

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers 1*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is badly faded.

The Literary Status of Cincinnati

Dear Mr. Editor:

As this is the anniversary of our club, and the one annual occasion on which we congratulate ourselves upon the vigor, health, and staying qualities of our institution it may not be inappropriate, between the paeans of praise, to take the bearings of the ship, as the sailors say, and ascertain not only where we are, but in what direction we are drifting.

I do not think that I shall surprise any thoughtful or observant person by remarking that there are few cities in the Union so much in need of enlightenment on literary matters as the Queen City of the West.

It is probable that we are holding our own in manufactures, inventions, conventions, buildings and commerce, and rather ahead in the extent and merits of our amusements; but there can be little doubt that the intellectual thermometer is down among the thirties, as the Signal Service men put it.

I do not mean by that that the mass of the people are not familiar with Plato and Bacon; but that the literary tone of the city, if it has one, is low, and its tastes of the crudest and most sensational kind. And this is not the result, either of our exorbitant love of money; there are several cities which have beaten us in the race for the dollar of our daddies. Nor is it our neglect of the arts which has put down the mental key, for a ready appreciation of good music and good pictures and graceful decorative art is quite marked and decisive. Nor is it want of libraries; nor books; as I surmise that if the books were distributed there would be a goodly number for each citizen. But it is the result of several causes.

In the first place, we are on the level, mentally and morally with our surroundings, or, as the German puts it "Man is what he eats." Now, there is a fine, unceasing drizzle or rain of political mud which is constantly settling down upon us, stopping up our pores, working into our systems, and reducing us all into rows of monotonous mud []. And then again, the daily bread, of course I mean the newspaper bread, which we take with the morning coffee, is so highly spiced that our mental palates do not respond to anything milder than cayenne pepper, garlic, croton oil, and what the doctors call No. 6.

Like the good Archbishop, I do not allude to any special paper for, after all, a newspaper is simply the mirror of its readers and is as much the embodiment of its readers tastes, the tangible, living expression of their likes and dislikes as their houses, their laws, their

dresses, and their daily speech. The paper is merely the finger that tickles and the reader the fellow that is tickled and laughs.

In Hood's Tale of a Trumpet, old Dame Eleanor Spearing, who was hard of hearing, bought of the Devil in the disguise of a peddler, a trumpet, which had the singular gift of changing the most innocent speech into the lowest and most indecent ribaldry. And yet I doubt if that famous instrument which that old lady stuck in her ear, gathered more scandal and dirt than does the daily sheet with which we tone ourselves up every morning. And it is a constant daily wonder with me that so many of my friends are still out of jail, and that so few of us have our throats cut when, coming home in the evening, I read in the daily truth-teller, in what community of bad men and women I am living.

I can fancy a kind of despair settling down in a man's mind, when he reads that his friend A or B, whom he always found honorable and honest was nevertheless a horse thief, and that C, his old friend C. was a common liar, a corrupter of morals, and a bunko steerer. It is true that neither A. B. nor C. nor their friends, seem to mind this sort of thing, and take it as they do malaria or the measles or the high taxes as a part of the web and woof of life. Talk of Zola's novels and his realism: why we publish a Zola novel every morning of our lives, of course with Zola's imagination and fancy left out.

But why dwell upon this, which is so familiar to everyone? Well, then, it is so familiar, the moral must be equally plain. It is fitting that there should be one dry spot where the mud does not penetrate one "coigne of vantage" where men like bullion shall pass for their intrinsic value where the light of day shall not merely be a detector tracing crimes, and the moonlight a dark lantern pointing out the burglar where the amenities of life may be practiced, and above all, where a little disinterested and honest thought may lift up the head, and not be ashamed.

For what good is intelligence, education, knowledge, judgment, if we sit idly on the edge of the stagnant pool of mud and laugh if the crowd struggle, fall in, and wallow in the mire? If a nation is to be lifted up, it is not by her mountains, nor her mines of minerals, but by her thinkers, for there is no such lever as thought.

Oh well, come now, (I hear someone say) what we want here is more fun and less talk. Tell Johnson to give us a better menu, ask Mr. Hill to change the wine but to preserve the labels, and request Hinman to give us a larger brand of cigars; of course we don't mind a good story or two. That one about the Bull and the Boat was all right, and so was the recitation by good Dr. Hunter about that girl who hit the mark; and that one by Fritz, how he taught the Indians to pull the long bow was very rich. But you see, continues the objector, we work hard all the week, and we are tired. Besides, when we want heavy literature or light literature for the matter of that, we buy 50 or 25 cents worth of it in print, and take it home, and our wives read us to sleep with it. There are professional writers paid for this sort of thing and they settle it.

Now this is the very point, Mr. Editor, intervene and say that precisely because the professional pens are settling everything, including the political ethics of this city, that

the members of the Literary Club cannot delegate their mental processes to others, and that a surrogate of thought is a doubtful advantage. I do not expect that each one shall cry with the possessed Paracelsus

I go to prove my soul!

I see my way as birds their trackless way.

I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first,

I ask not: but unless God send his hail

Or blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,

In some time, his good time, I shall arrive:

He guides me and the bird. In his good time!

And yet, better than to lisp the cadences of the somnolent lotus-eaters.

But besides it may be asked are not the rants of the professional writers filled with those who, like Falstaff's ragged regiment represent the poverty and needs of life rather than its fullness, its blossoms, or its fruit? Each author has a pretty large Saratoga trunk filled with words, but the ideas have plenty of room in the traditional thimble. We are in the mosaic age. A novel of today, like the Chinese puzzle, is a marvel of hand-skill. Each word is filed, each sentence dove-tailed, and all the periods planed down to a smooth level, as though the thoughts were of wood or stone. The plots are old enough to have, in their youth, the army of Xerxes or Alexander; but the characters are new; so new that there is a native air of shoddy about them. And so uninteresting that one wonders why the author dug them up from their natural obscurity unless it was to imitate the microscopists, and make you admire a flea's foot, or a toad's leg when increased by a thousand diameters. While to me, one of the permanent delights of Don Quixote is the author's slips in grammar, its racy but earthy expressions, the vulgar peasant gibing the heel of the theatrical convelier; the proverbs that tumble over every page like schoolboys in a forbidden field, and the amusing certainty that Cervantes forgot in the 9th when he told you in the 8th chapter. No plumb line, no measuring rod, no shears, no quotations from the cyclopedia, but only the smiling and untamed luxuriance of generous nature.

So do not let us rest idle in the assumption that all the mighty intellects are in Boston, New York, or even in Chicago, a genuine thinker or storyteller has as good soil to flourish in in the Valley of the Ohio as Cervantes had in the sterile regions of La Mancha.

Now, Mr. Editor, this is not an admonition or an exhortation that we should invite an early death by rapid production of cyclopedias, or the multiplication of an unnecessary number of book philosophies. There are books enough. So many too much in fact that if the fanatical Muhammadan, Omah, or one of his followers, does not arrive soon, and rid us of about one half of our superfluous literature, our intellectual lives will be so overshadowed by the mountains of mere books, that we will perish for want of that dry light, which is so necessary to human progress. If we could only imitate the house-keeper in Don Quixote, and call in the curate and the barber, let them sit in judgment on our libraries, and burn the worthless books in the court-yard, or throw them out of the window into the street, we should probably be cutting a free avenue for development for the coming race, and conferring upon them an unexpected advantage. So it is not more books as books that I am calling for.

But here are a large number of gentlemen, called from the liberal professions, law, medicine, science, trained by education, armed as it were by a second sort of instinct for observation, and coming in daily contact with the human character in nearly all its forms; surely to them we can say, impart to us occasionally the glimpses you catch of this many-headed monster, the people. Tell us, in your own free, off-hand speech, letting style take care of itself; the sidelights and shadows of human effort; take us into your atelier, your study, your laboratory, and workshop, and let us share in the pleasure of discovery or achievement, although we took no part in its labor.

In other words, give us the free expression of your thoughts, that summary which you make to yourself of the popular novel, the rising orator, the tendency of science, or the daily loss and gain of the various factors which make up what we call our civilization with the dollar mark omitted.

There is probably nothing in human experience so mentally self-supporting as a hobby. The orbit is not very wide, but it is full of surprising delights. It gives man a sort of reserve free of pleasure, which acts like the buffer against the shocks of misfortune. And the amateur microscopist, painter, musician, chemist, literatuer, is especially requested to remember the motto of this club "Here comes one with a paper" and he is precisely that one.

I commenced this paper by saying that the literary pitch, tone, or key of our city was decidedly low, and I close by requesting the members of this club to prevent it getting lower from inanition, or the daily consumption of unnutritious food, and if possible, save us from sinking any deeper into the sands of triviality or what is perhaps worse the sawdust realism of prurient newspapers.

Political, social, commercial, industrial, and theological questions have their special centers, advocates and promoters and we that belong to an older Republic still, the Republic of Letters, must not be idle.

It is on these terms that we say to the younger members, you must carry the torch in the race first, and afterwards we will join you in the cup and song. Our suppers and meetings must not be feasts "sickled over with a pale cast of thought," but, like the Greek symposium, in which the speech, the discourse and discussion was the principal theme, and the rest mere recreation or accompaniment.

Bacon introduced a new philosophy by insisting that its foundation should be experiment; that each adept should observe and think for himself, and we will adopt it, requesting that each one observe, think, and experiment for himself, and let us share in the discovery.

We may be "inglorious Miltons," but while we live do not let us be mute; when we are dead it will be time enough for that epitaph.

Budget.

Hooper, Editor,

October 31st 1885