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What is Literature? (1886)

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§1. Charles Lamb in one of his essays speaks of "books which are no books" as a catalogue including calendars and directories, scientific treatises and the statutes at large, the works of Hume and Gibbon, the histories of Flavius Josephus ("that learned Jew"), Paley's Moral Philosophy, almanacks, and draught-boards bound and lettered on the back. It moved the spleen of Elia "to see these *things in books clothing* perched upon shelves, like false saints, usurpers of true shrines—to reach down a well-bound semblance of a volume and to come bolt on a withering Population Essay—to expect a Steele or a Farquhar and find Adam Smith." But, humorous and capricious as it is, this catalogue gives us a glimpse of problems which since the days of Elia have gradually assumed defined shape and serious significance:—How shall we distinguish the various classes of writing which social evolution produces; how shall we separate specialized scientific studies from the works of creative imagination—the latter apparently Elia's ideal "books;" what, in fact, as distinct from scientific treatises and all other "things in books' clothing," is "literature"?

The unfortunate word has indeed been sadly abused. In popular usage it has come to resemble an old bag stuffed out and burst in a hundred places by all kinds of contents, so that we hardly know whether it could not be made to hold anything "written," from to-day's newspaper or the latest law reports, to Assyrian inscriptions, the picture-writings of the Aztecs, or the hieroglyphics of Egypt. Even professed scholars have contributed little towards the prevention of this cruelty to words. For example, Sismondi, one of the pioneers of literary history, though starting in his *Littérature du Midi de l'Europe* (1813) with the suggestive promise that he intended "above all to illustrate the reciprocal influence of the peoples' history, political and religious, on their literature, and of their literature on their character," vitiates from the outset any scientific treatment of his subject by leaving its nature unexplained. It is the same with Hallam. Shirking any effort to define the meaning of " literature," or even indicate the necessary difficulties in any

[*] The essay represents the first chapter of the seminal book *Comparative Literature* (1886) by Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett. Reference edition is London, Trench & Co., 1886.

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such definition, Hallam uses the word (as he tells us in the preface to his *Literature of Europe*) "in the most general sense for the knowledge imparted through books;" and so treats it as a common, and apparently useless, label for a perfect farrago of subjects—logic, astronomy, the drama, philology, political economy, jurisprudence, theology, medicine. Even immense improvements in the extent and depth of historical studies have done little to redeem the use of the word "literature," the origin of languages having for the most part diverted attention from that of the forms of writing as dependent on social evolution. Hence, such excellent scholars as J. J. Ampère, Littré, Villemain, Patin, Sainte-Beauve, Taine, in France; G. G. Gervinus, Koberstein, Hettner, Scherer, and the authors of "culture-histories"—Grün, Kiehl, Kremer, and others—in Germany, have by no means clarified European ideas of "literature" so thoroughly as might have been expected. No doubt we would not now, with Hallam, apologize for neglecting such "departments of *literature*" as books on agriculture or English law; still we have by no means reached any settled ideal of "literature" such as Hallam himself obscurely outlined by excluding history, save where it "had been written with peculiar beauty of language or philosophical spirit," from his *Literature of Europe*. Must we, then, surrender the word to the abuse alike of the learned and unlearned at the peril of some such caprice as that of Lamb—caprice not to be enjoyed as a freak of humour, but rather despised as the miscarriage of sober, possibly prosaic, inquiry? If we review the causes which have produced the abuse we shall at least understand the difficulties to which any definition of "literature" must be exposed.

§2. The word *literatura* even among the Romans had no settled meaning. Tacitus uses the phrase *literatura Graeca* to express "the shapes of the Greek alphabet;" Quintilian calls grammar *literatura*; and Cicero uses the word in the general sense of "learning" or "erudition." Accordingly, when scholars of the Renaissance began to use the word they did not intend to convey ideas which it now readily suggests. They did not intend to convey the idea of a body of writings representing the life of a given people; much less did they purpose by using the word to draw distinctions between one class of such writings and another. Borrowing the word in its Latin significations, they did not stop to dream of days when modern nations would possess their own bodies of writings, just as they did not stop to inquire whether Greek or Latin ideas of the lyric, the epic, the drama, were suited or unsuited to the new life of Europe they saw around them. Greece and Rome, though rich in terms for special branches of poetry, oratory, or philosophy, had not in fact needed a word to express the general body of their writings as

representing a *national* development. Greece had not needed such a word because she never was at one with herself, never attained to permanent national unity. Rome had not needed such a word partially because she passed, as if at one bound, from municipality to world-empire without halting to become a nation, partially because the cultured few who were the makers of her writings worked day and night upon Greek models. It was only when bodies of national writings, such as those of England and France, had been long enough in existence to attract reflection, it was only when the spread of democratic ideas in the eighteenth century began to make men regard the writings of their countrymen as something more than elegant copies of antique models made under the patronage of courts and princes, as in truth the fruits of the nation's historic past, that the word "literature" became useful to mark an idea peculiar to the nations of modern Europe. But the word in which the new idea was embodied served rather to conceal than to disclose any conceptions of national authorship. "Literature," long a mere generalization for letters or the knowledge of letters, classical or modern, was ill adapted to express the idea of a definite national growth.

§3. One cause of the indefiniteness of "literature" we have thus found in the source from which the word has reached us; another and more interesting cause we shall find in the development of social life. Karl Otfried Müller tells us how we may trace the three different stages of civilisation among the Greeks in the three grand divisions of their poetry; how the epic belongs to a period of monarchical institutions when men's minds were impregnated and swayed by legends handed down from antiquity; how the elegiac, iambic, and lyric poetry arise in more agitated times and accompany the growth of republican governments; and how the drama represents the prime of Athenian power and freedom. But this is only one out of a host of such examples. Take any branch of verse or prose composition, and you soon find that directly or indirectly its existence implies certain conditions of social life. The oratory of the Athenian Ekklêsia or the Roman Forum, of the English Parliament or the French Pulpit; the hymns of the Indian or Hebrew priests; the rythmical prose of Hebrew or Arab poets; the songs of the Homeric *aoidos* or the Saxon *scôp;* the chorus of the *Khorovod* in the Russian *Mir* or village-commune; Athenian, Roman, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, English, French, and German dramas;—all result from and reflect the action, thought, and speech peculiar to the particular places and particular times at which they appear. But this dependence on limited spheres of social life is concealed by the vague word "literature." Containing a generalization, and as such suggesting some abstract unity

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unconditioned by time and space, the word leads us to expect identity in the form and spirit of writing whenever and wherever it appears an identity which does not strike us as false until repeated comparisons and contrasts have forced upon us the recognition of the falsity. We can easily understand how the enthusiastic study of classical models contributed to disseminate in modern Europe the idea of this uniformity, and the belief that archetypes of "literature" had been fixed once for all in the brilliant ages of Pericles and Augustus. We can easily understand how the universal claims of medieval theology and philosophy directly or indirectly contributed to strengthen this belief in universal exemplars which threatened for a time to make the masterpieces of Athens and Home idols of literary imitation as unquestionable, if not as sacred, as the Qur'ân. But it is not so easy to grasp the facts that "literature," far from enshrining universal forms and ideas of beauty, owes both its creative and critical works to the development of social life; that familiar general or special conceptions suggested by the word drop off one by one as we retrace the steps of such development; and that all our subtle literary distinctions finally disappear in the songs of those isolated clans and tribes whose fusion produced the people and the language of future art and criticism. We may be sure that it is difficult to keep the varying relations of social development to literary growth steadily in view when we find a scholar like Mr. J. A. Symonds speaking of Athenian literature as "National," or an antiquary like Herr Ten Brink applying the phrase "National Epos" to days when the Saxons were merely a loose federation of tribes.

Indeed, we have only to watch the beginnings of national history in order to see how readily the actual development of literature is obscured, how hardly it is to be recovered. Nations, like individuals, have been always disposed from interest or vanity to forget their day of small things; like individuals, too, they have been always unwilling to isolate their origins from the great ones who have gone before. Some Æneas will connect the pedigrees of Ilium and Rome, some Brute the Trojan will serve as an aristocratic eponymous ancestor for the wild tribes of Britain. Thus, at the price of much confusion in language and thought, the interlacing of national histories reproduces on an enlarged scale the interlacing of clan traditions which has everywhere accompanied the fusion of clans into larger social groups. Thus, too, chronological standards, which can never carry us beyond the adult and self-conscious age of some particular group, are so applied as to raise the most confused impressions of relative antiquity in institutions and thought; and languages, customs, ideas, come to be reckoned old or young by measurements taken from the First Olympiad, or A.U.C., or B.C., or from the Flight. Hence, *within* the group,

social development is obscured by inability or dislike to look back to times when national language and ideas could not exist; *without* the group, it is obscured by imitation of peoples who have attained to higher grades of social progress; and so the conception of national literature, as well as that of national history, becomes a medley of confusion in which differences of time and place, of social and individual character, are obliterated. Nothing but historical reflection can restore the real order of development out of this chaos; and historical reflection, as a work of science, is only the tardy product of the present century. How recent are its applications to the domain of literature we may judge from two facts. Hallam, in 1838, could truthfully say that "France has no work of any sort, even an indifferent one, on the universal history of her literature; nor can we (Englishmen) claim for ourselves a single attempt of the most superficial kind." Donaldson, in his "Translator's Preface" to the first volume of Miller's *Literature of Ancient Greece*, observed, in January, 1840, that "before the publication of the present work no history of Greek literature had been published in the English language."

§4. But if it be hard for the popular mind to avoid confusing early and adult conceptions of literature, the critical mind, from causes peculiar to itself, is exposed to a similar confusion. If the facts of social development have been almost unavoidably overlooked by average intelligence, they have been deliberately set aside by the professed critic. When men first began to ask themselves why it was that the poet's works pleased them, they sought to find the cause not in human senses, emotions, intellect, but in analyses of the works themselves. Thus the *Poetics*, attributed to Aristotle, mark an effort to extract general principles of dramatic creation from the practice of the Athenian masters, Sophocles in particular. Few questions are asked about the development of the Athenian drama. The literary influences of Athenian life, contrasted with the life celebrated by the early epic and lyric poets of Greece, are ignored. No attempt is made to compare the drama of Athens with that of other Greek cities, much less to discover whether "barbarians" possessed any similar spectacles. Thus, by neglecting the influences of social life on literature, Greek criticism fostered the deadly theories that literature is essentially an imitation of masterpieces, that its ideals are not progressive but permanent, that they have no dependence on particular conditions of human character, on the nature of that social instrument language, on circumscribed spheres of time and place. In the imitative workmanship of Roman artists the principles of the Greek only gathered strength; and, transmitted through Rome to the peoples of modern Europe, they everywhere more or less checked the growth of truly national literature.

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While the more vigorous life of England and Spain developed new forms of the drama, Italy and France accepted the classical models, Germany following their example. It is true that at length the learning of Germany revolted from a bondage in which it recognised a hybrid monster of Greek, Roman, and French extraction. It is true that France herself, especially after the Revolution had thrown her back on older memories than those of Richelieu's centralism or Henri Quatre, came to learn the literary value of her own early history. But, in spite of these successes of the national against the classical spirit, one strong survival of classical influences lingered, and still lingers, in the critical mind of Europe. If men like Goethe and Victor Hugo could cast off the bondage of Greek models, and appeal triumphantly to the art of Shakespeare and Calderon, criticism was still far from giving up those universal ideas which, logically enough, had accompanied the conception of literature as the imitation of universal models. Thus, for example, the main purpose of A. W. Schlegel's defence of the "Romantic School" was to reconcile the conflicting principles of "Romantic" and classical art in universal ideas common to and underlying both; and Coleridge upholds the universal claims of Shakespeare's art with as much enthusiasm as any classical critic ever upheld those of the ancient masters.

The truth is that the "Romantic School" represented reformers imperfectly conscious of the purport of their reforms. These dissidents from an ancient creed of critical dogma failed to see that if literary art is something better than an imitation of models, if these models are admitted to be out of place when carried into social conditions markedly different from those under which they were produced, then the dependence of literary ideals on limited spheres of human association follows as a matter of course, and "Romantic" pretenders to universal rights are caught in the act of self-contradiction. Failure to observe this self-contradiction need not surprise any student of the social sciences. Political economists, for example, have based their science on assumptions of personal freedom, social classification, and human character which possess a very limited application even within the recent history of the English people; yet such facts as medieval serfage, the different social classification of different countries and ages, or the impossibility of action from self-interest in communal life, have only within the last few years prevented our economists from claiming universality for their theories. Again, English jurisprudence for a time did not hesitate to advance similar claims, although its leading idea of a central government, from which the commands, obligations, and sanctions of law shall issue, is in the political life of early Communities as clearly out of place as the literary ideals of Athens, Home, or Paris would have been among the early Arab clans. If we find fault with the

shortcomings of "Romantic" criticism we must remember that nothing is more difficult than to see an ideal without expanding it into universality even in the prosaic accuracy of scientific reasoning, how much more in works peculiarly belonging to the imagination—works in which the consciousness of thinking within limits is a fatal damper to the enthusiasm which creates without reflecting on the nature of its materials, and is paralysed when it attempts to critically retrace the steps of the creative process. Yet, unless we limit the range to which our criticism shall apply, we may find ourselves applying the standards of the Athenian to the Japanese drama, or those of the Greek lyric to the *Shih King* of ancient China. Clearly such limitless criticism has done much to obscure all ideas of literary development, and consequently to make the conception of literature the medley we have found it.

§5. But there are obstacles to the definition of literature which arise not from the origin of the word, nor from unhistorical ideas of the learned or the unlearned, but from the different and even conflicting aims of writing in different states of social life and the different means adopted to secure such aims. "By literature," says Mr. Stopford Brooke, "we mean the written thoughts and feelings of intelligent men and women arranged in a way which will give pleasure to the reader;" and the same admirable critic adds that "prose is not literature unless it have style and character and be written with curious care." Without pausing to ask whether Mr. Brooke would extend his ideal of "prose" so as to cover the rythmical cadence of Al-Harîrî, or the Chinese *Tsze* in which rimes are repeated at the end of lines of indeterminate length, without raising any questions about the development of prose, and allowing one ideal end of literature as opposed to science to be pleasure, not discovery or instruction, we find that the pleasure imparted by literature and the means of imparting it have in different states of social life varied surprisingly. For example, from our modern standpoint Professor Jebb is perhaps right in saying that "there can be no literature without writing; for literature implies fixed form; and, though memory may do great feats, a merely oral tradition cannot guarantee fixed form." Yet we cannot forget that even at the zenith of Greek civilization music and dancing (to say nothing of acting) formed an integral part of certain literary pleasures to a degree which our modern familiarity with printed books renders almost inconceivable. Not only have the pleasures of literature varied with the average character of the men and women it addressed—from communal villagers singing their harvest hymn to the courtly audience of Boileau—but the means to secure such pleasures have likewise varied from wild combinations of gesture, music, dance, and song, in which the

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words were of the least importance, to printed letters as the main instrument of the literary artist. Compare, for example, the so-called "Pindaric" odes of Gray with those of the Greek master himself, and nothing but our modern idea of literary art, as mainly an appeal to the eye and ear through print, can hide the grotesque absurdity of *strophe* and *antistrophe* reappearing like fleshless skeletons two thousand years after the dance and song that gave them life have died away.

As the means so also the ideal ends of literary production have varied remarkably under different conditions of social life. The prevalent belief that the proper ends of science are discovery and instruction, but that of literature pleasure, the greatest pleasure of the greatest number in the given national group,[*] is due to developments in social organisation and thought which have democratically expanded the audience of literature, specialised the pursuits of science, and established rather superficial distinctions between experience and its students on the one side and imagination and its votaries on the other. Some of these ideas would have been sadly out of place in days when the cultured few (as in Athens or Rome) reposed upon the labours of a mass of slaves; others, in days when science and literature were so closely intertwined as in the science-poetry of Empedocles or even the dialogues of Plato, would have been too confused to supply distinctions. In fact, the differentiation of literature from science, however "natural" it may now look to us, was a process of slow and fitful evolution dependent not only on individual intelligence but on social development. The dependence of the ideal ends of literature on such development might be illustrated from the writings of every people, every social group, which has produced a literature of its own. If it may be seen from Spenser's introductory letter to his *Faerie Queene* that our modern democratic conceptions of literature have no place in his knightly theory of poetry as intended "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline," similar contrasts might be easily discovered between the early and modern ideals of song in France, or Germany, or Spain. But we need not confine our examples to European nations. The paternal government of China and the sentiments of family life which form the striking social characteristic of that vast empire have left their marks upon the ideals of Chinese literature in general and upon that of the Chinese drama in particular. "Chinese poetry," says M. Bazin (introduction to his *Théatre Chinois*, p. xxvii.), "requires every dramatic work to have a moral end

[*] Mr. Palgrave (*Songs and Sonnets of Shakespeare*, p. 237) tells us that "pleasure is the object of poetry; and the best fulfilment of its task is the greatest pleasure of the greatest number." They who still fancy that literature in an age of democracy can remain the monopoly of a cultured Cloud-cuckoo-town will shrink from this use of a Philistine formula and resent the expression of poetry's ideal end in an echo of Benthamism. But art and criticism, if they are living, must reflect contemporary life and current thought.

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or meaning. For example, the moral purpose of the play called *Tchao-meï-hiang*, or *A Maid's Intrigues*, discovers itself in the words addressed by the lady Han to her daughter, 'Know you not that now, as in ancient times, the marriage of husband and wife needs to be consecrated by rites and ceremonies?' The *dénoûment* is the triumph of virtue. Any play without a moral purpose is in Chinese eyes only a ridiculous work in which one can find no meaning. According to Chinese authors the object aimed at in a serious drama is to present the noblest lessons of history to the ignorant who know not how to read; and, according to the Chinese penal code, the end of theatrical representations is 'to exhibit true or imaginary pictures of just and good men, chaste women, and loving and dutiful children—characters likely to lead the spectators to the practice of virtue.' Obscenity is a crime; and composers of obscene plays, says a Chinese writer quoted by Morrison, shall be severely punished in the abode of expiations, *ming-fou*, and their torment shall last as long as their plays remain on the earth."

Contrasting this aim of the Chinese drama with that of the aesthetic Athenian for, in spite of the famous definition in the *Poetics*, we can scarcely speak of Attic tragedy, much less comedy, as possessing a moral purpose critics who refuse to separate their ideals of literature from those of human conduct will probably agree with M. Bazin in placing the Attic sense of the beautiful below the didactic morality of the Celestial. Aristophanes, it is to be feared, stands condemned by Chinese judgment to a very lengthy experience of *ming-fou*; and as for such dramatists as Wycherley and Vanbrugh, their only hopes must depend on the rather dusty condition of their volumes nowadays. It may be true that the Chinese ideal is higher than that of our modern European dramas, which would limit itself to the truthful imitation of human character and custom in contemporary life. It may be that the Chinese is superior to the Indian dramatic ideal laid down in the prologue of the *Málati* and *Mádhava*,[*] and clearly expressing the dramatic taste of a cultured class such as the Bráhmans of India are known to have been. But our object is not to canvass the merits of this or that dramatic ideal; it is simply to show how widely such ideals have differed in different conditions of social life, and to illustrate by their conflict the difficulty, or rather impossibility, of reconciling such contradictions in any universal definition of literature which, be it remembered, must also include, many branches of verse and prose not to be found in the drama.

[*] "Again," says this prologue, "what avails it to boast a knowledge of the Yoga, the Sankhya, the Upanishads, or the Vedas? Such knowledge is of no use for dramatic composition. Fertility of imagination, harmony of style, richness of invention—these are the qualities which mark education and genius in this kind of writing. Such is the drama written by our venerable friend Bhavabhúti."

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§6. We have now reviewed four causes of the obscurity overhanging the word "literature"—the source from which it has reached us, unhistorical ideas about it entertained by the learned and the unlearned, the subtle changes in the means and the no less subtle changes in the ends of literary workmanship. In short, we have found what was to have been expected wherever the dependence of written upon living thought and of the latter upon social and physical conditions is overlooked—confused views of the present nature, the past, and the ideal future of literature. Other causes contributing to the same confusion might easily be added. For example, many problems properly belonging to any scientific treatment of literature are hidden away in more or less cognate studies. Thus, the origins of metres, if discussed at all, are generally treated as the worthless *peculium* of that broken-down philosopher, the grammarian; and rhetoric absorbs much of the interest which might be well bestowed on a subject so attractive as the developments of prose in different languages and social groups. But we need not extend our search for the causes of an obscurity which average thinking and cultured taste concurred to render unavoidable.

Definite ideas of literature have, in truth, been impeded by two grand facts which theory may affect to conceal but cannot really banish—the fact that all literatures, even to some degree those wrought by the hand of mere imitators like the Romans, depend upon conditions of social life, arid, if not stationary or decaying, constantly throw out new forms of vitality, constantly enter new phases of art and criticism; and the fact that, in spite of this constant movement in each separate literature, in all literatures viewed together as productions of humanity, definition implies, and must at least provisionally assume, a degree of *permanence* which is too often secured off-hand by violently declaring selected ideas to be universal and independent, not only of social life in its myriad shapes, but even of space and time. Hereafter we shall have other opportunities for discussing these obstacles to the scientific study of literature—obstacles, it must be remembered, common to all the social sciences, political economy, jurisprudence, even logic, so far as the laws of thought are dependent on social evolution. At present, however, we shall be satisfied with two principles which may serve to guide our efforts to reach defined ideas of literature. (1) Our definition cannot cover an unlimited range of human life save at the expense of confusing perceptions of sense, emotions, thoughts, not only belonging to widely diverse social and physical conditions, but often directly conflicting in the form and spirit of their literary expression. (2) We must be ever prepared to forego our limited definitions of literature, or any species of literature, when we pass out of the conditions to which they are properly confined.

Bearing these principles in mind, we may be content to set out with a rough definition of literature, as consisting of works which, whether in verse or prose, are the handicraft of imagination rather than reflection, aim at the pleasure of the greatest possible number of the nation rather than instruction and practical effects,* and appeal to general rather than specialised knowledge. Every element of this definition clearly depends on limited spheres of social and mental evolution—the separation of imagination from experience, of didactic purpose from aesthetic pleasure, and that specialisation of knowledge which is so largely due to the economic development known as "division of labour." In truth, our definition will carry us, and is intended to carry us, a very short way satisfactorily—perhaps no distance at all beyond conditions of art and science under which we live, or similar to these. If the student has expected something better, let him reflect that breadth of definition is only to be purchased by flagrant violations of the facts but just stated. He can, indeed, have no better introduction to the scientific study of literature than a definition which shall bring home one of the great lessons to be learned from this and every other science, the limited truth of human ideas.

We have spoken of our study as a "science;" let us state at the outset the meaning we intend to convey by that term. It must be evident from what we have already said that by "science" we cannot mean a body of universal truths, that the very evolution of literature is fatal *per se* to any such literary "science." But by the use of the term we mean to imply that limited truths discoverable in the various phases of literature may, nay, in order to be understood even as limited truths, *must* be grouped round certain central facts of comparatively permanent influence. Such facts are the climate, soil, animal and plant life of different countries; such also is the principle of evolution from communal to individual life which we shall hereafter explain at length. The former may be called the statical influences to which literature has been everywhere exposed; the latter may be called the dynamical principle of literature's progress and decay. But

* M. Victor de Laprade (*La Sentiment de la Nature chez les Modernes*, pp. 312-322), while discussing Goethe's efforts to combine science with poetry, raises the question whether didactic poetry is at the present day a legitimate form of poetic art. In doing so he draws a careful distinction between the didactic poetry of Greece or India, and that of days in which "science has left the path of hypothesis and imagination, has become possessed of fixed methods and knows its proper limits." In these latter conditions M. Laprade decides that didactic poetry is "un genre bâtard, dangereux, à peu près impossible;" that it is poetry at all only "in proportion as it withdraws itself from science to enter into the imagination." Goethe's *Faust* may contain geology, optics, chemistry; his *Wilhelm Meister*, scientific discussions and demonstrations; but in his *Elective Affinities* there appears that "fatalistic conception" of scientific law before which human liberty, master-maker of literary art, would seem to disappear. But M. Laprade has scarcely touched the true cause of that dissatisfaction which the metaphysical as well as the didactic poetry of modern times can hardly fail to produce. This cause is to be found in the fact that poetry and literature in general are expected to address the average mind in average, not specialised, language; whereas science pursues its studies and expresses its truths in the technical language it requires.

before we attempt to explain this principle we shall illustrate the dependence of literature on social conditions, and the consequent relativity, or necessary limitation, alike of its creative art and criticism.