A Thought on Shakespeare.

The most distinctive poems—the most permanently rooted and with heartiest reason for being—of the copious cycle of Arthurian legends, or the almost equally copious Chaucerian cycle, or the poems of the Cid, or Scandinavian Edades, or Nibelungen, or Chaucer, or Spenser, or Ossian, or Inferno—probably had their rise in great historic perturbations, which they came in to sum up and confirm, indirectly embodying results to date. However precious to ‘culture,’ the greatest of those poems, it may be said, preserve and typify results offensive to the modern spirit, and long past away. To state it briefly, and taking the strongest examples, in Homer lies the ruthless military prowess of Greece, and of its special god-descended dynastic houses;—in Shakespeare, the ‘dragon-rancers and stormy feudal splendor of medieval castes.

Poetry, largely considered, is an evolution, sending out improved and ever-expanded types—in one sense, the past, even the best of it, necessarily giving place, and dying out. For our existing world, the bases on which all the grand old poems were built have become vacuous—and even those of many comparatively modern ones are broken and half-gone. For us to-day, not their own intrinsic value, vast as that is, buts and maintains those poems,—but a mountain-high growth of associations, the layers of successive ages. Everywhere—their own lands included.—(Is there not something terrible in the tenacity with which the one book out of millions holds its grip?)—the Homeric and Virgilian works, the interminable ballad-romances of the middle ages, the utterances of Dante, Spenser, and others, are upheld by their cumulus-entrenchment in scholarship, and as precious, always welcome, unseemingly valuable reminiscence.

Even the one who at present reigns unquestioned—of Shakespeare—for all he stands for so much in modern literature, he stands entirely for the mighty aesthetic scepters of the past, not for the spiritual and democratic, the scepters of the future. The inward and outward characteristics of Shakespeare are his vast and rich variety of persons and themes, with his wondrous delineation of each and all—not only limenless funds of verbal and pictorial resource, but great excess, superabundance—manerism, like a fine, aristocratic perfume, holding a touch of musk (Ripheus, his mark)—with boundless sumptuousness and adornment, real velvet and gems, not sloppily nor paste—but a good deal of bombast and fustian—(certainly some terrific mouthing in Shakespeare!)

Superb and inimitable as all is, it is mostly an objective and physiological kind of power and beauty the soul finds in Shakespeare—a style supremely grand of the sort, but in my opinion stepping short of the grandest sort, at any rate for fulfilling and satisfying modern and scientific and democratic American purposes. Thrice, not of growths as forests primeval, or Yosemite groves, or Colorado rynines, but of costly marble palaces, and palace rooms, and the noblest furnishings and furniture, and noble owners and occupants to correspond—think of carefully built gardens from the beautiful but sophisticated gardening art at its best, with walks and bowers and artificial lakes, and appropriate statuary and the finest roses and lilacs and japonicas in plenty—and you have the tally of Shakespeare. The low characters, mechanics, even the loyal henchmen—all in themselves nothing—serve us capital foils to the aristocracy.

The comedies (exquisite as they certainly are) bringing in admirably portrayed common characters, have the unmistakable touch of plays, portraits, made for the entertainment only of the elites of the castle, and from its point of view. The comedies are altogether non.acceptable to America and Democracy.

But to the deepest soul, it seems a shame to pick and choose from the riches Shakespeare has left us—to criticise his infinitely royal, multiform quality—to gauge, with optic glasses, the dazzle of his sun-like beams.

The best poetic utterance, after all, can nearly hint, or remind, often very indirectly, or at distant removes. Aught of real perfection, or the solution of any deep problem, or any completed statement of the moral, the true, the beautiful, eludes the greatest, deftest poet—flies away like an always unequaled bird.

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