

MUCH HAS been said, of late, about the necessity of maintaining a proper nationality in American Letters; but what this *nationality* is, or what is to be gained by it, has never been distinctly understood. That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even Prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea — and at best is a questionable point. We would do well to bear in mind that “distance lends enchantment to the view. *Ceteris paribus*, a foreign theme is, in a strictly literary sense, to be preferred. After all, the world at large is the only legitimate stage for the autorial *histrion*.

But of the need of *that* nationality which defends our own literature, sustains our own men of letters, upholds our own dignity, and depends upon our own resources, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt. Yet here is the very point at which we are most supine. We complain of our want of an International Copyright, on the ground that this want justifies our publishers in inundating us with British opinion in British books; and yet when these very publishers, at their own obvious risk, and even obvious loss, do publish an American book, we turn up our noses at it with supreme contempt (this as a general thing) until it (the American book) has been dubbed “readable” by some illiterate Cockney critic. Is it too much to say that, with us, the opinion of Washington Irving — of Prescott — of Bryant — is a mere nullity in comparison with that of any anonymous sub-sub-editor of The Spectator, The Athenæum or the “London Punch”? It is *not* saying too much, to say this. It is a solemn — an absolutely awful fact. Every publisher in the country will admit it to be a fact. There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. It is disgusting, first, because it is truckling, servile, pusillanimous — secondly, because of its gross irrationality. We know the British to bear us little but ill will — we know that, in no case, do they utter unbiassed opinions of American books — we know that in the few instances in which our writers have been treated with common decency in England, these writers have either openly paid homage to English institutions, or have had lurking at the bottom of their hearts a secret principle at war with Democracy: — we *know* all this, and yet, day after day, submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland. Now if we *must* have nationality let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke.

The chief of the rhapsodists who have ridden us to death like the Old Man of the Mountain, is the ignorant and egotistical Wilson. We use the term rhapsodists with perfect deliberation; for, Macaulay, and Dilke, and one or two others, excepted, there is not in Great Britain a critic who can be fairly considered worthy the name. The Germans and even the French are infinitely superior. As regards Wilson, no man ever penned worse criticism or better rhodomontade. That he is “egotistical” his works show to all men, running as they read. That he is ignorant” let his absurd and continuous schoolboy blunders about Homer bear witness. Not long ago we ourselves pointed out a series of similar inanities in his review of Miss Barrett's poems — a series, we say, of gross blunders arising from sheer ignorance — and we defy him or any one to answer a single syllable of what we then advanced.

And yet this is the man whose simple *dictum* (to our shame be it spoken) has the power to make or to mar any American reputation! In the last number of Blackwood, he has a continuation of the dull “Specimens of the British Critics,” and makes occasion wantonly to insult one of the noblest of our poets, Mr. Lowell. The point of the whole attack consists in the use of slang epithets and phrases of the most ineffably vulgar description. “Squabashes” is a pet term. “Faugh!” is another. “We are Scotsmen to *the spine!*” says Sawney — as if the thing were not more than self-evident. Mr. Lowell is called “a magpie,” an “ape,” a “Yankee cockney,” and his name is intentionally mis-written *John Russell Lowell*. Now were these indecencies perpetrated by any American critic, that critic would be sent to Coventry by the whole press of the country, but since it is Wilson who insults, we, as in duty bound, not only submit to the insult, but echo it,

as an excellent jest, throughout the length and breadth of the land. *Quamdiu Catilina?* We do indeed demand the nationality of self-respect. In Letters as in Government we require a Declaration of Independence. A better thing still would be a Declaration of War — and that war should be carried forthwith “into Africa.”