THESIS,
A LULL IN AMERICAN LITERATURE,
FOR THE DEGREE OF
IN THE SCHOOL OF MODERN LANGUAGES.

BY
Nathan P. Goodell,
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A Lull in American Literature.

He may not consider literary growth as that of an organic being. It is no process of evolution by which marked excellence in one generation beget a like excellence in the next. The period after Chaucer was barren of literary excellence; so that if we were to prophesy the future from the past we would be drawing conclusions from inapplicable premises. The inheritance of literature serves more as a soil from which the writers of an age indulge their natural inclinations. So to prophesy of the future, we must look to past achievements, not as
something exerting an immutable molding influence, but as food which may by future assimilation influence the unaccountable beuts of future Literature.

History refutes itself. Literature may not. We should look to the character and institutions of the people to see the nature of their songs. From the versatile beuty loving Greeks sprang those men, almost gods, who painted, wrote and carved for all ages.

As the life of nations becomes more complex, thought assumes a more impartial character. So it would seem that this people emerging from as fierce an ordeal as ever tested a nation: having achieved a success unexcelled in civil and political measures, would push on to
higher literary attainments.

But the great voices of our past are muffled by the tomb and from the cradle of the Coming Period comes only the literary prattle of the literary men of the day. The senatorian tones of Beecher, Holmes, Longfellow and Emerson will drown for many years the utterances of feebler successors.

But it is not because of the eminent character of the dying period that the new born infant is to suffer by comparison. There exist among us conditions that are stunting the growth of our literary tree, planted though it be in the rich soil of the past, feeding as it does upon the juices of English literature; yet the blooms of the Cono
ing period will not be so profuse, so rare, so delicately fragrant as was that of the receding. This is the age of science, of business, of an insatiable greed for gain. The practical only finds place amongst the Orator of the day must speak the language of direct statement. The people of our time have no inclination to listen to the graces and beauties of language and this predominance of the practical over the real is having its effect upon American literature. The competition which the pressure of population entails in this Country urges the young man to neglect an education to enter business and who might have developed into a strong, wholesome writer becomes a "rusher" or
or the operator of a "boom machine" with scarcely an appreciation of what good literature is.

Imaginative minds create, and there are comparatively few in our Country. The minds of the masses deal entirely in abstractions. Sincerity, that most eminent factor of success in literature, is lost to the busy American afflicted with this "fever of the soul."

Realism in literature is the legitimate product of the practical spirit evidenced by a people. This realistic tendency is not favorable to American literature. True, the greatolume of our cities present aspects of realism which may be seized upon by the future novelists and developed into works as
true to degraded, heartless life as were the writings of the French realistic school, but they will be mere copyists.

High eminence has already been attained in this direction by Hugo and Balzac. We need new and original literary designs in this country. America’s artless aspiring is coming proverbial. Nothing is more fatal to literary growth than the presence of a superficial literary criticism. Numberless are the instances of budding genius maimed by the cold hand of a ruthless critic. If our writers could feel that their works were to be subjected to a just analytical mind, ready to award all merited praise and to rebuke all shallowness and pandering, they would not fail to earn the good opinion of such a
Critic and show his displeasure.

But how far short of his high standard does our modern critic fall? Nothing daunts his ironical intellect. With unaffected ease he tries to probe the inconsistencies, inaccuracies, or errors of his victims and seems to think that Criticism and hostility are synonymous. American criticism is much in the same conditio as that which Byron described when he said

"A man must serve his time to every trade.
"Save censure. Critics all are ready made.
"Fear not to lie, twill seem a sharper hit.
"Shrink not from blasphemy, twill pass for wit.
"Dare not for feeling, pass your proper jest.
“And stand a critic, hated yet caressed.”

To succeed financially a man must write down to the level of his critics, must submit to his censorship of the newspaper scribbler whose greatest talent is in appearing to know that which he does not. A book’s sale depends largely upon the newspaper criticism. These criticisms are written by literary nonentities who generally praise the bad and berate the good points. The consequence is that our best writers, realizing nothing from their labors and being unable to live on such an income, are forced to seek more lucrative em-
Artificial criticism has been an evil against which all literature has been forced to contend to some extent, but never before has criticism from incompetent sources been so prevalent as it may be found in the newspapers of the day.

We have had men who have been excellent in their right as judges, who have, indeed, been worthy of the name; but they have not seen fit to direct their attention to home talent, but with a desire to link their fame to immortal names have essayed to judge a Shakespeare or Milton.

Channing, whose giant intellect
delights only in the Abstract saw fit to write of Milton and contributed to English and American literature a criticism unequalled in liberality and research.

Henry Hudson, the master of a wonderful critical analysis, chose to enrich our literature by analyzing Shakespeare and his plays.

James Russell Lowell, that least American of all Americans, devoted his wonderful ability to "Some of the old poets." This lack of attention to home literature is having its effect upon our home writers. The crime is one of omission rather than commission. He miss the healthful effect of praise without flattery of justly merited rebuke.
American literature has presented names and products capable of employing the keenest insight and judgment, and our American critics would do well to drop his pernicious idea that only the conceded great deserve attention. When the British point with contempt to us and ask, "Who reads an American book?" our spirited authors reply by humbly bowing at the feet of their bards in groveling adulation. This is not the spirit that has made America what she is in political, social institutions; no more is it the spirit that will lead us to literary greatness.

And again the literary piracy of our best work is not only liable to confuse our American literature...
with the longer and more noted list of English writers, but it also robs our writers of their just renumeration. The works of our ablest and most wholesome writers have been appropriated by British publishers, while the rewards accruing are stuffed into the pockets of our lordly cousins across the deep. The following incident illustrates the nature of this high-handed plagiarism and pilfering. Gen. Wallace, while in England, went to the store of Frederick Warne Co. and bought a copy of his book; he examined it a moment and then asked to see the head of the firm. "I see you have changed my title," said the General, "we made other
changes in the book. The publisher... that "they had left out the story of Ben Hur and made a few minor changes." This is only one of many such examples. The annual list of British Publishing houses abounds with American reprints, so mutilated that they are scarcely to be recognized. The sales of these books bring in mammoth profits to their publishers, insuring the author not only unknown but also unrewarded.

The people of the United States are in a state of ethical inertia in regard to this matter. England is willing to meet us halfway. Our consent is only needed and the American writer may realize to the fullest the rewards of his talent and industry.
The profession of Journalism is having a bad effect upon our literature in that it is one of the steps by which the writers of our day rise to eminence.

Whitelaw Reid says "there is more young blood tending toward journalism than towards any other profession." What is the effect of this school upon its graduates? Unlike the French journalist whose ideal is to present the best possible opinions upon matters, the American journalist is forced to secure an audience by presenting brutal news, by going into the minutest details of crimes and horrors. He is expected to become the Master of a euphemistic style. He must have the art of dripping his pens into the
reckless fools of slander and divorce suits without raising a stench. In fine to be successful he must be able to write with ease, candidly or otherwise, upon every subject known to man.

Our journalists instead of becoming the disseminators of great truths, political and moral, are a set of sophists, disguising lies in reason's garb. Their sole endeavor seems to consist in making "the worse appear the better reason." The effect upon the young writer is too obvious to need elaborate indication. All his finer sensibilities are blunted by constant contact with the gross. He becomes the master of a style loose and prosaic. Sincerity, the most important...
and principle of success in literature is almost en-
tirely obliterated by the long practice of deluding subcri-
bors into false positions and views. And now, unable to
fight his way back to the sincerity and freshness of his
former views, he may only apply his information
by adding to it a knowledge of law and becoming a
veritable Deist.
Men little thought when they contended for the
freedom of the press in the years gone by, how that
inestimable liberty would degenerate into the license
of the newspapers of the day. Little could they see that it
was to become a bar to literary progress, not only as
being itself made inferior, but as exerting an injurious
effect by its unjustness, of criticism and by its leading our young writers from the principles of success.

And lastly, great evils did great events influence literature, and the greater the evil or the event, the greater and more startling is the literature brought against it. The fearful invectives of Cicero against Catiline would never have been the ideal of denunciation, had not the character of Catiline been so black.

The curse of slavery caused a forth the sweet and mood of Whittier &d stirred the giant heart of Beecher, to glittering periods of oratory. Some of Milton's noblest sentiments were inspired by the exigencies of the Commonwealth, and that noblest of all argumentative works, the Deorogitica was directed against
the censorship of the press. Under the influence of war literature blossoms forth anew. We see a renaissance of German literature after the Seven Years War. An example more pertinent to much nearer is the great inventive period of Holmes, Emerson and Whittier following close upon our civil war. Some one has said "there is not a flower of the soul that is not strengthened by war."
What finer bursts of oratory were ever uttered than those awakened by the echoing guns of Sumpter. The genius of Art, Knowledge and beauty are quickened into life when men fight to sustain great causes or to obliterate great evils. On looking for the great evils and great events that are to influence the quality of the coming literature we find them absent. We are not making history now. Consequently, we are very
prosperous. We are in a neutral state as regards the good side.

Consequently we are very quiet. The vehement utterance promptly
by the taking away of cherished rights, the expressions of anguish
for a loved country in imminent danger are not to be found in the
coming period. All the tendencies of the time seem to indicate this
sparsity of American literature for the coming period. The practical
has supplanted the ideal; but the time will come in this
country when men will get enough of the practical in earning
their daily bread, when a dash of sentiment will be as grate-
ful as the coolness of a fountain to a fevered brow. Newspaper
Criticism will always remain what it is, as long as its audience
exerts its restraining power of public opinion. The great difficulty of
international Copyright will be adjusted as soon as the forces of politi
ical machinery may be brought to bear against it. The solution of the great
problems of the day, will inaugurate great waves of feeling. The slavery
that Romanism is inflicting upon her blind superstitious children. The use
of the Romanists are both contrary to the institutions of our land. It must
solve the great questions presenting themselves for immediate, perhaps bloody
solution. Believe that the renaissance of American literature will come
from the West. There are the breaking hearts. There is to come a new type of
manhood and womanhood born of the amalgamated race. Some rind-file heart
will yet strike the keynote of the gorges and canyons of the West and their greatness
beats will voice a song as ingenious and mighty as were those of Burns
and Whitman. The star, as of old, is leading to the West and soon, we hope, will stand
over the cradle containing the glorious new born infant of American
Literature.

Finis.