinion" so), there is no danger to be apprehended from an excess of it. It is only where there is no freedom, that anarchy is to be dreaded. The mere sense of freedom is of too pure and holy a nature to consist with injustice and wrong. We would fain have our journal, in some sort at least, a journal of progress,—one that shall keep pace with the spirit of the age, and sometimes go near its deeper heart. Yet, while we shall aim at that gravity which is becoming of a manly literature, we shall hope also to satisfy that lighter and sprightlier element of the soul, without whose due culture the character is liable to degenerate into a morose bigotry and selfish precisianism.¹⁶

To be one exponent of a young spirit which shall aim at power through gentleness, the only mean for its secure attainment, and in which freedom shall be attempered¹⁷ to love by a reverence for all beauty wherever it may exist, is our humble hope. And to this end we ask the help of all who feel any sympathy in such an undertaking. We are too well aware of the thousand difficulties which lie in the way of such an attempt, and of the universal failure to make what is written come near the standard of what is thought and hoped, to think that we shall not at first disappoint the expectations of our friends. But we shall do our best, and they must bear with us, knowing that what is written from month to month, can hardly have that care and study which is needful to the highest excellence, and believing that

" We shall be willing, if not apt to learn;
Age and experience will adorn our mind
With larger knowledge: and, if we have done
A wilful fault, think us not past all hope,
For once."¹⁸



¹⁴ Children's game where one person is blindfolded and must tag the others ("Blindman's buff").

¹⁵ Spilberk Castle of the Czech Republic. The fortress was one of the most feared prisons in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and came to be associated with oppression of political dissenters during the 19th century ("Spilberk Castle").

¹⁶ "Strictness, rigid adherence to rules, puritanism" ("Precisianism").

¹⁷ Archaic word meaning "to modify or moderate by blending with something of different or opposite quality" ("Attemper").

¹⁸ The final lines are written in stanza form and put in quotations, but are not apparently quoted directly from some other source. Rather, Lowell and Carter may have been framing the conclusion as a poem quotable of itself, as if they were initiating a dialog with the reader.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Upon reading the introduction to James Russell Lowell and Robert Carter's ill-fated periodical, *The Pioneer*, one may at first wonder whether Lowell and Carter are operating on a particularly positive view of society, or even of humanity. Framed by their own reverence of truth, the first three-quarters of the introduction present a fairly dismal illustration of the public sphere in America, and more time is spent describing the dangers of common cultural practice relating to print than is spent describing the intended qualities of *The Pioneer* itself. After asserting that the vast majority of public opinion at the time is shallow and unfounded in Truth, Russell and Carter go on to boldly criticize precepts that even Americans today might find positive at first glance, such as nationalism, imitation of the Old Masters, and freedom of opinion. Without expressly denouncing them in their entirety, the editors suggest the limits of each precept—that nationalism creates boundaries, imitation stunts progress, and freedom of opinion inhibits empathy. They even go so far as to imply a dark side to the very institution which they are trying join by saying that art criticism can be more reductive than productive.

But just when it seems Lowell and Carter cannot think any less of the state of the American public sphere, the editors return to their foundational point, that truth reigns supreme, and explain that men have only been showing their “meanest part” rather than their truer, nobler selves. Here we finally move toward the vision for *The Pioneer* as a means for elevating humanity to that true, ultimately good, state. Based on that search for truth, Lowell and Carter set out their intentions for the periodical to be (1) a vehicle for progress, (2) a necessary combination of gravity and soul, and (3) a demonstration of freedom attempted to love by reverence of beauty. The irony is that by setting up *The Pioneer* as an emblem of Truth, the editors ask us to accept their opinions as true, an acceptance which they themselves earlier cautioned us against. In the conclusion of the introduction they ultimately acknowledge this, and admit that the goals they have set may be lofty to the point of unattainability.

Lowell and Carter saw the limits of their vision for the perfectibility of man, but those limitations did not prevent them from trying to present Truth as best they could. Modern readers may find it useful to read the introduction to *The Pioneer* in terms of the questions it raises about the presentation of Truth in periodical culture, and by extension, what constitutes Truth in the dissemination of information of the 21st century.

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