

Lecture on Hiawatha

Delivered before the "Union Fire Company," of Carlisle, by Prof. HERMAN M. JOHNSON.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I flatter myself that in selecting a theme purely literary for the present occasion, I have consulted the taste of my audience. I have, indeed, been advised otherwise. But I cannot persuade myself that, in a community not a little distinguished for its general refinement and culture, which has the honor of cherishing in its midst a literary Institution which dates with the years of the Republic, an evening assemblage should demand for its selectest intellectual recreations that class of topics exclusively which we baptize practically only by virtue of their remove from the esthetic.

HIAWATHA!—Now it is barely possible there may be some in this audience who have not yet made acquaintance with the strange name I have named. Perhaps therefore I ought to say:—

Do you ask me what my theme is; What the subject of my lecture; I should answer, I should tell you; 'Tis a poem by Longfellow, 'Tis a poem of queer metre, 'Tis entitled Hiawatha.

Thus wise makes the poem its bow to the great world as now to this lesser.

Strange subject enough! and yet, I can assure you, destined to become popular; because, purely native American. Nay, is already popular; not to the sense of enjoying popular favor, but of commanding popular interest. No living wonder has fallen from our seeming press within the century that has created so great a sensation, unless perhaps we except "Uncle Tom's Cabin" or the President's Message. Macaulay's history was a wonder to some; but men read Macaulay's history just as they read his essays; and they talked about it just as they talked about his essays. Fine sentences! they say; beautiful periods! so harmoniously rounded, or so nicely pointed! But when inquired of as to the facts, they shake their heads. But Hiawatha is read, and discussed, and recited, and imitated, and parodied, and burlesqued, and praised, and condemned, and so everywhere it finds no rest. And I have been credibly informed that men have forgotten, and ladies too, to exchange sentiments on the weather till they had first ascertained each other's stand point in regard to Hiawatha. The spirit of this nondescript, has invaded the seats of learning, and ousted the manes of the old buried poets from their long repose, where with the buried ages they had contemplated the "monumentum exegi," which they had inscribed for themselves; and starting into new life as by a veritable metempsychosis, they have forsaken their own old and standard strains, and by the magic touch of sophomore genius, lo!

Lyle Horace, speaking English, Lyle Horace, in translation, Seeks the Hiawathan measure.

And so various are the notes that respond to this sweep of the hand of Hiawatha, they produce a very chivarari. In the midst of such diversity, then, is it possible for us to find a common judgment? Let us inquire.

The true critic should establish the true criterion by which to try his subject. The poet is no longer the creator of the spirit of the age. He accepts it as his ruler; bows down to it; serves it. We are not therefore to judge the poetry of this age by that of Ham or Charlemagne; of great Macagnas or Chesterfield. And whatever we may say of our glorious nineteenth century, in which we have such a comfortable faith, we cannot claim for it that its highest merit is in its poetic wares. May be we are not courteous to the muses, and they avenge themselves. Our Longfellow indeed commemorates the fact, strange as it may seem, that brave old Pegasus was actually caught one cold evening and put in the pound up somewhere in a Yankee country village; and there the poor beast stood full half the live-long night, looking at the stars and solemn moon through the wooden bars of his miserable pen, just as stupid as if some wag had pinned extra ears to his pate. No wonder he rides them such a raid, the poor poets, when he gets out; and toses some of them sheer down the precipitous cliffs of Parnassus, or—Mt. Blanco, or any other hill he may chance to be on. I can think of but one other hypothesis to explain the sad state into which we are fallen.

It is said that the oracle of the Delphian Apollo was marked by the issue of an exhilarating gas from the fissure of a rock—similar to that which our Professor of chemistry sometimes manufactures, to illustrate how the

dignity of a senior may be dissolved. It was the inhalation of this gas that gave the Pythia her inspiration. It was said to have been discovered by certain shepherds, who observed that ever as their goats came upon a certain spot, they were seized with a sudden frenzy, and enacted strange antics quite unbecoming their goatships. Now, it is known, the oracle is long since silent. The trade of the Pythia is gone. What has become of the gas? In the absence of that certainty which can only be had by geological inspection, I venture the suggestion, that, as the ruin of the temple must have choked up the original orifice, and thereby forced the said gas of inspiration into some other duct, it may have found a passage by the seams of the rocks laterally and thence upward following the bend of the upheaval, and that it finds its issue now from the summit instead of the foot of the mountain. And hence it is, the recent visitants to Parnassus are seen to out such unprecedented capers. For instance—there is Tennyson—our Poet Laureate, Tennyson has written verses that will be cherished in memoria while human sympathies continue what they are. Pity he had not known the happy hour to stay the reed! But now, while that the good queen to whom he is laureate and her whom special constable, are hob-a-nobbing over a well-done Turkey; and, seeing that the railways across the continent, and the steamers down the Danube have shortened the route to muse-land, this Tennyson, the laureate, would fain take another sniff of the Parnassian exhilaration, and forthwith, he sings us a song of the veriest madlin that ever fell from mad poet's brains.

And then, there's Bailey, the English Goethe—unquestioned in his immortality, had he but written once and ceased. Then would after ages, when they would instance the sublime image of a great intellect struggling with the despair of a false position—for lack of the religious idea, have pronounced indifferently, Fostus or Faustus. But he too must essay anew, weaving us sentences winding all the way from Parnassus homeward and back again to limbo without once discovering the idea they set out after. And not sentences only, but words build he, after a fashion of his own. From his perch on the peak of Parnassus, looking down on the plains once vocal with the songs of Bion and Alcaeus, of Sappho and Anacreon, he must have recalled that the Greek was a dead language, and fancied himself entitled to the spoils. Returning by Rome, he found another dead language, and swept into his wallet such fragments as he could gather. Thence by way of Fatherland, he appended himself to the art of patching together crooked-jointed vocables in modes unprecedented. And so he gathers his rattle, which like the stones of Solomon's Temple, had sound enough hammer, before they were brought to the Holy City. And thus, what with interminable sentences unmeaning and unpronounceable adjectives that defy classification, his genius has labored with a new prodigy and he christens the ranting—a poem. It calls itself, by happy instinct—The Mystic! And lastly our Longfellow stands forth unannounced, bearing his offering to the Heliconian fount. The world is surprised—we may almost say astounded—and and doubly so;—first at the fact; second, at the form of the fact.

First we say, at the fact. That the last half of the nineteenth century, all unpoetic as we must confess it to be, should so early have given us the third poetic instalment—before the first heptad was completed,—before even the Eastern war or the Nebraska question was settled,—was more than we had a right to expect. But here it is. We had not had time to digest Maud and Mystic, before we are invited to a dish of sacroctash. Besides, the first two had notoriously failed. That a third should venture so close on their track seemed preposterous. The first two had—founded hopelessly; dashed, the one on Charybdis, the other engulfed in the maw of Scylla. That a third should tempt the strait without waiting a token of propitious heavens savored a little of impiety. But second the form of the facts. Unheralded the little book is before us, without preface or foreword, modestly waiting what the world will say to it. That it was intended for poetry is evident from its short lines and its fair and ample margins, faintly suggesting the comparison which some one has made with more conceit than wit of "a rivulet of verse meandering through broad prairies of margin." And then the lines are so neatly registered on the left, and so ragged in the outline on the right. Sure index of poetry! And to give the last and decisive test, the lines all begin with capitals.

We have a poem then. The world sits down to read. But what a hop skip and jump sort of measure! The world loses its gravity. The world explodes in merriment; and criticism, otherwise so grave and carping, evaporates in burlesque imitation. Take the following as a specimen. An unsophisticated Hoosier would describe a fresher in the Ohio—"the stream of silvery waters," as the natives euphonesouly called it, and the French in imitation—"La Belle Riviere,"—just such a fresher as frequently occurs in those western waters bearing damage to the merchandise piled above the wharves and to the rats that burrow

beneath them. Sober fact enough; but not so sober our Hoosier. The simple word fresher even must give way to the more poetic and sonorous, Higher water; and thus he utters:—

"Do not weary and I'll tell you, Tollyou, if you are not weary, Of the mighty Higher-water:— Higher-water swelling proudly, Proudly swelling down the valley, On the white waves he descended, On O-wah-to-paw, the white wave, With him came the whirling eddies; Came with him Ker-chunk, the big stump; Came the rolling logs, O-wah-als; Came the snags, the Jag-ger-nag gers; Came Sea-wot-che-to, the drift-wood; Came Ka-rick-toy, the fence rails; Came the corn-stalks, came the bark-wood; Came a pitching mass of plunder:—

What a mighty rush of waters, What an army of destruction, Coming down in wrath and fury, Coming down the handsome river, Coming down with Higher-water, Filled with raging, filled with fury, Rushing down to fight the big rats, To overwhelm the skulking wharf-rats."

This brief passage is selected from a song composed of over five hundred such verses; and it is but a specimen of five hundred other such lucubrations suddenly flooding the world with their light,—offspring of genius famed and unfamed, from Punch down to the advertiser of shoe-blackening and magnetic pills.—Now ludicrous as all this stuff is,—it involves a serious question. Shall burlesque settle a matter of criticism? Shall laughter loving Jonathan's poetic merit and just fame, under heaps of ridicule? Or is there no merit discernable in our subject? Let us inquire.

Soberly what is Hiawatha as a poem? Has it the essential qualities of a true poem, or is it a sham, or a farce? This involves the preliminary inquiry—What are the essential qualities of a true poem? We say a poem must have two things;—first a subject; second form.

First then, a subject. We claim this as the first essential. I have known but one successful instance, in contravention of this rule.—That is the famous epic which says:—

The King of Spain

Marched up the hill and then marched down again.

Now, a King of Spain may be as noble a grandee as any in his realm; but I aver, a King of Spain is not a subject for an epic; no King is; never was; never can be—Homer sang, not Achilles, but Achilles' wrath and that dire strife which bent unbidden many brave hearts of heroes to Hades." The Mountain bard sang, not Pius Enneas, but, "Arms and the man;—and the unwasting resentment of cruel Juno." The bard of modern Italy celebrates, not the "great Captain," but "the pious arms which liberated the holy sepulcher." The master of the English epic says; Of man's first disobedience, and—all its fruits of woe—till one greater man restore us.

Deeds then and not men, are the proper subject of an heroic poem. And as the poem under discussion is epic in its character, if it has character at all, we need not divert the attention to other departments of the art but ask, who then is Hiawatha, that his deeds should rank him with heroes? Hiawatha is the Indian ideal of the incarnation;—the realization of the promised seed of the woman, which should bruise the serpent's head. The work he had to work was the redemption of his race.

This promise has been the living hope of the world from the days of Adam. The specific form which this idea took on, in the post-diluvian world, dates from the time of Noah. It was a grandson of that father of the new world, whom impatient expectancy and the spirit of apostasy, first consecrated High-Priest of this glorious hope and invested with the character of an actual incarnation. It is the traditions of this Patriarch and his warlike compeers that constitute the basis of the mythologies of all the heathen world. By a theory which prevailed in some nations, either of transmigration or of a renewal of the ages, this incarnation was repeated, either frequently or at the completion of a great cycle, and so the last incarnation, ways recent, Now Hiawatha was not merely such an incarnation, he was the primal incarnation. The very name of the grand-son of Noah, is preserved, in the Indian form with entire etymological distinctness. The scene is shifted to a new theater and the text of the great drama not a little obscured, yet the characteristic idea is every where traceable. Hiawatha then and his compeers are the world-gods of this unsubdued continent. The traditions of their history and their deeds constituted the sacred literature of the native tribes. It was the songs of their praise that echoed through the wilderness from the tropic gulf to the frozen ocean. The subject then is sublimely heroic. No epic pen has touched a loftier theme.

Secondly then, as to the form of the poem. And here the question is what is requisite in matter of form? We look to the single verse, or line, we may say, when as here, the line and verse happen to be identical. Now we know that each verse must have completeness in itself; and that completeness is defined by

certain characteristic features which are essential. Aristotle says, a poem must have three things; a beginning, a middle and an end. That is philosophic; it worthy the father of criticism. Two of these and only two, are essential to a single verse; namely the middle and the end. The end is distinguished either by rhyme or by a fixed recurrence of a certain foot or combination of feet, or certain alliterations; the middle by the caesural pause. Where these two characteristics are wanting, there is no verse. It matters not, that you print your compositions in stichic lines; that they are registered nicely on the left and give a ragged outline on the right; that each line begins with a capital, and that it reads very smoothly—it is yet only prose. The subject may be poetic, the style may equal the subject; it may be poetry in everything but form, as is true of Ossian and Telemaque, but there is no verse. This is a law of the art to which every poet must bow.—

Tried by this rule, Hiawatha, alas! is wanting. The line has a middle but not a close; and it is this defect mainly that has drawn upon it such a world of ridicule. The unscientific reader was immediately conscious of some unaccountable incongruity—some poetic absurdity which he could not define, but which provoked his mirth and made the whole the whole thing seem a proper subject of burlesque. It is Longfellow who is to blame in all this, not the world. The world has a right to laugh when it can; nay, must laugh, according to Dr. Valentine, when the nerve of one of the three superior ocular muscles is touched. Now that is just the spot touched by this would-be poet.

I have already said, the poet must be judged by his age; and that the muse of the present age is notoriously freakish. She had before tempted our Longfellow to various whimsicalities. He has essayed the heroic hexameter, but only to illustrate that it is just as completely impracticable in the English as it is in the German or any other modern language. The age of that measure is with the past. He has tried nearly every other form in the ancient models, with like success. And now he has attempted the Trochaic Dimeter—a scale allowable in the Greek only because it admitted there with entire facility, nearly every other kind of foot, in any place in the meter. The little lines were thereby diversified and musical. The English has no such license. The movement therefore becomes at once intolerably stiff—just as precise and unpoetic as a row of pins. Our author has done what a master-hand could do to redeem these defects; but they are, in the eye of the art, irredeemable.

These features are the caprices of the age, I have said. Others, not only true poets, but postasters of every grade, have similarly set at defiance all rules of art. The parts of their work have no relation to each other, in form. They put lines in juxtaposition which are so short and so long, that some have no middle and others have no end. They ignore the idea of ratio, which is the central idea of beauty. They have outwitted the ancients who fantastically composed words, but ever with a strict regard to proportion, into the forms of various sensible objects;—as for instance: the form of the butterfly with expanded wings. You might just as well paste together two pages of prose by a corner of the leaves, and call it poetry. Another favorite form was that of the vase, which, ever pleasing in its outline to the eye, is still preserved in all that kind of compositions coming under the original and proper sense of the Latin carmen—that is, all formal inscriptions, dedications, titles, etc. Now you might just as well call the title of a book poetry, as much of this stuff, of which the only characteristic is that it is very strait on one side and very ragged on the other, or very ragged on both sides, and in its whole dress and gait, very shabby.

But is there no apology for our poet in choosing such a measure? He evidently sought the extreme of simplicity; and in that he was true to his subject. He conceived rightly that it should come.

"With the odors of the forest With the dew and damp of meadows, With the curling smoke of wigwams, With the rushing of great rivers, With their frequent repetitions, And their wild reverberations, As of thunder in the mountains."

And if there be no other form that would meet this requisition, then for the sake of the simplicity and for the sake of the grandeur of the theme, we must make a virtue of the necessity. But I do not see but the Iambic movement, which the modern ear almost universally demands, is equally simple; and yet how different in its melody! There is simplicity in the air of "Old Dan Tucker," as there is in a five miles jingle of sleigh bells; yet the one is perfect monotony and the other perfect music. In the Iambic movement, he could have combined diversity with simplicity; whereas, in the measure he has chosen, he is almost straitened to an absolute monotony. It is this peculiar kind of simplicity that has exposed it so sadly; this richness of monotony that has produced such an exuberant aftermath. Any simpleton can make poetry after

this sort;—it is of the form only that I speak. The most luckless wight I ever knew in the art of poetry, succeeded well enough with the first line. It was only with the second that the difficulty appeared, which he could never bring to rhyme with the first. But here they are all first lines;—all cast in the same mould. Each one is as like his fellow as two peas, and yet as independent of its fellows, as if it stood alone in the universe. Whoever can make one line can make a thousand. The roughest practice hand can sew the boards of equal length, and lay them in order like brick-bats; but when it is a matter of dove-tailing and matching curve lines, that is a different art. But enough of the form. I record against it these objections:—

- 1. It contravenes the law of the art. 2. It is of necessity monotonous. 3. It is caricatured with "fatal facility."

I recur for a moment to the subject. These traditions are found mostly in the writings of Schoolcraft;—in his Algic Researches and his reports to the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Washington. Such as are on record now, are probably all that will ever be preserved of that native lore of the wilderness. A very miscellaneous mass, it seems, as it stands in these records;—very childish to the casual reader, as only of such bug-a-boo stories as grandams use to frighten naughty children withal;—to the philosopher very curious, and grave in its matter;—and now suddenly all-inspiring to the poet. For it is only by that inspiration which rare genius alone can give, that our author has seized the leading idea from this apparent heap of rubbish and so selected and combined the related ideas as to form a complete whole, consistent in its parts, just in its proportions, magnificent in the grandeur of its outline. The treatment of the detail also; the arrangement of facts, the exhibition of passion and sentiment, the propriety of diction—is in harmony with this noble conception. There are passages of exceeding pathos. Instance the scene of desolation—such a desolation as was ever wont to visit the tribes when a winter like the present settled upon the forests. Remember the scene is in the vicinity of lake Superior, where even now, the snow buries the cottages and blockades the villages. No beast could stir abroad, and the boldest hunter that ventured forth,

"Saw no track of deer or rabbit, In the snow beheld no foot-prints, In the ghastly, gleaming forest Fell, and could not rise from weakness, Perished there with cold and hunger."

And when famine and pestilence invaded the wigwams; mark this wail of anguish—

"O, the famine and the fever, O, the wasting of the famine, O, the blasting of the fever, O, the wailing of the children, O, the anguish of the women.

All the earth was sick and famished, Hungry was the air around them, Hungry was the sky above them, And the hungry stars in heaven, Like the eyes of wolves, glared at them."

But such passages are episodes. The poem is epic. Nay, it is the long-sought epic. Many poets had plumed their Dædalean wings in the hope, only to make, as I an Icarian venture. Columbiads, Americanads, Allegheniads, Washingtoniads, had been tried by every variety of genius, in every variety of form, but now only the theme of the American epic reveals itself to a born poet.

The action of the poem is well sustained. In this regard it meets the demands of the critic and carries the reader with increasing interest to the close. There is not in it that intensity of passion, that outbursting rage and violence that we see in the heroes of Troy. That were not consistent with the Indian character, and especially not consistent with the character of these world-gods. Their passion is deep, and strong, but composed. Their conflicts are marked by a sense of a divine sustaining energy, which likens them rather to Milton's Battles of the angels. There is no where that reach and elevation of thought and profound reflection or refined logic, which we see in the Paradise Lost; but instead, the ideas of a simple and uncultivated people. And so completely and happily does it represent the character of that people—the circle of their ideas—their philosophy—their body of divinity—that in spite of all its sad defects of form, it must live. And when the rattle of small arms that now besets it, shall have spent its fury, and the smoke shall have cleared up, Hiawatha will take its place by the side of the Iliad and Paradise Lost as the epic of the Western-Continent.

A gentleman on board a steamboat with his family, on being asked by his children "what made the boat go," gave them the following very lucid description of the machinery and its principles: "You see, my dears, this thingum-bob here goes down thro' that hole and fastens on the jigsaws, and that connects with the—crinkum-orkankum; and then that man, he's the engineer, you know kind o' stirs up the—what do you call it, with his long poker, and they all shove along, and the boat goes ahead."