

T. G. TUCKER



**PLATFORM
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T. G. Tucker

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PREFACE

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The following monologues were given as public addresses, mostly to semi-academical audiences, and no alteration has been made in their form. Their common object has been to plead the cause of literary study at a time when that study is being depreciated and discouraged. But along with the general plea must go some indication that literature can be studied as well as read. Hence some of the articles attempt—what must always be a difficult task—the crystallizing of the salient principles of literary judgment.

The present collection has been made because the publisher believes that a sufficiently large number of intelligent persons will be interested in reading it. On the whole that appears to be at least as good a reason as any other for printing a book.

The addresses on "The Supreme Literary Gift," "The Making of a Shakespeare," and "Literature and Life," have appeared previously as separate brochures. Those on "Two Successors of Tennyson" and "Hebraism and Hellenism" were printed in the Melbourne *Argus* at the time of their delivery, and are here reproduced by kind permission of that paper. The talk upon "The Future of Poetry" has not hitherto appeared in print.

Though circumstances have prevented any development of the powers and work of the two "Successors of Tennyson," there is nothing either in the criticism of those writers or in the principles applied thereto which seems to

call for any modification at this date. For the rest, it is hoped that the lecture will be read in the light of the facts as they were at the time of its delivery.

The Supreme Literary Gift

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When we have been reading some transcendent passage in one of the world's masterpieces we experience that mental sensation which Longinus declares to be the test of true sublimity, to wit, our mind "undergoes a kind of proud elation and delight, as if it had itself begotten the thing we read." We are disposed by such literature very much as we are disposed by the Sistine Madonna or before the Aphrodite of Melos. Things like these exert a sort of overmastering power upon us. Our craving for perfection, for ideal beauty, is for once wholly gratified. Our spirit glows with an intense and complete satisfaction. It would build itself a tabernacle on the spot, for it recognizes that it is good to be there. We do not analyse, we do not criticize, we simply deliver over our souls to a proud elation and delight. Nay, at the moment when we are in the midst of such spontaneous and exquisite enjoyment, we should, in all likelihood, resent any attempt to make us realize exactly *why* this particular creation of art so fills up our souls down to the last cranny of satisfaction while another stops short of that supreme effect.

And yet, afterwards, when we are meditating upon this strange potency of a poem or a building or a statue, or when we are trying to communicate to others the feeling of its charm, do we not find ourselves importunately asking wherein lies the secret of great art? And, in the case of literature, we think it at such times no desecration of our delight to put a passage of Shakespeare or of Milton beside a passage of Homer, of Æschylus, or of Dante, an essay of Lamb beside a chapter of Heine, a lyric of Burns by one of Shelley, and to seek for some common measure of their excellence.

Suppose that, in these more reflective moments, we can come near to some explanation; suppose we can realize what it is that these supreme writers alone achieve; then, when we read again, the very perfection of their achievement springs forward and comes home to us with a still keener delight. We feel all we felt before, but we enjoy it more, because we understand in some degree why we feel it. Say what we will, we are never really content with an admiration which cannot render to itself a reason. What are all the thousand works of literary criticism called forth by, unless it be by that perpetual question which nags for an answer in all intelligent minds, the question "What is the gift which, behind all mere diction, behind all cadence and rhythm and rhyme, behind all mere lucidity, behind all mere intellect, and behind all variety of subject matter, makes writing everlastingly fresh, admirable, a thing of beauty and a joy for ever"?

Alas! we cannot, indeed, necessarily hope to get that gift into our own power because we can perceive it in the great

masters. According to the Apostle, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights." "Their vigour is of the fire and their origin is celestial," says the pagan. The *cœlestis origo* is unpurchasable. Nevertheless, even for the ordinary being who aspires himself to write, there is this practical benefit to be derived from an insight into the truth—that he will know in what the supreme gift does consist. He will not delude himself into fancying that it means merely grammatical accuracy, or a command of words, or tricks of phrase, or a faculty for rhyming, or logical precision, or any of those other commonplace qualities and dexterities which are almost universally attainable.

He will at least aim at the right thing, and, even if he fails, his work will be all the higher for that aim.

I do not propose to speak in general of great books, but only of great literature. Literature proper is not simply writing. You may tell in writing the most important and unimpeachable truths concerning science and history, concerning nature and man, without being in the least literary. You may argue and teach and describe in books which are of immense vogue and repute, without pretending to be a figure in literature. But, on the other hand, you may be very wrong; logically, scientifically, historically, ethically altogether wrong; and yet you may exercise an irresistible literary fascination over your own generation and all that follow. Charles Lamb speaks disdainfully of books which are no books, things in books' clothing. He had in mind Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, essays on population, treatises

on moral philosophy, and so forth. He meant that such works are works, but no literature. Mill's *Logic*, geographical descriptions, guidebooks, the *Origin of Species*, whatever may be the value of such volumes for thought or knowledge, they are not literature. There is only one test to apply to such books as those. If their statements are true, if their reasoning is accurate, if their exposition is clear, such works are good of their kind. Nevertheless, it is scarcely literary judgment which judges them. You might as well apply "architectural" criticism to our rows of tin-roofed cottages or to the average warehouse or wool-store or tramshed. These are buildings, but they are not architecture.

Meanwhile Herodotus, with all his superstitions, his credulity and mistakes; Plato, with all his blunders in elementary logic; Homer, with all his naïve ignorance of science and the wide world; Dante, despite his cramped outlook; Milton, in spite of his perverse theologizing—these and their like are, and will always be, literature. No matter if Carlyle's *French Revolution* be in reality as far from the literal truth as the work of Froude, yet Carlyle and Froude are literature, along with Herodotus and Livy and Froissart, while the most scrupulously exact of chronicles may be but books.

The charm of supreme literature is independent of its date or country. The current literary taste varies, we know, at different periods and in different places. There are successive fashions and schools of literature and literary principle—an Attic, an Alexandrian, an Augustan, a Renaissance Italian, an Elizabethan, a Louis Quatorze, a

Queen Anne, a nineteenth century Romantic. And yet from each and all of these there will stand out one or two writers, sometimes more, whom we have enthroned in the literary Pantheon, and whose place there among the gods seems only to grow the more assured as time goes on.

Now, what is it that is left, the common *residuum*, to all these literary masters; to Homer, Sappho, Æschylus, Plato, Theocritus, Juvenal; to Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Molière; to Goethe, Shelley, Victor Hugo, Carlyle, in spite of all their manifest differences in subject, and style, in ideas and ideals, in range of thought and knowledge? When we have got behind all the varying and often contradictory criticism of their several epochs; when we have stripped away the characteristics which mark a special era; what is there essentially and everlastingly good—in the true sense "classic"—in virtue of which these particular writers renew for themselves with every generation the suffrages of understanding humanity? If there is a "survival of the fittest" anywhere, it is assuredly in art, and especially in the art of literature. Seeing then that writer is so unlike to writer, both in what he says and the way in which he says it, what is that cardinal literary virtue, that quintessential x, in virtue of which both alike are masters in their craft?

The answer is very elusive. Let us seek it, in the Socratic spirit, together.

But first let me remind you that in order to find the answer, the seeker must possess both literary cultivation and also breadth of mind. Unless we have read widely in literature of many sorts and kinds; unless we have

developed a generous catholicity of taste and appreciation, a many-sidedness of sympathy and interest; unless we have corrected our natural idiosyncrasies by what Matthew Arnold, after Goethe, calls a "harmonious expansion of all our powers," we cannot see clearly; we cannot distinguish between the impressions which we derive from literary power and art, and the impressions which we derive from something else to which we happen to be partial, but which is quite irrelevant to the question. Any one who belongs to a particular "school," whether of style or thought; any one who approaches literature with a spirit overweighted by political bias, scientific bias, or religious bias, is disqualified. He cannot hope to stand equally away from, or equally near to, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe, and, after setting aside their elements of disagreement, distinguish and admire that which is definitely and for ever admirable in their creations. Do we lack sympathy with the tragic feeling? Do we shrink from it? Then we can be no judges of tragic art, of *King Lear* or the *Ædipus*. Have we no sense of humour, or only a gross and vulgar sense of humour? Then we can be no judges of the writings of Cervantes or of Sterne. Are we incapable of ardent idealism? Then we cannot be just to Shelley. Is a capacity for profound reverence and adoration not ours? Then we must not claim to say the last word on Dante. The uncongenial subject prevents us from feeling with the writer, and we therefore fancy a defect of literary power or charm in him, while the defect is all the time in ourselves. We will, for the moment, suppose ourselves to be the ideal critics. And let us first see what the supreme literary gift is *not*.

We may admit that, in all literature which the world will not willingly let die, there must be expressed something worth expressing. The matter must be, in some way, of interest. But it appears to signify little *how* it interests. It may be enlightening, elevating, or inspiriting: it may be profoundly touching: it may be of a fine or gracious sentiment or fancy: it may be startling: it may be simply entertaining. Some people, perhaps, remembering certain French and other fiction, would say that it may even be deliberately wicked. That I do not believe. On the contrary, it is much to the credit of a world which is declared to be so rotten with original sin, that deliberately wicked writing finds so little lasting favour with it. It does gladly let such writing die, however well written. Interest fails, and admiration of the literary skill is speedily swallowed up in disgust. Moreover it is seldom that the true possessor of the supreme literary gift turns it to base ends.

Consummate literature, we have admitted, must be interesting. It would be truer to say that the possessor of the supreme literary gift will *make* his matter interest us, however light or serious, however literal or imaginative, it may be. But, when once of interest, the matter may be anything you will.

The supreme literary gift, for example, does not imply profundity or originality of thought. Homer and Chaucer are not deep thinkers, nor is Herodotus or Virgil, Burns, Keats, or Tennyson. There need be nothing philosophically epoch-making about a literary creation which is destined to be immortal. Nor yet does the supreme literary gift necessarily imply extraordinary depth of emotion. Of the writers just

named Burns and Keats perhaps have this capacity, but the rest—including Tennyson—reveal little of it. We do not find burning passion to be a distinct feature in Plato, in Milton, in Goethe, or in Matthew Arnold, while it is emphatic in Sappho, in Byron, and in Shelley. Again, the supreme literary gift does not imply any special expression of truth or instruction, moral, religious or other. Homer and Dante cannot both be right. If Homer is right, then Dante is lamentably wrong; and if Dante is right, Goethe is unforgivably wrong. Wordsworth cannot be harmonized with Shelley. Milton was a Puritan, Keats a neo-pagan. In the domain of literal and historical truth what becomes of *Gulliver's Travels*, or Scott's novels, or, for the matter of that, *Paradise Lost*?

All this is self-evident. Yet, if we do not ask our superlative writers to be heaven-sent teachers, to be prophets, to be discoverers, what do we ask of them? Is it to write in a particular style, in a given lucid style, a given figurative style, or a given dignified style? Nay, it is only very mediocre writers who could obey such precepts. Every supreme writer has his own style, inalienable and inimitable, which is as much a part of him as his own soul, the look in his eyes, or his tones of voice. Bethink yourselves of Carlyle, how his abrupt, crabbed, but withal sinewy and picturesque, prose compares with the pure crystalline sentences of Cardinal Newman, and how these again compare with the quaintly and pathetically humorous chat, the idealized talk of Charles Lamb. Think how easy it is to recognize a line of Shakespeare, of Milton, or of Wordsworth, almost by the ear; how audibly they are stamped with the character of their

creator. There are, in fact, exactly as many styles as there are superlative writers. Indeed this individuality of style is the outward and visible sign of their inward and spiritual literary gift, which is the gift to express—*oneself*.

Then what does the superlative writer do? The fact is that literature in the proper sense is an art, as much an art as painting or sculpture or music. The supreme masters in literature are artists, and the consensus of the world, though unconsciously, comes to judge them simply as such—not as thinkers or teachers, sages or prophets. They are artists.

And what is the province of art? After all the definitions and discussions are exhausted, we are, I believe, brought down to one solid answer, the answer of Goethe, "art is only the giving of shape and form." That is to say, the object of art, whether in words or colours or shapes or sounds, is simply to give expression to a conception, to a thought, a feeling, an imagined picture which exists in the mind of the artist. His aim is to communicate it truly, wholly, perfectly to the minds of his fellow men, by one of the only two possible channels. By means of art mind can communicate itself to mind either through the eyes or through the ears; by spoken words and music through the ears, by painting and sculpture and written words through the eyes.

I need not dwell upon the thought what a wonderful thing this communication is, whereby the pictures and feelings existing in one brain are flashed upon another brain. Nor need I elaborate the point that this communication is rarely absolute, rarely even adequate. To make people understand, even those who know us best, how difficult that is!

The Greek sculptor Praxiteles conceives a human form of perfect beauty, posed in an attitude of perfect grace, wearing an expression of perfect charm and serenity. It exists but as a picture in his brain; but he takes marble and hews it and chisels it till there stands visible and unmistakable before us his very conception. He has given body and form to his imagination. Perfect artist as he is, he communicates with absolute exactness his mental picture to all the world of them who behold his work.

The Italian painter Raphael conceives a woman of infinite loveliness and purity and tenderness to represent the mother of Christ. How are we to be sharers in that conception? He takes brushes and paint, and there grows upon his canvas the Sistine Madonna, that picture of such mystic potency, which to see at Dresden is never to forget. He stamps upon our minds the very image and the very feeling which were upon his own.

The great musician hears imaginary sounds and harmonies within his brain, proceeding from or accompanying emotions of divers kinds. He forthwith, by arrangements and combinations of musical notes, their times and qualities, communicates to us also those sounds and harmonies; he reproduces in us those same emotions.

Do not say that it is the function of an artist to communicate to us beautiful things or ugly things, things graceful or things profound, things of pleasure or things of grief. Say rather, simply, it is his function, as artist, to communicate—perfectly, absolutely—whatsoever he seeks to communicate, in its form, with its feeling, in its mood; the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of his

conception and its atmosphere. No doubt the thing of beauty, the profound thing, the thing of joy, is most delightful for the spectator to contemplate; to the artist himself it is apt to be most inspiring, and therefore art seems to be concerned mainly with beauty and joy. But that is the only reason. As artist, his function is simply to body forth, and present to other minds, whatever he conceives, and he is consummate artist just in proportion as he secures that end.

Now take the literary artist. He in his turn conceives a thought, or picture of the imagination or fancy. A feeling may come over him with a gentle grace, a subtle influence, an overmastering passion. A mood—a state of soul—may colour all his view, tinging it with some haunting melancholy or irradiating his whole world till it seems a Paradise. How is he to communicate to us this thought, this picture, this fancy, the grace and subtlety and passion, the precise hues of his mood for sombreness or radiancy? Well, he takes words, and by selecting them, by combining them, by harmonizing them with a master's hand, he sets before us certain magic phrases wrought into a song, an ode, an elegy, or whatsoever form of creation is most apt and true, and he makes us see just what he sees and feel just what he feels, printing it all upon our own brains and hearts.

In this then must lie the essence of the literary gift—in the power of a writer to express himself, to communicate vividly, without mistiness of contents or outline, his own spirit and vision. I repeat that it is irrelevant whether what he sees and feels be beautiful or not, joyful or not, profound or not, even true or not. Nor does it matter either what his

style may be. He is a master in the art of writing when he can make his own mind, so to speak, entirely visible or audible to us, when he can express what his inward eye beholds in such terms that we can behold it in the same shape and in the same light—if, for example, when he sees a thing in "the light which never was on sea or land, the consecration and the poet's dream," he can make us also see it in that faëry light.

This is no such easy thing. The fact that there are a hundred thousand words in the English dictionary does not make it easier. It is not those who know the most words that can necessarily best express themselves. Neither is it true that, because feeling is real, it can therefore speak. "Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh" has no such sense as that. Many and many a fine thought is lost to the world, and all the value of many a deep emotion, because he who thinks or feels cannot voice himself, any more than you or I can necessarily take a brush and paint, like Turner, the unspeakable glories of a sunset which our eyes and soul can nevertheless appreciate to the very full. "What makes a poet?" says Goethe, and he replies, "A heart brimful of some noble passion." No doubt the noble passion must be there *before* a man can be a poet, but equally beyond doubt the passion alone cannot make him one. To say that a heart full of the ardour of religion, of love, of hope, of sorrow or joy, can always express its ardour, is an assertion against which thousands of poor inarticulate human beings would rise in protest. It is simply contrary to experience. There is many a man and woman besides Wordsworth to whom "the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often

lie too deep for tears"; but, unlike Wordsworth, no sooner do these less gifted men and women attempt to express one such thought and impart it to others, than lo! the subtle thought evades them and is gone. They can give it no embodiment in language. Their attempt ends in words which they know to be obscure, cold, trivial, hopelessly ineffectual.

How unevenly distributed is this power of expression! Let us begin as low in the scale of verbal art as you choose. Let two observers chance to see some previously unknown plant, with novel leaf and flower and perfume. If they could paint the leaf and flower, well and good; but ask each separately to communicate to you in words a mental picture of that plant. Observe how, with equal education in the matter of language, the one will describe you the forms and colours and fragrance in apt and expressive terms and comparisons, which seem to paint it before your eyes. The other plods and halts and fails, and leaves no clear impression. If to the one the flower is just red and pointed, to the other it is, perhaps, a tongue of flame. The one has but literal facts to tell, the other is full of imagination and similitude.

Take a step higher. Have you seen and heard the lark, and studied his movements and his song aloft in the sky of Europe? Can you express simply what you then saw and heard, so that all who have witnessed the same can see and feel it over again? How many words would you take, and how vivid might your picture be? Then compare your effort with Shelley's famous

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest,
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still doth soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run,
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun!

Another step, and we come to a region no longer of outward description, but of thought, of feeling, of delicate fancy, of soaring imagination.

I suppose thousands upon thousands of persons possessed of what our great-grandfathers used to call "sensibility," have felt at eventide, when alone in certain spots, a kind of subduing awe, as if some great spirit-existence pervading all nature were laying a solemn hush upon the world. In various degrees one here and one there can express that feeling, but how many can express it as simply and yet effectually as Wordsworth does:—

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free;
The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea:
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly!

To express and body forth: there is room for the manifestation of this prime literary gift in all sort of subjects. It may be shown in a fable of Æsop, in *Robinson Crusoe*, in a children's story, in Mark Twain's boyish experiences on the Mississippi, in a Barrack-room Ballad of Rudyard Kipling, in Thackeray's *Esmond*, in Shelley's *Ode to a Skylark*, in either a comedy of Shakespeare or his *Hamlet*, in a sonnet of Dante's *Vita Nuova* or in his *Inferno*. Æsop's communication of his point of view is final. So is Defoe's communication of mental pictures. So is Mark Twain's of that Mississippi pilotage. So is Kipling's in his *Drums of the Fore and Aft*, or his *Mandalay*. These men are all admirable literary artists in their own domains. Each fulfils all that is demanded of his art. If we could keep this fact clearly before us, our judgments of writers might be more discriminating. Do we think Kipling possessed of an extraordinary degree of the literary gift? Who could think otherwise, seeing that he can effect exactly what he sets out to effect by means of words? His scenes and his thoughts—such as they are—start forth living before us. But do we then think a Kipling proved equal to a Shakespeare in sheer excellence of his gift? That is another question. The things which Shakespeare realizes and expresses demand powers of realization and expression more far-reaching and more subtle than are required by those things to which a Kipling gives shape and form. In Shakespeare are multitudes of deep and rare reflections, vivid imaginings, penetrations of sympathy and insight, and all so clearly crystallized, with such apparent ease, that they become ours at once, as if they were natural to us. His communication of the most subtle states of mind is